Title: Compulsory Sexuality and Amatonormativity in Higher Education: A Photovoice Study with Asexual and Aromantic Students

Abstract approved: ______________________________________________________

Erich N. Pitcher

This thesis explores the experiences of ten asexual and aromantic college students at Oregon State University and the strategies they used to navigate their sexualized and romanticized campuses. The questions that guided this research were about belonging, resilience, kinship, and worldview. Did they feel they belonged to anyone or mattered to anyone at the university, were they resilient and what helped them be resilient, where and how did they find community and how did they view the world through their identities? Photovoice research was used as the methodology in this study, using photography to make visible asexual and aromantic students who have been treated as invisible (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). This research was collaborative with the participants, they were viewed as co-researchers and they made meaning of their lives and identities together (Wang & Burris, 1997). Study data illuminated a hostile campus environment for asexual and aromantic students, where they felt excluded and othered by society, friends, family, classmates, and professors. Yet despite their invisibility they practiced resilience and found belonging and kinship as strategies to be successful in college.

Keywords: asexuality, aromanticism, college students, student affairs, LGBTQIA+, compulsory sexuality, amatonormativity.
Compulsory Sexuality and Amatonormativity in Higher Education:
A Photovoice Study with Asexual and Aromantic Students

by

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

____________________________________________________
Elijah G. Stucki, Author
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aseuxality and Aromanticism</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LGBTQ Experiences in Higher Education</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LGBTQ+ Campus Climate</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Campus Racial Climate</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Queer Kinship and Resilience</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resilience Theory</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LGBTQ+ Campus Centers</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coalitional Politics</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Politics of Critical Hope</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asexual and Aromantic Experiences</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compulsory Sexuality and Amatonormativity</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pathologizing Asexuality</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asexual Identity Disclosure and Discrimination</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exclusion from LGBTQIA+ Community</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Corrective Rape, Sexual Coercion, and Relationship Violence</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asexualities and Other Identity Vectors</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Page</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability……………………………………………………..41</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and Ethnicity……………………………………………42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework: Sense of Belonging……………………45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Research Methodology…………………………………………48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Research Paradigm…………………………………………49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photovoice Methodology…………………………………………50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photovoice in Higher Education…………………………………………52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of the Study…………………………………………52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Photovoice Process…………………………………………54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator Not Researcher…………………………………………54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Recruitment…………………………………………55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Descriptions…………………………………………57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection and Sources…………………………………………59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis…………………………………………………..64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Data Analysis…………………………………………66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallery Showing………………………………………………..67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Investigator’s Involvement……………………………………67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics…………………………………………………………..68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness………………………………………………..71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positionality……………………………………………………73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Limitations</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4: Compulsory Sexuality and Amatonormativity on Campus</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants’ Initial Constructed Themes</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion/Other</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit or Miss</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reclaiming V-day</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Your Own Space</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Refined Themes</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being Excluded and <em>Othered</em></td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisibility and Impossibility</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Disclosure</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dehumanized, Fixable, or Unnatural</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unworthy of Relationships or Intimacy</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Othering in LGBTQIA+ Spaces</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ace and Aro Students of Color</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Coercion and Violence and the Importance of Consent</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consent about sexual conversations</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need for Education and the Burden to Educate</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burden to educate</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistances and Resilience</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging and Kinship</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Implications for Higher Education</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of Sense of Belonging</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brave Space Critique</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibilities for Coalition Politics and Radical Hope</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Higher Education</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of Compulsory Sexuality and Amatonormativity in Higher</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of LGBTQIA+ spaces</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad Education and Awareness of Asexual and Aromantic Identities</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing an Epistemology of Love</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Further Research</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Photovoice Steps Info Graphic</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Agenda for Photovoice Study Workshop for January 15, 2017</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Demographic Survey</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Narrative/Photo Reflection Sheet</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Workshop Number 2 Agenda</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Questions to Guide Small Group Discussion</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G: Evaluation Survey</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H: OSU Pride Center Founding Documents</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix I: Asexual Inclusive Sex Ed</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Umbrella Terminology</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Choose</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Clock</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Heart Leaf</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Valentine’s Day Section</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Life</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Rainbow</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Flags</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Stop</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Path</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. (e)ducate</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Dictionary Definition</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Whiteboard</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Bare</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Ice</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Shield</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I Belong in Bed</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. My Valentine</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. m(e)</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. (i)magine</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Gloves on a Keyboard</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Asexual and Transgender Flags</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. (e)nergize</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Leaf</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Solidarity</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Gloves</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Maggie</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Phone</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. (r)epresent</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. The Cycle of Liberation</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Compulsory Sexuality and Amatonormativity in Higher Education: A Photovoice Study with Asexual and Aromantic Students

Introduction

I met my partner in 2014, when they were young and new to the queer community. We grew quickly attached and despite everyone around us trying to force us not to be together, we found each other anyway. I had never felt something this overwhelming for anyone before, and I fell hard. One day almost a year and half later, my partner disclosed to me through tears that they were asexual. I was bewildered and did not understand or take it well. I had my own preconceived notions about asexuality and was socialized to believe that everyone was supposed to be sexual. But I loved them, and I vowed that I could at least try to understand it. As I asked questions of my partner and did my own research, I realized myself that I related with asexual experiences. I began to start understanding why I had felt so different for so long.

Despite this new realization, I was never really proud of being asexual, or ace; it was something that, just was. This continued until I met Maggie, a participant in this study who changed my life long before this research began. They were more proud of their asexuality than anyone I had ever met. The first time I met them they were dressed as Captain Ace, an asexual superhero. We became fast friends and together have worked on programming at our university to raise awareness about asexual and aromantic identities. Maggie helped me meet other asexual and aromantic, or aro, people and we have grown our own community. They helped me be proud of my identity—something I know that a lot of asexual and aromantic people struggle with. Maggie and my partner helped make this research a possibility.
Asexuality and Aromanticism

“Definition is a commentary on meaning-- they are related but they are not twins.”

-Dominique Christina, 2018 Examining Masculinities Conference

The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network’s definition of an asexual individual is “a person who does not experience sexual attraction” (AVEN, 2018). The asexual definition has become especially politicized and it has been reduced to simplicity despite the complex and diverse identities located within (Lund & Johnson, 2015; Przybylo & Cooper, 2014). Asexuality and aromanticism are more like umbrella terms, meaning they have several other identities included within them (see Figure 1) (Przybylo, 2016). For example, I identify as asexual but I am also demisexual; asexual describes myself kind of while demisexual describes more fully who I am.

Figure 1. Graphic representing umbrella terminology of asexual and aromantic identities.

I critique the simplicity of the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)’s simplified definition just as other scholars have (Cerankowski & Mills, 2010; Chasin, 2011;
Instead I draw upon asexualities scholar Eujung Kim for a definition (2011):

The term ‘asexuality’ refer(s) broadly to a relative absence or insufficiency of sexual interest, biologically and socially described function, and interpersonal sexual engagement. Therefore it does not necessarily preclude celibacy and autoeroticism, if viewed from a behavioral perspective. Asexuality is dependent on the demarcation of what is considered to be sexual in certain historical, social, and cultural contexts as well as within medically defined normative sexual boundaries. Thus it is also a concept or a position that distances itself from the realm of sexuality as natural, as well as from the knowledge and language that put sexuality into discourse (p. 481).

In short, asexual identities are complex and diverse and are defined by the societal norms and systems that it functions in. What I mean by that is that if we lived in a world where sex or marriage was not expected of us asexuality and aromantic identities would probably look very different.

The existence of asexual and aromantic identities tell us that sexual and romantic attractions can exist separately. (Przybylo, 2016). Usually we think of being in a romantic relationship and that relationship includes sex. But there are so many different ways to be intimate with someone or to have a relationship with someone that does not need sex or to be romantic. Some asexual people experience romantic attraction, while others may identify as aromantic (Lund & Johnson, 2015). Similarly, there are aromantic people who do not identify as asexual. Aromanticism, similar to how Kim (2011) described asexuality, relates to having a relative absence of romantic attraction and points towards the social construct of amatonormativity which I will discuss later (Brake, 2012; Canning, 2015). My community has
ASEXUAL AND AROMANTIC STUDENTS

generated vocabulary that teaches about its diversity (Lund & Johnson, 2015; Przybylo, 2016). Sub-identities under asexuality may include terms like gray-osexual (or gray-A), denoting anyone who experiences some level of sexual attraction but for which desire plays a minor role (Przybylo, 2016). Demisexual is another term that indicates that a person may not experience sexual attraction or it may play a minor role in their life until a strong emotional bond forms with another person (Przybylo, 2016). The aromantic communities can in turn also identify as gray-aromantic and demiromantic; but asexuals also describe their romantic identities in terms similar to other queer identities (Przybylo, 2016). For example identities such as homoromantic, biromantic, heteroromantic, and so on have been used by asexual and aromantic people to describe their romantic orientations (Przybylo, 2016). In my life, I have had asexual and aromantic friends who identify as demi-panromantic, meaning they are demiromantic but also panromantic. New language is being created every day to explain a person’s interactions with sexual and romantic attraction. Throughout this thesis the word nonsexual and nonromantic are also used, these term reference that there are other ways of abstaining from sex, intimacy, or romance not related to asexual and aromantic identities. For example, being celibate or anti sexual, or not wanting a relationship for personal reasons. Now that I have defined identity specific language we need to define the theoretical framework that are used throughout this study.

In this thesis, I use a couple of social construction theories to help student affairs professionals understand the experiences and oppression facing asexual and aromantic students. The first is compulsory sexuality, on which Gupta (2015) wrote, compulsory sexuality...is the assumption that all people are sexual and...[it] describe[s] the social norms and practices that both marginalize various forms of non-sexuality, such as a
lack of sexual desire or behavior, and compel[s] people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity (p. 132). This notion of compulsory sexuality goes by many names including sex-normative culture (Cerankowski & Mills, 2010), sexual normativity (Chasin 2011, 2013; Hinderliter 2009), the sexual assumption (Carrigan, 2011), and sexusociety (Przybylo, 2011). Yet, the underlying assumptions remain the same: that we live in a world that is sexualized and it has an effect on us.

For an example of compulsory sexuality think of the ways in which people are rewarded for conceiving and having children, or the over sexualization of commercials and advertisements.

The social construct of compulsory sexuality has drastic effects not just on those who are asexual and/or aromantic, but on everyone (Alcaire, 2015; Gupta, 2015; Kim, 2011; Scherrer, 2008). Compulsory sexuality regulates sexual behavior (Gupta, 2011, 2015, 2016), creates pressure to have sex or engage in sexual acts (Gupta, 2011; Gupta, 2016), and privileges sexual relationships over other relationships (Gressgard, 2013). Additionally, laws reflect this privileging of particular relationship formations (Emens, 2013, 2014), and doctors and clinicians punish those who do not conform to compulsory sexuality (Bogaert, 2004; Foster & Scherrer, 2014; Gupta, 2011). By taking serious the experience of individuals who hold asexual and/or aromantic identities, it is possible to understand how regimes of power rooted compulsory sexuality are oppressive. Rather than situate the “problem” of compulsory sexuality within individuals’ experience, I argue that it is the societal expectation that everyone be sexual, oppresses and regulates all bodies, sexual or not (Kim, 2011).

The second social construction theory is amatonormativity, a term coined by Elizabeth Brake (2012) that describes concepts similar to compulsory sexuality. Amatonormativity:
[Is] the assumption that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types. The assumption that valuable relationships must be marital or amorous devalues friendships and other caring relationships...amatonormativity prompts the sacrifice of other relationships to romantic love and marriage and relegates friendship and solitudinousness to cultural invisibility. (p.89-90)

Amatonormativity shows up in our daily lives, romantic love is expected from us—we are told that we are supposed to get married, and grow old with someone. But what if growing old with several friends is just as valid? The expectation that everyone be in monogamous, romantic relationships also oppresses and regulates all bodies and is also rooted in regimes of power.

As an asexual, queer, and trans student affairs graduate student, I know firsthand how certain aspects of my identity are made invisible on college campuses. Prior to conducting the study I will describe later, I conducted interviews with three queer resource center directors in Oregon for one of my classes. The project was to visit these spaces to get a feel for what a specific functional area did. After touring various LGBTQ+ Resource Centers and learning more about the programs and services, I inquired about what is specifically offered for asexual and aromantic students. Despite my high expectations, they all had a similar disheartening answer: “we could be doing better”. This response was disappointing for me because this is my future career field and I had expected more from it.

I was disappointed again after attending the National LGBTQ Task Force’s 2017 Creating Change conference in Philadelphia, PA. There I observed a panel called Inclusive Sp(aces): Making college/university LGBTQ+ Ace Inclusive. I attended this panel with other
queer resource center directors from across the United States. The conversation that occurred furthered my belief that LGBTQIA+(Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Aromantic) centers and student affairs professionals did not understand asexual and aromantic identities. Nor did it seem that there was much effort being made to create resources, programming, or building community amongst asexual and/or aromantic people.

However, prior studies suggest that asexual and aromantic people are in our universities. For example, in the 2016 AVEN census survey over half of asexual and [aromantic] respondents reported that they were students (Bauer et al, 2017). Further, at Oregon State, according to LGBTQ Needs Assessment data there is a large percentage of asexual students (Diversity & Cultural Engagement, 2017, unpublished report). Throughout my research with asexual and aromantic communities, and in my personal experience as an asexual person, I contend that higher education leaders could be better supporting ace and aro communities.

It is especially important to respond to the needs of ace and aro communities because of the invisibility and exclusion often felt by members of this community (Foster & Scherrer, 2014; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). For example, within queer spaces online asexual and aromantic students have been subjected to violence for asserting their queerness (Canning, 2015). In the queer movement asexual and aromatic issues are absent and excluded (Canning, 2015). In the AVEN 2014 census only 11.4% of asexual and aromantic people felt unconditionally welcome in LGBTQIA+ spaces, despite the fact that a large portion of the population consider themselves to be LGBTQIA+ (Ginoza, 2014).

It is also the case that classrooms and curricula do not address the ace and aro communities in positive terms (Kristina Gupta, personal communication, May, 2017), and are treated as invisible (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015), and pathologized (Gupta, 2016). It seems that
asexual and aromantic students are merely an afterthought; seemingly reluctantly included in the LGBTQIA+ acronym, with no real resources or programs devoted to them. This is because of the invisibility faced by asexual and aromantic populations, as well as the underfunding, understaffed, and unsupported structures given to LGBTQIA+ spaces from their institutions.

Andrienne Rich (1986) argued:

Invisibility is a dangerous and painful condition...when those who have power to name and socially construct reality choose not to see you and hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent...when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror or saw nothing (p. 231).

This invisibility and the moments of psychic disequilibrium make pursuing a college degree all the more difficult for ace and aro students. As such, it is important to study how ace and aro students experience and navigate college environments. The study of these identities in students affairs is necessary because of our values for diversity and social justice (ACPA & NASPA, 2010).

Despite this commitment that we have made on paper there have been no research in student affairs on asexual and aromantic students. Through in-depth research and responsiveness in developing more supportive institutional cultures for asexual and/or aromantic students, the field of student affairs can counter the harm done not just to these students, but for everyone. When need to seriously understand the roles that compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity play on college campuses. To make this commitment more than non-performative we have to start enacting change in higher education. As Ahmed (2012) suggested “To generate institutional commitment means to make institutions catch up with what they say they do” (Ahmed, 2012).
Chapter one introduces us to research on asexuality and aromanticism. Chapter two describes how asexual and aromantic people are queer. Therefore literature on LGBTQ+\(^1\) populations in higher education will help us understand the experiences of asexual and aromantic students. Specifically useful to this study is campus climate research, queer kinship, resilience, and critiques of LGBTQIA+ Campus Centers. I also complicate queer community as an inclusive space. Next is discussed the theoretical frameworks for this study called a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Because there is no research in student affairs on asexual and aromantic populations the research on asexual and aromantic people at large will help us to understand collegiate experiences. Then described are several experiences that happen to asexual and aromantic people including identity disclosure discrimination, corrective rape and relationship violence, and mental and physical health issues. There is also a specific discussion on the tensions between asexual and aromantic communities and LGBTQ+ communities. Lastly is included research on other salient identities to asexual and aromantic people including disability, gender, and race, and racialized sexual tropes are also discussed.

Chapter 3 introduces the critical research paradigm that is used throughout this work. To make the experiences of asexual and aromantic students more visible a methodology called Photovoice was chosen. This methodology make visible the participants because it uses photography, you see their experiences through their lens. It has several components including that it is an arts-based methodology and a participatory action research method. Photovoice research in higher education is discussed to give explanation for its usage in this study. Then context for the study is given for readers to understand why I chose the university I did to study.

\(^1\) I use the term LGBTQ, LGBTQIA+ differently throughout this research. LGBTQ+ is used in reference to the queer community as separate from asexual and aromantic communities. LGBTQIA+ is the most inclusive way to refer to the community where the A stands for asexual and aromantic NOT allies.
The process through which I engaged in Photovoice with my participants is established next, including participant recruitment, and demographics. Data sources and collection methods are then demonstrated. The participants engaged in participatory analysis with myself, and the themes they found were further refined. Ethics, research positionality, trustworthiness of the study were clarified next and lastly, the limitations of the study were expressed.

Chapter four describes the findings of this research including the initial themes created. These themes were Resilience, Education, Community, Hit or Miss, Reclaiming Valentine’s Day, Exclusion and Othering, Creating Your Own Space. Then I argue the revised themes. Exclusion and *othering* includes the ways in which asexual and aromantic students described being invisible, dehumanized, unnatural, fixable, and receiving messages that they were unworthy of intimacy or relationships. Othering in LGBTQIA+ spaces and community was described in detail separately because of its pervasiveness that was exacerbated by participants other salient identities.

The next theme is sexual coercion and violence and the importance of consent in asexual and aromantic communities. Described were ways in which compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity were forced or pressured upon students. Consent was described as an important tool to mediate the social forces at play manifested by compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity. A need for education was described as essential from the participants, because currently their identities were described as invisible in their classes, queer spaces and community, and everywhere else. Also conveyed was the burden, tokenization, and outing experienced by these students once they disclosed their identities that often kept them quiet.

The resistance and resilience of participants was crucial for their belonging. They described the ways in which they practiced resiliency despite facing barriers formed by
compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity. They reclaimed things that were harmful to them, wrote their identities into existence, fought back against the invisibility they face, and engaged in the practice of imagining.

The theme of Belonging and Kinship was separate from Resilience and Resistance but the two are intrinsically linked. Kinship was so important for asexual and aromantic students to feel like that someone cared about them and wanted them to succeed. Belonging was created by loudly being out, by creating spaces for themselves, finding kinship and community with others, and by creating symbols of resistance and community.

These findings helped lead to an understanding of the implications for higher education, including the recommendations for practice in higher education. This study suggests that asexual and aromantic students need to recognize the ways in which compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity are enforced and upheld through the culture, practices, and policy of higher education. They need broad education and awareness of asexual and aromantic identities as well as the study of Asexualities Studies, and we need opportunities created for asexual and aromantic students to build kinship networks. Lastly, suggestions for further research are given.

My hope for this work is to start a dialogue in higher education about its values, and to start a restructuring of the ways in which we as student affairs professionals cause harm every day. Whether that comes in the form of compulsory sexuality, amatonormativity, white supremacy, or ableism, we need to be aware of our privilege and power to do something about it. Greater awareness and education of the needs and identities of asexual and aromantic students is needed. I strongly urge that this includes a critical view into the lived experiences of these students as whole people, who are asexual or aromantic and Latinx, Native American, Black,
disabled, or neurodivergent. All our identities are impacted by systems of oppression and no best practice works for these students.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Rojas (2012) wrote that social movements are interwoven with universities as nearly every significant moment in the past century has had relationships with the university system, from civil rights to gay rights. We know that asexual and aromantic students are at our universities already, but what is being done to understand and support them? While there are various studies of student diversity in higher education (Smith, 2012), there are currently no published studies that address the experiences of asexual and aromantic students. Because of this gap, this literature review will connect the research on LGBTQ+ students to asexual and aromantic research at large. The section ends with the theoretical framework that guides this thesis.

Every year the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (the forum website where the asexual movement started) conducts a survey of its members. In 2016 over 96% of respondents said that asexuality should be a part of the LGBTQIA+ umbrella (Bauer et al., 2017). This survey was answered by more than nine thousand people worldwide. I assert in this paper that this is proof enough that asexual and aromantic people are a part of the queer community. There are also several similarities between the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students and the experiences of asexual and aromantic people (Pryzybylo, & Cooper, 2014; Robbins, Low, & Query, 2016). For example, both asexual/aromantic and trans people experience feeling invisible (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Pryor, 2018) and coming out is experienced by all queer identities (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Stevens, 2004). As such, I draw from related literature to help define how these students may experience their campuses.

LGBTQ+ Experiences in Higher Education
There have been several studies on LGBTQ+ students in higher education. Researchers have looked at identity development (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Love, Bock, Jannarone & Richardson, 2005; Stevens, 2004; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012); multiple intersections of identity (Poynter, Washington, 2005; Nicolazzo, 2017); career development (Scott, Belke, Barfield, 2011; Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003); campus climate (Alexander, 2009; Brown & Gortmaker, 2009; Evans & Herriott, 2004; Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007; Rankin, 2006, 2010; Vaccaro, 2012); leadership of LGBTQ+ students (Fassinger, Shullman & Stevenson, 2010; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Renn, 2007; Sanlo, 2002); retention and student success (Kosciw, Palmer & Kull, 2014; Sanlo, 2005); LGBTQ+ centers and their inclusion (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014); queer kinship (Freeman, 2008; Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, & Woodford, (2017)); LGBTQ+ community college students (Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2015; Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016; Ivory, 2005; Ottenritter, 2012); experiences in housing (Evans & Broido, 2009); campus organizations (Garvey & Rankin, 2014); and the harassment or violence they can experience (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni & Walters, and Zarate, 2011; D’Augelli, 1994;). Consistently, these studies suggest that LGBTQ+ students experience a hostile campus climate, and struggle while in college.

Recently, there has been a surge in work specifically about transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary students. Researchers have explored trans* students’ experiences in resident housing (Krum, Davis, Galupo, 2013; Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015; Nicolazzo, Marine & Wagner, 2018); explored the experiences of transgender men (Catalano, 2017); trans masculine students (Jourian 2017, 2018); trans* and gender nonconforming students at women’s colleges (Marine, 2012; Nanney & Brunsma, 2017) gender nonconforming identity development (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012); trans* issues on campuses (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, Curtis, Davis & Tubbs,
ASEXUAL AND AROMANTIC STUDENTS

2005; Beemyn, Domingue, Pettitt & Smith, 2005; Bilodeau, 2005; Nicolazzo, 2016; Seelman, 2014) and trans* student’s resiliency and kinship (Nicolazzo, 2016; Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn & Woodford, 2015). Together, these studies suggest that there is widespread genderism on campus that effects trans students in negative ways such as violence, harassment, and invisibility. For this study, the research on campus climate, queer kinship and resilience, and LGBTQIA+ campus centers is useful to help us understand asexual and aromantic students and they are described next.

**LGBTQ+ campus climate.** This research focuses on how campus is experienced by LGBTQ+ people and how people at a campus think of LGBTQ+ people. Research by several campus climate surveys found that LGBTQ+ students perceive their campuses as unwelcoming environments (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Keilig, 2004; Rankin, 2006; Rankin, et al., 2010). Blumenfeld, Weber, and Rankin’s (2016) participants described feeling that their institutions were doing nothing or little to improve conditions for them. Attending what they perceive to be unwelcoming or hostile campuses, students reported lower interest in staying at those institutions, and discouraged future students, staff, and faculty from attending them (Blumenfeld, et al., 2016) These students are 30% more likely than their peers to consider leaving their universities (Rankin et al, 2010); and if a student believes their needs are unimportant or they are excluded from campus life they are less likely to persist through graduation. Woodford, Chonody, Kulick, Brenan, and Renn (2015) found that sexual orientation microaggressions were more common than overt expression of heterosexism. They stated that these microaggressions “threaten LGBQ students’ academic development and psychological wellbeing” (p. 1). The concept of microaggressions originated within studies of racism (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Wills, 1977) and has been applied to sexual minorities (Woodford, et al., 2015).
Microaggressions entail “everyday brief, low-intensity events that convey negative messages about the targeted group” (Woodford, et al., 2015, p.1). The study by Woodford et al. (2015) found that microaggressions were prevalent on college campuses for sexual minorities.

The 2010 National College Climate Survey found that: “Colleges and universities are failing to provide LGBTQQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning) people with an environment that research suggests is necessary for learning and scholarship” (Rankin, et al., 2010, p. 6). LGBTQ+ students face harassment and violence (Basalm, et al., 2011; Nadal, Issa, Leon, Meterko, Wideman, & Wong, 2011; Rankin, 2003; Rankin, et al., 2010; Waldo, Hesson-McInnis, & D’Augelli, 1998) and were more targeted for harassment than heterosexual and cisgender students (Evans & Broido, 2002, Rankin et al., 2010); a majority of students hid their identity because they feared for their safety (Rankin et al., 2010; Windmeyer, Humphrey, & Barker, 2013). Because of this harassment and stigmatization, LGBTQ+ students face severe problems that affect their physical and mental health which alters their ability to succeed in college (Sanlo, 2005). These include low self-esteem, feeling alienated, isolated, invisible, experiencing depression, anxiety and the potential for suicide (Sanlo, 2004).

It is important to note that not all LGBTQIA+ identities experience campus climate in the same ways. Bisexual college students have had different experiences than their lesbian and gay counterparts (Dugan, & Yurman, 2011). Despite the fact that we are all a part of the queer community, we do not all share the same identities. Bisexual students in research conducted by Dugan and Yurman (2011) were found to experience ostracism from both heterosexual and gay communities. Understanding that different populations with the queer umbrella have different needs, it has been recommended that we study individual identity experiences (Dugan, & Yurman, 2011).
There is a relationship between the way students view campus climate and the way they interact with students and professors in the classroom (Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2015). Studies on community colleges especially have conveyed that faculty can make a hostile classroom for these students by refusing to acknowledge their existence, or challenging their identities in class (Garvey, et al., 2015). Students in one study were upset that they were always absent from curriculum in classrooms (Garvey, et al., 2015). It is no wonder then why LGB students choose what major they will graduate in based on whether or not it is perceived as welcoming of LGB people (Longerbeam, et al., 2007). Negative experiences in the classroom have led to queer and trans students feeling silenced, and trans* students specifically have felt invisible when their identities were treated as non-existent (Garvey & Rankin, 2015). This invisibility has hindered students in the coming out process (Garvey & Rankin, 2015). Trans* students shared that they needed faculty to create an atmosphere wherein they could express themselves. When faculty failed to provide such a space, participants were forced to advocate for themselves and educate others at their own risk (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017). When they were faced with their identities being treated as subjects in the classroom, the students had two options; either they stay silent and remain invisible or they use their identity to have their voice heard (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017). For those who remained invisible, the interactions they had with faculty were minimized and students avoided conversations about their identities (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017). Having to educate others about their identity had taxing effects on trans students. (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017). Dealing with the macro discourses of genderism had its effect on the micro interactions trans students had daily (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017).

**Campus Racial Climate**
In addition to understanding how LGBTQ+ individuals experience college campuses, I draw on literature that leads to understanding on how racially minoritized individuals experience the campus environment. Prior studies suggest that that campus racial climate is also hostile, unwelcoming, and not inclusive (Pieterse, Evans, Walter, & Mallinckrodt, 2010; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado 1992; Reid, Radhakrishnan & Wyat, 2003; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Stewart, 2008). Research shows that minority students tend to have a lower sense of belonging than their peers (Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008).

Racial microaggressions are unconscious and subtle attacks toward people of color and happen all the time on college campuses (Patton, 2011). These microaggressions are shown to have a significant impact on students where they felt isolation, frustration, and self-doubt (Solarzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), and affected their academic performance, and their ability to stay in college (Solarzano, et al., 2000). Students of color talked about being invisible in the classroom and curriculum and put in positions to represent their entire race (Solarzano et al., 2000). Microaggressions, whether conscious or unconscious, inform our institutions, laws, schools, churches, and the personal lives of people of color. Patton, Raneiro, and Everett (2011) wrote that “racism is still a pervasive issue that has been internalized and institutionalized to the point of being an essential and inherently functioning component of everyday life” (p. 69). Many campuses are still structured in racist and oppression ways that produce microaggressions (Patton, 2011).

The experiences of queer and trans students of color illuminate that finding a home in racial cultural centers or in LGBT centers can be a struggle. They deal with the possibility of both heteronormativity, genderism in racial cultural centers and racism in white centered LGBTQ+ spaces (Patton, et al., 2011). The research on sense of belonging with gay students was
done on the lives of gay men of color at predominantly white and historically black colleges in the United States (Strayhorn, 2012) Strayhorn found that gay men of color in his national student survey often found themselves in situations where they felt they did not belong or matter to others on campus. Participants identified several campus settings in which they felt feelings of isolation or alienation, often due to anti-gay discrimination, homophobia, or racism (Strayhorn, 2012). Why then do not all college students who are marginalized and oppressed drop out of college?

Research on kinship and resilience is especially important for us to understand how students persist despite multiple forms of oppression and barriers that affect them. Morrow and Ackermann (2012) found that having a high sense of belonging meant less perceived isolation, which lead students to persist to their second year (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). There is also a connection between sense of belonging and college students seeking help from peers for classes (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Membership in social community organizations and engagement and sense of belonging were connected, and memberships in racial-ethnic student organizations helped mediate the effects of an adverse campus climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Students who are more involved in college life felt a stronger connection with others on campus than those who are less involved, or not at all (Strayhorn, 2012). All these findings relate a sense of belonging as vital towards students’ success, likelihood to persist, and students’ health and wellbeing. Belonging is therefore crucial for students to have while attending colleges or universities, and for their basic survival. We need to belong and matter.

