14 Critical Methods for Studying Adolescent Sexuality

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Those who work with "critical methods" often turn their gaze to examining how power runs through the process of knowledge production. Or as Michelle Fine argues, critical researchers work to trace the "biography of our questions" (Fine, 2017, p. 5). As social scientists studying adolescences and young adulthood are increasingly drawn to critical perspectives in their research, many still wonder how to proceed and what methods are available. The modifier of "critical," as I use it here, signals a researcher's commitment to accounting for and examining the role of inequality, even when it might be difficult to observe, has become normalized, or is disavowed by participants. Critical methods work to dislodge assumptions, make clearer what is hidden or difficult to hear. It is a practice of drawing attention to power, including how concepts are defined, how data are collected and analyzed, and the history of the theories that guide our work (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Fox et al., 2009; Kurtiş & Adams, 2015; Teo, 2015).

This perspective is especially important when it comes to child and adolescent sexuality development research. It is here, early in life, that we can see how norms, for example, "health" and "safety," have restricted the questions researchers ask, limited the information gathered, and produced policies that wrap around young bodies in an effort to contain thoughts, ideas, and desires deemed unhealthy and dangerous (Garcia & Fields, 2017; McClelland & Fine, 2014). A range of methodological practices is necessary, especially methods that press a researcher to ask more, ask why, wonder about what is unsaid or unsayable, and what cannot be heard or is un-imaginable. In line with Fine's (2016) call for "just methods in revolting times," I urge researchers to carefully consider what one cannot see (what appears to be shared, but is not) when designing research on, with, and about oppression. My aim in this chapter is to advocate for several critical methods that bring these questions to the foreground in one's research design.

Background

Sexuality and Young People

Because sexuality is often used as a dividing line between adulthood and childhood, discourses of innocence and protection are used to reinforce barriers to sexual information (Fields, 2005). Conversations about sex education, both in the United States and abroad, often hold within them enormous urgency and are consistently sites of moral panics about what children will learn (Garcia & Fields, 2017). Part of the panic around children's sexuality is that this development is imagined to inevitably go wrong; if children gain access to the "wrong" kind of sexual knowledge or experience, they may not become the "good" kind of sexual citizen (Robinson, 2012). This unbounded fear of how children encounter sexuality has made any talk of young people and sex inherently suspect. More than 25 years ago, Rex Stainton Rogers and Wendy Stainton Rogers (1992) noted the dangers associated with asking young people about sexuality:

> These days about the only situation in which it is legitimate to even talk to children about sex is within sex education or investigation for alleged abuse. Anything else risks the accusation of being sexually abusive or the stigma of being erotically involved (p. 176).

This fragile constellation of ideas about when it is "appropriate" to talk with young people about sex has severely limited what researchers have investigated, leaving questions unasked and outcomes unexamined (see Collins, 2003). This history deeply informs contemporary research on child and adolescent sexuality and requires that researchers contend with how methods in the field have grown up and around these barriers and worries about appropriateness and risk.

Critical Approaches to Research

Critical approaches to methods have been developing for several decades, across many disciplines (e.g., Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2009; Traub, 2015). In psychology, critical methods have often involved engaging with the history of the field, aiming to disrupt the colonial, racist, and homophobic structures that have determined what norms and procedures gain epistemic authority (Adams, 2014; Martín-Baró, 1994; Teo, 2015). In other words, which voices, theories, and methods have been institutionalized and which have been marginalized or delegitimized? There is a long tradition of critiquing these histories in psychology, especially from feminist psychologists who have called attention to how disciplinary norms have kept marginalized voices systematically silenced (Warner et al., 2016; Weisstein, 1968; Wilkinson, 1991). With this history in mind, critical researchers continue, today, to develop practices that bring consistent and close attention to how concepts are theorized, assessed, and observed.

Describing methods as "critical" is a way to mark that research is not a clear window into a phenomenon. Critical methods work to make the methodological process more evident rather than less evident. While research is typically designed to reduce bias and know something with more certainty, critical methods focus on collecting more information about differences, variations, and imperfections in the research process itself. This, in turn, foregrounds the research process alongside representing complex individual and social phenomena. When reflecting on the complicated relationship between empirical work and critical work, Lisa Jean Moore (2016) argues that one could consider this move toward critical work as "[e]mpirical research methods created and refined through serious engagements with queer, post-structural, feminist, social justice, and other politically sophisticated theorizing [to] facilitate useful research" (p. 33). This space of mixing (epistemologies, theories, and histories) requires that critical methods develop the flexibility that is needed to produce a research design – and – deeply critique the limitations and assumptions built into this design.