**Queer Kinship and Resilience**

Often when we think of kinship, we envision a biological family politicized and stabilized in law, as in next-of-kin. For example, marriage law stabilizes the biological family as
the most important and beneficial relationship in individuals’ lives (Weston, 1991). Although kinship has been described as being among blood relatives or families of origin, it is in actuality more than that (Nicolazzo, 2017). Kinship studies have illuminated that people experience family and kinship in a variety of different ways (Weston, 1991; Nicolazzo, 2017). Kinship and family-making can be “friends; they may also encompass lovers, co-parents, adopted children, children from previous heterosexual relationships, and offspring conceived through alternative insemination” (Weston, 1991, p. 3). Examples of kinship in my own life have looked like deep queer friendships. These kin attended my wedding in place of my biological family. We take care of each other in the same ways that biological families are supposed to. The kinship networks are often called ‘families we choose’ in queer communities (Weston, 1991). In fact, remaining friends with exes, creating homes with friends, and chosen family is a radical distancing from legal kinship.

Queer and trans kinship networks have also been studied in relationship to student success in higher education. Nicolazzo (2017) defined a kinship network for trans students as a:

- Close group of peers who recognized and honored participants’ gender identities, expressions, or embodiments; provided a refuge from the cultural realities of gender binary discourse and compulsory heterogenderism on campus and; acted as a potential site for participants to use to resist or push back against systemic trans oppression, if they chose (p.123).

Additionally, kinship networks did not have to include exclusively trans people. Queer folk have been found to make their own families and networks of support, whether that be in person or online (Nicolazzo, et al., 2017).
The internet was vital for Nicolazzo’s (2017) participants in learning about their trans identities; Tumblr, a blog site, was mentioned as a place of education and community building. Tumblr had a large queer presence that was important for learning about trans identity in ways that were comfortable and safe, and allowed participants to appreciate trans* people’s lives that were not sensationalized as they were in the media. Work on trans kinship by Nicolazzo, et al. (2017), has shown us that having trans* kinship networks increases student success and the ability to be resilient in the face of violence and discrimination. It also revealed that a positive academic climate regarding a participant’s identity can motivate the development of kinship networks (Nicolazzo, 2017). Resilience work in LGBTQ+ higher education literature teaches us that LGB students often experience loneliness and that having peers with similar identities may alleviate that loneliness (Longerbeam, et al., 2007). Kinship networks therefore are a method of practicing resilience, so the two are inherently related to each other. Despite hostile campus climates, LGBTQ+ students persist (Pitcher, et al., 2016). Work by Pitcher et al. (2016) has illuminated that university policies and procedures, services, programs, LGBTQ+ resource centers, and student organizations are important sources of support for LGBTQ+ students and increase student success.

**Resilience Theory.** Resilience theory focuses on risk factors and the conditions that pose a threat to an individual or community (Nicolazzo, 2017). Nicolazzo’s (2017) study pointed out that there are risk factors for trans college students that pose challenges and threats to their success and wellbeing. But trans students still persisted and achieved success regardless. Community is an incredible component to resilience theory (Nicolazzo, 2017). For Nicolazzo’s (2017) study it was important to know exactly how community was formed, maintained, and navigated. Resilience needed to be defined as more than just retention for students as it only
focusing on retention did not show the microaggressions, trans oppression, and minority stress that trans students face (Nicolazzo, 2017).

**LGBTQ+ Campus Centers**

Patton (2012) argues that campus cultural centers are spaces for resistance and resilience building, homes away from home. LGBTQ+ resource centers have been found to be important for three reasons: they provide physical space, community and professional support, and serve as the symbol of LGBTQ+ support and inclusion. (Pitcher, et al., 2016). The primary functions of a LGBTQ+ Center, according to Self and Hudson (2015), are for safety, legitimacy, and advocacy. Provided by every center was some basic level of survival for LGBTQ+ people. These centers were a refuge from having to always be an educator for non-LGBTQ+ people, as well as providing community (Self & Hudson, 2015). Legitimacy of the center was related to whether or not the center was viewed as valid by the university. LGBTQ+ centers provide necessary legitimacy and credibility and were the platform for advocacy on their campuses (Self & Hudson, 2015). This depended on funding and authority given to a center; it greatly mattered how well a LGBTQ+ community could be served by the legitimacy it was offered by its university (Self & Hudson, 2016). What Self and Hudson (2015) described was that often times these centers are in survival mode. They are too busy fighting for funding or legitimizing the need for a center that they end up doing less work that is intersectional and critical of itself (Self & Hudson, 2015).

Critiquing LGBTQ+ Centers’ names and transgender inclusion, Marine and Nicolazzo (2014) found tension between trans students and LGBTQ+ centers. What they came to find was that almost all programming was done about trans people but not *for* them; it largely was about teaching non-trans people about what trans* identities were (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). This
study also describes the need for educators to be intentional with their language. A Stephen Quaye quote in this study said: “Language is important because it conveys messages to people about their worth, which they then internalize as truth” (Quay, 2011, p. 285). This rings true not just for trans people, but for queers with disabilities, and queer people of color (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014).

What this review teaches us is that colleges and universities are hostile and unwelcoming for queer people. They are exposed to violence and harassment, which affect their physical and mental health. Because of the threat of violence they often hid their identities to stay safe. Not all identities experience campus climate the same and they need different strategies for inclusion and resources. Queer students are invisible in classrooms and curriculum, and trans students especially felt invisible in their classrooms. They felt burdened to educate about their identities and they had to be out to advocate for themselves, educating others at their own risk. Racial campus climate also effects safety, isolation, self-doubt, violence and harassment experienced by students of color. But multiple forms of oppression often led to not belonging in campus cultural resource centers because they were unable to be their whole selves, often experiencing genderism, heteronormativity, and racism. Yet despite all of this negativity students found ways to persist towards graduation by practicing resilience and building kinship with each other. LGBTQ+ centers were important for finding community and support but were also critiqued because trans students faced exclusion and invisibility in these spaces. Queer politics and theory have an impact on the way that LGBTQ+ movement operates. I am going to veer slightly to talk about queer theories implications in higher education.

Coalitional Politics
Subjection is used by Spade (2011) to indicate the power relationships that impact how we know ourselves as subjects through system of control. They affect the ways we understand our bodies, the things we believe about ourselves and our relationship with others and institutions, and the ways we imagine change and transformation. Spade (2011) argues that we need to understand how power operates to be truly liberated and we cannot do so by simplifying it. What Spade (2011) argues is that systems of control permeate our lives, the ways we know the world, and the ways we imagine transformation. What Spade (2011) means by all of this is that systems of control stay in power because people created them and recreated them over time because we teach them. We are socialized to believe things about race, gender, sexuality, religion, and more. For example, as a child I was taught that only two genders existed and this socialization affected how I identified myself and how I told others, and how I felt about myself. Our society has created laws, policies, culture all based off of ways of knowing that are taught and upheld over time.

We are taught neoliberalism as subjects to the systems of control that exist today (Spade, 2011). Neoliberalism again is the ideology or theory of political economy that proposes that people can advance liberation through capitalism in an institutional framework (Foucault, 1980). They explains that neoliberalism has had an effect on lesbian and gay rights. There has been a shift from a more transformative social movement agenda to inclusion and incorporation (Spade, 2011). This has looked like the creation of nonprofit organizations that are run hierarchically that champion corporations and push inclusion (Spade, 2011). For example of neoliberalism politics in the gay movement look at how corporate pride festivals and parades have become. Key agenda items of this strategy included anti-discrimination laws focused on employment, military
inclusion, decriminalizing sodomy, hate crime laws, and more. These examples are what Spade (2011) calls law reform strategies.

Marine and Nicolazzo (2014) wrote that several of their participants, who were LGBTQ+ center directors, expressed concern that they did not have enough time to focus on programming for all queer identities. They argue that coalitional trans politics written by Spade (2011) gives LGBTQIA+ Center staff insight into creating an intersectional approach to their programming and work that can help them forge unique partnerships across the campus community. Spade (2011) argues that coalitional politics resists neoliberalism and identity politics by focusing on those who are most affected by oppression. Identity specific activism (or identity politics) has segmented activism along dimensions of identity that do not recognize the intersectionality of people, and keep us from seeing the collective oppression and goals we all have in common (Spade, 2011). Neoliberal trends that Spade (2011) mentions are the shift in relationship between workers and owners (which has led to the decline of labor unions), dismantling of welfare programs, trade liberalization, increased criminalization and immigration enforcement, and more. For example, we question if immigration is not a queer issue if undocumented queer and trans people exist and are policed and receive violence? Spade (2011) calls for a mobilized focus led by those living on the sharpest intersecting edges of multiple systems of oppression and control. They argue that such a political movement is unrecognizable as LGBT politics. It focuses on prison abolition, criminal justice reform, wealth redistribution, organizing against immigration enforcement, and actually focusing on the political practices that address queer and trans survival (Spade, 2011). Another queer theory that guides this research is the politics of hope, which is described next.

**Politics of Critical Hope**
Giroux (2003) wrote that we need educated hope to combat a neoliberal, anti-utopian future. What that means is that we live in a world that is controlled by multimillion dollar companies that are out of reach of the realm of law, and we live in a world that squashes hope. So in opposition to this, we should create educated hope and dream of utopian futures (Giroux, 2003). Giroux (2003) illustrated that workers should resurrect a language of resistance and possibility, radical imagination, and militant utopianism. This hope is an educated one that uses theory to address social problems and civic courage to mediate the memory loss of the country (Giroux, 2003). Hope for Giroux (2003), acknowledges “the capacity to see the worst and offer more than that for our consideration (p. 99).” He argues that the discourse of critique and hope together are crucial for the possibility of social change. He also tells us that higher education is one of the few sites left for students to learn about the limits of commercial value and to learn the skills of social citizenship, which work to deepen and expand the possibilities of collective agency and democratic life. What Giroux is arguing is a strategy for politics that relies on using radical imagination and hope as a way to create social change. In my life I can see and name this strategy being used in movements like Black Lives Matter. Walidah Imarisha (2017), who I saw in person speak at the Change makers Conference in 2017, spoke about this politic of hope and radical imagination. She said that we could not reach a utopian future without colonialism, racism, queerphobia, sexism, and all the -isms without first imagining how to live in a world without them. Without this critical hope and imagination we would re-create the same structures that we know now. Ending this section on LGBTQ+ experiences in higher education I now connect these experiences and the experiences explained in asexual and aromantic research.

Asexual and Aromantic Experiences
Asexual and aromantic communities began to form social and political movements online as early as 2001. The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network or AVEN, a forum based website, was started during that time by prominent asexual activist David Jay. With the organization of the AVEN platform, as well as other online spaces such as Tumblr blogs, Facebook groups, local gatherings and national conferences, asexual activists have been able to accomplish several goals. For example, the ace community has coordinated asexual awareness programming, taken part in Pride parades in cities around the world, and have organized an annual International Asexuality Conference since 2014 (Przybylo, 2014).

Described here is more detail on compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2015), the assumption and social construction that all humans are sexual, and amatonormativity (Brake, 2012), the assumption and social construction that romantic relationships are normative, previously mentioned in the introduction. Both amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality are used throughout this thesis in examples of the barriers that asexual and aromantic people face because of these systems of oppression. I’ll also explain the research done on asexual and aromantic people that illuminate pathologization, exclusion even from queer community and spaces, discrimination and negative mental and health outcomes, and corrective rape and relationship violence. It is important that other identity vectors be described because the effects are far greater on ace and aro people who are trans, have a disability, or are people of color.

**Compulsory Sexuality and Amatonormativity**

Compulsory sexuality is the assumption that all people are sexual (Gupta, 2015). This social construct has had effects on asexual and aromantic people; we are treated as abnormal, or unnatural if we do not have sex or engage in intimacy in unconventional ways; our identity, or just our individuality may be treated as a disorder or as immoral. (Gupta, 2013). Reparative
therapies exist for asexual and aromantic people similar to other identities that have been deemed as unnatural, wrong, or immoral, such as being gay, or transgender (Chasin, 2014). Understanding compulsory sexuality allows us to see that college campuses are especially sexualized spaces. Wade (2017) talks about hook-up culture on campus and an expected unattachment to sexual partners, and even though students may not be having casual sex as much as everyone thinks they are, including themselves; there seems to be a performative aspect to sexuality that may push people into unwanted sexual encounters (Wade, 2017). Gupta (2015) found that there is proof of compulsory sexuality everywhere. For example many studies have found that heterosexual women are more likely to engage in unwanted sex than heterosexual men, but the rates of consensual unwanted sex among these men are also high. (Gupta, 2015). This research illuminates that not only are asexual and aromantic people affected by compulsory sexuality, but everyone is (Alcaire, 2015; Gupta, 2015; Kim, 2011; Scherrer, 2008).

This reveals that peering into the lives of asexual and aromantic people allow us to see the ways in which compulsory sexuality is enacted. Compulsory sexuality written and defined by Emens (2013; 2014) and Gupta (2015) is not a new subject. Michel Foucault (1980) argued for compulsory sexuality without naming it so. Foucault (1980) argued that sex has been defined for Western societies as the key to who we are. He argues that the subject is a sexual subject, and what he means by that is that institutions make us sexual subjects (a person who is ruled by the state) through practices of subjection (the action of subjecting a country or person to one’s control). If we do not act like sexual subjects we won’t receive recognition (be seen) from others and ourselves. By letting ourselves be defined as sexual subjects we give power (institutions) control over our bodies and lives. Relating to the subject on subjection Foucault also talked about
neoliberalism. Foucault argues that the self becomes produced through discourse and practice of neoliberalism.

Gupta (2016) analyzed compulsory sexuality and its effects asexual and aromantic people; she found that two-thirds of the participants reported feeling isolated or alienated from others or society because of the stigmatization and invisibility of asexuality (Gupta, 2016). The invisibility and over sexualization of media lead many in the study to feel broken, as if they were not human for not wanting sex (Gupta, 2016). Fahs (2010) argued that sex is an institution that is linked with state power and connects relatively personal practices with larger social and cultural narratives. Evidence for this is found in research on the role of compulsory sexuality in capitalism and the profit-driven media sector (Gupta, 2015). Western society privileges sexual identifications and desires, and marginalize and oppress non-sexualities and non-monogamies, which are a detrimental to asexual and aromantic identified individuals and others (Copulsky, 2016; Gupta, 2016). You can see this power that sexuality has in the ways we engage in sexual behavior (Gupta, 2011, 2015, 2016); the way we privilege sexual and romantic relationships over other relationships (Gressgard, 2013); the ways compulsory sexuality shows up in law (Emens, 2014), and how sexuality and non-sexuality have been pathologized (Gupta, 2011).

Elizabeth Emens (2014) wrote on compulsory sexuality and the way asexuality challenges the law and sheds light on a sexualized legal system. Emens (2014) argues that law has been shaped by sexuality and sex norms, based on the idea that sex is important. Interactions included requirement of sexual activity, special carve outs to shield sexuality from law, legal protections for sexual identity and from other’s sexualities (Emens, 2014). She points out in her article that in some US states, marriage requires sexual consummation in order to receive full legal ratification, and if not consummated there is ground for voiding the marriage (Emens,
In an immigration context, failure to consummate the marriage renders the marriage a sham. Under immigration law, proxy marriages, marriages in which the couple is not physically present for the marriage ceremony, are not recognized until consummation. Emens argues that in several ways marriage therefore requires sexual activity and thereby marriage law effects asexuals (Emens, 2014). Domestic partnerships have even more limitations for asexuals as an alternative to marriage; but these partnerships often impose requirements such as cohabitation, shared finances, and monogamy; some even may require sexual consummation. (Emens, 2014). Workplace policies that pay for spousal and family benefits could have an impact and exclude asexuals and aromantic people (Emens, 2014).

Amatonormativity is “the assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types” (Brake, 2012 p. 88). For an example of amatonormativity look at the rights that are afforded to married people, or the ways in which people are viewed as incomplete until they find a monogamous partner. We have been socialized to believe that we need a soul mate, that we have to get married, or at least end up getting old with a monogamous partner (Brake, 2012). We are expected to have these types of relationships in our lives and we are discriminated against if we do not follow this script (Brake, 2012). We only value people as units and not as individuals which denies individuals’ inherent value and worth (Brake, 2012). How many times have you been asked by a family member when are you going to get married? Amatonormativity does not reveal the complexity and diversity of human relationships.

Neal (2016) listed five ways that amatonormativity sets harmful relationship norms.
compatibility, makes non monogamy more difficulty, leaves asexual and aromantic vulnerable, and it leaves abuse culture intact (Neal, 2016). Romantic orientations very existence have illuminated the ways in which romantic relationships are privileged through legal, and social ways (Neal, 2016). There are drastic legal effects for those not engaging in normative relationships; including exemptions from sexual battery in some jurisdictions (Brake, 2012), privileging of legal rights and responsibilities, including 1049 federal laws, (Scherrer, 2010) and the penalization of caring relationships that do not fit the norm. Amatonormativity effects all bodies and relationships including inaccessibility to healthcare, legal access rights for an abusive spouse, and marriage promotion (Brake, 2012). Because of the expectations around sex and relationships, asexual and aromantic people can be put in vulnerable situations (Neal, 2016).

Neal (2016) explains that aromantic people are “more likely to be pressured into unwanted romantic or sexual situations and worse” (Neal, 2016). Because of the ways in which society and the media teach us about relationships and sexuality as a tool of amatonormativity, we practice what we see. Neal (2016) bring up an important critique that society treats love like it is on a pedestal, and there is no critique of the ways in which love is enacted harmfully. “Because it says that if they love you, they can’t hurt you. Because if you love them, you can’t leave. Because all you need is love. Because you can’t give up on your soulmate” (Neal, 2016). If we continue to go on unquestioning amatonormativity we continue to keep abuse culture intact.

Described next are examples of how compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity impact asexual and aromantic people’s lives. This includes the pathologization of their identities, discrimination, negative experiences after coming out, corrective rape and relationship violence, and mental and physical health issues. These experiences that affect asexual and aromantic
people’s lives also are triple fold for asexual and aromantic people of color, so described are
other identity vectors that help us complicate the narrative of asexual and aromantic experiences.

**Pathologizing Asexuality**

Pathologizing someone means to treat them as psychologically abnormal or unhealthy. Let me just say right now that being asexual or aromantic is totally healthy. But the field of psychology has pathologized asexual and aromantic people since the 1970’s. (Brotto, 2010, p. 611). A major part of the psychological research on asexuality has been on the pathologization of it (Aiken, Mercer, & Cassell, 2013; Bogaert, 2004, 2006, 2012; Brotto & Yule, 2011; Broto, Yule, & Gorzalka, 2015; Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes, & Erskine, 2010; Cranney, 2014; Hoglund, Jern, Sandnabba, & Santtila, 2012; Lippa, 2017; Prause & Graham, 2007; Poston & Baumle, 2010; Van Houdenhove, Gijs, T’Sjoen, & Enzlin 2014; Yule, Broto, & Gorzalka, 2017).

This matters for this study because it illuminates the ways in which asexuality has been treated, much like gay and trans people, as a disorder and as un-human behavior that must be fixed or altered. Chasin (2014), a feminist researcher, compared the mistreatment of gay, lesbian, and transgender people by the field of psychology as similar to the ways that asexual people are pathologized and treated.

Since the 1970s, asexuality has been categorized in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD). HSDD is defined in the DSM as “persistently or recurrently deficient or absent sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity” (Brotto, 2010, p. 611). According to several researchers, Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder can be challenged as a social construction (Bishop; 2013; Bogaert, 2012; Flore, 2013; Yule et al, 2013). There are several arguments against the use of HSDD as a diagnosis, including that a majority of the research up until 2013 had been done by sexuality and psychology researchers.
ASEXUAL AND AROMANTIC STUDENTS

who hold biases and assumptions that not having sex is unnatural and inhuman (Brotto & Yule, 2017; Chasin, 2011; Flore, 2013). Many feminists have commented and critiqued the field of psychology for the way it has pathologized asexuality and aromanticism (Chasin 2013, 2014; Flore 2013; Przybylo, 2013; McLellan, 2015). In 2011, Pryzybylo argued that the pathologies of nonsexuality become assigned to those who do not repeat sexuality or who do not enjoy repeating it. The DSM-IV-TR identifies several sexual disorders in women: Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder, Sexual Aversion Disorder, Female Sexual Arousal Disorder, Female Orgasmic Disorder, Dyspareunia, and Vaginismus. They argue that all of these serve to repeat an androcentric model (male focused) of sexual desire, orgasm, and coitus (Pryzybylo, 2011).

Feminist scholar Jacinthe Flore argues that the DSM manual does not provide measures, scales, or norms for diagnoses, yet it assumes normative sexuality against which all other sexualities can be measured and classified (Flore, 2013).

Hinderliter argued that since the mid-1990s, there has been an increasing influence of the pharmaceutical industry in treating and researching sexual problems. He used examples such as the creation of Viagra for women based on the huge profitability of Viagra for men, which Hindliter says “demonstrated sexual scientists’ poor understanding of female sexual problems.” (Hinderliter, 2013, p. 4). This led to the creation of the Female Sexual Dysfunction diagnosis, and began a collaboration of the pharmaceutical industry and sex researchers (Hinderliter, 2013; Kim, 2010).

The danger of the DSM is that it becomes a powerful bio political tool (Foucault, 1980); it creates the norms regarding sexual behavior and it can have devastating impacts on individuals lives. Throughout its history it has been an enforcer of heteronormativity and a reinforcement of procreative ideologies (Alcaire, 2015). It discursively states that there are people who are
unchangeable and in need of paternalistic protection from the medical community and the state healthcare system (Alcaire, 2015). It uses its power as a tool to provide state structures with legitimacy to separate certain groups of people from society and to other them (Alcaire, 2015).

Moving on to the medical field, Gupta (2011) talks about sex for health discourse, or the use of sex as healthy for you by the medical field, which has been exaggerated by popular media. The scientific research and the popular press omit details and positions sex as universally applicable (Gupta, 2011). Sex for health claims, using science and medicine, that sexual activity leads to physical and mental health benefits (Gupta, 2011). They argue that although sex-for-health may de-stigmatize sex for some, it also increases pressure to be sexually active and contributes to the pathologization of asexuality and aromanticism, as well as other forms of non-sexuality (Gupta, 2011). This suggests that there is bias in the medical field regarding assumed sexuality that disadvantages asexual and aromantic people.

The experience with pathologization of their identities by the medical profession has led to mistrust between them and asexual and aromantic people, and has had an impact on how society views not having sex or a romantic relationship. The majority (76.4%) of respondents from the AVEN census did not choose to come out to their mental health professionals, and most reported that if they came out to their health care provider they had neutral or negative experiences (Bauer et al., 2017). Gupta (2016) did a research study where she asked the interviewees specifically about their experiences with medical professionals, and, in response, around one half of the interviewees described experiences of pathologization. Around one third of the respondents reported that they were lead to consult a health professional to discuss their asexuality, and only one interviewee had a positive visit, and it was noted that this was unrelated to their ace identity (Gupta, 2016). The legacy of pathologization is also seen in the 2015 AVEN
census where 10.4% of respondents had seen a mental health professional because they felt pressured to (Bauer, et al., 2017). This is important to note because although participants may have felt like their identity was valid they were still pushed to see a mental health professional to fix it. This is a similar narrative from the experiences of other sexual orientations and the mental health profession. If you are likely to be seen as crazy, unnatural, or un-human for coming out as asexual or aromantic how likely are you to do so? The next section describes the experiences of ace and aro people coming out and the discrimination they’ve experienced.

**Asexual Identity Disclosure and Discrimination**

Several researchers have looked at the coming out process for asexual and aromantic people and the internet was found to have a major role in the validation of their experiences (Robbins et al, 2016). Robbins, et al. (2016) found that there were motives for coming out to friends and family, including relieved social pressure from peers, and coming out also addressed uncomfortable questions about sexual experiences or preferences. Despite this few asexuals had positive experiences when coming out (Robbins et al, 2016). MacNeela and Murphy’s (2015) participants expressed that very few people knew about their identities, and many of them perceived themselves to be living in environments where their identities were not accepted. After coming out asexual and aromantic people were likely to experience being disbelieved and dismissed of their identities (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015), pathologized (Yule et al, 2013), or told to find medical help (Robins et al, 2016). Additionally, there are several ways coming out is unique for asexual and aromantic people that are distinct from LGBTQ+ individuals; including the ways in which their identities lacked social credibility, and asexual people restricted the disclosure of their identities and isolated themselves (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). MacNeela and Murphy (2015) found that the attitudes and stigma surrounding coming out as asexual posed
significant threats to positive self-perceptions and often they managed their social unease by “passing” in social environments where heterosexuality and sexuality was assumed (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015).

Related to the ways in which asexual and aromantic people have experienced discrimination they can also be othered in communities where they would expect to feel like they belong. Despite community building and awareness building work, the 2015 AVEN survey illuminated that a significant percentage (83.4%) of respondents never participated in offline groups (Bauer et al., 2017). There exists a significant barrier that asexual and aromantic communities are online and continue to find it hard to form community and activism offline. A large majority of ace and aro respondents to the 2015 AVEN survey reported that their identities should be a part of the LGBTQI+ umbrella (80.9%). Similarly about half of respondents identified themselves as queer (Bauer et al, 2017). Yet despite this the majority of respondents (60%) did not participate in LGBTQIA+ communities outside those dedicated to asexuality or aromanticism.

**Exclusion from LGBTQIA+ Community.** There exists a tension between asexual and aromantic communities and the rest of the LGBTQ+ community. I already identified as queer at the point in my life when I was figuring out that I was asexual as well. I decided to join some online Tumblr blogs about asexuality to understand my partner and myself. What I found there was simultaneously very helpful and very harmful. The good consisted of really great useful resources for asexual and aromantic people and a community. But the bad consisted of LGBTQ+ bloggers who were attacking asexual blogs. I learned that this is called the asexual discourse online, and it happens still on most social media platforms. This discourse was created by anti-ace inclusion users claiming that asexuality was not part of the LGBTQIA+ community and that
the A in the acronym had always stood for ‘ally’. They also argued that there were certain qualifications that were needed for an identity to be a part of the LGBTQIA+ community which were defined by a need to experience oppression. Some of these anti asexual blogs became violent towards asexual bloggers, including the use of verbal threats and doxing (leaking personal information of an individual on the internet with malicious purpose) (Ashley, 2016; Vanderzee, 2017).

This practice of determining who belongs within a group and who does not relates to what Canning (2015) called identity boundaries. As queer spaces use identity-based vocabularies, they can create these boundaries with our language that can exclude others. There have been similar identity boundaries felt by bisexual women within the lesbian community. This created a debate on whether bisexual people are “queer enough” to be included in queer spaces (Canning, 2015). Oftentimes, asexual and aromantic identities are not included within the LGBTQIA+ acronym. For students like me and my friends who feel so strongly that they are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, to see ‘A’ excluded from the acronym, or defined as ‘allies’ sends a message to us that we are not welcome. Because many queer people do not consider asexuality to be queer, there are few spaces in ‘real life’ that offer safe haven for asexual people to explore or discuss their identities. “The exclusion of asexuality in queer spaces leads to many asexual people feeling isolated, solely because they are unable to connect with other people who may share their experiences” (Canning, 2015, p. 56). It is important to note that asexual communities are formed largely in response to these negative events. Thus the lack of family and friend support or community is a rather serious matter. All of these negative experiences lead asexual people to have various forms of stress and negative health consequences.
Despite this history of pathologization and minority stress experienced by asexual and aromantic people, Vanderzee (2017) found in their research on asexuality and healthcare that asexuality is not often considered in research centering queer health, nor in LGBTQ+-friendly healthcare programming and training. Foster and Scherrer (2014) examined the mental health of people who identified as asexual, and they found that the marginalization experienced by participants had consequences including victimization and psychological distress indicating minority stress. Minority stress explains the “excess stress to which individuals from stigmatized social categories are exposed as a result of their social, often a minority, position” (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress has been studied in reference to racial groups and LGBTQ+ populations and has been found to lead to poor mental and physical health overtime in minoritized groups (DiPlacido, 1998). The ability to access adequate mental and physical health care is critical for asexual and aromantic populations because of this minority stress. But pathologization and discrimination from health practitioners has created barriers towards getting health care. It also has led to a history of violence against ace and aro people. Described in this next section is the real consequences of this pathologization and compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity.

**Corrective Rape, Sexual Coercion, and Relationship Violence**

There is no specific study of asexual or aromantic students’ experiences with sexual coercion and assault on college campuses. The American Association of Universities (AAU) conducted a report on campus climate relating to sexual assault and misconduct (Westat, et al., 2015). They listed asexual as a category in the demographics asked of participants. However in the data they pulled together asexual students were combined with those who were questioning their identity, and those who did no list their identity. So although the numbers for sexual assault in this category were incredibly high, they could not be specifically linked to asexual and
aromatic students. Further research is needed to complete this gap in knowledge on sexual coercion, and assault experienced by these in higher education.

As a survivor myself, reviewing this literature and hearing stories about sexual violence brings up so much emotion for me. I cannot express to readers how pervasive and normative it is for asexual and aromantic people to experience relationship violence, sexual coercion, and sexual violence. As I was coming to understand my identity and doing research online, I was met with so many stories of violence and unwanted sex. As described earlier, asexual and aromantic people are vulnerable in situations where sex is expected of them.

I want to make a distinction between coercion and sexual assault. Coercion is a strategy used by perpetrators of violence to trick or intimidate someone into having sex without physical force (Office of Women’s Health, 2018). Coercion can also look like pressuring a partner into sex when they don’t want to (Bauer et al., 2017). But many people do not believe that manipulating, pressuring, or pushing someone into sex is also sexual assault (Westat, et al., 2015). How likely are you to report sexual coercion, if it’s just viewed as normative relationship practice? This type of assault was reported in the AAU national report on sexual assault and misconduct by less than 1% of students, with trans* student reporting more than other students (Westat, et al., 2015). The AVEN census asked two questions in their census I believe to point out this. Respondents were asked two questions one specifying if they’ve ever been raped, and the other asking if they had ever experienced sex that they did not give consent to or were incapable of giving consent to (Bauer et al., 2017). What they found was that only some participants believed that any version of non-consensual sex was considered rape (Bauer et al., 2017). For those who had answered that that they were unsure if they had been raped almost half (49.5%) experienced non-consensual sex.
Relationship violence can take many forms, but for ace and aro people, this could look like pressure from a partner for sexual activity. For instance in the AVEN census, respondents were more likely to come out to their friends (both queer and non-queer) than their partners (Bauer et al, 2017). Respondents reported having had sex due to social pressure from a partner (18.5%), and half of respondents reported experiencing sexual violence from their partners (50.6%) (Bauer et al, 2017). For example, Gupta (2016) found that two thirds of interviewees reported that social norms about sexuality and relationality and the invisibility of their identities negatively affected their interpersonal relationships, and in turn, these norms made it difficult to keep a romantic relationship with partners if they did not want sex (Gupta, 2016).