A Question of Methods

Critical methods can occur at any point or throughout a research design. Examples include critical perspectives that researchers might take to expand notions about who is sampled (Hitchens et al., 2018), who is imagined as expert (Torre et al., 2012), how concepts are defined (Smith et al., 1999), or how epistemologies influence the production of knowledge (Bowleg et al., 2017). In addition to these, I argue that inequality and disparities potentially hide in and among participants' imaginations and expectations (McClelland, 2010, 2014, 2017). In other words, aspects of inequality might shape data with an invisible hand that cannot be "controlled for" or predicted and that most methods enable these expectations to hide in plain sight. Participants may normalize their experiences with violence, aggression, insults, and discrimination, and they may, at times, lose the ability to label such experiences as "weird" and "abnormal," making them all the more insidious and difficult to document or analyze. Accommodation to these conditions must be documented – especially for those who experience the constant "drip feed" of discrimination (Fine & Ruglis, 2009). As participants are often unwilling to label discriminatory actions, researchers must pursue questions in this field using a wide variety of critical designs. Critical methods, for example, might attend to the ways that a participant's responses reflect not only their individual experiences, but also histories of how institutions, schools, neighborhoods, families, and peer groups have set up young people to imagine their lives, or how political, economic, and personal vulnerability operates for some more than others in any data collection process.

Cellophane

Ten years ago, Michelle Fine and I (McClelland & Fine, 2008) wrote about concerns we had surrounding how young women talked to researchers (us) about their sexuality. After several young women told us about how they didn't know and didn't need to know more about sex education, we wondered about the political and cultural brakes that pressed on young women and on those of us listening. In that essay, we developed the metaphor of "cellophane" in order to symbolize the mixture of public policies, commercialization, and feminist desires that wrapped young women and those who do research with them in a "collective discursive cellophane." We argued that cellophane was being produced by:

> . . . a market economy that rushes to commodify young female bodies; sociopolitical, moral, and hetero-normative panics that obsess over young women's sexualities; racist imagery and institutional practices that vilify the sexualities of women of color; and by schools increasingly kidnapped by the policy of teaching Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage curricula in place of serious sexuality education. (McClelland & Fine, 2008, p. 232)

These layers of cellophane, we worried, made it difficult for young women to speak about their desires, since their tongues might be weighed down with dominant assumptions and panics. Similarly, we worried, our ears might be clogged with our own dominant feminist discourses for their desires.

Facing the reality of cellophane in a researcher's work, we made a series of suggestions for what we called "methodological release points" as a way to craft research methods that acknowledge these political and discursive contexts and still manage to understand something about what it means to be a young woman living and developing sexually in the early decades of the twenty-first century. In the spirit of "expanding the methodological imagination" (Fine, 2007), I dive into these questions again and make additional suggestions for how one might integrate these release points into their research practices.

Methodological release points offer analytical wedges that invite new questions about "opacity, obscurity, obstruction" that are inevitably a part of any research about issues related to sex and sexuality (Traub, 2015, p. 3). Rather than trying to surmount these obstacles, methodological release points invite researchers to work within the liminal (Morawski, 1994) and the noninnocent (Lather, 2007) spaces feminist researchers have long invited us to imagine. As Patti Lather (1993) argues, "better research" is not a matter of looking harder or more closely at our objects of study. But rather, we must see "what frames our seeing-spaces of constructed visibility and incitements to see which constitute power/knowledge" (p. 675). In other words, critical methods press us to understand the process and politics of knowledge production, while also continuing to be knowledge producers. It is this somewhat paradoxical space that animates critical methods.

Moving Forward

At stake in any discussion of research methods is the potential for profound misunderstanding and misinterpretation about what researchers see and hear when we study a phenomenon. Those who do research often have a hard time imagining life in the shadows; as a result, "our affective responses to police shootings, school closings, evictions, and varied enactments of precarity differ wildly from those who live under the boot of oppression" (Fine, 2016, p. 348). With this and the many other arguments made about the racist and colonial implications of knowledge production (see Kurtiş & Adams, 2015; Teo, 2011), social scientists are increasingly drawn to developing and using critical research methods. But many still wonder, what might this look like? How should I proceed? And, what can critical methods help me see or hear that I would have otherwise missed?

Four Examples

In order to encourage readers to use critical methods in their work, I draw on four examples from my own research. I start with a discussion of the *self-anchored ladder*, a method that invests in meanings that participants bring to research and how these affect the scores they provide. Second, I discuss *survey marginalia* methods that invite participants into the research dynamic, thickening the already complicated definitions of "inside" and "outside" a survey design. Third, I discuss *Q methods* as a way to ask participants to show us their thoughts, creating a mosaic of associations that can be analyzed empirically as well as used as a way to invite complicated and messy lives into research. Finally, I discuss interview analysis strategies, which focus on *adaptation to injustice* within the interview dynamic and present potential analytic frameworks to contend with cellophane as it appears in qualitative interviews.