Corrective rape is also a common occurrence in these communities. Accounts from ace activists, like Decker suggest that merely identifying as ace is enough to be targeted with death threats and the need for a “good raping” (as cited in Mosenberg, 2013). In the AVEN census overall 43.5% of respondents reported having experienced sexual violence. This is comparable to other LGBT populations. The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (Black, et al., 2010) found that 44 percent of lesbians and 61 percent of bisexual women experience rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner; and 40 percent of gay men and 47 percent of bisexual men have experienced sexual violence other than rape. Whether a particular asexual person experienced sexual violence or not, the fear that such violence would occur looms large.

Consent can be something hard to navigate and understand in any relationship but especially in relationships with asexual and aromantic partners. If we are to truly provide for asexual and aromantic people on our campuses and universities, their existence must be advocated for by health professionals and those who work in sexual violence prevention and advocacy work. Especially when it comes to the experiences of asexual and aromantic people
with other salient oppressed and marginalized identities. They face several systems of oppression that affect their daily lives.

**Asexualities and Other Identity Vectors**

Having reviewed literature that addresses various experiences common to asexual people, I will now explore how asexuality may interact with other forms of social difference, including gender, disability, and race and ethnicity. While the literature is scarce in these areas, there is emerging scholarly work that helps to identify some particular experiences individuals might have with various vectors of identity.

**Gender.** Asexual identification is also intertwined with transgender identity. Many of the members of the asexual community identify as trans*, transgender, genderqueer, or gender variant, and a third of participants in the AVEN census also identified as such (Bauer, et al, 2017). It is also important to mention that the census found that asexual and aromantic people who also identified as trans or gender variant had higher proportions (22%) of rape and non-consensual sex.

**Disability.** Eujung Kim (2011) argued that the pathologization of asexuality is interconnected with racist, sexist, and ableist discourses. Przybylo (2014) argues that people are encouraged to practice coupled heterosexuality organized around coitus (penis penetration of the vagina aimed at male ejaculation). Thus, coitus is consistently upheld as the essential relationship and sex act. Therefore, ideas of sexual norms are attached to notions of normative bodies and the promotion of heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and androcentric sexual ideals (Kim, 2011). This in turn harms many individuals with disabilities, older people, children, intersex people, trans people, lesbians, and ethnic, racialized and impoverished others, who are then not entitled to be sexual (Kim, 2011).
Conversations about asexuality and disability are complicated by the ways in which people with disabilities are consistently met with forced asexuality, including in the form of forced sterilization (Lund & Johnson, 2015). Karen Cuthbert (2015) in their article on asexuality and disability states: “...asexual-identified disabled persons are at risk of double erasure given attempts by the asexual community to distance themselves from disability, and attempts by the disabled people’s movement to distance themselves from asexuality, as both seek de-pathologization” (Cuthbert, 2015).

**Race and Ethnicity.**

Relatively, studies at the intersection of asexuality and race suggest that there is a longer history, despite the creation of a more contemporary asexual movement (Owen, 2014). Prior studies suggest that asexuality may be seen as an ideal by white people because of the logic of self-mastery (Owens, 2014). This notion of self-mastery is largely unavailable for racially minoritized individuals, who are always already seen as exceeding the bounds of acceptable sexuality (Owens, 2014). For example, many racialized groups are thought to be hypersexual (like Latina women and the trope of the Latin lover, and the sexualization of Asian women’s bodies) or asexuality (like the desexualization of Asian men). A consequence of this belief system is that asexual and aromantic people of color are disbelieved when they identify as such. Attention must be paid toward the intersection of asexual/aromantic and identifying as a person of color, because of the ways that systemic violence have multiplying effects (Crenshaw, 1989).

When considering asexuality across various racial and ethnic groups, Aasha Foster argued that “asexual people of color often do not feel like they belong in asexual groups — both on and offline — as these spaces tend to be overwhelmingly white” (as cited in Reichard, 2014). Given Kim’s arguments about sexual norms being attached to notions of normative bodies, this
also includes white bodily norms. In the AVEN census 83% of the respondents identified as white, while just over 17% were people of color (Bauer et al, 2017).

For Native communities, understanding asexuality within the enduring legacy of colonization is necessary. Vanderzee (2017) argued that gender and sexuality “have been formulated as colonial constructs in large part to manage Indigenous peoples’ gender roles and sexuality-a practice which was key in remaking Indigenous peoples into settler state citizens” (p.128). The process of regulation by settlers included land rights through marriage, the enforcement of Western gender roles in residential schools, and the blood-quantum policy. Thus, by analyzing the constructs of gender and sexuality through indigenous frameworks, this deconstructive process benefits everyone, sexual and asexual, romantic and aromantic (Vanderzee, 2017, p. 128).

Resulting from colonization, the violence facing asexual and aromantic Native communities is especially acute. The AVEN census (Bauer, et al., 2017) revealed that Native Americans had the highest proportion of rape and non-consensual sex of any other racial grouping (35.5%). Native American respondents also reported significant experiences with sexual assault (54.8%), experienced sexual pressure from a partner (35.5%), having sex due to social pressure from those who were not sexual partners (16.1%), and were significantly more pressured to see a mental health professional because of their asexuality (Bauer et al, 2017).

Departing now from Native communities to focus more intensely on Latinx communities, Foster (as cited in Reichard, 2014) asserted that asexual Latinas are constantly fighting racist and sexist messages. Given the view that Latinas as hypersexual, the process of identity disclosure as asexual is complicated by sexual stereotypes. For example, as Reichard (2014) noted, bodily autonomy is denied to Latinas whose bodies have been reduced to sexual objects. The AVEN
census reported that 9.2% of the U.S respondents identified as Hispanic, Latino or of Spanish origin indicating that these communities had lower representation in the census. Despite the low number of respondents from this racial group, Hispanic/Latinx respondents indicated higher percentages of non-partner perpetrators of sexual violence reported in the AVEN census (80%) (Bauer et al, 2017). For Black and African American communities the AVEN census reported little findings overall, which they theorized may come from the lack of inclusion for black asexual and aromantic people in AVEN. There is also little information on the experiences of Asian American communities.

While there is a growing body of evidence related to the intersection of race and asexuality, the present body of evidence leaves more questions than answers. Further, in translating from the broader context of these prior studies to a higher education context, it is important to note that the existing literature does little to provide information about how asexual students of color might experience their campuses. The identities that intersect with being ace and aro are important to recognize, because not every asexual and aromantic person has the same experiences, and are made more complex by their other identities.

In this section compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity was described and the ways in which they regulate all lives but especially harm asexual and aromantic people. Manifestations of these systems show up in the pathologizing of asexuality and aromanticism which has created a legacy of treating ace and aro people as un-human and unnatural. This legacy makes it difficult for ace and aro people to disclose their identities for fear of discrimination, or for their safety. This discrimination can even come from queer spaces that ace and aro people expect to be welcome. Corrective rape, relationship violence, and sexual coercion and violence are also incredibly common for asexual and aromantic people. Despite needing access to medical care
because of all of this discrimination, stigmatization, and pathologization most ace and aro people are not out to doctors of mental health providers. It’s also been proven that they experience minority stress similarly to other LGBTQ+ populations. Minority stress causes physical and mental health issues long term. All of these manifestations of compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity are also more complicated by other salient identities of asexual and aromantic people. The violence for these ace and aro people of color, ace and aro people who are trans, or disabled is far greater depending on their other salient identities. There also are less resources and understanding of their whole personhood. Ending this section, discussed next is the theoretical framework that guides this study.

Sense of belonging research was mentioned earlier in connection with racial campus climate. Sense of belonging research has been used in intersectional ways to understand the experiences of queer students of color, specifically black gay men (Strayhorn, 2012). Because of its prior usage in explaining strategies to recognize the whole student as all of who they are, and because it is incredibly helpful as a strategy for students to practice resilience, it is central in this thesis as a theoretical framework.

**Theoretical Framework: Sense of Belonging**

Mattering is “a motive, the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension [which] exercises a powerful influence on our actions” (Schlossberg, 1989. P. 9). Mattering and community are necessary for human survival and its opposite marginality can be a way of life for marginalized groups, described as invisibility (Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering has incredible persuasion over us, and being needed can save lives (Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering is connected to a sense of belonging, because in order to belong we have to feel like we matter to people (Strayhorn, 2012).
Strayhorn (2012) wrote that “sense of belonging is framed as a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior” (p. 3). Strayhorn’s model of sense of belonging relies heavily on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Strayhorn, 2012). Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a theory of what motivates human behavior, and is usually drawn up in the form of a triangle which represents a hierarchy (Maslow, 1942). The theory states that physiological needs need to be satisfied to reach the other levels in the hierarchy of safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, and ending with self-actualization (Maslow, 1942). The argument that Strayhorn makes using Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is that belonging is incredibly important for student success, especially for students of color who face racial discrimination (Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn argued that in college sense of belonging refers to social support, and a feeling of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, and being important to a campus community or others on campus. “It’s a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective response or behavior” (p. 3). Strayhorn asserted that there is a deeply ingrained desire of students to simply feel that they belong in their college environment, and lack of it can affect academic performance, and can lead to students leaving universities (Strayhorn, 2012). Sense of belonging research has come from communities of color (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Núñez, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008/2012). Strayhorn’s (2012) research is rooted in black gay men’s experiences, and Latino students in college (Strayhorn, 2008, 2012). Despite this, Strayhorn argues that sense of belonging can be applied to all students (Strayhorn, 2012). Sense of belonging has been used as part of the questions asked of participants of this research. Where do they feel like they belong, if at all? What does belonging look like to them? These questions are
important for looking at how ace and aro students are surviving their college experiences and will be answered in chapter four.

Conclusion

Because higher education has acted as an incubator to trigger social unrest, we know that universities can affect society, not merely mirror it (Rojas, 2012). Therefore, there is possibility of the university spilling out its knowledge, potentially affecting the state, public opinion, and other institutions (Rojas, 2012). This is why the study of Asexualities and asexual/aromantic identities in higher education, and specifically students affairs, is incredibly important. Because of our values for diversity and social justice (ACPA & NASPA, 2010), we have the possibility of changing the harm done not just to asexual and aromantic students, but for everyone.

In this chapter, I explored literature related to LGBTQ+ students experiences in higher education and then connected them to asexual and aromantic experiences in research outside of higher education. I concluded by explaining the theoretical framework of sense of belonging that I will be using throughout this study. I chose the methods that were used in this study because of the invisibility experienced by asexual and aromantic people. This methodology allows the viewer and reader to peer into the world view of some asexual and aromantic students. To make their identities, experiences, and stories visible. This is explained in more detail in Chapter three.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

Take a minute to think about where you keep your photographs. Are they on your Facebook? Do you have a photo wall in your home? Do you store them on your phone? What can these photos tell us about you? Do you have close people in your life that you take selfies with? Do you like eating fancy looking food? Can you imagine what that tasted like while looking at that photo? Do you feel something when looking at photos of someone you love? Photos are filled with memories and can evoke strong emotions in us (Latz, 2017). Photography is greatly important in this study because it is emotional, and it allows onlookers to peer into someone else’s worldview (Latz, 2017). What can we understand if we see what others see and are able to feel what others feel?

This methodology makes the invisible visible, and asexual and aromantic students are invisible (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). As argued in the previous chapter, there is a gap in the higher education and student affairs literature with regard to asexual and aromantic students. In this study, I aim to shed light on the experiences of asexual and aromantic students. I hope to increase knowledge and awareness about asexual and aromantic students’ needs and issues in higher education, as well as provide solutions for these students’ needs to be met.

Listening to the work of Jourian and Nicolazzo (2016) on queer higher education research, I queered the researcher/researched binary through invocation of a collaborative research process. What I mean by collaborative is that as much as possible I wanted my participants to be co-researchers. “Collaborative methodologies reject the normative structure of research (e.g. a researcher performing a study on a group of participants) with a model in which everyone - researcher and participants alike - becomes co-researchers” (Jourian & Nicolazzo,
My participants made themes from their research together, they were able to choose, disagree with, and challenge questions I came up with to frame the study. My goal for this research was to let them speak for themselves, because I believe so much literature on us does not do so.

In this chapter I will explain the paradigm that guides this research and how it used in student affairs. Next I will explain what Photovoice method is and how it has been used in higher education research. Then I will explain the context of the study which was done with only Oregon State students. Then I will explain the Photovoice process, procedures, and data analysis that I used in this specific study. Following that I describe the ethics, positionality, and trustworthiness of this study. Lastly, the limitations of the research will be explained.

**Critical Research Paradigm**

As a critical researcher who grew up in the United States my work makes certain assumptions about the world. A critical paradigm views reality as shaped by political, social, economic, ethnic, age, disability and gender factors that over time form structures that hold power that are viewed as natural and unchanging (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Jones, Torres, & Armino, 2013; Lather, 2006; Mertens, 2007). Being aware of these societal values and privileges creates potential for social transformation. Objectivity is impossible, therefore all research is subjective, and advocacy is the goal, and the purpose is meant to be transformational and emancipatory (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Jones, Torres, & Armino, 2013; Lather, 2006; Mertens, 2007). Through discourse and dialogue in community with those who are most affected by societal structures is knowledge gained. An understanding of power and cultural relations is critical (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Jones, Torres, & Armino, 2013; Lather, 2006; Mertens, 2007). Research is to liberate those are the most oppressed and marginalized so careful thought and care
is built into the research design. Research should be made with others and be participatory in nature, where methods can changing or flexible based off of participants desire (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Jones, Torres, & Armino, 2013; Lather, 2006; Mertens, 2007). Respect for the communities studied is necessary, and I cared greatly for the participants. My aim was to make their world easier by illuminating their struggles, therefore the research is political and seeking justice (Mertens, 2007).

Critical perspective needs a connection to praxis and research should be tied to changing society (Paton, Renn, Guido, & Quay, 2016). A critical research paradigm is utilized in this work in the hopes of transforming student affairs operations, policies, structures of power, allocation of funding, and the everyday practice of professionals (Guido, et al., 2010). This paradigm is especially appropriate for my work because of the methodology I have used, which comes from critical theorists work (Latz, 2017). Having explained the paradigm that guides this research and its use in student affairs I will now describe Photovoice in more detail.

**Photovoice Methodology**

Photovoice is meant to be an emancipatory method used to help shine a light on the voices of those who are often silenced or invisible in society. It’s been used to do so for victims of domestic violence, for people with disabilities, people of color, LGBTQ+ people, the elderly, and many more (Wagner, 2015). To address the goals of this project I used this methodology which is a *participatory action research* and *arts-based method* (Latz, 2017).

Participatory action research, explained by Lewis (1946) asserted that “[a]ction research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to (find) effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives” (p. 40). Participatory methods are meant to cause a stir and evoke social action towards change. Participatory action research has three attributes
that distinguish it from other types of research: sharing ownership of the research between the participants and the researcher/facilitator, engaging a community that understands the social problems it faces, and having an outcome of community action (Latz, 2017).

Arts-based research uses a form of art to generate feeling (Latz, 2017). As defined by Barone and Eisner (2012), arts-based research has ten concepts, seven of which are relevant to this study. The seven that I draw from include: a. humans have invented many ways to represent and understand our world, b. each form of representations comes with limitations and benefits, c. the purpose of arts based research is not to answer questions but to engage in dialogue, d. arts based research can capture meaning and feeling in ways that other measurements cannot, e. arts based research can be done by everyone, not just artists or art educators, f. arts based research adds to discourse by diversifying the methods we use, and g. using the expressive property of the medium contributes to human understanding (Barone & Eisner, 2012). By using photography, Photovoice projects are equipped to convey subjects’ feelings more than if they did so through conversation or writing (Latz, 2017). There is a connection here between using an arts based method and photography which is also emotional. Photovoice “is an evocative and emotionally drenched expression that makes it possible to know how others feel... Photovoice participants are afforded the opportunity to both create images and words to express their realities and feelings” (Latz, 2017, p. 32). Photovoice enables participants to bring the explanations, ideas, or stories of other community members into the assessment process; it provides tangible and immediate benefits to people and their networks; it enables people to depict not only the community’s needs but also its assets, and the images produced and the issues discussed encourage social action (Wagner, 2015). It is precisely because of these reasons that Photovoice was chosen as my methodology.
Photovoice in Higher Education

Photovoice has been used in higher education research, especially in teaching (Cook & Quigley, 2014; Cushing & Love, 2013; Goodhart, et al., 2006). Specifically in student affairs research it has been used to document DREAMers student perspectives (Ramos, 2016); document veterans experiences on campus (Tomar, 2013); to visualize trans* student’s experiences (Lim, 2012); to discuss the racial climate for black students in residential housing (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017); to explore how Native American college students experience space and place at the University of Mexico (Minthorn & Marsh, 2016); and to understand the lives of community college students (Latz, 2012). Photovoice was also used by students with disabilities at the University of Texas at El Paso to document barriers they face to academic and social engagement at their university (Agarwal, Moya, Yasui, & Seymour, 2015).

Writing on the possibility of Photovoice for student affairs research, Ro and colleagues (2017) argued that Photovoice as a methodology can “add richness and depth to assessment evidence” (p. 54). Prior studies using Photovoice allowed participants and researcher/facilitators to document images that represented the barriers they were facing that led to recommendations for architectural and attitudinal changes on their campus (Agarwal, Moya, Yasui, & Seymour, 2015). In this study, I aimed to do much the same. Now that the methodology has been defined and explained, let’s move on to the study itself.

Context of the Study

Oregon State University is a large public land grant research institution located in the Pacific Northwest in a small city (NCES, 2018). Its student population consists of over 25,000 undergraduate students and 5,000 graduate students, with a majority of undergraduate students
(54%) categorized as men (NCES, 2018). The institution recently enrolled 24.1% students of color, and 12.1% international students (Office of Institutional Research, 2017).

Prior to conducting this study, I engaged in archival methods to understand what if anything was already known about asexual and aromantic students. My initial search with the key words, Pride Center (the LGBTQIA+ resource center), asexuality, and aromanticism at Oregon State University produced no mentioning of either experiences. Whenever the acronym ‘LGBTQIA’ was brought about in texts or posters for events the A always stood for allies. This is interesting considering the asexual movement began as early as 2001. There seems to have been some understanding of asexual and aromantic identities before my arrival at OSU however, because there is a small aromantic flag and asexual flag that is displayed in the Pride Center.

Recently there have begun to be more activities relating to these identities on their social media, and in their events. The director of the Pride Center at Oregon State would be the first to say that their needs to be improvement related to asexual and aromantic inclusion. They have directly helped with funding of this study and deeply care about the inclusion of asexual and aromantic students.

According to OSU’s recent LGBTQ+ Needs Assessment Survey, 22% of those who responded identified as asexual, more than those who identified as lesbian (20%), gay (14%), or pansexual (13%); it was the third most common identity behind queer (31%), and bisexual (26%). Drawing on this same data, 1% identified themselves as aromantic, although romantic orientations were not an option on the survey. From this same survey a staggering number (76.8%) of participants from all queer identities identified as having a disability and noted that the biggest stressor in their lives was mental health or wellness. There were also high numbers
who identified themselves as trans, with most (25%) identifying themselves as nonbinary (Diversity & Cultural Engagement, 2017, unpublished report).

The Photovoice Process

Wang (2006) narrated the steps for this methodology after reviewing 10 Photovoice studies. First, you should select a target audience for the research, make sure that it is people who are policy makers or community leaders. Second, recruit your participants. Third, introduce the methodology carefully to the participants and facilitate a group discussion on how to use a camera, have a conversation on ethics and power as a photographer. Fourth, gain informed consent from the participants and state the level of their involvement so that it is understandable. Fifth, propose initial themes or framing questions for taking research that should be chosen by participants. Sixth, distribute the cameras and review how to use them. Seventh, provide a period of time for participants to take the photos. Eighth, meet to discuss the photos and narratives and identify themes together. Finally, plan with participants the format in which to share the photos and narratives and how to reach policy makers. Wang described these steps are not always linear and that some steps can be missed or changed. Photovoice is meant to be a malleable research method catered to its participants and study (Wang 2006). Within this study, I followed the linear process described by Wang, except steps six and five were reversed.

Facilitator Not Researcher

Throughout this text I have used the term facilitator to describe myself and my role throughout the Photovoice process. Wang and Burris (1997) described this term in the position of Photovoice as someone who is “accountable to a group or community and openly committed to certain kinds of social change” (p. 376). Photovoice facilitators must recognize the political nature of this methodology and be sensitive to issues of power and should be supportive towards
their participants. A facilitator must be committed to understanding the local history, economies and culture of their participants. (Wang & Burris, 1997). I strived to represent this definition of a facilitator given forth by Wang and Burris. I have been incredibly passionate about this project because of my understanding of asexual and aromantic communities and my own personal identities.

**Participant Recruitment**

For the majority of Photovoice research an IRB submission must be completed so that we can work with human subjects (Sutton-Brown, 2015) and I completed the IRB submission on December 4, 2017. There is funding needed to do Photovoice research as you need to be able to feed the participants in exchange for their time, as well as to buy materials and supplies and to print photos (Latz, 2017). Funding for this project came from the Pride Center and the President’s Commission on the Status of Women.

I recruited my participants via several local LGBTQIA+ Facebook groups the ace and aro support group located in our counseling and psychological services; email listservs; the Native American Longhouse, Women’s Center, and Pride Center email listservs and Facebook pages; my personal social media pages, and invoked the help from friends and participants in my study to spread the word and encourage their friends to join as well. My connection within the asexual and aromantic community at Oregon State allowed for my access to asexual and aromantic participants.

According to Smith (2012), time is needed for relationship-building for a partnership to evolve between the researcher and the co-researchers. “It requires showing up and showing one’s face” (p.15). Although not part of this research study design, my positionality as a graduate teaching assistant at the Women’s Center at Oregon State allowed me to design an event on
asexuality and aromanticism and consent early last year. It allowed me to ‘show my face’, and because I invited campus health professionals to the event, helped with the creation of the asexual and aromantic support group. Because of these efforts, I have become integral to the campus asexual and aromantic community of which I am apart. However, this did not mean that recruitment was easy; in fact, I struggled with recruitment until the final weeks of the deadline. In addition, my racial identity may have influenced who was willing to participate as I am white, as are most of the participants.

According to Wang (1999), an ideal Photovoice group is small with 7-10 participants to encourage depth in group conversations. I initially had 10 participants for the study but 4 participants left the study after initially expressing interest. Another participant declined further participation after the first workshop because of the work required for the study. Two other participants left the study after the first workshop because of the workload from school, having an active family life, and expressed struggling with the ability to continue managing competing demands for their time. Also, one participant took pictures, but did not submit with enough time to print images for the meaning making workshop. This participant later told me that they had health issues and ultimately left the study after missing the second workshop. Guidance from the literature suggests that participant departures from the study are expected, and Latz (2017) specifically suggested inviting twice as many participants as 50% participant attrition is common (Latz, 2017). Several participants described severe stress related to school, work, and the ability to put their best work into the study. As previously noted, “often, when you are working with populations that have been historically marginalized, participating in a study is not a high priority regardless of energy, intent, or excitement” (Latz, 2017, p. 68).

Participant Descriptions
In this section I will briefly describe the participants that worked alongside me for this study. I want to give readers a view into their personalities and individuality of each of them. No asexual and aromantic person is the same and individually we each have different salient identities that also make up who we are. I asked participants if they wanted to select a pseudonym and some chose to use their real names.

 Jeran is a petite person who can often be seen wearing bright colors and dresses. Ze can usually be seen with several buttons on their person attached to messenger type bag. Jeran is also shy and speaks quietly. Jeran is incredibly kind person and hir often showed up to help me with a project just right when I need someone. The first time I met hir was not in the context of this study. Hir volunteered for the Women’s Center where I have worked over my time in graduate school. Jeran was just recently out to hirself as asexual and demiromantic and questioning this still at the start of this study. They were however very open with me about being genderfluid.

 Maggie dresses like Dean Winchester from the CW’s *Supernatural*, and they are built similarly. Maggie is incredibly passionate about ace and aro issues. They regularly wear ace and aro flag gear on their person in the form of costumes, hats, and homemade gloves. The first time I met Maggie was way before this study began because they are one of my best friends, my kin. I can still remember vividly the first moment I met them. It was my second week at OSU and I was attending a training with Resident Assistants of a building. Maggie introduced themselves in costume as Captain Ace (an asexual superhero they created) on their nametag and they were wearing some asexual pride gear. I had never met anyone who was so openly asexual. Maggie has been out for quite a long time and are incredibly open and educate anyone about both identities whenever they can.
Lee has fiery short haircut to match their fiery personality. Also an incredibly kind person Lee fights hard for representation of their identities and stands up to help people in their life. I met Lee also outside of the context of this study. They were best friends with Maggie who is my best friend. They have been out as asexual and aromantic for a long time and very comfortable in their expression of their identities. They are often the sidekick of Maggie at drag shows explaining asexual and aromantic terminology to the audience.

Quinn has a slight build and I usually saw them with an eyebrow piercing, button up shirt, and beanie on. They were very comfortable in the group because they are close with Maggie and Lee. Quinn is incredibly funny and smart. I met Quinn for the first time during this study and we have grown to be friends since. I regularly saw them after at the Women’s Center studying or watching Tv shows. They have been out as ace for a short time but still was questioning their romantic orientation.

Lily is petite and was very quiet. They seemed to be friends with some of the other participants involved in the study. They were a resident at the building and hall where Maggie is the RA. The first time I met them was at the first workshop and I didn’t have time to get to know them very well. They dropped out of the study after the first workshop because of personal reasons.

Marcella is also petite, with short blond hair and a very focused and motivated personality. They were working on a major in a STEM field and was taking math as a minor. They have a very witty humor and I got that they did not say a lot unless it was something they thought was important to say. I met them for the first time at the workshop where they said they wanted to meet other asexual people.
Ceph has the greatest curly blue hair and is tall. Ceph like Maggie are always willing to educate on the subject of asexuality or aromanticism. That’s how I met Ceph as I was planning a panel on asexual and aromantic people and their experiences with consent. Ceph had loads of ideas and many people I could get in contact with. I have known Ceph over a year and half when we met and Ceph seemed very comfortable in their identities before we met. Unfortunately due to Ceph’s workload that term they were unable to continue after the first workshop.

Natan is always very stylishly dressed and has a stocky build. They are soft spoken and very kind. Natan is very proud of the work they do for their fraternity and are an incredibly involved student. I met them for the first time outside of this study at a Pride Center function, but we just barely knew each other when they joined the study. They were unable to continue doing the study after the first workshop for personal reasons.

Jaz is very funny but also very quiet. From what they said while I got to know them they seemed very lonely. They also seemed to be questioning a lot about themselves. We met for the first time at the first workshop. They had some personal reasons for not continuing in the study despite getting almost to the second workshop.

Jasmine is one of the most articulate people I have ever met. They have incredibly curly hair and I usually see them in big hoop earrings. Jasmine is one of those people who just seems to know exactly where they are going and what they want. I met Jasmine because they were best friends with someone I love very dearly, and worked within Diversity and Cultural Engagement at OSU which houses the Women’s Center I work for.

**Data Collection and Sources**

Following recruitment, I held an initial workshop for participants. The first workshop served three main purposes: to introduce the participants to each other, to explain Photovoice to
them, and to discuss the ethics required of them as photographers (Sutton-Brown, 2015). I also obtained informed consent during this workshop. To ensure participants understood the expectations and ethics of the study, I created an infographic to support participants’ understandings (See Appendix A). I also taught them basic camera skills, collaborated in developing framing questions and lastly, discussed campus climate (See Appendix B). I also collected demographic information at this point (See Appendix C).

The goals for Photovoice research are not determined on the quality of the photo itself but on the content of the photo, so it does not matter whether participants use cheap cameras or fancy ones (Sutton-Brown, 2015). The purpose therefore of the camera basic skills portion of the agenda was to provide training on basic camera operations, more complex technical training is ill-advised, as it stifles the creativity of the images (Sutton-Brown, 2015). For this portion of the workshop, I had help from a photography professor at the university with developing the content. The cameras came as donation from the university community who believed in the project, including my advisor and friends. Every camera was different, but all were digital to allow for image sharing and manipulation. Prior to the workshop, I spent some time with google and camera manuals. During the workshop, we discussed the importance of the emotional content of photos through sharing examples of powerful photography. Examples of previous Photovoice studies help participants imagine the project (Latz, 2017).

Regarding informed consent, the IRB protocol required obtaining verbal consent for audio recordings. Given that audio recording was required for participants, only those participants who were willing to be recorded could participate in the study. I was asked that I gain consent verbally from participants willing to be involved in the project about recording the workshops, and for their work being used in publication.
### Table 1

**Participants Demographic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Romantic Orientation</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Disability Identity</th>
<th>Medical Conditions</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Duration In Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jeran</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>Demiromantic</td>
<td>Genderfluid</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Full duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>Aromantic</td>
<td>Agender</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>ASD, Chronic pain, depression, and asthma.</td>
<td>Upper middle-class</td>
<td>Full duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazmyne</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>No sexual attraction</td>
<td>Demiromantic</td>
<td>Two-spirit</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Bipolar disorder</td>
<td>Mid and lower class</td>
<td>Half Duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Asexual/Queer</td>
<td>Demiromantic/ aromantic</td>
<td>Transgender, Nonbinary, Trans masculine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Depression, anxiety, chronic pain, OCD, and PTSD.</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Full duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinn</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Queer ace</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>(Enby) nonbinary, transgender, agender</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Depression, anxiety, eating disturbance</td>
<td>Poor class background</td>
<td>Full duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Gray ace</td>
<td>Recipromantic</td>
<td>Trans, nonbinary</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Middle class background</td>
<td>Half Duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcella</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>Questioning romantic orientation</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Able-bodied</td>
<td>Middle class background</td>
<td>Full duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceph</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Gray asexual</td>
<td>Grey romantic/ Queer</td>
<td>Agender</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Depression, anxiety, PTSD, chronic pain.</td>
<td>Middle class background</td>
<td>Quarter Duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natan</td>
<td>Latinx, chicax</td>
<td>Demisexual</td>
<td>Homoromantic</td>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Depression, anxiety.</td>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>Half Duration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Xicana.</td>
<td>Asexual, but questioning</td>
<td>Aromantic</td>
<td>Cisgender Woman</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Depression, anxiety.</td>
<td>Poor/working class</td>
<td>Full duration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The IRB required that the participants not take pictures of anyone not a part of the study, which included any recognizable part of a person. Even if they had gained consent to take a picture from that person it would not be allowed into the study. It was important to note that because the pictures and narratives would be displayed in the gallery they could possibly be identifiable or outed in their identity. Communication between the facilitator/researcher and participants must be consistent and ongoing and provide many opportunities for participants to ask questions or request clarification (Latz, 2018).

For the discussion on campus climate, I asked them questions decided upon with the principal investigator beforehand (see Appendix B). I felt that it was important to ask these campus climate questions so that they were in conversation with each other on how they interact with the university, and to gauge whether or not they felt belonging. I hoped that having this conversation would produce ideas on issues they should focus on through photography that were important to our community. We then moved on to finding framing questions which would guide the participants as prompts for their photos and narratives.

In Photovoice the facilitator typically chooses an initial general topic and then asks the participants to decide on the specific questions or issues they would like to address in relation to that topic (Sutton-Brown, 2015). “One way to get the process started is to write out all the potential prompts for the group to see. From that point, prompts can be added, deleted, collapsed, and refined through group discussion” (Latz, 2017, p. 71). I explained that the general subject of the study was on asexual and aromantic experiences in higher education and I had previously brainstormed some possible example framing questions for the group to look at for this workshop. To my surprise, despite not understanding the questions at first, they kept the initial six questions I had brainstormed and added a seventh question (Appendix B).
Following our discussion of the framing questions, we discussed how to complete the narrative sheets (see Appendix D). The narrative sheet asks the participant questions about their photos so the facilitator can piece it together for a mini gallery showing later (Personal conversation with Laura Santurri, December 2017). When participants are involved in dialogue about their pictures during the meaning making workshop they are creating data that is recorded and analyzed afterwards.

After the first workshop, participants were sent the camera PowerPoint presentation, examples from a Photovoice study, the framing questions, and narrative sheets via email. Participants had two weeks to take photos which they submitted via Google Drive folders to ensure data security. Because of the stress that the participants had mentioned earlier, some of the participants did not get the photos are cameras to me until the next week before the second workshop. Encouragement, reminders, and updates were communicated as often as possible to help participants (Latz, 2017).

There were irregularities related to the first workshop. Three participants (one of whom eventually left the study altogether), received the first workshop separate from the main group because of scheduling issues. With the recommendation from the principal investigator, I facilitated an abbreviated version of the workshop. While this prevented the participants’ ability to shape questions, this still allowed for them to participate in the rest of the study.

At the second workshop, we started with breakfast for the participants and gave them the opportunity to see all participants’ pictures and narratives. Photographs were used to excavate memories from the participants (Latz, 2017). Because of this memory work, before the participants arrived I set up their photos on the walls of the space that we were using in gallery
format, with just the photo and the narrative. I did this strategically so that the students could get a glimpse of what a later gallery showing could look like.

After everyone arrived for the day we started with introductions, since some participants had not met each other yet (see Appendix E for workshop 2 outline). We proceeded to take two hours to discuss each individual photo in two separate groups. Each group was recorded. The principal investigator and I facilitated these small group discussions using a discussion guide (see Appendix F), although participants and facilitators can vary from the guide depending on what the participants’ desires. The small group discussions were a key component of the workshop as the sharing of photographs was meant to induce dialogue among the participants (Sutton-Brown, 2015). In the group dialogue stage, participants share their photos and their stories with the group in an effort to situate the photo in the context of their own experiences (Sutton-Brown, 1997). It allows the participants to also make meaning collaboratively (Latz, 2017).

Data Analysis

We continued on to large group discussions, which led into participatory analysis (Wang & Burris, 1997). Participatory analysis described by Wang and Burris (1997) is an approach that avoids the “distortion of fitting into a predetermined paradigm and enables us to hear and understand how people make meaning of themselves and what matters to them” (p. 378) There are three steps involved in this process: selecting, contextualizing, and codifying. They first were involved in contextualizing their photos which happened in the small group meaning making process. Contextualizing is about telling what the stories in the photographs mean using the acronym VOICE - voicing our individual and collective experience (Wang, 1997). This gives multiple meanings to photographs because they have a collaborative
meaning as well (Wang, 1997). They contextualized their stories with each other, and disagreed with each other.

Next, they talked to each other and moved the photographs from around the rooms so that the photographs were displayed into specific themes, codifying them. Codifying is identifying the themes throughout all the photographs and narratives (Wang, 1997). They then moved on to the selection process where I invoked the help of silent voting and a sticky dot process (Personal conversation with Laura Santurri, January 2018).

Selecting is where participants choose the photos that most reflect the community's needs or assets (Wang, 1997). The participants, silently and one at a time, took colorful circle stickers and voted on the photographs that best narrated the framing questions they had made together earlier, and what they individually thought were the issues they wanted to point out. They were not limited to a number per theme nor limited in the number of stickers they could use at all.

They then continued again with the codifying process by selecting quotes from the first workshop based upon themes they created in large group at the second workshop. The participants took pre-made cutouts of quotes selected by the facilitator from the first workshop. They then put the quotes on the wall under the theme they thought it fit best.

Continuing with the selecting process, I asked the participants how they wanted to proceed with the choosing of photos for the gallery showing together. It was suggested by a participant that they together go back through their selected photographs and automatically included photos with 3 or more stickers into the gallery showing; then they would discuss the rest of the photos as to whether they should be in the show and were appropriate to show their community’s needs and issues.
After this process, we then went on to decide how the gallery presentation would look. Did they want any music or special colors, for the show? Because of time constraints the locations for the gallery had been chosen by myself beforehand. I thought it best to choose a place for the photos that was a part of the target audience. The Pride Center, the Women’s Center, the Asian and Pacific Cultural Center, and the Native American Longhouse were chosen as the sites for the walking gallery showing.

We then moved on to a discussion of confidentiality which was especially important for this group of participants because some of them were not out to friends, family, their classmates, or others (Sutton-Brown, 2015). It was important to me that I ask the participants if they wanted to be a part of the gallery showing. Because of the vulnerability exposed in the photographs and the IRB recommendations their names are not associated with their photos for the gallery showing and are pseudonyms in this thesis. We ended the workshop by completing the evaluation survey (see Appendix G), with final discussion about the gallery showing date, and any last questions from participants.

**Further Data Analysis**

Because participatory analysis is the main frame through which analysis is formed for this study I did not want to stray too far from the themes the participants had created in the second workshop together. Wang and Burris (1997) described a process of data analysis for needs assessment to prioritize the findings. They suggested using internal replication and external replication. Internal replication meaning that the findings may be validated by remarks from a single source (e.g. a participant’s own importance on a subject). External replication means that the findings may be validated by other sources. In other words, they are told by other participant’s photos and stories. “Taken together, there may be enough internal and external
replication to suggest that the findings provide a reliable picture of people’s priorities at a particular historical moment” (Wang & Burris, 1997).

First, I defined each theme based off of participants’ words from the transcript. Then I displayed their photos and themes up on the wall with their narratives and quotes from the first workshops. I looked at the transcript and found where the participants had talked about the photo or narrative, then cut up the transcript and taped to the corresponding narrative and photo on the wall. This way I could see visually see how much conversation was spent talking about a photo or narrative, which allowed me to see the external replication. Because the participants had decided which pictures were important to them personally via the sticky dot/silent voting process, I had a clear view of internal replication as well. I could see which themes were important to participants individually and to the group. Then using the participant defined themes, I collapsed themes together that I thought described similar concepts. For example, a theme called Hit or Miss described othering experienced while at the Pride Center and given a category already existed called othering/exclusion, I collapsed the concepts together.

**Gallery Showing**

The gallery showing occurred April 9-13, 2018 at Oregon State University. The gallery showing is just as important to the study as the rest of the process as it is the action part of the participatory action research method. The target audiences should be invited to the showing with the hope that Photovoice will provide an effective way for the participants to show their perceived strengths and needs and to promote critical dialogue about the community’s needs to reach policy makers.

**Principal Investigator’s Involvement**
The principal investigator, Erich Pitcher was much more involved in the work of this study than is normal for other research. They were there for several parts of the research process including being present at both workshops. They helped lead a small group through the meaning making process of the second workshop. Although we had a set list of questions for this process we differed in the ways in which we asked follow up questions or adhered to those list of questions that may have gotten different conversations from the participants. Erich’s small group spent more time on individual photos than my small group did therefore getting richer data about participant’s experiences. Also Erich does not identify as asexual or aromantic and while facilitating the small group they may have asked more clarifying questions about terms that the students were using than I because of my involvement with the community. Their presence may have influenced how open participants were about their identities because education was required about terms or experiences. However, there was no evidence to show that they could have done so. It is also possible that their influence of the study may have shown up elsewhere that I could not have seen or heard.

Ethics

Photovoice does not dissolve power relations and is not free from ethical dilemmas (Latz, 2017). Procedural ethics were met in this study by following the suggestions and guidelines given by the internal review board at Oregon State University (Tracy, 2010). There was special consideration for this study considering it was done with students who may or may not be out about their identities. Given that there was a possibility that students may be outed or exposed, it was important throughout the informed consent process to explain to participants all of the possible consequences of their work (Latz, 2017). For participants who took pictures of each other or of themselves or part of their bodies (e.g., someone has blue hair or a tattoo), it was
important for them to understand during the informed consent process that they could be
recognizable very publicly if they decided to be a part of the gallery showing, and also in the
thesis writing, which could be published in the future.

I asked the participants via email and in person about what names and pronouns they
would want to have in the study, and the oral defense. Holtby, Klein, Cook, and Travers explain
that “putting one’s experiences of oppression on display for people in power to consume can be a
Participatory action research can put the burden of representation and the possibility of further
marginalization on its participants and it cannot eliminate that the participants’ voices will be
taken to represent their broader community (Latz, 2017). I asked participants who dropped out of
the study if I had permission to use their recordings, and all of them consented. For students who
had signed up for the study but couldn’t make it to the first workshop I made time for us to get
them the camera, and facilitate two the workshop two more times. I wanted everyone who
wanted to participate to be treated with care and make sure that their information was being used
the way they wanted. I made sure that participants knew that they could also come see me at the
Women’s Center, where I worked, if they wanted to think through any pictures, or have any
questions. Participants were often stressed about other academic deadlines in their lives so I gave
those who did not get their pictures and narratives on time to me more time to get them done.
Taking care of the participants wellbeing was important to me.

I chose Oregon State University because of its familiarity to me as a student who attends
the university and because I know of the short history of asexual and aromantic activism here,
and the longer history of LGBTQ+ activism, and activism from students of color. Being a part of
staff at the Cultural Resource Centers on campus allowed me to be close to this history. I have
done my best to be aware of the legacy of institutional and systemic racism in Oregon that affects the students I interact with and care about deeply every day. Still, the demographics of my participants reflect the history of racism in a state that excluded people of color for a long period of time and is affected by this legacy (Imarisha, 2014). This is reflected by the history of white racism in Oregon and by choosing this place to do my research at a predominately white institution in a predominantly white state.

Being an asexual researcher studying asexual and aromantic students I understood and related to participants’ stories. I was connected to their experiences and found joy and pain in those experiences that mirrored my own. Engaging in collaborative methodologies comes with challenges, and I wrestled with balancing being as collaborative as possible without overburdening the participants. Narratives on the evaluation survey expressed what a challenge it was to complete the photos and narratives in the period of time they had been given. I had to also trust that they would drop out of the study if it was too much for their schedules, which several of them did. In the evaluation survey, participants described the only challenges they faced during the study was waking up early on a Saturday and the short amount of time to turn in the photos and narratives. More than anything else, they just wanted more time.

On the evaluation survey done at the end of this study, one participant described what it felt like to view everyone’s photos: “I like the way the photo exhibit is community based, because I originally thought each person would have them displayed separately. I like the collaborative nature, and common themes...I feel very honored to have been a part of this and I feel very proud of the work I did.” The participants who spent the most time in the study I grew close with, if I was not close with them already. During the second workshop I asked participants why they had wanted to be a part of the study and a majority said they had wanted to be a part of
it because I was doing it. I care deeply about these students and I have continued to see some of them since the study showing up to see me at my work to give me a hug or to be involved with my work in other ways. They have taught me more about how to be proud of my identity than I ever learned elsewhere and these relationships are incredibly dear to me. Participants chose to be involved in the data analysis and in the creation of the findings and their voices are central in the findings chapter of this study. As a member of the asexual community I hope that this work will achieve the attention it deserves and that instead of focusing on me, we focus on making higher education and our universities less oppressive and better for these students who I know are struggling.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness and rigor, I align with some of Tracy’s (2010) eight “big tent” criteria for credibility and quality research (Tracy, 2010). A worthy topic is one that is relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative (Tracy, 2010). I believe that the time for research on asexuality and aromanticism is just beginning to grow and this research is the first of its kind of which I am aware in higher education.

This research challenges relationship and intimacy status quo, and challenges well-accepted ideas (Tracy, 2010). Rich rigor refers to the use of a variety of theoretical constructs, data sources, contexts and samples. There were a variety of data sources for this study including: photos, narratives, and transcripts from small group and large group conversations. There was also multiple meetings that allowed participants to share more parts of their stories. Sincerity can be achieved through self-reflection, vulnerability, honesty, transparency, and data auditing. In this study, I engaged in self-reflection and noted that while I am authentic about the limitations of this research and where I could have done better and/or made mistakes. I have strived to be as
transparent as possible about my decisions in the study and provide some rationale for why various decisions were made.

Credibility was achieved through practices of thick descriptions and triangulation. As will be described in the findings chapter, I offer a rich and thick description of participants’ experiences. In this study, triangulation involved using many sources of data, from photographs, transcripts from group conversations from several meetings, and personal narratives. I also used several theoretical frameworks including compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2015), the assumption that all people are sexual, amatonormativity, the assumption that romantic relationship are normative (Brake, 2012), critical trans politics (Spade, 2011), a sense of belonging theory (Strayhorn, 2012), and intersectionality (Tracy, 2010).

Resonance refers to the ability to affect an audience. Researchers should engage in practices that promote empathy from their readers. Because of the emotional vulnerability provided in photovoice research, I have no doubt that its readers and its image onlookers will be affected. Images trigger emotions in us, and there is vulnerability in the participant’s storytelling (Latz, 2017).

Meaningful coherence studies “achieve their state purpose, accomplish what they espouse to be about, use methods and representation practices that partner well with espoused theories and paradigms and attentively interconnect literature reviewed with research foci, methods, and findings” (Tracy, 2010). This research achieved its stated purpose of reaching policy makers to make change at more than just Oregon State University. The gallery showing invite was explicitly sent to student affairs professionals, LGBTQ organizations, sexual health and wellness, student health services, counseling and psychological services, and survivor advocacy. I will be continuing to have conversations with policy makers and different organizations at OSU on their
inclusion of asexual and aromantic populations and their understanding of the ways in which compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity are practiced.

Positionality

Much of the existing literature on the subject of asexuality and aromanticism is done by white people, both on those who have been researched, and those doing the research. Research on cross cultural asexuality is rare, and U.S based research done on or by people of color in regards to asexuality is more so. (Gupta et al, 2013). Even I am a white person doing research on a mostly white sample. I must describe my positionality because although my methodology tries to include participatory elements in analysis, my own subjectivities are not absent from the research analysis, design, and writing. My worldviews and beliefs greatly influence this work as a member of the asexual community (Pitcher, 2016). My experiences as both a minoritized individual and as part of the dominant culture played a part in the analysis. I did not come to my asexual identity easily and I am not free from my own internalized aphobia, internalized ableism, internalized transphobia, and internalized white dominance, and the ways that the constellation of experiences, identities, and positionalities that I hold may have impacted the participants. Because of time restraints I also had to make decisions that controlled where the research was held, when it would be accomplished, and mostly how it would be done.

Photovoice does not eliminate the power that I had as a researcher/facilitator and because I am white I have more privileges afforded to me by society. I did my best to facilitate equal dialogue among my participants but often failed to challenge whiteness when it showed up and took over space. I noticed several times throughout the process of the small and large group discussions that because three of the participants had existing friendships there seemed to be an unawareness that others needed to speak. Several times throughout the workshops I had to ask
participants not to speak over or interrupt each other and to allow space for those who have not yet spoke to do so. I was particularly worried about this because there was only one person of color that made it to the second workshop and I felt that others in the group did not recognize the power and privilege they had in erasing this person’s voice. Several times I had to mention to participants to give space to those who had not spoken. “I’m not hearing a lot from Jeran and Jasmine, others give them a little bit of space. If you want to speak more please do, others please give them a little bit of space.” Yet regardless of me saying this more than once, these students took up a majority of the space. I failed to challenge this and it is likely that I let other racial microaggressions enter the space unchallenged. I believe that coalitional politics is necessary for liberation, oppression is connected, and that asexual and aromantic folk will not gain liberation until we recognize that we are bound to the struggles of all minorities (Spade, 2011).

Limitations

There are several limitations in this study, including the demographics of participants. This study cannot speak to all asexual students’ experiences and is not generalizable as a result. This study was conducted at a large, research university that is predominantly white and located in a predominantly white state, as such research in other contexts may yield different insights. Given this is a single institutional study, a multisite study would yield different results. The sample size for this study was also small, so the variety and diversity in its sampling is a limitation. A significant portion of the population in this study identified as white so further study of the experiences of asexual and aromantic students of color are needed. The participants were all in their twenties as well so the experiences of transfer students or nontraditional ace and aro students were not studied. The data would have also been richer if more time was given to the participants to take their pictures and write their narratives. I was not aware or out about my
asexuality until the senior year of my undergraduate education, nor was I proud and out about it until I was in graduate school. Thus, even though I am an asexual student at a university, I do not experience the university in the same ways as the undergraduate students in my study do. I am not subject to classes that are not in my major if I do not want to take them.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I described the critical and cultural blended paradigm that guides this thesis. Also described is the Photovoice methodology, its theoretical strands, and process and how I engaged in it with my participants. Then participant recruitment and demographics were described. Next the data collection process and sources were talked about in detail. Further data analysis was spoken about as well as ethics and trustworthiness of the study. Author positionality was pointed out and lastly the limitations of this study were mentioned.
Chapter 4: Compulsory Sexuality and Amatonormativity on Campus

Introduction

During the first workshop the participants of this study created framing questions that they would answer together through photography. These questions were about belonging, resilience, identity, and community. Did they feel like they belonged at the university, what did it feel like to belong, what did it feel like not to? What are some suggestions for how the university could cultivate more ways for them to belong? The question relating to worldview was about how they viewed the world through their identities? Did they see things that others don’t? Community was important for us to look at for its connection to belonging, so where did they find community if at all? Lastly, they asked about resilience, what does it look like, and how do they practice resilience?

Because of the collaborative nature of the methodology used in this study, the participants decided upon the themes for this research together. This chapter starts with an explanation of the themes created by study participants through participatory analysis (Wang & Burris, 1997). Following the initial theme discussion, I will explain the further refined themes. Taken together, our findings suggest that students who are public about their asexual, aromantic, and/or identities felt overwhelmingly othered and excluded from the university environment. Invisibility, dehumanization, and being told they were unworthy of love, relationships, or intimacy were common forms of this othering. They also described feeling like campus queer resources and spaces were not for them, or made them feel even more invisible. Some participants explained that when you are treated like you are invisible, you start to believe something is wrong with you. Many students described having to educate about their identities and our research finds that there is an incredible burden put on these students to do so.
Issues of social exclusion were exacerbated by the students’ varying ability statuses and other salient identities. Given that all but one student had mental conditions and half of the participants identified as students with disabilities, this suggests that a possible connection between disabilities and these identities that points towards minority stress (Foster & Scherrer, 2014). Ability also contributed to the feelings of social exclusion and isolation participants reported.

Students described how the university environment—marked by compulsory sexuality, the assumption and social construction that all people are sexual (Emens 2013, 2014; Gupta, 2015) and amatonormativity, the assumption and social construction that all people need romantic relationships (Brake, 2012)—created significant barriers to feelings of mattering and belonging. They found it harder to connect with people who were not asexual or aromantic because of their assumed sexuality and view of relationships. They described constantly feeling exhausted, isolated, left out, micro-aggressed, tokenized, and burdened by a sexualized and romanticized world. These barriers exclude students and the effects of this exclusion for study participants were feelings of invisibility, isolation, fatigue, depression, and self-hate.

In addition to creating an exclusionary environment, the social forces of compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity helped rape culture thrive on campus. This is evidenced by the ways in which sex was normalized and expected of participants without their consent. In response to this heightened and continued rape culture, participants described consent as a vital part of asexual and aromantic communities. Touch was described as important and that consent was needed before any level of touch was given, whether between friends, family, or in sexual or romantic relationships.
Despite these barriers, most of these students were resisting and practicing resilience. Participants created their own kinship networks on campus, and found belonging and kinship online. This cannot be said for all participants however; some participants reported having a difficult time feeling like they matter or belong, and these students’ stories were heartbreaking to hear. Some students talked about how they had no friends, stayed in their residence halls all day long, and were not involved in campus life. Described next are the initial constructed themes that participants came up.

**Participants’ Initial Constructed Themes**

At the second workshop participants participated in the process of participatory analysis (Wang & Burris, 1997) and created themes together based on their narratives and photographs as co-researchers. Through this process, they created eight themes: Exclusion/Other, Hit or miss, Education, Resilience, Community, Reclaiming Valentine’s Day, Creating Your Own Space, and Miscellaneous (for things they felt did not fit in to the other categories). Participants described the themes during the second workshop and I use their language throughout.

**Exclusion/Other**

Exclusion and *Other* is about internalized aphobia (aversion to asexual and aromantic people as a social group or as individuals, similar concept to homophobia) or external aphobia. During the participatory analysis process the participants quickly found the theme of community from the photographs and narratives (Wang & Burris, 1997). They identified the opposite of feeling belonging and community as exclusion or feeling like “the other”. Participants described the messages they received whether verbal or nonverbal that they were different or excluded. Maggie described it as “people shoving you on the sidelines”, “feeling excluded” or “internalized struggles, or exclusion.” When I asked about whether it was about how people treated them, they
agreed. Quin described some photographs in terms of “exclusionary tactics” that society or people in their live used to make them feel not normal and other.

**Hit or Miss**

This theme relates to feelings of the previous theme, but was separated from the category of exclusion and othering. It included ways in which participants felt some effort was being made towards asexual and aromantic inclusion, but that it did not go far enough to make them feel welcomed or included. Maggie said: “It’s not exclusion” to which Lee replied: “It’s more like there’s not enough being done,” Maggie replied again saying: “Like they could be doing a lot more but there just doing the bare minimum.” This category referenced a couple of pictures from the Pride Center on campus, where they felt like not enough was being done to recognize asexual and aromantic identities.

**Education**

The theme of education was about access to knowledge about ourselves and our histories which have been erased. There is a need for us to teach about asexuality aromanticism as legitimate identity and personhood, not a disease or disorder. Maggie described this saying, “they represent education and access to education and how there should be more conversations educating [about our identities].” Where are we in classroom curriculum? Where are we in the queer movement? Quinn said “a lot of people don't know what [our identities are]”. Marcella, who is a white, asexual woman, who is questioning their romantic orientation, added “It’s talking about this sort of discussion from a class [but yet] you don’t really hear the term[s] [asexual or aromantic] about.” They also described an incredible burden put on them to constantly be educating their professors, friends, family, coworkers, relationships, and etc. Lee said: “When I tell my story I feel stripped bare, like this is an intimate thing about you and you want to just
have me say everything and teach you everything”. They described carrying the emotional burden of proving themselves constantly.

**Resilience**

Participants describe their definitions of resilience as being strong in the face of adversity, showing love for yourself, finding joy, existing, and having information about your identity and knowing your history. Lee asked the group “What does resilience look like” and Maggie replied “it looks like laughter and living life, it’s speaking out, and doing art, Quinn also replied saying “or being strong in the face of adversity.” Resilience was defined by how they made it through hard experiences, but also the ways they practiced resilience.

**Community**

Finding community was hard for most of the participants in this study to do. But Jasmine described it as “a place that you feel like you belong.” Lee described community as “connecting with other people, other like-minded people and giving them help and getting help from them.” Community was related to finding belonging, finding people who understand, finding people you don’t have to always educate, and community was self-care for them.

**Reclaiming V-day**

Reclaiming Valentine’s Day was a very small theme consisting of two pictures created by one participant. They were about viewing Valentine’s differently than how it is normally treated by society. Lee described it as “radical acceptance of Valentine's Day, or the good things about [the holiday].” Jasmine described it as “gifting yourself and gifting others” The main concept being that they were re-creating a holiday that has been viewed as harmful. So reclaiming Valentine’s Day was about turning harm into joy. We do not have to be held down by
amatonormativity, or the assumption that romantic relationship are normal for human and should be preferred to other relationship types (Brake, 2012).

**Creating Your Own Space**

Creating your own space was described as making decisions “for yourself,” Maggie said. Quinn added to what Maggie said also saying that creating your own space was making decisions for yourself “because you're defying society's [expectations].” Lee described it as “owning your own space.” This was important because as previously mentioned in the literature review many asexual and aromantic people do not feel welcomed or at home in many spaces, especially in spaces where they would expect to belong. So the process of creating a space for yourself despite not feeling like a space existed elsewhere was an important part of resilience. This showed up in ways they formed community, and defining what their identities were and deciding that their identities were beautiful and deserving of space. Quinn explained this saying: “Being ace isn’t seen as beautiful… [but] my identity is beautiful to the right people.

Having now described the themes that participants’ and I co-created, I will now describe the refined themes that I developed after further analyzing the study data. I collapsed themes together that I thought described similar concepts. For example, a theme called Hit or Miss described othering experiences while at the Pride Center and given a category already existed called othering/exclusion, I collapsed the concepts together. The participants had initially created eight themes that were simplified to five themes that are described next.

**Refined Themes**

**Being Excluded and Othered**

Students described receiving messages that their identities or existences were unreal, invisible, impossible or illogical. There are several sub-themes throughout this section that were
identified including participants feeling invisible or unreal, their identities were deemed fixable or unnatural, and they received messages from society that they were unlovable or unworthy of intimacy or relationships. At the end of this theme is also a special emphasis on the experiences of othering in LGBTQIA+ spaces and movements. There existed tensions between the participants and the Pride Center on campus and the overall LGBTQ+ rights movement. This is no surprise given what the literature has said on the experiences of exclusion from queer communities, (Canning, 2015), queer studies (Przybylo & Cooper, 2014), and the asexual and aromantic discourse online (Vanderzee, 2017).

Invisibility and Impossibility

This study, like MacNeela and Murphys (2015) study found that asexual and aromantic students were disbelieved when they disclosed their identities and were treated like their identities were unreal, and impossible. Maggie described asexual and aromantic people as the “invisible community.” This feeling of invisibility was described in the literature by several other marginalized groups including students of color (Solarzano et al, 2000), and LGBTQ+ students (Sanlo, 2005). A feeling of impossibility of identity was also described in the work of Garvey and Rankin (2015) where trans students described feeling like their identities were non-existent. Invisibility is then a common experience felt by marginalized groups. Talking about the pervasive invisibility they felt on campus Lee said, “We’re not talked about unless it's in specialized places like [the] ace and aro [support] group, [or] specific classes when we bring it up.” Lee went on to explain: “It’s like people don’t think there’s enough [asexual or aromantic] people in order to actually do something about it.”

Jaz who is black and two spirit, asexual, and demiromantic explained what happened to her when she came out. “People will ask me questions, and I’ll [say] ‘this is how I identify,’
[then] they’ll be like ‘cool so not relevant to the current topic at hand’ and so you just kind of move on, back to robots.” When Jaz disclosed their identity they were treated with such little regard that their identity was deemed unimportant and unbelievable. This connects to what MacNeela and Murphy (2015) described as asexuality lacking social credibility, where asexual and aromantic identities were not visible or believed to exist.

Perhaps the most striking example of the sense of being impossible comes from Marcella. Marcella is a STEM major and is also incredibly witty. For context, the pictures comes first and then the quote below is the narrative that Marcella attaches with the photo. The picture and narrative taken by Marcella illustrates the message of their identity as impossible.

Figure 2. Choose. Marcella is facing a wall and on it, there are three pieces of paper. The paper to the right reads: “My family doesn’t accept my romantic/sexual partner.” The paper to the left reads: “My family accepts my romantic/sexual partner.” In the middle of the two larger pieces of paper is a smaller paper that says: “Pick a side” with arrows pointing in the direction of the other papers.
This is me trying to decide how to answer the question on the pieces of paper. This is a recreation of an experience I had in the residence halls and I want to show people why I was so uncomfortable with it. They were having this event in the residence halls where we were discussing some subject. We played a game where we had to move to one side of the room or the other depending on how we answered a question and we were told not to stand in the middle which represented a neutral answer. One of the questions was something about people accepting our romantic/sexual partner and since I am asexual and don’t have a partner and can’t imagine who my partner would be I choose to stand in the middle because it is impossible for people to have an opinion about a non-existent person. They could have [an] opinion on me not being in a relationship or an opinion on my identity but that is not the same. The organizers of the event did not like my choice and they told me not to stand in the middle. I felt left out and forgotten by the OSU community. They set up the event and created a question that I could not answer and were upset when I tried my best to participate honestly.

In Marcella’s narrative and picture she described feeling like the activity led by residence education erased her identity, as if being asexual was not even possible according to the facilitators. Ironically, the purpose of the activity was to increase participants’ awareness of relationship issues. Unfortunately, the ways in which the activity was structured reflected the social norms of compulsory sexuality that were also described by Gupta’s (2016) participants.