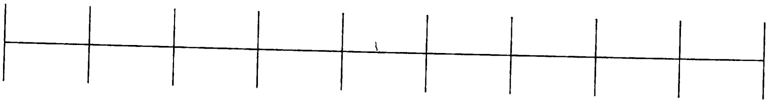
The Self-Anchored Ladder

The self-anchored ladder item, adapted from Cantril's ladder (1965), is an item where the participant is asked a question and provided a Likert-like response scale. However, unlike most Likert items, no textual anchors are provided (e.g., the scale does not provide terms such as *mostly agree* to *mostly disagree*). Instead, the participant is instructed to place a mark anywhere on a 10-point ladder to indicate their level of response and also asked to describe the low, middle, and high ends of this scale (see Figure 14.1). As a result, the participant responds to the question, but also provides their interpretation of the concepts in the question. This provides an extremely important level of data for a researcher to consider. While interviews might be helpful in gaining access to these details, the ladder opens up a small but powerful way for participants to demonstrate how they imagine concepts and the wide range of ways they imagine what is possible. In other words, the ladder vividly illustrates how they envision "a little" and "a lot" of something in their lives.

Researchers have consistently found that individuals rely on different interpretations and experiences when responding to survey items, but these differences are rarely captured in survey designs (Landrine et al., 1992). This can result, for example, in participants responding with "highly agree" to a survey item, but using very different criteria than other participants in the same study. This produces data that appear to be consistent, but can easily lead to misinterpretation.

In a study with young adults, aged 18–28 years, I used the self-anchored ladder in a study that examined the relationship between sexual satisfaction scores and

How would you rate your overall level of sexual satisfaction? Please mark your response anywhere on the line below:



Briefly describe what the low, middle, and high ends of the scale above mean to you:

LOW END OF SCALE	MIDDLE OF SCALE	HIGH END OF SCALE

Figure 14.1 *Example of self-anchored ladder item (McClelland, 2017)*

participants' definitions of sexual satisfaction (McClelland, 2017). I developed four analytic strategies for working with the data provided by the self-anchored ladder. In my own study, each analysis told a different story. When I compared sexual satisfaction scores across demographic groups (e.g., race or sexual identity), they did not appear to significantly differ from one another, signaling that racial-minority and White, as well as sexual-minority and heterosexual participants, did not differ from one another in their sexual satisfaction. In addition to this quantitative analysis, when I examined how participants organized "sexual satisfaction" on the unanchored ladders, I found several different organizational strategies for ranking low to high. For example, some relied on how often they felt satisfied (e.g., 50 percent of the time), while others used the presence/absence of emotional closeness as measures of sexual satisfaction. I also examined how often participants used specific terms when describing sexual satisfaction and found a wide range of terms that were used by some, but no term stood out as consistently used when participants defined sexual satisfaction in this format. Lastly, I examined the role of what individuals imagined as "worst" and "best" in their appraisals and how these evaluations informed numerical scores. Across these findings, I argue for how researchers might make knowledge claims about young adults' sexual satisfaction, but also develop greater insight into the limitations of making these kinds of claims without the full picture that the self-anchored ladder can offer. As a self-report procedure, the self-anchored ladder provides researchers with the kinds of data to do this necessary investigative work.

For example, I found that there were important group differences in how participants drew on experiences with gender, race, pain, violence, and expectations about future pleasures when answering the self-anchored ladder item. Female participants defined the low end of their ladders using terms related to pain, fear, and depression. Of note, their sexual satisfaction scores on the ladder were consistently higher than their male counterparts. Male participants relied on the absence of sex as their low point. As a result, a very different definition of sexual satisfaction emerged across these two groups. The ratings, I argue, cannot necessarily be compared between these two groups (McClelland, 2017). The self-anchored ladder does not dispense with making comparisons across groups but, rather, insists on making comparisons with a great deal of attention to conceptual analysis as a function of any research endeavor.

The ladder is best suited for researchers who are interested in the possibilities and limitations of measurement, especially those who either already have, or wish to develop, critical awareness of how measures obscure diverse perspectives and are interested in bringing this critique to the practice of measurement. Critical social scientists might most benefit from using the self-anchored ladder to bring greater attention to issues of social inequality and develop commitments to disrupt colonial, racist, and homophobic structures that undergird psychology's theories and methods (Teo, 2015). This would include studying how terms that are used to sort groups and people may actually obscure the ways that some have learned to expect less or more. For example, researchers might examine concepts that have been well developed and have a long history of use in psychological research (e.g., subjective well-being), as well as those that are less well developed and require further analysis, perhaps due to emergent theoretical or empirical work (e.g., empowerment).

Researchers working with children might use the self-anchored ladder in verbal or written forms to understand how young participants are imagining a concept, perhaps by asking children to describe images or words they associate with the "best" and "worst" of something. This method might prove very useful in research about early childhood or young adult sexuality where there often a lot of discomfort talking about these ideas. A researcher might use a ladder within an interview to bring more attention to possible comparisons with others (i.e., "how do you think your friend would answer this question?") or with younger selves (i.e., "how would you have answered this question last year?").