In dialogue about Marcella’s photo above, Maggie talked about binaries. “We shouldn’t be thinking in binaries because that’s not how the world is most of the time. You should have space for [a] grey area [or] like third option, ya know? If someone wants to sit in the middle, that’s a valid reason, that’s an option for them to pick. We shouldn’t be forcing them to choose a
side.” Maggie illuminates the existence of a binary between how the world views asexuality and sexuality, and aromanticism and romanticism. You either do have sex or you do not, and you either are in a relationship or you are not. These binaries erase the identities that exist within the spectrums of asexuality and aromanticism. Maggie describes that there is even when asexuality is viewed as possible that it’s viewed in a binary form. People often assume that when you’re asexual that you will never want to have sex or romance. This binary narrative erases that there are many identities that experience varying levels of romantic and sexual attraction.

Other evidence of the ways that participants felt invisible related to completing forms. While the demographics forms used in this study accounted for students’ sexual and romantic orientations, this was an anomaly for most participants. For example, Maggie, said while filling out the demographics survey for this study: “I put my romantic attraction with my sexual attraction because I’m so used to doing that.” Two other participants described putting their romantic orientations with their sexual orientations on forms they had filled out previously because their romantic orientations were never asked about. For these students, it has become an expectation that people will not ask their romantic orientation.

Identity Disclosure.

Resulting from the larger social context and the specific lived experiences of participants, participants expressed protectiveness over their identities. For example, Jeran and Jasmine had a conversation on why they are not out about their identities to everyone. Jasmine said; “I think people that do know [about my identity] are willing to learn more about asexuality versus, the people I'm not open [to about] my sexuality. I just have this feeling like they'll just be more questions and not really an attempt to understand my experience, so I [don’t come out].” Jeran responded “I kind of have to agree with that. I generally don't tell people, unless I feel that they
would understand.” The invisibility of asexual and aromatic identities hindered these students ability to come out. They describe here the strategies they used to decide when they should or should not disclose their identities. Invisibility of identity hindered the coming out process for other queer students in Garvey and Rankin’s (2015) study.

In response to being disbelieved or refuted of their identity MacNeela and Murphy’s (2015) participants managed their social uneasiness by “passing” as straight and sexual. When I asked a question about whether the students disclosed their identities in their classes very few had. Jaz said: “Someone ask me questions I'm pretty open about it, but as someone who looks female and goes buys female and has a rather feminine name. Not that I care but like people don’t really ask questions. Because there’s nothing different about my appearance, if that makes any sense.” Here Jaz describes that they are not outright open about their identity and because asexuality does not have any visual cues it rarely came up, therefore passing themselves as straight and sexual. The invisibility of their identities and an expectation of experiencing hostility led most of the participants to not disclose their identities.

Not disclosing one’s identity can make it harder to find resources, or to find community and kinship (Garvey & Rankin, 2015). Community, and feeling safe to be who are was not a common narrative I found with the participants of this study. Four of the participants in this study described not having friends. A majority of participants were not out to their families and one student described having no family who cared about them. Jeran described the relationship with their family when it came to their identities. “Whenever I go home for the weekend I definitely change how I do things, because while my family back home know some of me, they do not know everything. So I definitely have two different sides of myself. There's parts of my family that know nothing, so I really have to hide everything from them. It's rough.” Jasmine
also described not coming out to her family because they are religious and are transphobic, homophobic, and aphobic. These narratives describe the opposite of a sense of belonging or having kinship.

**Dehumanized, Fixable, or Unnatural**

Related to the sense of invisibility, participants also experienced being told their identities were unnatural or inhuman. When their identities were recognized, they were described as going through a phase, or their identity was something unnatural or to be fixed. Whenever a group of people are viewed as less important, or valuable they become vulnerable to abuse, neglect, discrimination, and exploitation (Disability Justice, 2018). This is a manifestation of how compulsory sexuality (the assumption that all people are sexual, Gupta, 2015), and amatonormativity (the assumption that a single amorous relationship is normative, Brake, 2012) play out in our lives in violent ways. A method built for dehumanizing identities, including sexualities, is pathologization, the process of regarding or treating (someone or something) as psychologically abnormal or unhealthy (Foucault, 1980). Foucault (1980) describes the Diagnostic Statistical Manual as a powerful tool of state power creates norms about sexual behavior that has negative impacts on people. It is no wonder then that the legacy of pathologizing asexuality has had a hand in the way that asexual and aromantic people are treated today.

For example, Jasmine described something that happened to them after they disclosed their identity, “In my field; zoology, [or] science, and STEM fields, when you come out to people they automatically [think] back to how they learned about asexual reproduction in plants and bacteria. That’s the first thing they think of when they think of my identity. It’s like trying to navigate that, so that’s not the first thing that they think of.” While this association with asexual
ASEXUAL AND AROMANTIC STUDENTS

reproduction makes sense, the impact of the discussion reveals how such associations were damaging to Jasmine. Jasmine described a time when this happened to her:

I’m a zoology major and [my] biology classes teach about asexual reproduction and I remember people had flashcards for like asexual and at the same time, I had been telling someone what asexuality was. They pulled out their flashcards and they were like, like [this?].

What Jasmine’s narrative suggests is that when disclosing her identity people view her asexual identity as something inhuman, similar to plants or bacteria.

Maggie illustrated that asexual and aromantic people are also treated like they are not human in the media: “Like in shows, or in movies, if we're lucky, we are portrayed as heartless robots.” To which Lee responded,

Like in the Big Bang Theory, which I have so many issues with, [Sheldon] is portrayed as a robot, and he [thinks] sex is gross, [then] he’s fixed by having a relationship. Society does not portray ace people in a very saintly or nice way.

In addition to popular media tropes, participants also described how identities of asexual characters from books or comics were erased or diluted when asexual characters were written and brought to TV or film. For example, Maggie described this when they said, “When they are adapting from sources that have canonical asexual characters [or] if they have an aromantic identity as well, like Jughead Jones [who is an asexual character from the Archie comics that was not asexual in the Riverdale TV show based off of the Archie comics] and Raphael from the Shadowhunters [an asexual character], then their identity is washed a little bit, it’s diluted.”

Another way that participants described feelings of being excluded or othered, was when people assumed their identities were a phase. The rhetoric around sexual identities being a phase
also has a root in their ability to be fixed by medical professionals, which also relates to the pathologizing of asexuality (Alcaire, 2015). Narratives of being fixed of sexual identities are not new, sexuality being curable has been seen in the way psychology has treated other sexual identities, such as gay, trans, or bisexual identities (Chasin, 2015). When I came out as bisexual at a young age in 2017 my parents told me that they could ‘fix’ me by having me see a doctor.

This pathologizing of their identities led some of the participants to having to constantly battle this assumption and their right to exist and identify as they do. For example, Quinn said: “I feel really defensive whenever I go anywhere, because I feel like I’m going to have to defend myself to like, exist, at all, ever.” This sense was further elaborated by a picture and narrative taken by Quinn.

Figure 3. Clock. The hanging, pendulum pieces of a grandfather clock in mid motion. The glass reflects a tiled room with couches, large windows, and bright lights.

Ace people are often told to ‘Give it time, you’ll find a person that you want to have sex with’.

The grandfather can keep the time, we don’t need it. [This is] the ace community’s experience with being told to wait on identifying as asexual.
In many cases, participants described how they are often not believed after disclosing their identities. Paralleling experiences that bisexual individuals often have, asexual and aromantic participants in this study were often told they will eventually experience sexual attraction (Dugan, & Yurman, 2011). During the second workshop, Maggie, Quinn, and Lee all related to this photo and to the experience of feeling like others express disbelief about their identities because of their age, or because it is “unnatural” or “not possible”. Lee conveyed their agreement with this message when they said: “The whole ‘give it time and you'll find someone thing’ is definitely something that I connect with, having been told that, but [yet] time goes on.” Maggie agreed: “I feel like the same could be said for the aromantic community as well. Like “just wait and you'll find the right person or you haven't met the right person yet.” Constantly being told to wait instead of people accepting your identity in the here and now.” Maggie also described that their identity was fixable, “people already attempt to invalidate my identities by saying I haven’t found “the one” yet. It can make me feel small and alone.” The legacy of pathologizing asexuality and aromanticism shown by these students show how isolating and broken they can feel to be told that you can be fixed.

Unworthy of Relationships or Intimacy

Most of the participants described receiving messages about relationships and intimacy. Students described feeling like silent observers of others’ relationships, and they have been told that they can not or should not expect their own relationships or intimacy. Participants received these messages from the media, society, family and friends, and even from the queer community. For example Quinn describes this in a narrative attached to this photo.
A lot of people think asexuals are heartless people that aren’t worth giving attention and affection to. We’re left on the ground, wasting away because allo² society refuses to ‘see’ us. Leaf was found outside of the Pride Center which, I think, is an appropriate place for heart shaped leaves. Mainly, I feel a bit at loss and unlovable since [identifying] as ace. I understand that it is society that is making us feel unloved and worthless but that doesn’t make it less hurtful.

This photo and the feeling it conveyed resonated with several participants when they viewed it at the second workshop. Lee said “I definitely resonate with the narrative because we're ace, people are like “oh they must not want affection, so we're just not gonna give it to them.” Like “Oh you don't want this? There must be something wrong with you, you heartless person.” Because of the ways in which compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2015) and amatonormativity (Brake, 2010) played

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² Allosexual or allo, zed, zedsexual refer to people who do experience sexual attraction or romantic attraction.
out in participants’ lives, what Quinn describes here is also about self-hate, self-doubt, and internalized aphobia.

In Gupta’s (2016) study on compulsory sexuality almost two thirds of the participants described that social norms about relationships and intimacy had negative impacts on their relationships. Relating to the conversation about stereotypes and expectations of relationships and intimacy, most of the participants talk about Valentine’s Day as a reminder of amatonormativity (Brake, 2010) and compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2015) in their lives. Meaning that there are scripts about relationships and intimacy that have been prescribed by society (Gupta, 2015). Maggie created a photo and narrative that speak to this.

![Figure 5. Valentine’s Day Section. It is a section of Valentine’s Day cards that say romantic, romantic religious, and happy Valentine’s Day.](image)

I want to share this photo because it’s an example of how much society focuses on romantic relationships compared to others. The meaning behind this photo is that, especially in the month of February, all society cares about is selling romantic relationships and holding them higher than platonic or familial ones. This relates to me
and my community because people already attempt to invalidate my identities by saying I haven’t found “the one” yet. It can make me feel small and alone sometimes because, while I am very romance favorable, I know that entire relationships are ignored and seen as less than because they aren’t romantic or sexual; which are celebrated by society and used for a profit.

Lee conveyed this message while talking about the photo of the Valentine’s Cards section.

I get really upset that it's all romantic relationships for [the] husband, it's pretty much implied in almost all the words in the cards that it's from her. [Vice versa for the] opposite for the wife. I like sending Valentine’s Day things to my friends and family and it's really, really hard to find those. Friends ones are easier ones to family ones, family ones [are] really hard to find.

What this comment tells me is that society is upholding a relationship hierarchy during Valentine’s Day. Romantic relationships are treated as more important than other relationships in our lives even though mutual caretaking in other relationships is just as valuable (Brake, 2012). Maggie described amatonormativity (Brake, 2012) while talking about their photo with the other participants. They said: “It’s already seen as a hierarchy with relationship types and it gets even worse as we get into Valentine’s Day in the month of February. It’s the example of amatonormativity, which is that having a romantic relationship is critical for any human to have or that it’s normal for every human to have. I feel like that is amplified a lot during this time.”

Another example of the way amatonormativity (Brake, 2012) played out in participants’ lives was revealed in a photo and narrative created by MarCELLA.
I hate that you have to get married in this game. Not everyone gets married in real life. They let players choose whether or not to go to college but not whether or not they get married and I hate that. It makes me feel [excluded] and then I have to choose if I want to have a husband or a wife if I want to continue playing. If it were a choice I might opt to get married because it is just a game but it is not a choice so I feel angry. When I have a game night with people, I don’t appreciate the stress this game gives me.

Related to this disbelief within the context of disclose were various pressures and expectations of intimacy and intimate relationships. Describing the board game ‘Life’ Marcella said:

Not everyone gets married in real life. It makes me feel (excluded) and then I have to choose if I want to have a husband or a wife if I want to continue playing.
Marcella here illuminates that not getting married is treated as impossible. Seemingly small events like assumption built into board games are consistent with the kinds of microaggressions described elsewhere (Rankin et al., 2010). The message this game sends was not lost upon the students in this study. Lee remarked, “in that game you have to get married, it’s like saying oh you’re not complete unless you’re married. Which is… cringe.” Jasmine described this marriage script as it was taught to her by her family. She said: “I definitely [identify] with this because my family is a Latino family that expects all of us to get married and have kids. [There is that pressure from] even your friends. Before knowing my identity it was always, ‘Oh you'll find someone, Oh you'll find someone’. [But] no, I don't have anyone I need to find.” Here Life was used as a manifestation of how we are all meant to play into amatonormativity and that we’re ‘not allowed’ to vary from that path (Brake, 2012).

Taken together, the experiences of participants suggest that there are a variety of challenges facing asexual and aromantic students. This issues create a profound need for community. One would logically think that LGBTQIA+ spaces would be a place for community for ace people, yet as the data from this study suggest, this was too often not the case. I turn now to discussing othering processes in LGBTQIA+ spaces.

Othering in LGBTQIA+ Spaces

Recall from the literature review when I described asexual discourse and non-inclusion practices that LGBTQ+ people online have been a major part of the asexual/aromantic discourse on social media. Asexual and aromantic communities exist primarily online on sites like the asexuality visibility and education network or AVEN, or on social media. Despite identifying as queer, other queer people have attacked asexual and aromantic people online by verbally threatening them and doxing them (leaking personal information of an individual on the internet
with malicious purposes) (Ashley, 2016; Vanderzee, 2017). Asexual and aromantic students experience outright violence, microaggressions, or discrimination when they assert that they are queer online. This policing of identity and community is not a new tactic, Canning (2015) wrote that queer spaces use identity based vocabularies that can exclude others. Bisexual women have felt similar identity boundaries within the lesbian community, being told that they are not queer enough. Discourse around sexuality and policing identities is another way that identity boundaries are being put into use against asexual and aromantic individuals.

Natan described experiences with hostility and the difficulties faced in trying to find community online. Natan said, “It’s tiring having to like explain to people all the time how different it is. I'm still queer. That's also really irritating [when] people make this assumption that we don't face the same discrimination as other queer folx, or that we're not queer at all.” Maggie and Ceph who is white, grey-ace, grey-romantic, and agender also had a conversation about the asexual discourse online. Ceph said “Just a lot of places that discuss asexuality end up in a bullshit ton of discourse.” Maggie replied “That’s why I got out, I didn’t want to deal with it.” All three of them described finding a community online that helped them find out about their identities but then were forced to leave or limit their time in those spaces because of its increased toxicity by others outside of the asexual and aromantic communities.

Maggie described feeling left out of the LGBTQIA+ movement because the community did not care about asexual and aromantic issues. They said: “Partly because of this discourse and because of the invisibility of asexual and aromantic communities, participants described a perceived unwillingness for the queer movement (and queer spaces) to pay attention to asexual and aromantic issues. They described receiving messages that they were unwelcome in the larger
LGBTQIA+ community and movement. Maggie explained this phenomena in the following way:

They always see the marriage equality issues, or people being attacked in schools because of who they’re dating. That happen[s] to asexual and aromantic [people] too. Asexual and aromantic people still go through conversion therapy, [and] corrective rape happens. It’s still there. Our form[s] of oppression just looks different so it doesn’t get talked about.”

What Maggie is speaking about in this quote is that asexual and aromantic people experience oppression even though it’s believe that they do not. We still are pathologized today, as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder has not been entirely removed from the DSM. According to Vanderzee (2017) research, asexual people are still getting treated or have undergone conversion therapy for HSDD in ways that are damaging. There is a pervasive invisibility experienced by these identities and that is viewed as unimportant next to other queer issues and I believe that compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity play a part in keeping them invisible and separate from LGBTQ+ communities.

I will note here that the LGBTQIA+ rights movement throughout its history has been fraught with contention (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014, Willse & Spade, 2013, Ettelbrick, 1989). Trans* people have been left out of the current LGBTQIA+ politics (Spade & Willse, 2013), something that is shared with the asexual and aromantic participants of this study. Not only have these communities been overlooked, but black queer people and queer people with disabilities have also been treated as invisible (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). Spade (2011) argued that the politics of law reform in the professional LGBTQ+ movement has produced progress only for a very specific type of LGBTQ+ person (white, cisgender, able bodied, middle and upper class
gays and lesbians). What this means is that funding, resources, and political gains largely benefit the groups who already have the most privilege (Spade, 2011).

Similarly, Rojas wrote (2012) “Gay rights activism resulted in ‘LGBT’ centers on campus” (p. 256). While the gain in space and “recognition” is noteworthy, it also brings complications, especially given the history of LGBTQIA+ issues. Knowing this contentious history within the LGBTQIA+ rights movement, it should be no surprise that asexual and aromantic students are invisible in LGBTQIA+ campus centers. These centers were not originally created for all queer students. What this illuminates is that LGBTQIA+ campus centers are not separate from LGBTQIA+ politics.

A majority of the participants had not visited the Pride Center which is consistent with the findings from the AVEN survey where a majority of respondents described not participating in LGBTQ+ communities outside those dedicated to asexual and aromantic communities (Bauer, et al, 2017). For the four participants who did go to the Pride Center they described it as lacking in resources for asexual and aromantic students, and they spoke of feelings of invisibility surrounding their identities, even within a space that they believed was theirs too. But they still went there frequently to try and encourage the center staff to be more inclusive. Lee’s picture and narrative illustrate this feeling.
Figure 7. Rainbow Spiral in the Pride Center

This shows how I am not as excited (about the Pride Center) as I was when I first heard about it.

While describing this photo Lee said: “this picture is like a rainbow thing, I don’t know what that’s called in the Pride Center and it’s kind of faded and it’s really hard to see the purple and that’s just how I feel about the Pride Center. When I first heard about it I was like oh my gosh this is so cool and now I’m just like there’s not a lot of ace stuff, it’s hard to see the ace stuff and my excitement has faded.” Several other participants agreed that this is the feeling they had while at the Pride Center. Maggie augments Lee’s feelings:

I spend a lot of time in the Pride Center so there’s the running joke that I live in there. I was really excited about the Pride Center and like going in there and seeing what resources they had, and they don’t have much regarding asexual and aromantic people. They are very slow at putting stuff out for us. They do the absolute bare minimum which over time can be really irritating. But I hang out there a lot [and] I’ve made a lot of
friends there. I hope that being there will help [people see that] hey we’re here, do something for us.

Maggie talked about the personal relationships with the staff at the Pride Center and being often let down or feeling left out when events were not created for asexual and aromantic identities. Like trans students in Marine and Nicolazzo’s (2014) study, there was tension around naming, events/programming, and staffing of LGBTQIA+ centers. Asexual and aromantic programming was about asexual education for non-asexual and aromantic communities and not designed for them. Quinn mentions this saying: “What I've noticed is when people try to set up ace and aro events, they're like ‘but what are we supposed to do?’ And a lot of the time its allo people setting them up and they're like ‘I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing for this’.

A discussion on creating programming, services, and space with and for asexual and aromantic students as opposed to services on them is an important distinction to be had (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014).

A similar conversation was described in the photo narrative of Maggie.
Figure 8. Flags. It is a photo of the aromantic and asexual flags, laminated, on a wall in the Pride Center. They are small flags that are above the window in the Pride Center.

I want to share this photo because it’s one of the few ways my communities are represented in the Pride Center. The deeper meaning to this photo, and why I shot it in the angle I did, is to show how little representation we have. Having our flags on the wall, and one of us in the acronym breakdown (LGBTQIA+ not including aromantic), is, to me, the most minimal effort the staff could give in showing support for our communities and making us feel welcome. This relates to my life and the people in it because we’re often treated as an afterthought or tacked on at the end. It’s a reminder that we still need to fight and advocate for ourselves and not just rely on our community centers to do it for us.

Lee and Maggie had a conversation on this topic in this narrative. Maggie said: “I think part of it is expectation [because] come on you’re supposed to be the LGBTQ+ resource on campus, and you’re barely doing anything for us.” None of the conversations from this study refer to the Pride Center as a hostile place for asexual and aromantic students. It was more that there was unawareness of their identities, or an inability to see the larger picture when it came to their invisibility and exclusion that fueled their invisibility. Maggie described what it felt like to be in the Pride Center and feel left out of conversation on sex and intimacy.

I often feel sidelined by the LGBTQ+ community. Because as an asexual or aromantic person, I don't relate to their experiences all the time so I'll just be there twiddling my thumbs and watching stuff happen. Often I’m an observer of people's relationships and people will ask my opinion, even though I haven’t been in a romantic relationship for I
don't know how many years. Sometimes I feel like a silent observer due to amatonormativity.

Maggie describes that it may be harder for asexual and aromantic students to like they relate with other queer folks because of compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2015) and amatonormativity (Brake, 2012).

The word expectation often came up when describing the Pride Center. Foster and Scherrer (2014) found that asexual and aromantic people had experiences of minority stress. Perhaps entering the space already had them on edge, because they had experiences with the ace and aro discourse online. Would they be welcomed in a queer space when spaces they had entered online had been quite the opposite? My participants had expectations that the Pride Center and its staff would make asexual and aromantic identities issues more visible because of the ace and aro discourse online. However they often felt like programming, resources, and services at the center fell short and often focused more on other identities. But when asked by a facilitator if this was a specific Pride Center expectation, the participants replied that it occurred in LGBTQ+ spaces in general. Therefore these matters of recognition and expectation have broad consequences and result from larger social structures.

Not all experiences with the Pride Center felt invisible for participants however. Jasmine described a difference in the Pride Center’s inclusion recently that was initiated because people started to understand more about asexual and aromantic identities.

The last few years there’s been more like open dialogue and programming around asexuality and aromanticism. So I do feel that. Also I have lots of friends that do work and have worked at the Pride Center that didn’t know about asexuality, but during their time there learned more and started advocating for ace folks a lot more.
Jasmine points out that the dialogue around asexual and aromantic identities are important for change to start being made. Perhaps because of the participants presence in the center the Pride Center has started to work on creating more programming for asexual and aromantic people.

I want to pivot slightly from this conversation to talk about the specific experiences of students of color. There is not much known about the experiences of asexual and aromantic people in general. The AVEN census described more sexual and intimate partner violence experienced by ace and aro people of color. Which suggests that racism plays a huge part in the violence experienced by the asexual and aromantic communities, again showing that there is another social structure that regulates the lives of asexual and aromantic people.

**Ace and Aro Students of Color.** When it came to feeling included by the Pride Center on our campus, Natan described the Pride Center as not a space for them, and felt that there were no resources for queer, ace or aro students of color. Natan said:

I've always felt like the Pride Center [is] very white. As a person of color, and as a nonbinary person of color, being ace is very different, my experience is different. My sexuality also comes from trauma so it's a lot of things you don't want to talk to people [about] you know? No one has those kind of resources, which is why a lot of people stick to Tumblr. I've never felt like the Pride Center [is] the place to go. My other queer friends validate my experience, and they're more of a resource for me than the Pride Center is. I've known multiple staff who have worked there that are people of color [and they] feel uncomfortable [with] their fellow staff members. Ever since then I've never liked going to the Pride Center. [The Pride Center director] is great, like I love most of the staff there. But it can be a very white dominated space [so] I would not count them as a resource for myself.
Natan describes feeling ostracized as a queer and ace person of color from the queer community and the Pride Center. They suggest that the resources that asexual and aromantic people of color need may not be the same resources that white ace and aro people need. They also reference how important it was for Natan to have a kinship with other queer people of color or from online resources. Racial microaggressions may have played a part in their ability to feel like the Pride Center was a place for them.

Jasmine echoed Natan’s narrative about queer people of color and the Pride Center and made a connection between the way that SOL (the LGBT multicultural network) and asexual and aromantic students feel. She said:

This photo of the aromantic and asexual flag just being on the wall connects [to] SOL at the Pride Center. They’re also an afterthought. My friends work in SOL so I always hear about how they have to struggle with how they [are] gonna make this work and they don’t have the same support or the same resources that the Pride Center has. It’s like both of my identities at the Pride Center now are just like tossed on the wall and left there.

This sense of being left out, excluded, or invisible is a common critique of LGBTQIA+ centers and the LGBTQIA+ movement (Barnard, 2003; Cohen, 1997; Fox & Ore, 2010; Ferguson, 2005; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). Being LGBTQIA+ is discursively white and assumed a white issue (Fox & Ore, 2010). Fox and Ore (2010) state that if we only work on one form of oppression we unintentionally contribute to other systems of oppression. They also describe the existence of ‘safe spaces’ as those that are white, when in reality these spaces are not safe for queer and trans people of color. (Fox & Ore, 2010).

All of these critiques of the Cultural Centers, and the Pride Center in particular here do not put into context the pressure on centers to be all they can for their students with little
funding, resources, and staffing. Jasmine, a former cultural resource center student, illuminated this saying:

I think the way the university handles the Cultural Centers in general is the reason for our lack of support in these centers...it's like they need to find reasons to keep us there because they don't think that our very existence on this campus is enough. All the work they're putting on [Associate Directors] to make them not able to be in the space and address these concerns is a problem.

Jasmine so eloquently alludes that if the University really wanted to be inclusive they should probably put their money, and staffing where their mouth is. Diversity and Cultural Engagement at Oregon State University houses all of the seven cultural resource centers and most of the diversity programming for the entire university. However they are also one of the most understaffed, underfunded, and under supported initiatives. They serve hundreds of students of color, queer students, and other marginalized students. The Pride Center currently at Oregon State is housed in a building that was renovated sixteen years ago and which used to be a literal house. The house itself has had many problems like flooding, pests, and just not being big enough to house the needs of the population. The director is the only professional staff mentoring 10 student staff, the SOL graduate student and 3 staff, and many volunteers. The Pride Center is also the only LGBTQIA+ organization housed in a building in Corvallis, Oregon. So it has also become a community destination for those who are not students, including faculty and staff, and people in the Corvallis community. A lot is placed on the shoulders of the director of the Pride Center. Knowing this context and knowing the director of the center what could they do if they had the funding, staffing, and support from the university to do so?
All of these experiences of feeling like an outcast, unnatural, unreal, or invisible are not surprising to me as I myself have felt them as well. This theme is filled with heartbreak, pain, and students feeling like they do not matter. As Sanlo (2005) found harassment, stigmatization, or harassment affected student’s physical and mental health of LGBTQ+ students. Several of these students experienced mental health issues and more than half of them identified as having disabilities. Although I cannot say that these feelings may lead students to experience mental conditions, several researchers have found links between LGBTQ populations and higher likelihood of mental conditions and suicide (Seelman, 2014, Hobbes, 2017; Petter, 2017; Meyer, 2003, 2016). As a result of these experiences, many students in this study described feeling like they did not matter or belong anywhere on campus, to queer people or in queer spaces, with their families, or to anyone at all. Further feelings of not belonging related to sexual coercion, violence, and consent are described next.

**Sexual Coercion and Violence and the Importance of Consent**

From the literature review I found that sexual coercion and consent are incredibly important to asexual and aromantic communities. The harm that compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2015) and amatonormativity (Brake, 2010) have had on asexual and aromantic populations is shown in the high numbers of sexual coercion and violence and intimate partner violence from the AVEN census (Bauer et al., 2017). There is no study on the experiences of asexual and aromantic students in regards to sexual coercion and violence in higher education. Yet, there are dozens of studies that address issues of sexual violence on campus (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Krebs, Lindquist, & Barrick, 2011; Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007; Sinozich & Langton, 2014; Westat, et al, 2015). Recall from the literature review that the AAU
ASEXUAL AND AROMANTIC STUDENTS

report on sexual assault and misconduct listed asexual as a category in the demographic but this statistic was not able to be linked to the experiences of asexual and aromantic students.

Students in this study described feeling separated from a sexualized and romantic world that expected them to also be sexual and romantic. This had consequences for their sense of belonging because they were sidelined, separated, and described feeling pressured into sexual and romantic situations because they were told that no one does not want sex or intimacy. Although no participants divulged information about sexual violence or coercion a narrative Natan described what often happens when they come out that describes a common narrative about being able to be fixed by sex. They said:

[Asexuality is] not something that's very like common or that a lot of people talk about, so it is something that people are constantly asking [about]. [They’ll ask you] ‘how does that feel’ or ‘when did you start like realizing this?’ or the typical questions; 'are you sure 'cause you haven't had sex with someone that you know;' or someone hasn't like pleased you right or stuff like that.”

This conversation with Natan describes the lack of comfort in coming out as asexual or aromantic and how if you are not careful people will try to fix you. I have heard conversations like this one in reference to sexual coercion or corrective rape or feeling pressured into sexual situations experienced by asexual and aromantic people. Some of Gupta’s (2016) participants described being told by friends, family, and partners to see doctors or psychiatrists to get fixed or that having sex would fix their relationships.

The participants in this study described finding compulsory sexuality all over campus (Gupta, 2015). Jasmine talked about experiencing compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2015) at our
university while at a safer sex promotion workshop, where she described feeling left out from the dialogue. She said:

I think it’s kind of interesting [that] OSU does a lot of safe sex promotion. There’s like a lot of events that were based off of safe sex practices; like the different types of condoms and whatnot that you can use during sex. It’s useful information, but there’s always that assumption that everyone has [these] kind of like sexual experiences. I’ve never felt [that]. So It’s interesting when people make assumptions [and say] “oh yeah, everybody wants to have sex.” There’s [parts] of [those] workshops [where they’ll] try to relate to folks, they’ll say: “do you know how when you feel this…” and I'll be like, that's not universal.

This narrative illuminates that sexual assault programs and programming assumed that everyone experiences sexual attraction. Therefore they exclude an understanding of the way intimacy is achieved by asexual and aromantic students and the vulnerability of sexual coercion and assault these students can face. Through communal knowledge, these students understood their vulnerability. Lee conveyed: “You know corrective rape is a thing that happens to people in this community and that's horrible. Stop is just a really important word, and the word no...stop is a very valuable word. Being able to say stop or no is a huge part of that and people listening is a huge part of that.” Quinn illustrates the meaning mentioned above in a photo and narrative:
I think ‘Stop’ and consent, in general, are an accurate representation of the ace community. We find a lot of need to express what we are okay and not okay with and ‘stop’ is an important part in communicating such. I find ‘stop’ is a very valuable word in the world of consent. Mainly, I relate this to the want to tell others to stop talking about sex.

During the second workshop, students made several comments about this photo and how it made them feel. Maggie said:

I think it also speaks to the conversation of continuously talking about consent and your boundaries in relationships as an asexual or aromantic person or both. [Because] each person has a different level of what intimacy is for them, what is romantic for them, what is sexual to them. Having that open discussion-- and I might be wrong in saying this, but
I feel like our communities are the most vocal about it because it's something that is so critical.

Gupta (2016) also describes that because of compulsory sexuality, asexual and aromantic people are often pressured into unwanted sex with partners because of social pressure. If you are in a community where you do not want sex or romance but feel pressured to engage in sexual acts or relationships, consent becomes a vital conversation to have. This is why Maggie says it is critical in our community. Quinn, who took this picture, said:

I think ‘Stop’ and consent, in general, are an accurate representation of the ace community. We find a lot of need to express what we are okay and not okay with and ‘stop’ is an important part in communicating such….I find ‘stop’ is a very valuable word in the world of consent.

The participants describe here the importance of consent that is normative for asexual and aromantic communities. Although the participants did not narrate this, I believe that touch and consent are vital for our community because often our consent has been violated. A conversation on differing expectations of intimacy and relationships was also had that illuminates the possible ways in which asexual and aromantic students are vulnerable to sexual coercion and relationship violence. Lee said:

Being aromantic or on the aromatic spectrum, people expect you to be repulsed by romantic things. But being asexual and being sex positive or sex neutral, you can still want sex and not be attracted sexually to people. [It’s] the same thing for aromantic [people], you can not want a full blown romantic relationship and still like romance. It's like people expect you not to. I love romance, like cuddling and warm feelings towards people and showing [them] that you love them. Going on dates whether or not it's a
‘romantic’ or ‘platonic date’. That's still something that I enjoy. It's not like I'm gonna shun intimacy with people because I'm on the aromantic spectrum.

Lee describes a different interpretation of what intimacy can be. Neal (2016) wrote that because of the differing expectations around sex and intimacy asexual and aromantic people may be in vulnerable situations where they are likely to be pressured into unwanted romantic or sexual situations. Maggie commented on the internal desire for romantic coded behaviors that others view as only reserved for romance. They said: “I'm really close with a friend and we will cuddle extremely platonically but it's also like I will also do this exact same thing with a romantic partner too.” Again here Maggie points out that what is viewed as romantic for some may also be platonic. These conversations illuminate that there is a social norm regarding what is sexual and what is not, and what is platonic and what is not that is blurred for asexual and aromantic students in this study. This relates to what Gupta (2016) found where asexual and aromantic people challenged, defied, and resisted the idea of sexual norms. What possibility could recognizing compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity have for challenging the marriage industrial complex (Ferguson, 2017), or legal kinship (Eng, 2010)?

**Consent about sexual conversations.** Along with the conversation on consent within relationships or intimate partnerships comes a conversation on sexual language and descriptions of sex in queer spaces. There exists a certain dynamic about queer spaces that students talked about that made them feel uncomfortable. Lee described feeling uncomfortable with the sexual energy in bars where a lot of queer programming that is not on campus occurs. “All the queer spaces, not all the queer events ‘cause the Pride Center, but like all the queer events they’re all at bars. Like they’re all around drinking and bars are really sexualized, there’s a lot of sexual
energy.” Quinn illuminates how hard it can be for asexual and aromantic people to feel welcome in spaces that constantly talk about sex and intimacy.

Figure 10. Path. The path turns to dirt and lies between a tan building and a stretch of trees and bushes.

Being ace can be hard because of our differences from allosexuals and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. To the point that we are hidden, given a dirty, out of the way path to a so-called safe space (this is a metaphor). This is the beginning of the path to the back entrance of the Pride Center. I relate to how unspoken an ace identity is. Our safe spaces exist in spaces that openly talk about sex and while I am open to sex talk, the sheer amount of it can become overwhelming.

Lee and Maggie had a conversation about this photo that augments Quinn’s story. Maggie said: “Spaces like the Pride Center will talk openly about sex [which is fine], not all asexual people are sex repulsed. But there are a sizable amount that are and people leave them
out of the conversation just because they're in the minority.” Lee replied: “I'm not sex repulsed but talking about sex can get tiring and repetitive. You know I'm okay with talking about this but after a while it's just exhausting. That's not the only thing that's part of me.” Lee and Maggie use the term sex repulsed, so I want to make sure to define what that means. There are terms that asexual and aromantic people use to mention how comfortable they are with discussion around sex or intimacy. Sex positivity is being totally okay with hearing about sex or intimacy and enjoying those conversations. Sex neutral means you are apathetic to sex, and sex repulsion is being physically ill by thinking about or being shown sex. (Lost247365, 2015). So we can probably imagine what it may be like for someone who is sex repulsed to enter what the participants describe as sexualized spaces without consent for those conversations. What was learned from the literature review is that many asexual and aromantic people may be survivors of sexual violence. They may not want to hear about sex because it could possibly be attached to trauma. This also is not an isolated situation for asexual and aromantic survivors of sexual violence, but possibly other survivors of sexual violence as well.

This illuminates a need for serious discussion about sexual conversations and consent for those conversations in queer spaces if we are to help asexual and aromantic students belong. Wade (2017) talking about hook-up culture found that there is a performative aspect to sexuality especially relevant in college. I wonder if that is not also the same, perhaps more for queer students. Gupta (2016) described that asexuality (and aromanticism) have the power to challenge gender and sexual norms that can have transformative potential. Could asexual and aromantic students help other queer students recognize that performativity and compulsory sexuality in their lives? These conversations illuminate a great need for education about asexual and aromantic identities. Described next is the need for education in all of higher education.
Need for Education and the Burden to Educate

The participants in this study described this theme as the need for accessibility of education about ourselves and our identities. Higher education is a place of knowledge and learning, yet the students described barely ever hearing about their identities or finding themselves in their curriculum, especially in places that they believe should be teaching about them. These findings are similar to the findings from Garvey, et al (2015) where negative classroom experiences lead trans and queer students to feel silenced or disengaged. Trans students especially felt silenced and they felt invisible when their identities were treated as non-existent (Garvey, et al, 2015). There are similarities between ace and aro students and LGBTQ+ students experiences of feeling invisible, erased in curriculum, and feeling like their identities were not real. Lily who is white, gray-ace, recipromantic, and nonbinary said “[in the] classes I have [it] doesn’t normally come up, ‘cause it’s all science. I just try to stay on topic to get the work done.” Several of the students talked about also not disclosing their identities in their classes like Lily. This invisibility is a burden on the students to do the education and emotional labor about their identities, thus putting them at risk for outing, discrimination, microaggressions, and possibly violence. These findings are similar to the findings about the taxing effects educating others had on trans students in Duran and Nicolazzo’s (2017) study.

The accessibility of education on the subject of our identities is limited; if there is no way to get on the internet or access academic articles you will likely not hear our identities mentioned. Marcella mentioned this saying: “It can be hard to get access to good reliable information. You [have] to pay for a lot of articles. We are in college and we can access a lot of good scientific articles through the college.” I can attest to this as I did not come out as asexual
until much later in life. I had not even heard about asexuality until my second year of college and I really did not understand it until my partner came out to me as asexual when I was 25 years old.

This invisibility and lack of access to information can make it hard for people to hear about these identities and understand themselves. It can also lead to asexual and aromantic people feeling broken, and in human that may lead serious mental health issues (Gupta 2016; Foster & Scherrer, 2014). Jasmine described this in a narrative and photo they created.

![Figure 11. (e)ducate. Pictures a shelf full of books.](image)

The privatization of knowledge in academia and print makes it hard to find people of color that have platform to educate on various subjects that should be dominated by them. My best friend and I went into the Book Bin to find some books to read. We ended up in the history section, and I tried to find books on socialist revolutions in Latin America. I was skeptical of some of the books because they were written by white Europeans so I tried to find books that were written by historians from the countries they were talking about. It was hard. Whole stories can’t always be found in libraries and bookstores. They’re found in oral storytelling, in community gatherings, and traditions passed from
abuelxs. But when we have access to privatized knowledge, I think we need to make it accessible to folx who don’t have the same access.

Jasmine is speaking here about communities of color but I think it also relates to the experiences of asexual and aromantic people. Jasmine asks us to think critically about who has access to information about their identities? Do we have also have access to ways to respectfully learn about other identities as well? Why is it that academic articles that teach about compulsory sexuality or amatonormativity are locked up in academy? Very few asexual and aromantic folk that I talk to even know that these social constructions and the terms to name them exist.

Marcella talked about the fact that our identity has been defined for us.

*Figure 12. Dictionary Definition. Dictionary definition of asexual from 1987*

I think it shows how far we have come as being recognized as a community and a sexual orientation. It also shows what people usually think asexual is. Most people think of asexuality in terms of biology and reproduction.
Talking about this photo Jasmine commented: “We have to go outside of what we’re supposed to trust to define words for us. It's like a dictionary, it's supposed to have all the correct information, but it doesn't. So like reframing how we think about knowledge and who has it and whether it can be bound in a book.” It is incredibly hard to find articles or history about asexual and aromantic people. If remembering our histories helps us to be more resilient, how can we do so if we do not have access to them, or if researchers are not looking into our histories? As Maggie said earlier, our histories have been erased, and we need to dig and find them—especially the stories about asexual and aromantic people of color and asexual and aromantic people with disabilities. Maggie described how it was for them to read about the experiences of asexual people of color in the new journal *The Asexual*.

This makes me think about why a lot of the vocal parts of the asexual and aromantic communities are so white. It's because we have white privilege, we can access the internet, we can access all this information whereas, not a lot of other communities can’t. I've read from [the] asexual magazine, which is pretty rad. The issue of this month is all about stuff from people of color, writing about their experiences with the asexual community. It's really interesting to hear that.

Jeran created a photo that describes what they wanted to see in higher education. It is entitled Whiteboard and pictures a person writing on a whiteboard in blue marker the words ‘non-sexual what is it?’ Non-sexual is another word used to talk about asexuality and other non-sexual identities.
I believe that there should be more discussion and classes about non-sexuality and non-romantiscism at OSU.

Marcella described the absence of this kind of conversation in classes. “[This photo is] talking about this sort of discussion from a class, or that a person’s teaching and they think that it should be a discussion in classes. Yeah you don’t really hear the term nonsexual.” This illuminate a connection to the way LGBTQ+ students have also felt about feeling like their identities are invisible in the curriculum in classes, even in ones in which they should be mentioned (Garvey, et al., 2015). Maggie commented on this photo saying how many classes they had been that mentioned asexuality.

I agree with the narrator’s caption that there should be more discussion in class. As far as I’m aware there’s only one class that even mentions asexuality and even then like it’s bare bones basic-- potentially not the most educational, and that’s in the human sexuality class.

Quinn also talked about this saying:
Human Sexuality gives you about two sentences worth of what asexuality is. I don't even think it mentions aro [identities] and it's on sexuality, [so] why do you not talk about us? Sexuality is focused on the [cisgender heterosexuals] and we’re here, please talk about us.

Students described that even in these studies and environments where there should be education about their identities there is not. Ceph described having to educate about asexuality and correct people in his women gender and sexuality class. “You’ll end up in a situation where you feel the need to correct someone [which] happened [in] my WGSS class and it was really annoying.” I have had similar experiences and have felt invisible in Queer Studies courses. As a researcher on asexuality, I know that there is enough literature on asexuality to include at least one article on our identities. Yet I have had to also correct people in Queer Studies classes on asexuality and felt like I had to justify why it was a part of Queer Studies. As Przybylo and Cooper (2014) explain, Asexualities is almost absent from queer, feminist, and critical sexuality studies. I believe that the invisibility that participants faced mentioned earlier also extends to the invisibility in education about our identities anywhere; as Lee said earlier, we are not in classes, we are not in sexual education, we are invisible and it is only talked about when we bring it up.

These narratives show us that currently there really is no depth to discussions in classes about asexuality and nothing yet about aromanticism. While being asked what it would mean if there was a class [or even more discussion] on their identities, Lee said:

I feel like I would be more comfortable if more people knew about what it is. It’s also a chance for people [who have these feelings] who don’t know what to have a chance to explore that and understand more about themselves.
There is a power that comes from understanding your own history. For example Maggie said that it was power for them to learn that asexual and aromantic people have always been a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. They said:

We’ve been here since the beginning. We’ve been part of the foundation of this community like we may not have had a label for our life but we were very close with the bisexual community, back when this movement really got it’s kick start. We’ve been there, we’ve been part of that foundation that you were talking about like how it’s the foundation.

What Maggie is referencing here is that Rust (1995) wrote that asexuals had once been a part of the bisexual community. We were here before the creation of AVEN and may have even been at Stonewall or beyond. How powerful the knowing of that history is for the analysis of today’s politics. Rojas (2012) argues that when a movement begins its own studies (e.g. black studies, queer studies, and women’s studies) it is strongly linked with student protest and the creation of similar program in other universities. “Intellectual movements may... engender institutional reform” (p. 267). Studying asexuality and aromanticism for myself and the history of people who identified as such has given me drive to change higher education. What power could teaching Asexualities studies do for asexual and aromantic students and for change in higher education?

**Burden to educate.** Students previously had mentioned that they were careful in disclosing their identities. This theme I think can give us another reason why it can be hard to do so. This feeling is clarified in Lee’s photo Bare that pictures a tree without leaves.
This is how I feel when I talk about my sexuality in front of groups of people or when I feel the need to explain myself.

Lee related furthers on this photo in dialogue with other participants:

[This is a] tree that's like no leaves and there's greenery around it and like it's just like stripped bare. Which is how I feel when I feel outed or if I'm talking in front of a group. Like even when I'm doing a pride panel. It feels stripped to the bone, I'm sharing everything, there's nothing to hide, no place to hide. If I feel the need to explain myself when someone says something that's like super heteronormative or even just like assuming that I would want a relationship. It's like eh, actually no, I'm sharing this very important part of myself because I'm trying to fix a misconception that you have.
Lee describes here the burden that asexual and aromantic people have to educate and do emotional labor about their identities. Natan described this when we were talking:

[Can I be open about my identities in classes?] Yes and No. I think it's very situational.

Where do I [feel I] have the energy [to] talk about it all over again? [It’s] also something that people don't really know about so you have to explain the difference between asexual, aromanticism; what that is and [what] being demisexual [is]. But it’s always the same thing [and] it’s very exhausting and it's tokenizing. I hate when people are like ‘oh yeah my friend's like asexual you should go talk to them’ and I'm like 'um, okay'. So yeah there’s always like a yes and no situation. Like do I want to talk about it? People want to hear about it cause it's not something that's commonly talked about. But it's more up to if I have the energy to talk about it.

This stories illuminate again that there is an educational burden put on the students, one that can’t always engage in. Beemyn and Rankin (2011) found that the taxing effects on trans students to educate about their identities is overwhelming. As a result of this burden to educate and the labor it required some trans student found it better to give up educating others, because of the impact on themselves emotional, and physically (Nicolazzo, 2016, 2017). Maggie describes doing this emotional labor all the time:

When I had my RA training at the beginning of this term it was the first time that someone brought asexuality without me bringing it up first...It was there without me asking or like bringing it up. Folks in the room knew that I was the ‘local expert’ on it [they] offered for me to talk about it. [But] I was like ‘no you talk about [it], I don’t want to do this all the time, you do it.’
Quinn talked about how dangerous it can be for someone to be the ‘local expert’ on asexuality and aromanticism. “If you’re the local expert, everybody goes to you, everybody, and then you are forced to talk about it, even if that’s not what you wanna do…when we are treated [like] the expert we are [then] sometimes outed without our consent.” Ceph commented afterwards. “We end up being resources on topics that we aren’t supposed to be, which then goes into having to explain your identity in a space where you should not have to.” Being outed in public can put students at risk for being treated differently by their peers, and can even lead to violence. It also is tiring and emotionally exhausting to educate and defend your identity. Ceph described this saying “your emotional labor is not free.” Meaning that engaging in this educating points again to the taxing effects on the students to engage in these conversations.

These experiences illuminate that education is needed to help make visible asexual and aromatic people in their classes, in queer spaces, and on our campus. It is also needed to reduce the burden on asexual and aromatic students to educate about their identities which effects the ways in which they are visible to disclose their identities. Similar to other LGBTQIA+ students, asexual and aromatic student hid their identities if a space was presumed to be hostile (Rankin et al., 2010). Education is needed to navigate all of the barriers that asexual and aromatic students face. Despite this educational burden, invisibility, dehumanization, and more some of the students in this study engaged in in practicing resilience.

**Resistances and Resilience**

Resilience is critical for belonging and they often work together, however some participants in this study described not belonging but still being resilient. Nicolazzo (2017) studying trans students found that resilience was important to combat invisibility and genderism. This applies to asexual and aromatic students in the same ways to resist the ways in which
compulsory sexuality (Gupta 2015) and amatonormativity (Brake, 2010). Similar to Nicolazzo (2017) I am interested in the ways that resilience is a verb instead of a noun, an action that we can practice. I also agree with Nicolazzo (2017) that there are limits to practicing resilience based on participants other salient identities. This section describes the ways that these participants practiced resilience despite manifestations of compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity to be proud of their identities. They reclaimed things that were initially harmful to them, wrote their identities into existence, fought back against the invisibility they face, and engaged in the practice of imagining. These conversations about resilience did not mean that it fixed their feelings of exclusion or being othered or that they still did not struggle with it all the time. Still, they found some ways to build micro communities on campus, to be proud of who they are and help others be proud of who they are too, to engage in self-love and self-care, to recreate things that have been harmful for us and redefine them, to find joy in resistance, and to learn the history of our ancestors to get a bigger picture of how to resist and be resilient.

Lee created a picture and narrative that gives us an example as to these students’ resilience. In the picture a tree branch has icicles hanging from it.
Figure 15. Ice. Even though the rest of the world freezes you out you can still thrive.

While describing this photo Lee said:

This tree was frozen over multiple times but it's still going. It's got buds at the end of the twigs and branches and to me that's how I feel. People gloss over or freeze [conversations] about asexuality. They [say] ‘but wait what about this [identity or that identity] has more violence against it, it’s a bigger lethal problem’ etc. They just kind of phrase the conversation and redirect it. But we're still here and we're still gonna keep growing.

Lee describes here a feeling that resonated with several of the other participants. That although there were barriers, and isolation, they could still find ways to be resilient and resist. This is what Gupta (2016) calls challenging, resisting, and defying sexual norms. Lee speaks of resilience here; that even though you may face incredible barriers toward feeling like you matter or belong, there are ways to build spaces of your own, and resist against compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity.

Quinn, who is white, queer ace, nonbinary, and has disabilities, described resilience as being similar to a tree that they pass every day that has posters on it. “[The] posters get ripped down but people just put them back up and that's resilience.” Finding ways to get back up after experiencing microaggressions, ace and aro oppression, and minority stress are incredibly important for these students wellbeing (Nicolazzo, 2017; Foster & Scherrer, 2014).

Gupta (2016) developed several themes about the ways in which asexual and aromantic people resist and defy sexual norms (and I believe also legal kinship and relationship norms). Several of these themes are present in this research as well. Quinn described the challenges that come with practicing resilience saying: “To really be resilient you gotta like be proud of who you
are in a sense, ‘cause like it's a lot harder to be resistant to oppression when you're not feeling your own identity.” This relates to Gupta’s (2016) theme of constituting asexuality as a sexual orientation or identity. Regardless of the invisibility they have experienced, Quinn said they are loud and proud about their identity.

I actually like force myself on Facebook, I use it very [much] like I don’t care who sees it and what they think. I’m going to share the things that I think. So a lot of it ends up being very ace and queer and trans friendly. Because this is who I am and if you have a problem get the frickin’ hell out. And I know a lot of people can’t do it. But if I don’t [talk about my identities in] that way nothing is gonna come out.

Gupta (2016) found the use of asexuality in the language of sexual orientation and identity offered disruptions to sexual norms, and challenged compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2016). Jasmine also described this as “existing is resilience.” Pointing out that being proud of your identity challenges those norms as well. Maggie also talked about how proud they were of their communities. They created a superhero named Captain Ace, which they named for the asexual community and Captain America. It helps them feel like they are not alone and that there is something to fight for. Maggie describes what Gupta (2016) named as community building and visibility which also was an act of resistance to sexual norms. In a picture and narrative created by Maggie they describe a shield they made for their superhero alter ego.
Figure 16. Shield. This picture shows a shield made to look like Captain America’s shield in the asexual flag colors.

I wanted to show the photo of the shield because to me the shield is a representation of resilience. It's where actually a lot of my ideas for Captain Ace came from. Captain America is my favorite comic book hero and is a role model for me because he stands up for the underdog and fights for justice and doesn't stand for oppression of anybody. I created captain ace through the love of this character and the love I have for the community. A lot of people think of this shield as just a defensive thing, but it can also be used for offense and for fun. That's how I see it too, and it also ties in to my protective nature, like as a shield I can protect people with it.

This superhero character was important for Maggie to feel like they were not alone or disconnected from their communities. Like Nicolazzo’s (2017) research these students described having kinship networks. These were close groups of peers that recognized and honored their sexual and romantic identities and provided a refuge from compulsory sexuality and
amatonormativity, which helped them push back against ace and aro oppression. (Nicolazzo, 2017). I found Maggie’s creation of this character as a method of self-care to connect them to their communities. Engaging in self-care and self-love was evident throughout the resilience theme created by participants. Lee, who is white, asexual, wtfromantic\(^3\), agender, and has disabilities said that “resilience [is]...showing love for yourself.” Finding a place that was your own was also important for feeling belonging and engaging in self-care.

Lee and Maggie had a conversation on this subject. Lee said: “I feel like there aren’t a lot of places for [yourself] except for your own created space. There’s not a lot of spaces that are created for you. Except for things like the aro ace support group.” Maggie responded “and that’s just specifically within our Corvallis group too. If you don’t have access to the internet because of xyz number of reasons you can’t [engage in our community]. So having your own space is really important for that.” Lee and Maggie depict that spaces created for only asexual and aromantic students can be incredibly powerful for building resilience. This includes online spaces which can provide this ability to provide community to build up resilience (Nicolazzo, 2017). Membership is social community organizations and engagement is connected to sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). He found that students who are more involved felt a stronger connection with others on campus which increased their sense of belonging. This made them more likely to persist towards graduation and increased student’s health and wellbeing (Strayhorn, 2012).

A lot of the ways that these students felt they belonged was by being resilient in aloneness and in self-care or reclaiming things that had previously been harmful for them. This

\(^3\) *WTFromantic*: does not or cannot define the lines between platonic and romantic attraction; may desire a queerplatonic relationship, feel an attraction somewhere between platonic and romantic, or simply don’t know if they feel romantic attraction
was something that I did not see in the literature on other LGBTQ+ students. Some of the students described feeling safe at home in their beds. Beds and home take on new meaning as places for creating belonging and resilience. In a photo and narrative created by Marcella it describes this:

![Image of Marcella lying in bed with her eyes closed, portraying happiness.](image)

*Figure 17. I belong in bed. Marcella is lying in her bed with her eyes closed with her face portraying happiness.*

I feel very safe and happy in my bed and wherever it is I feel I belong. I often joke with my roommate that if I were to get married I would marry my bed. If it were possible I would probably actually do it.

This narrative that Marcella describes was also briefly talked about in Gupta’s (2016) study. Being alone and valuing aloneness was part of creating the theme new relationships. It included how being alone was viewed as valuable to Gupta’s (2016) participants. Other participants talked about engaging in self-care as an act of resilience. Jeran said,
I feel resilient when I am sitting in bed with a good book and my dog Nickle (Nicole). Everyone has some hobby or pastime to make them feel good and confident, and this is one of mine. These are two things that make me feel resilient. I find that books help me feel stronger, because they help me ignore the stuff that troubles me.

I find these students willingness to practice resilience by practicing self-care interesting because it reminded me of a quote by Audre Lorde. She said that self-care is an act of political warfare (Lorde, 1988). What I get from these students is the practice that Lorde speaks of. Taking care of yourself is resistance. Relating to redefining what resilience can look like and space one participant talk about redefine things that have been harmful.

Marcella especially found joy in doing this by playing twister, an uncomfortably intimate game with friends, or by watching hentai anime with friends. Marcella really found joy and self-care in redefining these things, especially the meaning of Valentine’s Day. She holds up a heart shaped purple valentine in front of herself in a picture and narrative that explains this.

*Figure 18. My Valentine. This is me holding a valentine.*

Whenever my family made Valentine’s Day cards my mom always insisted that we made one for ourselves. I kept this one for myself because it was the colors of the asexual flag.
People should remember to love themselves. It is a personal tradition and a statement about my identity.

Describing this in more detail Marcella said:

Some people hate Valentine’s Day because it is a commercial holiday that prioritized romantic and sexual relationships. I like Valentine’s Day because I grew up as it being a day of candy and giving cards to friends. I would always make my own cards and I have continued that tradition to this day. I give them to friends and family and whoever else I want. You don’t have to celebrate a holiday like the media tells you. I have met people who are opposed to Valentine’s Day and it makes me wonder if I should really be so excited about a day that seems exclusive to those in romantic relationships. Then I remember that the media only makes it seem like that to make money and that holidays are interpretive.

This redefining harmful norms was also a theme in Gupta’s (2016) study on redefining relationships, and language and terminology to make space to defy norms. This practice directly resisted and challenged a holiday that has been described previously, by other participants, as a manifestations of amatonormativity (Brake, 2012).

Resilience is not always about being battle hardened, it is about joy and sharing your story. Jasmine illustrates this in a photo:
Figure 19. m(e). Side profile featuring curly hair, silver hoops, and them failing to keep a straight face.

I love my hair, my hoops, and I love to smile. I was trying to capture what my ‘resilient’ face would be. Is it my face when I’m chanting and demonstrating? Is it my face when I’m confronting white supremacists? It didn’t end up mattering because my best friend and I were having too much fun to take this photo, so I kept giggling and smiling, and I decided that yes. Resilience does look like joy. I don’t know if I necessarily have one look when I’m being resilient, I don’t know if anyone does, honestly. I think we as being, and surviving, and sharing our stories are continuously showing what resilience looks like.

Resilience to Jasmine was about being able to be joyful when things are hard. Responding to this photo and narrative Lee commented that one of the reasons we were doing this study was “to help other people who don’t know how to feel resilient. Maybe they see this and they [will say] ‘oh that’s what resilience is for me’, or ‘that’s how I can be resilient.’” I agree
with Lee and Jasmine, joy and being proud of yourself are so important to being resilient in the face of adversity.

Jasmine voiced another way that resilience showed up in her life. “I'm reading a lot about US imperialism and the situation in Central America and like how Mexico duplicates a lot of what the US does to Mexico. It’s like information builds my resilience.” Here Jasmine describes that understanding the erased histories of our identities can lead to our resilience. The importance of understanding our history and our stories can have an impact on the resistance resilience of ourselves. Remembering our histories was a part of this narrative for Jasmine and remembering our ancestors is important for our continued resilience. Maggie talked about the importance of remembering asexual and aromantic history towards building their resilience to keep fighting to be included in queer spaces. They said:

A lot of people who do not want asexual or aromantic people to be part of the community forget that at least in the United States, we’ve been here since the beginning. We’ve been part of the foundation of this community like we may not have had a label for our life but we were [there] back when this movement really got its kick start. People might try to take us out of it.

Remembering our histories helps us resist the oppression and invisibility we experience and to understand that there are scripts we are told about relationships and intimacy which are socially constructed. It connects our struggle to the larger picture, a world without colonialism, imperialism, white supremacy, genderism, heteronormativity, and oppression. A reminder that we are stronger when we are intersectional in our movements. Another important part of understanding where you have come from is understanding where you can go. We must imagine
a life beyond oppression, colonialism, and imperialism. This imagining is described in a photo by Jasmine.

Figure 20. (i)magine. A pleather-bound journal, with various keys adorning the front cover and the words ‘you have the key to unlock your potential’ written on the clasp.

This journal is a special gift given to me by a sister. I had always tried to have a journal or a diary, but eventually lost it. She made it easy for me. She wrote me letters and entrusted me with pieces from her previous thoughts and quotes. Since beginning this journal, it’s become a space for imagining. I use it to write stories and experiences, theories, and doodles. I’ve used it for writing workshops, and it’s become [been?] a space for me to engage in science fiction how I know it through Walidah Imarisha – a space to imagine beyond how we currently live and interact, beyond colonialism and imperialism.

Jeran commented on this photo saying: “I kind of agree with that [saying on the journal] ‘cause like um no one else can like tell you what to be or what to do, it's really up to you to unlock
what's inside of yourself. I really appreciate this piece about imagining a future to get to the world we want to live in. Because we have to believe it’s possible to keep going every day and keep fighting and resisting the oppression we experience.”

A photo by Maggie I think illuminates their power in writing stories that imagine asexual and aromanticism as visible.

![Gloves on a Keyboard. Maggie’s ace flag gloves on a mac computer keyboard.](image)

*Figure 21. Gloves on a Keyboard. Maggie’s ace flag gloves on a mac computer keyboard.*

I want to share this photo because I am an asexual artist. The story behind this photo is that the main characters in all of my novels and short stories are somewhere on the asexual and aromantic spectrum. My non-fiction writing is also influenced by asexuality and demi-romanticism. This relates to my life and the community because there are very few novels with openly asexual and/or aromantic characters and I want to create more representation for our community in fantasy/urban fantasy genres.

Imagining our futures allows us to be able to reach them one day. Both of these narratives point out how important imagining and making visible their communities were for the future, whether that was being involved in the work of imagining, or fighting against visibility by
writing your way into existence. These practices of resilience were incredible ways to fight back against invisibility and to get to a world where asexual and aromantic people feel like they belong.

Several times throughout this study students described several identities that were salient for them alongside their ace and aro identities. For example, Maggie described their gender and ace identities as connected. They illustrated this in a photo and narrative that they created. In the photo are two flags hanging on a wall. On the left is the asexual flag and on the right is the transgender flag.

*Figure 22. Asexual and Transgender Flags. This is a photo of my asexual flag and transgender flag hanging vertically in my bedroom.*

I want to share this photo because these flags symbolize the pride I have in my most salient identities and communities and how both of those identities influence each other. The meaning in the photo is that while I am apart of these communities, the blank space in between represents how I can make my experiences; that I am more than just my
identities. The two flags together also represents my internalized aphantia, and transphobia. I sometimes believe I won’t find a long-term partner because I am both transgender and asexual. This relates to my life because I dive head-first into my passions, and sometimes that can be an obsessive hobby and it becomes all that I am.

While I am so incredibly proud of myself and my community, there is also more to me. Jasmine took a picture that helps us understand that Jasmine’s race and ethnicity are also relevant to their asexual and aromantic identities.

Figure 23. (e)nergize. It is a picture of two rows of orange lights illuminating the path into the MLK Memorial in Washington, DC. At the center, an orange beanie and bright blue jacket can faintly be seen.

While in Washington DC, lobbying for the Clean Dream Act, I thought about how I could capture resilience (direct action, showcasing the Dreamers in orange beanies at the capital, lively homeless communities in a very militarized and wealthy capitol). But I didn’t feel comfortable pulling out my camera then. I was very much in the moment. There originally wasn’t any story behind this picture. It was just me trying to capture my
friends walking into the MLK Memorial. But then, our time at the memorial happened. It was emotional and filled with awe. It was that little break we needed to breathe, cry, process, and connect our struggle to a larger picture before waking up the next day and fighting, again. So this photo represents what we often don’t see or congratulate. The private moments that give you energy to continue.

This picture ties together being ace and fighting for DACA. What these two pictures and narratives say to me is that you can not separate your salient identities. Gender and race and sexuality are interwoven together. Therefore we must help other social movements to deconstruct the ways in which they engage in compulsory sexuality (Gupta 2015) and amatonormativity (Brake, 2010) and we must deconstruct the ways in which our movement engages in colonialism, white supremacy, genderism, and ableism.

These experiences of practicing resilience suggest that despite these students facing a variety of challenges to their belonging and success, they still managed to find ways to be resilient and persevere, find joy, and do self-care. Belonging and kinship and resilience are strongly connected together. Like Nicolazzo (2017), we found that practicing resilience looked different for each participant based off of their salient social identities, and they did not always work. While deciding upon the framework questions for this study, students had a hard time visualizing what ways they were resilient at all. In our first workshop Lee said: “I don’t understand what it means by resilience? Like I know that means but like... Like yeah in the context I don’t really know what it means like as a picture. Like I don’t understand.” Finding strategies for resilience were important for the participants to keep going on. The next theme points out the ways in which belonging was made more fully in community and an explanation of kinship networks formed by these students. I separate the theme resilience from belonging and
kinship because as explained by Quinn above you can experience belonging and not feel resilient, and be resilient and not experience belonging.

**Belonging and Kinship**

I found that some of the participants had kinship with each other similar to what Nicolazzo (2017) described. They were a close group of peers who honored their sexual and romantic identities, provided a refuge from compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity on campus, and acted as sites for participants to potentially resist or push back against ace and aro oppression (Nicolazzo, 2017). Kinship was described by participants as having people in your life that you did not have to always educate. It was not always necessarily found in person--online spaces played a major role in finding out about their identity and finding community. Kinship also did not necessarily have to be with other asexual or aromantic people. Participants also described the ways in which symbols played a role in finding community. A photo and narrative by Quinn explain describe what it felt like for Quinn to have kinship with others and to have people see your identity as beautiful.
Being ace isn’t seen as beautiful. It’s seen as gross and strange. We are like leaf, even if we are alone, we are free and beautiful. Honestly, just thought it was pretty. I relate to the fallen leaf. Something no one would look at but it’s beautiful in the right light. My identity is beautiful to the right people.

Lee described what it explained that having a kinship with people who understood our identity “When I need socialization and I need to just take down time and be with people that I know.” Like Nicolazzo’s (2017) study these kinships provided a refuge from oppression that students experienced on campus. Lee illuminates that kinship a different kind of kinship network they had made in their home with their roommates.

They represents self-care and that self-care can be with other people. Like for part of the time I was watching them they were playing together, but in this picture they're sitting about, in between a half a foot and a foot apart. They're just chilling, they're just soaking up the sun and doing self-care in a space with other people that they trust. That's like when I need socialization and I need to just take down time and be with people that I
know. I just sit in a room with people I trust and I just do what I can, I don't necessarily have to talk to them or interact with them except for being in the same place as them. That's kind of like resilience for me, hanging out with Maggie, or going [to] the ace aro group, or being at home with people who know and accept my identity. Just chilling.

These forms of kinship are different ways of identifying community which was similarly found in Gupta (2016) study. Maggie commented on this photo, “That’s how I feel with my best friends and with Lee and with Quinn. Specifically this group and also Elijah and other folks. We can literally be in the same space with each other and it's like oh this is great I'm feeling good.”

These students illuminate the ways in which we can challenge compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity by believing in different ways to engage in relationships and intimacy that do not rely on a biological family structure, and romantic and sexuality scripts. Choosing the people they have in their life carefully was important for their belonging.

Like Nicolazzo’s (2017) study I found that kinship was a close group of peers who honored their sexual and romantic identities. Describing this Lee said “You can just say something and they’ll understand it, you don’t have to explain [it].” The previous theme explained that there was a burden to educate others about asexual and aromantic identities. This was also found in Gupta (2016) study where participants described relief upon finding an asexual community. Lee describes here how nice it was for them to be in a group of asexual and aromantic folk because of not having to do that emotional labor.

Relating to Nicolazzo’s (2017) study these kinship networks acted as sites for participants to resist or push back against ace and aro oppression. Maggie helped me come to learn to love my identity and I am not the only one they helped do this. Maggie has built an ace and aro
community on our campus by being visibly out and this has helped others come out as well. This is illustrated in a photo and narrative created by Maggie:

![Gloves](image)

**Figure 26.** Gloves. Two knitted gloves made in the colors of the asexual flag and between the gloves is a button that is designed like Captain America’s shield in the asexual flag colors. It says ‘my pronouns are they them’ and at the bottom of the button it says ‘Captain Ace’.

I want to share this photo because the two items in the photo are symbols of the pride I have for my community and that I’m recognized by people in the queer community on campus. The story behind this is that people recognize my gloves and ask about them all the time. The gloves are soft and functional; two things I care about in clothing. Their texture also calms me on days when I feel anxious because they’re so soft. They instill a sense of pride in me because I know someone in the community made them and I feel even more connected to the asexual community when I wear them. The button is also important because important people in my life made them for me. Once again, it’s an intersection of my gender and sexual orientation identities. The button may be small, but
it’s a large piece of affirmation for me: it validates & celebrates my pronouns, my identity as an asexual person & as Captain Ace, and I can take it anywhere with me. This relates to my life because there isn’t a lot of acknowledgment of asexual, or aromantic, folks on campus, so any small piece of pride helps me feel less alone and disconnected.

Three participants talked about how influential Maggie had been in helping them come to their identities. Maggie was the first person I ever met who was proud of being asexual and aromantic. They not only helped others in this study come to feel proud of their identities or to feel not alone on campus, they helped me feel proud and not alone. Maggie is part of the reason this study even exists. Jeran conveyed similar feelings about Maggie while discussing their image:

Anything to do with Maggie kind of is biased to me because my first experience with ace is definitely Maggie. [I] never knew anyone before that. Maggie [at the] Rainbow Continuum [club meeting] showed a video on ace and aro [identities] and that's when I first started to question it, and then it kind of just built from there. I went to the drag show and Maggie was there as Captain Ace and I was like 'yeah I think I might be onto something'. Quinn related similarly in eir photo which is a picture of Maggie.
Figure 27. Maggie. A white person look to the side of the screen, wearing rainbow dog tags and an asexual flag ace spade shirt.

Maggie is a very good friend who gives out a lot of hope and friendship to those they meet. They were working the desk for their RA job that night and had looked up to assist someone who had come up to the counter. I think it shows what a valuable community member they are. They are also pretty much the center of my ace community and pretty much the reason I accept my own ace identity as much as I do.

Quinn said while describing this photo, “If it weren't for Maggie too many of us would still be [in the] closet.” I found this true as five of the participants knew Maggie before the study and three of them described coming out because they knew Maggie. I find it incredible that one person being so openly asexual and aromantic could have as much impact on others on campus. They helped others be out about their identities, to be proud of their identities, and resist oppression, and even fight back against it (Nicolazzo, 2017).
Participants said having ace and aro spaces helped them to be able to talk about their identities more easily. At the first workshop, Lee said: “being around people who already know this stuff is so relieving. You can just say something and they’ll understand it you don’t have to explain what you say like of an offhand comment.” I relate this easiness to feeling like you belong in a space. Lee also described that having spaces that were scheduled weekly and were designated ace and aro spaces were incredibly helpful for them. This included a weekly support group created through our counseling and psychological services called the Ace and Aro Support Group. Lee said:

Even though it’s small the aro ace group is like super helpful. Like before I only really knew Maggie who was aro ace and there’s like three or four other people in that group that I had never meant before. Having scheduled things [is] really good [for] connecting to people.

Kinship was not always necessarily found in person by some participants--online spaces played a major role in finding out about their identity and finding community, which is a similar finding to Nicolazzo’s (2017) study. Natan, Latinx, Chicanx, demisexual, homoromantic, and nonbinary describes this; “I think for me it's more like the internet is like my bigger friend, you know? Like I have other queer folx, but it's different.” The community online was described as a place where these students first found out their identities, first felt belonging, and first created a space for themselves. Jasmine, Maggie, Jeran, and Quinn also described engaging in belonging through online spaces. Maggie created a photo and narrative that talks about this.
Figure 28. Phone. A side photo of Maggie’s iPhone with their social media folder open displaying the apps for Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, Tumblr, Snapchat, Amino, Twitter, GroupMe, and Instagram Editor.

I want to show this photo because a lot of my community involvement and activism is done through social media. The story behind this photo is that I found my community through these sites. While I discovered Asexuality on AVEN, Tumblr was where I did a lot of my initial exploration. Twitter is where I’ve met and befriended other Ace & Aro identifying artists and activists who continue to inspire me. Social media & internet hangouts are a crucial part of asexual and aromantic culture. While we’ve been around since before the internet, having access to the World Wide Web and sites like AVEN, Tumblr, and Twitter have helped us establish a community locally, and around the world.

Revealing more about this image Maggie said:

A lot of the asexual and aromantic community is formed online. I discovered asexuality on AVEN and Tumblr was one of the places that I spent a lot of my earlier exploration.
On Twitter is where I do a lot of my activism, through sharing my narratives and uplifting other voices. I find other people on there who inspire me to continue doing stuff even when I'm irritated or exhausted being an educator. It's also a way to stay connected with friends.

Relating to this Jasmine said: “I was scrolling through Tumblr in like 2011 when I found definitions for aromanticism and asexuality, so that is how I found my identity. Through like social media.” Social media obviously had a big influence in forming kinships online to help with resilience in some of these students.

Kinship did not necessarily have to be with other asexual or aromantic people. Jasmine described a very close kinship of friends. “I've made [community] at OSU, like my closest friends were very accepting of my ace identity and like if anyone says anything negative about ace identities they're ready to pull up.” Similarly to what Nicolazzo (2017) found, Jasmine describes engaging in kinship with friends who were not asexual or aromantic. But that having queer friends of color of any identity was especially important for both Jasmine and Natan. This kinship network for Jasmine was empowering. She teared up while talking about this group of people who understood her identity and engaged in new ways to be in relationship with her. She said:

Me and my friends have already envisioned what our future's gonna be like once we get a start on our careers and stuff. I'm gonna be the aunt that teaches them sex ed because the rest of them are not as comfortable, and there's gonna be a chain of babysitting going on with all of our friends. They're letting me....they're gonna let me babysit. I'm okay with children. I've always envisioned myself being alone the rest of my life and like I was
okay with that, but finding all these people that are so dear to me. I found all these friends that like want to spend the rest of their lives with me.

This narrative affected other participants in the study as well. To engage in community with people who were not asexual or aromantic but chose to develop new relationship types to include Jasmine was especially affecting to participants and to myself. This was also found in Gupta’s (2017) study which found that asexual and aromantic people found new ways to engage in relationships which still allowed them to experience intimacy or romance.

An interesting thing I noticed in several photos and narratives was the connection to objects or symbols as a way to feel connected to your community. Maggie described this in previous photos in the gloves they wear, or the pin made for them. I personally wear a black ring because it signifies my asexuality in a passive way. Black rings have been chosen as an asexual symbol throughout asexual spaces online. Jasmine describes symbols in she photo (r)epresent:

![image](image.png)

*Figure 29. (r)epresent. A picture of the Californian flag with a rainbow across the bottom.*

I didn’t know that a California Pride flag existed before this month! I stayed at a friend of a friend’s house in DC, and I immediately felt at ease when I saw the flag.
This narrative and photo explain a symbolism of home and belonging that helped Jasmine feel immediately at ease in a new place. I think the ways in which asexual and aromantic folk use clothing, rings, and flags represent a similar symbolism.

All of these experiences with community led students to feel like they belonged to someone, mattered to someone (Schlossberg, 1989). Which is necessary for students to be successful and to thrive (Schlossberg, 1989) Feeling cared about can greatly increase students ability to persist and resist systems of oppression (Strayhorn, 2012). It can also increase students’ academic performance and persistence to graduation (Strayhorn, 2012). Belonging is vital for student success and is crucial for their humanity, which as we have found can often be taken away from asexual and aromantic students. These students found ways to find belonging by disclosing their identity and being loud about their identities regardless of the costs that were associated with that. As proved by Maggie’s out-ness, one person can have far reaching effects on others. Maggie further empowered others to be out about their identities and form community and kinship with each other. Others found belonging online that validated their identities. Kinship was crucial for students feeling like they belonged. It also did not matter that the community was exclusively asexual or aromantic, you could form kinship and relationship in new ways, similar to what Gupta (2016) found, that defied societal norms and fought back against their invisibility and isolation. In sum, experiences of kinship and belonging greatly influenced participants’ ability to continue being a student and resisting against compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2015) and amatonormativity (Brake, 2012).

Conclusion

The questions that I and participants asked throughout this research were about sense of belonging: what did it feel like, where did they find it, how could universities cultivate it. They
also asked themselves about their worldview, how they connect with their communities, and how they practice resilience. We discovered these questions together through participatory analysis (Wang & Burris, 1997) and then through further analysis I narrowed down these themes. The themes tell us that the campus climate for asexual and aromantic students is hostile and students are treated as if they are invisible, inhuman, unnatural, or unworthy of intimacy and romance.

There also felt othered and excluded in LGBTQIA+ spaces and in LGBTQIA+ politics, which greatly affected these students and doubly affected asexual and aromantic students of color. Related to exclusion, these students described the ways in which compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2015) and amatonormativity (Brake, 2012) effected their relationships and intimacy, which explained a necessity for conversations on consent and abuse in relationships.

Because of the invisibility of asexual and aromantic identities in their classes, in LGBTQIA+ spaces, and most everywhere else in their lives, these students described an incredible need for education on their identities and the issues they face. This education would help to reduce the burden and tokenization that came with being an out asexual or aromantic person on campus. Identity disclosure among the participants was low, showing that they felt unsafe to disclose at a campus they viewed as hostile to their identities.

Despite the barriers created by compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity, students found ways to practice resilience. Belonging, kinship, and resilience were tied together to help students resist and persist. Their kinships were vital towards finding belonging and mattering to someone had significant improvement for their lives. All of these themes point towards the need for education about asexual and aromantic identities and experiences, experiences for furthering their sense of belonging and ability to form kinship networks, and for higher education to
evaluate its role in challenging systems of oppression such as white supremacy, compulsory sexuality, amatonormativity, and ableism.
Chapter 5: Implications for Higher Education

Introduction

The findings from this research tell us that for asexual and aromantic students in this study, our campus was hostile and unwelcoming. Can you imagine telling a friend about something so integral to your life, only to have them say that it is not real? Feeling like we belong and like we matter are vital for our happiness (Schlossberg, 1989). Participants experienced significant barriers to belonging because of compulsory sexuality, the assumption that all people are sexual, and amatonormativity, the assumption that all people need amorous monogamous relationships, including receiving messages that they were unreal, impossible, or that their identities were illogical. Even when participants’ identities were recognized as real, they were then described as unnatural, something which needed to be fixed, or more so that they were unworthy to participate in intimacy or close relationships.

The campus climate being hostile and creating a sense of being otherworldly left participants feeling invisible. A majority felt as if there was not a space for them on campus, including in queer spaces. Yet despite all this, some students found ways to make space for themselves, and to find kinship, community, and resilience—whether it was online or on campus. Despite their resilience, these students felt burdened to be the token asexual or aromantic person and were often pressured into educating about their identities, even if they did not want to. Many of them described feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress. In answering these questions about themselves, the results revealed that there is little to no belonging felt on campus for these students. Furthermore, it found that participants do practice resilience and find kinship, and despite negative experiences, most of them are incredibly proud to be asexual and/or aromantic.
These findings and the research in this thesis have illuminated several ways that higher education needs to change.

**Discussion**

In this section I wanted to have a discussion on theories that needed to be critiqued, and comments from participants including a critique of the use of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in the theory of sense of belonging used by Strayhorn, a critique of the ideology of safe space. I also include a discussion on liberation, hope, and possibilities of coalitional politics. I then move on to the recommendations for higher education praxis and research.

**Critique of Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging takes on heightened significance in environments that individuals experience as different, unfamiliar, or foreign, as well as in contexts where some individuals are likely to feel marginalized, unsupported, or unwelcomed (Strayhorn, 2012). This is especially relevant to college students who need a nurturing environment, mentoring, and involvement to succeed (Strayhorn, 2012). I want to critique Strayhorn’s use of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs because it is a theory built on the foundations of compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2015) and amatonormativity (Brake, 2012). At the very bottom of the pyramid hierarchy in physiological needs (which include basic needs such as satisfying thirst and hunger), sex is referenced as a basic need that is necessary to satisfy before reaching other levels of the hierarchy (Strayhorn, 2012). This essentially erases the narratives of asexual and aromantic people and discursively says that asexual and aromantic people therefore could not be successful or reach self-actualization without a need or desire for sex. What we’ve learned from this literature review is that sex is not required for human beings to be happy or successful. I believe strongly that
students' motivation to belong will lead to success. However the use of sex as a need erases the narratives of asexual and aromantic students.

**Brave Space Critique**

Participants wanted a safe space on campus, and they often named that they wished the Pride Center could be that for them. For example Quinn said:

I found this leaf outside the Pride Center. Which I thought was appropriate because it's a leaf, and going back to the leaf metaphor, we're left on the ground outside of a place where we're supposed to feel safe. Which is like half my photos “we're supposed to feel safe here, well why the hell do we not?”

Arao and Clemens (2013) have critiqued the idea of safe spaces. They argue that authentic social justice learning communities require risk, difficulty, and controversy that are antithetical to safe space ideology of being free from discomfort (Arao & Clemens, 2013). They also argue that using safe space as an ideology is a tool of colorblind racism that white people use to avoid conversations about race. The United States systems of power and dominance were not made to privilege people of color, queer people, and all the intersections of identity between race, class, gender, and sexuality (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

Recall from the literature review that LGBTQ+ centers were not created to be for all queer identities, races, or abilities. Higher education was also not created for the people that are a part of it now (Rudolph, 1990). This realization teaches us that these spaces will never be spaces of safety. Wise (2004) said “This country is never safe for people of color. Its schools are not safe; its streets are not safe; its places of employment are not safe; its health care system is not safe” (p. 35). Arao and Clemens (2013) argue that although Wise (2004) mentions race, that this
statement is true for the examination of sexism, homophobia, heterosexism, ableism, religio-
spiritual oppression, ageism, U.S centrism, and other manifestations of oppression.

LGBTQ+ centers have not included asexual and aromantic identities in their acronym
descriptions and mission statements (see Appendix H). Oregon State University’s Pride Center
was founded in 2004, which was three years after the asexual movement was started. The
acronym however does not mention asexual or aromantic identities. What this shows is that
queer centers were not created with asexual and aromantic students in mind. It is unproductive
for our communities to ask part of the institution to create our community for us, or expect that it
will be a place of belonging. Ace and aro folk are not made whole by institutions but our kinship
communities can help us do that (Nicolazzo, 2017). Like Maggie stated in the findings, we must
not rely on community centers to include us— asexual and aromantic students must fight and do
the activism and community building necessary to make space for ourselves on campus. hooks
(2000) stated that “we can begin the process of making community wherever we are (p. 143).”
hooks illuminates that we do not need organizations or meetings to form community. Maggie
was described as an asexual and aromantic community builder because they were visibly proud
of their ace and aro identities. They helped me and several participants come out as asexual and
aromantic, and build a community of people who are proud of being asexual and aromantic. The
more visible we are, the more likely it is that we will be able to find each other and create
kinship networks. Having ace and aro specific spaces was described by the participants as
incredibly important. We must also work on making these spaces brave spaces and not rely on
the logic of safety which discursively excludes students of color. It is especially poignant for
asexual and aromantic students to understand how safe space ideology deters being a space for
people of color. This is because the asexual and aromantic movement online is incredibly white
and people of color who are ace and aro already feel like they do not belong (as cited in Reichard, 2014). Arao and Clemens (2013) have suggested using brave spaces to critique the idea of safe spaces and have strategies in a brave space framework to be a more just learning community. They suggest setting up brave space guidelines or ground rules as a valuable part of learning, which engages a more collectivist approach to conversation (see Arao & Clemens, 2013 for more).

**Possibilities for Coalition Politics and Radical Hope**

Coalitional politics mentioned in the literature review are politics that focus on the most marginalized of a community, and finding common ground between movements for liberation. I argue that the asexual movement’s goal of recognition from queer communities and general awareness will do nothing for those who are most affected by compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity (Spade, 2011). For example, in the AVEN survey we know that asexual, trans, people of color are the most affected by violence in our communities and yet our politics involve recognition as opposed to fighting racism (Bauer et al, 2017). Instead of the asexual and aromantic movement being critical of the LGBTQ+ movement’s practice of neoliberal strategies, we are engaging in similar strategies (Cerankowski & Mills, 2014). Spade (2011) has critiqued the politics of recognition through law and legal reform and has said that we will never be liberated if we engage in recognition politics. I critique the asexual movement here because I believe we have been thinking too small for too long. We have focused so much on getting recognized by queer people or in the media that we have not analyzed how these identity politics and neoliberal strategies are harmful for us. If we put the asexual movement in the cycle for liberation created by Harro (2000) I believe we can pinpoint our location in the getting ready phase (see figure 30) because we have not yet developed a “coherent analysis of oppression.” We
have not yet taken steps to empower ourselves. Harro (2000) explains that liberation is about finding balance, practicing love, believing that we can succeed, and that we are alone. I can not stress enough how important hope will be towards reaching this liberation (Giroux, 2003). The participants in this study named that they experienced internalized aphobia often. I believe that this internalization of our oppression is keeping our movement from thriving. The participants named that having Maggie be so open changed their lives and allowed themselves to be out and open about their identities with others. This burden can not solely live with Maggie, as being open and proud of who we are is incredibly powerful.
Using coalitional politics we can question how a liberated future for asexual and aromantic people is linked to the liberated future of other social justice movements. Where are our common goals? If we believe that all oppression is connected and we are bound together to undo our oppression, are asexual and aromantic movements bound to the liberation of all? I also ask the question is liberation for all not bound to the deconstructing and undoing of asexual and aromantic oppression? This section will engage in conversation about how our liberated futures are bound to the liberation of racism, sexism, genderism, and other forms of oppression.

Focusing on the question of critical hope I wonder how asexual and aromantic folk see their liberated future. Are we using radical imagination to design a world where asexual and aromantic lives are not living under oppression? If we are to follow the advice of Walidah Imarisha (2017) we must start there before we can achieve that future. Since this is my first time interacting in an offline community of asexual and aromantic folk, I can not say these participants are more or less functional than any other group of people. But they seemed to be plagued by a number of challenges. At every turn there was no recognition, no validation, and complete lack of possibility. Pulling from the work of Giroux (2003) and Imarisha (2017) I can see a great need for critical hope in the project of the asexual movement. I have spent time with other asexual scholars and the question of a liberated future has seemed like a daunting one. Is it possible that we could live in a world where sex was not expected nor required for relationships and dating? Would marriage abolishment be a goal of the future? Using coalitional politics, we can also question how a liberated future for asexual and aromantic people is linked to the liberated future of other social justice movements.
Garwood (2016) describes how neoliberalism has reshaped citizenship to be comprised of “consumption, rights, and family values (p.8).” They argue that families (legal kinship) have been at the center of political rhetoric for decades between both Left and Right parties. For example, you often hear about the “how gay rights would affect the family or the children.” Garwood argues that neoliberalism creates good family and bad family discourses that delineates single parents, queer families, or those economically dependent on the state as bad. Weston (1991) argued that kinship has been overtly politicized in the United States, and non-familial arenas are infused with heterosexist presumptions that are regulated by kinship (Weston, 1991). They use the example of immigration law (pre-marriage equality) which did not recognize gay or lesbian partnerships for undocumented partners as legitimate (Weston, 1991). Weston (1991) describes queer kinship as not structured through hierarchically ordered categories of relationship, and they do not produce gendered divisions of labor or relations by age and gender. They argue that the United States would more likely validate domestic partnerships than to recognize gay families that span several households or families that include friends (Weston, 1991). They also argued that many gay people found it difficult to demonstrate the importance of kinship or to convince heterosexuals that lesbian and gay identity involves anything other than sex (Weston, 1991). Foreseeing the future, Weston (1991) argued that gays and lesbians must not give into the path of least resistance in which they settle for whatever sort of recognition they can get for their gay families. They also foretold that if gays and lesbians gained marriage equality that it could privilege some while delegitimizing others (Weston, 1991). Spade (2011) has argued that the queer movement’s fight for marriage equality has done just what Weston (1991) warned, privileging white, cisgender, gays and lesbians through neoliberal strategies. Eng (2010)
argued that instead of challenging the construct of legal kinship, queer families have only furthered legal kinship and its power.

Eng (2010) argues that neoliberalism created Queer Liberalism which “articulates a contemporary confluence of the political economic spheres that forms the basis for the liberal inclusion of particular gay and lesbian U.S citizen-subjects petitioning for rights and recognition before the law” (p. 3). Eng’s main argument is that gay and lesbian people were once excluded from the structures of kinship and family but today they are inhabiting those structures (Eng, 2010). Instead of a critique of family and kinship, the movement desired state legitimacy (Eng, 2010). Eng argues that the emphasis on Queer Liberalism relies on the logic of colorblindness. What Eng means by this is that the queer movement has forgotten its critical roots; instead of challenging whiteness which created the systems of kinship and family, we have given in to them, especially white queer communities. Dean Spade (2011) argues that white European cultural norms determine kinship and family structure and that these norms and structures have been used in the genocide of indigenous people. Eng (2010) illuminates like Spade that legal kinship and family structures are a racial project that have implications for all sexual identities.

These scholars argue that legal kinship and European family structures are social constructions that oppress people of color, queer people, people with disabilities, and others. They are the creation of whiteness meant to oppress and regulate minoritized groups and is deeply rooted in colonialism and the genocide of native people (Spade, 2011). Spade (2011) illuminates that the circulation of these norms create the conditions of violence, exploitation, and poverty. They wrote that the operation of norms are central to producing the idea of a national body that is always threatened to justify excluding certain populations from programs that distribute wealth and life chances (land and housing distribution programs, and well-funded
white schools) and target them for imprisonment and violence (criminal punishment, immigration enforcement, sterilization) (Spade, 2011). I argue that what these scholars are arguing against (legal kinship) is a manifestation of amatonormativity, the assumption that an amorous, monogamous relationship is necessary for people. They argue ways that amatonormativity is harmful and violent to everyone and is a white creation.

Other scholars have argued that compulsory sexuality is a white creation and brings attention to the ways in which our society have desexualized certain groups as a method of social control (Gupta, 2015). She points to the hyper sexuality of African American women and men, Asian women, and members of the working class. Simultaneously, other groups such as older people, people with disabilities, people of size, and Asian men are viewed as asexual and un-human. These strategies erase the experiences of asexual and aromantic people of color. All of these strategies of hyper sexuality or asexuality have been used for social control created for whiteness. Knowing this, we can see the connections between race, asexuality, and aromanticism. Weston (1991) argued that queer kinship networks before marriage equality had the possibility of challenging legal kinship. Legal kinship, abuse culture, performative sex, coercive sex, and desexualization are methods of control created by whiteness and are manifestations of compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity. We can therefore see that an argument exists that compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity are created by whiteness. It is then a common goal shared between movements working towards racial justice and asexual and aromantic movements to deconstruct these systems of oppression.

I also argue that there is a possibility for coalition between queerness and asexuality and aromanticism. Przybylo and Cooper (2014) argue that where there is queerness there is also asexuality. They illuminate that rethinking the centrality of sex to both feminist and queer
politics helps us consider what is at stake if we continue to neglect asexual perspectives in queer theory and the feminist movement. They argue that queerness should not be expanded or revised to include asexuality (and aromanticism) but that queerness “should be reworked and rethought from asexual and aromantic perspectives (Przybylo & Cooper, 2014, p. 3)”’. This means a deeply thought analysis of the ways in which compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity harm all queer people.

Gupta (2015) clarifies that feminism and queer theory for some time have eschewed notions of sex as liberatory. She argues that this extreme sex positivity does not recognize the actual harms of compulsory sex and amatonormativity on the queer movement and in queer theory. Gupta wrote that: “this equation is rendered more problematic by the fact that consumer-oriented capitalism funds the intensification of sexual desires, the adoption of new and varied sexual practices, and the consolidation of sexual identities” (Gupta, 2015, p.144). Both sex positive feminism and queer theory are opposed to consumer capitalism, yet at the same time Gupta (2015) argues that they are playing into the system of compulsory sexuality.

We can see examples of the harmful effects of compulsory sexuality on queer communities in the ways in which gay men are expected to have certain bodies, or engage in sexual practices. For an example, I recently saw the film Dream Boat which delves into the experiences of gay men from all over the world on a cruise together (Beats & Milewski, 2017). Participants from the film mention the great demands on their bodies to be muscular, to be viewed as sexy, and to be worthy enough to get a date. Marek, while crying, says: “I would like to make relationship with someone who will love you as a person, not just love you because of your face, because of your body and I would like to find someone who will love that I am myself. And not only be like a product, yeah like fuck product...like someone to fuck, like, you
know, a product on the shelf in the shop… so many guys they just wanna fuck (Beats & Milewski, 2017).” This film shows exactly how compulsory sexuality shows up in queer communities. Gupta (2015) does not argue that we instead return to sex-negativity, but that we oppose extremes of sex positivity and sex negativity in either direction, otherwise we are creating yet another binary for our world. There are other places for coalition between asexuality and disability which have been put into conversation by Eujung Kim (2011), and asexuality and feminism written about by Gupta (2015) including the pervasive norm of rape and abuse culture as manifestations of compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity (Neal, 2016).

These systems of power are greatly influenced by racism and genderism. We know that native folks and trans folks are especially harmed by norms of legal kinship and compulsory sexuality because of the high numbers of sexual assaults and relationship violence (Bauer et al., 2017). The asexual movement must recognize its implications in racial justice, immigration reform, police and criminal justice reform, wealth redistribution, and more (Spade, 2011). We must also illuminate for others the harmful nature of compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity so we can work together on dismantling them (Spade, 2011).

**Recommendations for Higher Education**

“The study of race, class, gender, sexuality, and culture has transformed [our] field not only because of what is learned about those who are “different” but also because of what emerges about the validity of knowledge, the development of adequate theories, methodologies, and connections to practice” (Smith, 2012, p. 232). Leading scholarship on diversity in our field have suggested that the viability of the field is threatened if diversity is not engaged at its center (Smith, 2012). I argue that there is therefore a necessity for higher education to begin to analyze its implications in social constructions such as compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity that
harm all of its students. It demands, as other social movements have, “whole-scale reconstruction of the higher education system and its values” (Rojas, 2012, p 260).

As a researcher of this study and as part of these communities I recognize that our identities are complex and diverse. We are not all the same; we do not think the same, act the same, and need or want the same things, therefore there are not best practices for one university that can be applied to all. Nicolazzo (2017) argued that “the complexities of participants’ experiences demand complex solutions to promote more welcoming collegiate environments” (p.139). My participants did not all experience belonging or resilience, and they disagreed with each other several times. They had several salient identities (such as being transgender and asexual or latinx and asexual) that impacted how they also experience our society. Therefore these implication are not best practices, but rather calls to action (Nicolazzo, 2017). There should be:

1. Assessment of how compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity are enforced through policies and procedures, practices, and the culture of higher education that affect everyone, but asexual and aromantic students especially.

2. Broad education and awareness of asexual and aromantic identities.

3. Developing an Epistemology of Love.

These calls to action are also a plea from myself, because of the harm that happens every day to asexual and aromantic students.

**Assessment of Compulsory Sexuality and Amatonormativity in Higher Education**

Although this thesis is written about asexual and aromantic students at a single institution, it is incredibly important to recognize the manifestations of compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity that regulate everyone’s lives. This builds from Nicolazzo’s (2017) assertions
that gender mediates all people’s experiences, whether acknowledged or not. If we understand how compulsory sexuality affects all of us, then we all can start to deconstruct it and create change on our campuses. Therefore staff, faculty and students need to examine the ways in which they are complacent and uphold these systems. We must ask ourselves questions about how these systems of oppression influence our behavior, actions, policies, and practice. Some examples of this are the following: questioning why employee insurance policies are only given to spouses, why we erase romantic orientations on our college forms, how we have erased asexual and aromantic people in our histories, what we are teaching about sex and intimacy, what are our expectations with our students regarding relationships or sex, how is compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity written and enforced in our policies and procedures and in our campus culture, and how do we look at sexual assault and sexual coercion differently because of our knowledge of these systems of oppression? These students described the high price they paid to educate about their identities. What would it look like if allosexual and alloromantic people shouldered that burden?

**Assessment of LGBTQIA+ spaces.**

As someone whose career path focuses on LGBTQIA+ campus center work, my critique that follows in this section comes from the positionality of love for queer and trans campus spaces. I fully believe that identity centers still serve necessary functions within the academy as pointed out by Renn (2011) and Patton (2011). However I believe like Marine and Nicolazzo (2014) that “more attention must be paid to the genesis and construction of these centers as sites for liberatory practice” (p. 4). An assessment is needed of the ways in which queer or LGBTQIA+ spaces are upholding systems of oppression, including compulsory sexuality,
amatonormativity, and white supremacy. Online discourse has affected asexual and aromantic people’s trust of other queer people. If you are told that you are not part of the LGBTQIA+ community online, how likely is it that you are going to go into a space created for LGBTQIA+ students? The expectation of exclusion in queer spaces is a very real fear of the participants of this study that affected how they entered the space. Although they divulged stories of not feeling welcome while in the Pride Center, none of them could name a time when they were received overt discrimination, but more that microaggressions took a major toll on their wellbeing and comfortability. The anticipation of exclusion is part of minority stress and effects the ways in which students will reach out to find community on campus centers, if they choose to reach out at all. Being aware of this hostility, queer centers and spaces on campus must go the extra mile to include asexual and aromantic students, and especially ace and aro students of color.

Like Marine and Nicolazzo (2014) mention, names hold incredible power for inclusion of trans students. The participants of this study mentioned how that it felt exclusionary and unwelcoming for people in the Pride Center to not include the A in the LGBTQIA+ acronym or shorten the acronym to LGBTQ+. I believe that extending the acronym in both speech and writing itself can have an effect on how included asexual and aromantic students feel, especially because the argument of the A in the acronym referring to allies has been used to exclude ace and aro people online. There are also other ways to visually cue that they are welcome. Other examples are pictures of asexual and aromantic figures in history being included on walls with other LGBTQIA+ activists, asexual and aromantic books, flags, and content on social media. Opportunities and events that are meant to help kinship form with other folk who identify as asexual or aromantic or allies are incredibly important. For example, the Pride Center at Oregon State created ace and aro socials at least once a term that provide food, and space outside the
Pride Center for asexual and aromantic folk to socialize together. Participants in this study found that ace and aro support groups through counseling services were also especially helpful for finding kinship with each other. Developing programming for the asexual and aromantic community as opposed to only creating programming about them is an important distinction to understand (Marine and Nicolazzo, 2014). While I believe this programming is especially important, I also believe that both kinds of programming are necessary to be a welcoming environment for asexual and aromantic students. Marine and Nicolazzo (2014) wrote that several of their participants who were LGBTQ+ center directors expressed concern that they did not have enough time to focus on programming for all queer identities. But an intersectional approach to programming can help LGBTQIA+ centers form unique partnerships.

The question that often comes up when discussing asexual and aromantic inclusion, even for the students in this study, regards conversations around sex in these spaces. Cerankowski and Mills (2010) asked the question how might asexuality fit into a community where sexual culture is at the center. They argue that asexual and aromantic people are queer and they challenge a sex normative culture— even one practiced by queer communities (Cerankowski & Mills, 2010). The participants in this study talked about how sexualized queer spaces were for them, how sexual conversations were expected of them and how taxing it was to perform sexuality in those conversations. I would like to challenge queer centers to think about asking for consent for these conversations in these spaces that affect not only asexual and aromantic students, but also survivors of sexual or relationship violence. Livingston (2015) argues that consent is a “queer community-based discourse on sex and relationships, concerned with how to negotiate relationships with people in the community spaces where we play” (p. 14). They argue that consent is needed for these sexual and relationship conversations and not just in practices in
the bedroom—we actually engage in conversations of consent all the time in public spaces. An example they use is content or trigger warnings before speaking in a public place about sensitive topics. Thinking about consent as a community act before conversation allows us to think about how to practice it within queer spaces.

**Broad Education and Awareness of Asexual and Aromantic Identities**

These students taught us that they feel invisible on our campus. Education and awareness of these identities are needed. This includes the knowledge of how compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity affect asexual and aromantic students, and also includes education as a tool to make their identities visible. Sincere conversations and education also should happen in specific places that provide aid to asexual and aromantic students. This includes survivor advocacy centers or programs, safe sex or wellness programs, Counseling and Psychological Services, and Student Health Services.

Because of the long history of pathologization by counselors and health professionals, there is need for education in relation to Student Health Services and Counseling and Psychological Services on OSU’s campus. Several recommendations have been made about how to improve the relationship between asexual and medical and mental health professionals. In Foster & Scherrer’s (2014) work they propose three strategies for health practitioners: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Knowledge is about the need for practitioners to understand asexual identities (Foster & Scherrer, 2014). They also must gain skills in using that knowledge, including finding ways to be more inclusive of LGBTQ+ and asexual and aromantic identities. Examples include adding the identities on forms and paperwork, using gender neutral language, seeking out ways to affirm their identities, and focusing on the client’s needs and issues without focusing on their asexuality (Foster & Scherrer, 2014). Lastly, it is important to recognize the
stress that clients can experience by being asexual in a sexualized society, which can be isolating and marginalizing. We must focus on changing the belief of asexuality as a disorder and begin to treat it as an identity. Gupta (2017) also gave several recommendations that add to Foster and Scherrer. These include treating relationship issues surrounding sex as a relationship problem and not a problem of one of the partners, examining practitioners’ own bias related to sex, and recognizing that asexual people may and can want to increase their level of sexual interest, which does not negate their asexual identity (Gupta, 2017). Amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality are normative structures upholding healthcare. Doctors can be very much involved in our private lives. The sex for health discourse mentioned in the literature review has affected the performance of sex in our lives. Foster and Scherrer’s (2014) recommendations would also be appropriate for student health offices to think about. An analysis of the ways in which compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity function in student health and counseling and psychological services is needed.

Survivor advocacy, sexual health, and healthy relationship programming and offices need to be aware of the incredible needs asexual and aromantic students have. Because of the high amount of sexual coercion, intimate partner violence, and sexual assault experienced by asexual and aromantic students, an assessment of the effectiveness of current sexual assault prevention programming, advocacy, and trauma support is needed. Areas that teach about sexuality and relationships on campus need to be aware that intimacy and relationships can be different for ace and aro folk. Jasmine described feeling like safe sex programs were not created for her identities. Recommendations for sexual health education have been created by the Asexuality Visibility and Education network that can help these professionals (see Appendix I). Their recommendations are to include ace (and aro) terminology in forms and dialogue; talk about romantic orientation;
discuss gender expression and consent; clearly distinguish between sexual and emotional intimacy; and avoid equating statements that harm asexual and aromantic people (ACE of NYC & AVEN, n.d) Compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity need to be a part of the way that we teach about love or intimacy, relationships, and sex that we experience in our life. Amatonormativity creates a relationship hierarchy, discourages communication and compatibility, makes non-monogamy more difficult, leaves asexual and aromantic people vulnerable, and it leaves abuse culture intact (Neal, 2016). This shows up in the way we talk about sex and intimacy in these trainings and workshops and the ways that these offices interact with students. There is great possibility for transformation and deconstruction of these forms of oppression if they are taught to those who would be affected by them.

An amazing example of a possibility for resisting amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality on campus is shown in an educational framework created by Antioch College. The students in 1990 created the Sexual Offense Prevention Policy that encouraged a wave of education about consent in college (Rosman, 2018). They started including education on consent in platonic relationships at the school (Rosman, 2018). Examples of this showing up on campus include friends asking permission before giving hugs, and personal space being discussed in class (Rosman, 2018). In my view, a framework upheld by a policy on affirmative consent (especially in regards to nonsexual touch) can be an incredible thing not just for asexual and aromantic students, but everyone.

Another area of improvement is in curriculum taught in higher education. Students often talked about being erased in their classrooms in human sexuality, queer studies, in STEM fields. As with other queer inclusion in curriculum faculty must be aware of the harm that invisibility of identity can have on these students. Rojas argues that when a movement begins its own studies
(e.g. Black Studies, Queer Studies, Women’s Studies) it is strongly linked with student protest and the creation of similar programs in other universities. “Intellectual movements may... engender institutional reform” (Rojas, 2012). University movements may change the lives of those who participate in them and research on activist’s shows that those who begin there will continue in politics and that activism is a first step towards a political career (Rojas, 2012). Przybylo and Cooper (2014) argued that Feminist and Queer Studies should begin integrating Asexualities Studies in their curriculum. I believe more curriculum and visibility on asexual and aromantic identities can also further opportunities for kinship building. The first Asexualities class is being taught this year at Simon Fraiser University by Ela Przybylo. This sets a precedent for future Asexualities classes in higher education (Przybylo, 2017).

**Developing an Epistemology of Love**

Palmer and Zajonc (2013) define an epistemology of love as the true heart of higher education. This love is an intimate and personal connection that is separate from romantic or erotic desire. Nicolazzo defined epistemology of love in students affairs as “seeing and hearing each other for who we are, which requires giving each other the agency to define who we are for ourselves as well as allowing each other to change and amend who we are or could be in the future (p. 153).” Nicolazzo (2017) argues that although this seems like a small thing, loving kindness is incredibly important. The kinship networks for students in this work were powerful for improving their self-worth and resilience. In these kinship networks they found belonging which they had once desired from other students, staff, and their educational environment (Nicolazzo, 2017). Love is in fact missing from asexual and aromantic students’ lives. Recently a member of this study came to me while I was packing up my office to leave my position at the Women’s Center at Oregon State. They told me how much it had meant for them to have me be a
part of their life, and that I helped them feel like they belonged for the first time on campus. It seemed like such a small thing for me to do to reach out to this student and help them find community, but it was no small thing for them. hooks (2010) illuminates that resistance motivated from a place of love requires nothing from individuals but operates that love’s effective power brings about real change from places of hope, as opposed to fear. hooks (2010) asserts that “it is difficult to imagine that love really has the power to change everything” (p. 209) but love can, and love does change everything (hooks, 2010). Alloromantic and allosexual educators should take it upon themselves to find ways to cultivate and engage in community with asexual and aromantic students (Nicolazzo, 2017). Education about these identities taken on by allosexual and alloromantic people could help alleviate the burden to educate and dispel myths that keep asexual and aromantic people from coming out, thus allowing students to continue to form kinship networks (Nicolazzo, 2017). Nicolazzo (2017) suggests that the kinship networks could change the way that trans students experience their universities, and I believe that the same can happen for asexual and aromantic students. Engaging in this work requires a commitment to self-reflection even when that is hard or uncomfortable. However, if we wish to embrace an epistemology of love, we have the possibility of improving the lives of asexual and aromantic students who desperately need people to care about them (Nicolazzo, 2016).

Suggestions for Further Research

Because this is the first research on asexual and aromantic students in higher education, much research is needed to understand the experiences and needs of asexual and aromantic students. In particular I believe that because sexual violence, coercion, intimate partner violence, suicide, and mental health concerns are so normative for asexual and aromantic people, all of these need to studied. I also believe that there is significant insight to be gained when studying
asexual and aromantic dating, relationships, and kinship networks. There is a small amount of literature focused on the experiences of asexual and aromantic people with health practitioners, but I believe assessment is needed and cultural competence training in student health services and counseling programs on campuses. There is also no research outside of higher education on the experiences of asexual and aromantic people with job discrimination and housing insecurity. The financial impact of disclosing their identities is missing from the literature. I think that further analysis on why asexual and aromantic students do not disclose their identities could greatly improve our understanding of these students’ experiences. I encourage more work on coalitional building between movements for justice that include a compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity analysis. I believe that the power of understanding these forms of oppression provides a path for liberation that can greatly transform our society.

Conclusion

This work was emotional for me. I have cried at the relevance these students’ stories and photographs have had in my own life. Some of them were my community before this research even began, and now we have formed our own kinship network. Since this research I have seen some of them almost daily hanging out in the space where I work. I have become more proud of who I am and more resilient because of being a part of this research with them. I have been concerned with the wellbeing of these participants since our first meeting.

In this chapter, I reviewed the findings of this study including the pervasive isolation, educational burden, and invisibility asexual and aromantic people face. Despite these barriers, some students found belonging and kinship with other people that helped them to believe in who they are and to become more resilient. The three recommendations for higher education include an analysis of compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity in higher education, broad education
on asexual and aromantic identities, and opportunities created to encourage kinship to increase student success and resilience. I ended with suggested recommendations for higher education research.
References


f. The Ace Community Survey Team.
Netflix.


Gupta, K (2016): “And now I’m just different, but there’s nothing actually wrong with me”: Asexual marginalization and resistance, *Journal of Homosexuality*, DOI: 10.1080/00918369.2016.1236590


Jourian, T., & Nicolazzo, Z. (2017). Bringing our communities to the research table: The liberatory potential of collaborative methodological practices alongside LGBTQ


https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2422683


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Appendix A

Photovoice Steps Infographic

- Email
  - Elijah
- Art and Photography Workshop
  - 2 hours
- Picture Taking and Reflection
  - 2 weeks
- Meaning Making Workshop
  - 8 hours

(Optional): Gallery showing during April
Appendix B

Agenda for Photovoice Study Workshop for January 15, 2017

Agenda (2 hours):

- Introductions to everyone in study (**5 mins**)
  - Who I am Why we want to do this?
    - Welcome everyone
    - Thank them
    - My Name, pronouns
    - Title
    - Why?
  - No literature in higher ed for nonsexual and nonromantic students.
  - As a demisexual and with a partner who is on the ace and aro spectrums, I know how invisible we can be made to feel.

- Review of what the whole process is (**5 mins**)
  - Handout of resources
  - Infographic

- Demographics Survey to participants (**10 mins**)
  - Demographic survey forms

- Informed consent process overview for study and for picture taking (**15 mins**)
  - Only people who are part of the study can be featured in the images. We can only accept pictures of study participants. Images of stuff, places
    - Go over that point, give examples.
    - Go over what doesn’t count
- Pictures of people not in the study anywhere else, even if they’re in the background. No names on facebook visible, etc.
  - A copy of the document for consent for everyone
    - Go over document, give the highlights
    - Answer questions
- Lorenzo’s powerpoint on how to use a camera, with lighting, etc. (30 mins)
  - Discussion of art as photography, what a powerful photo looks like
    - Photos from lgbt photovoice
- Discussion of campus climate for nonsexual and nonromantic minority students (50 mins)
  - What is it like to experience some to no sexual or romantic attraction at OSU?
  - Do you feel like the pride center is somewhere you can go to get resources?
  - Do you feel like you can be open and talk about your identity in classes?
  - How do you connect with your communities?
- Discussion of pressing issues for sexual and romantic minority students
- Discussion of framing questions and selecting questions moving forward
  - Suggested framing questions to build off of
    - What does the feeling of belonging look like?
    - What represents your identity? How do you look at the world through these identities?
● Where are places you feel you belong? What about that place helps you to feel you belong?
● How/what do you feel you connect with your communities on campus, or do you find that somewhere else?
● What does resilience look like? What is your facial expression when you feel resilient?
● What helps you feel resilient?
● Are there ways that this university could promote belonging for nonsexual and nonromantic students?

○ Final Questions
○ What does the feeling of belonging look like?
○ What represents your identity? How do you look at the world through these identities?
○ Where are places you feel you belong? What about that place helps you to feel you belong?
○ How/what do you feel you connect with your communities on campus, or do you find that somewhere else?
○ What does resilience look like? What is your facial expression when you feel resilient?
○ What helps you feel resilient?
○ Are there ways that this university could promote belonging for nonsexual and nonromantic students?

● Explanation of narrative reflection sheet to be sorted out in email (5 mins)
Appendix C

Demographic Survey

Thank you for agreeing to take this survey. Your answers will be kept confidential.

1. In what city and state were you born (and country, if not in the United States?)

2. How old are you?

3. Please describe how you identify in terms of race or ethnicity?

4. Please describe what your employment status is?
5. What words would you use to describe your class background?

6. Please describe how you identify in terms of gender identity?

7. Please describe how you identify in terms of gender expression?

8. Please describe how you identify in terms of sexual orientation/identity?

9. Please describe how you identify in terms of romantic orientation?
10. Please describe how you identify in terms of disabilitie(s) or non-disabilitie(s)?

11. Do you have any physical or mental conditions that make daily activities difficult? (i.e., depression, use a mobility device, etc)

12. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your demographics or identity?

    Please feel free to use the rest of the space on this page to do.

Thank you for taking your time to complete this survey!
Appendix D

Narrative/Photo Reflection Sheet

For each of the ten photos that you choose, please answer the questions below:

1. What is the file name of the photo?

2. Provide a brief description of the photo:

3. Why do you want to share this photo?
4. What’s the story behind this photo? Is there a deeper meaning to this photo?

5. How does this relate to your life, the lives of people in your community, or both?
Appendix E

Workshop Number 2 Agenda

**Workshop #2 Agenda**

i. **Breakfast and Viewing of Photos with Narratives** (30 mins) \textbf{10:00am-10:30am}

ii. **Re-Introductions** (5 mins) \textbf{10:30 am-10:35 am}

   1. Themselves to each other, name, pronouns, why you wanted to be a part of the study?

iii. **Housekeeping and Reviewing agenda** (5mins) \textbf{10:35-10:40am}

   1. Where are the bathrooms here, gender neutral.
   2. Reminder that we are recording and last time it was really hard to hear you all when you talked over one another. So let’s try our very hardest to not interrupt one another and let each other finish their thought before talking.
   3. Agenda for the day on a board

iv. **Small group discussion** (2 groups) about photos & narratives and their meaning, using the following prompts: (60 mins) 2 chunks to each group. \textbf{10:40 am-11:40am}

   1. Discussion of each participant’s photographs
      a. Cluster photos by meaning/type/theme
      b. Do you connect with this image? Why or why not?
c. What meaning does this image convey? What might this photo say about ace/aromantic communities? Which photos best reflect the community?

d. Does this photo best align with the framing questions?

v. Large group discussion, insights from first workshop, and distilling ideas into themes across both workshops and photo taking, themes will be roughly similar to the types of themes one might anticipate based on the framing questions. (20 mins) **11:40 pm-12:00 pm**

1. Ask for themes from each of them
2. Word jumble talking about things on board.
3. Themes that we heard while you were all talking.

vi. **Break (15 minutes) 12:00 pm-12:15 pm**

vii. Photo viewing & silent voting of best photos (25 mins) **12:15 pm-12:40 pm**

1. Give them a certain # so they can only choose 4 of their favorite photos from each person’s grouping?
   a. 7 participants X 10 photos = 70 photos, break up visually.
   b. Vote within the clusters, a collective experience.
   c. Are there any other photos we can’t live without?
   d. No artificial restraint.

viii. **Quote selection (15 mins) 12:40 pm-12:55 pm**

1. Quotes on to pieces of paper from first workshop
   a. Fit them under the themes
b. Select what they thought was most compelling for the theme

ix. **Lunch 1pm-2pm**

x. Finalize the gallery images and accompanying text (45 mins) **2:00pm-2:45pm**

2:45pm

1. Results from silent voting process

2. What do we want our gallery presentation to look like?
   a. We’ve chosen our quotes
   b. Any specific colors or designs?
   c. Show gallery spaces
   d. What do they want it to feel like when people come in? Music, lighting. Silent, something happening?
   e. What is it that they want people to know? Is there some photo that helps to introduce the gallery in some way?
      Sequencing of the photos matters.
   f. Which photos they want in which cultural resource center

xi. Discussion of confidentiality needs (15 minutes) **2:45pm-3:00pm**

1. What names do you want to use in the study? Can be real name or not?
   a. Change person’s name look at narratives names. Part of narratives may need to be redacted. Flag any issues.

2. Do they want to be a part of the gallery?

xii. Complete the evaluation survey (15 mins) **3:00pm-3:15pm**
xiii. Next steps discussion and wrap up 3:15pm-3:30p

1. When the gallery showing is, review of what they asked for it to look like.

2. Kickoff for the show on April 9th time tbd

3. Would they like their photos to be used for a pride center pride week showing as well?

4. Any last questions?
Appendix F

Questions to Guide Small Group Discussion

Discussion of each participant’s photographs

i. Do you connect with this image? Why or why not?

ii. What meaning does this image convey? What might this photo say about ace/aromantic communities? Which photos best reflect the community?

iii. Does this photo best align with the framing questions?
Appendix G

Evaluation Survey

Thank you for agreeing to take this survey. Your responses will be kept confidential.

1. Did you enjoy your participation in this study? What did you enjoy most and why?

2. Was it challenging to participate in this study? What did you like the least and why?
3. What would you have changed about the study if you could?

4. How did you feel about the photo exhibit portion of the study? Did you opt out of this part of the study? Why or Why not?

5. Did you feel that the facilitators provided for your needs, did you feel like your voice was heard/understood?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in this study? Please feel free to use the rest of the page to do so.

Thank you for completing this Survey!
Appendix H

OSU Pride Center Founding Documents

The OSU Pride Center

Vision
The Pride Center envisions an environment where lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, and intersex individuals and our allies at OSU are affirmed as whole people; unified as a community towards our common goals; and cared for in a positive educational setting.

Mission
The OSU Pride Center provides programs and resources for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning and intersex members of the OSU community and their allies. The Pride Center affirms LGBTQQA identities and lives by providing education, trained peer support, outreach, community development, visibility and advocacy. The Pride Center is a safe space for all people to explore aspects of sexual orientation and gender in an open and non-assuming atmosphere.

Values
In keeping with the ideals of OSU the Pride Center strives to create an inclusive environment committed to social justice, honesty, integrity, and equality in all of our daily interactions. To this end, we uphold the following standards as responsibilities for the Pride Center:

• To maintain transparency in our actions, processes, policies, and leadership development
• To serve as advocates for underrepresented and marginalized communities at OSU
• To hold ourselves accountable and to be held accountable for our actions to the students, staff, faculty, and community that we serve
• To provide educational opportunities around LGBTQQA issues to the broader campus
• To serve as a model for innovation in programming, services, and student development
• To provide opportunities for students to engage in service to the OSU campus and community
• To honor the individual experience of people at OSU by providing holistic support for their needs
• To create an easily accessible and approachable environment within the Pride Center
• To uphold confidentiality as key to serving individuals within the LGBTQQA community
• To give individuals at OSU the tools needed to become empowered members of the OSU community
Appendix I

Queer Resource Center Mission Statement

**Queer Resource Center**
@ Oregon State University

The OSU Queer Resource Center provides programs and support services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and intersexed members of the OSU community and their allies. The QRC affirms the identities and empowers the lives of LGBTQIQ people by providing education, outreach, program support, consultation, community development, visibility and advocacy. The QRC is a safe space for all members of our community to explore aspects of sexual orientation and gender identity in an open and non-judgmental atmosphere.

The Queer Resource Center offers many resources for students, staff, faculty and community members of Oregon State University:

- Our expanding library contains many books and magazines about queer issues and can be checked out for three weeks.
- Pamphlets with information ranging from Coming Out to Safe Sex.
- Subscriptions to Advocate and Out magazines, and we receive Just Out (based in Portland).
- During the summer we offer two hours of staffing each day, Monday through Friday, and once school begins in the fall we will have eight hours of staffing each day.
- There are many other resources and services that can help queer people on the OSU Campus. The QRC can help people connect with these programs.
- The center space is a safe space and can be used as a place to read a book, ask questions, study or hang out. It can also be reserved for meetings or events (it fits about 10 people).
- The center puts on many programs throughout the year. The best way to learn about these events, as well as stay informed about events and issues in the area is to sign up for the QRC Listserv, which you can do by emailing the QRC, or talking to someone on the QRC staff.

We look forward to seeing you in the future.

The Queer Resource Center is located in the Women’s Center (Benton Annex). Contact the QRC at 541-737-9161 or send an email to qrc@mu.orst.edu.
### Asexual Inclusive Sex Ed

**Making Health Education More Affirming and Inclusive**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Include Ace Terminology:</th>
<th>Discuss Gender Expression:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many ace students are looking for signs that their experiences are valid and that they are not alone. Simply including “asexual,” “demisexual,” and “grey-a” in a list of sexual orientations can send a powerful message to ace students. This also provides students who may not know what is-changing new knowledge about the range of sexual desire they or others may feel.</td>
<td>Being ace raises complex questions around gender, and many aces choose to express themselves as masculine, feminine, or gender non-binary in ways that defy traditional norms. Acknowledging that gender expression is something that everyone must explore and discover for themselves can help create a safe classroom for all students.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Clearly Distinguish Sex and Emotional Intimacy:</th>
<th>Discuss Consent:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most aces desire and build emotionally intimate relationships. These relationships may look like romantic partnerships, close friendships, connections with family and community, or deep relationships with themselves. Talking about ace experiences of intimacy reinforces that ace students are not broken and creates a useful conversation for all students.</td>
<td>Many people (not just aces) enjoy cuddling, kissing, and other forms of touch in situations where they do not want to have sex. Encourage students not to make assumptions about the kinds of touch that others enjoy, and to ask for verbal consent (“Would you like a hug?”) early and often. Make it clear that desire for touch does not imply desire for sex, even if sex has already happened in a relationship.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Talk about Romantic Orientation:</th>
<th>Avoid equating asexuality and celibacy:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separating sexual from romantic orientation helps students imagine the complex ways that intimate relationships might or might not involve sex.</td>
<td>Celibacy is a choice to not engage in sexual activity, while asexuality is a lack of sexual attraction. A celibate person may experience sexual attraction and choose not to act on it. An asexual person may choose to have sex for reasons other than sexual attraction.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Avoid statements like “all people have sexual feelings”:</th>
<th>Avoid stating that asexual people never have sex:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These statements reinforce a common message that asexuality does not exist, and that a lack of sexual attraction is a problem that must be fixed.</td>
<td>Some asexual people choose to have sex, either as a way to connect with a partner, out of curiosity, or because of natural sexual fluidity. Others never have sex and focus on other forms of physical and emotional intimacy.</td>
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<th>Avoid statements like “asexual people are ok being alone”:</th>
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<tr>
<td>While this is true for some aces (and is also true for some sexual people), it falsely implies that aces are destined to spend their lives in isolation.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

For more information: [www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)