Survey Marginalia

If you've taken a paper and pencil survey, have you ever left a note in the margin? Perhaps you wanted to explain your answer or reword the question to better fit your experience. Maybe you wrote "sometimes" next to a question since the only response options were "all the time" or "never" and neither of those felt right to you. These are all examples of survey marginalia (i.e., the notes, marks, or comments left by participants in the margins of self-administered surveys). Unfortunately, marginalia are nearly always disregarded and often seen as unimportant by survey researchers. I argue, instead, that marginalia are an invaluable tool for any researcher who wants to understand more about the phenomenon, person, or group they are studying (McClelland, 2016). Marginalia offer an opportunity for participants to "speak back" to the researcher and enable several types of feedback, including: (1) ideas that are thought to be unpopular or undesired; (2) disagreements with the imagined (and real) researcher; (3) viewpoints that are more extreme than a survey allows; (4) questions and indications of what is not clear in survey items; (5) ideas that are important to a person but not asked about; and (6) ideas that are asked about but not interesting or relevant to the participant (McClelland, 2016). In short, this critical method involves paying attention to the ways that participants resist being misunderstood by a researcher. When thinking about research with young people, honoring this resistance is especially important; research is potentially a place for young people to have a voice, to express, and be heard. Studies of survey marginalia offer a powerful way for participants to be present in research and interrupt researchers' assumptions and misunderstandings.

In my own study of survey marginalia, I examined the comments and marks that participants left in a survey about sexual health (McClelland & Holland, 2016). Rather than ignore the marginalia, I used them to develop new information and new analysis procedures for the survey analysis portion of the study. For example, guided by the survey marginalia, I could see that participants were not able to indicate when a question was not applicable to them and skipped over several items when they were not sexually active. Rather than code these data as missing (and eliminating these participants from the analysis), I developed a modified scoring procedure which kept these participants in the analysis sample. When we used these new procedures, several key findings changed. In other words, the comments people made in the margins were critical to making more accurate observations about their sexual health. When survey items do not adequately capture elements of a person's experience, the consequences can be extreme, yet often remain unexamined. With this in mind, we developed a set of guidelines for researchers to use when pursuing studies of survey marginalia. Three categories stand out as relevant for researchers who are interested in developing analysis of survey marginalia: (1) marginalia that aim to clarify or explain survey responses, (2) marginalia that aim to correct the survey, and (3) marginalia that communicate a survey item is not applicable (see McClelland & Holland, 2016 for more detail).

In a study about adolescent girls, Valerie Hey (1997) studied marginalia in another form; she collected the notes that girls wrote to one another during the school day. While the girls in her study called these "bits of silliness," Hey studied these notes for their "invisible communication activities" and found that these notes captured aspects of female friendship, emotional labor, and the high stakes of femininity that would have been missed if these notes were ignored. In fact, Hey (1997) described the notes as a form of marginalia: "The girls' notes were intentionally 'marginal;' for example, they were written on the margins of more official writing" (p. 51). Much like my argument for researchers to recuperate the notes left in surveys, Hey (1997) described the ways that she had to work to position her analysis of the girls' notes since these data are in a form that is "at odds with the notion of research as a serious scientific endeavor" (p. 51).

Leaving comments in the margins of a survey, crossing out words, and changing the text of the survey are all ways that participants can make their voices heard, even if a researcher did not ask for their input (or asked for input only in a specific format, as in "check all that apply"). Marginalia is often a way for a participant to say, "You won't know the answer by asking like this," or "I can't make my experience fit here," or "This is what you need to know" (Smith, 2008).

Marginalia, therefore, offer an important way for researcher and participant to communicate with one another during a study, even if they are not physically in the same place. When participants are faced with survey questions that do not match their experience, the person may reject the survey, accommodate their experience to fit the questions, or reformulate the questions to accommodate their experience (in other words, provide inaccurate data). Without greater attention to the feedback that participants leave (when researchers provide the opportunity), those asking the questions risk not knowing what we have missed in the process of trying to learn something.

As researchers increasingly turn to administering surveys online, these issues of marginalia, I argue, are just as important, but more difficult to address. This is one reason to consider keeping surveys in a paper format when possible. The interaction with participants may be valuable enough to outweigh any time or cost savings that online administration offers. In addition to this suggestion, I have several others for those looking to consider collecting and analyzing survey marginalia in online survey formats. Comment boxes that ask for "any additional thoughts on the survey" should not be confused or conflated with the opportunity to offer marginalia. A comment box at the end of a survey asks for summative thoughts and impressions; this differs greatly from the comments and markings that can be spontaneously offered while answering items. A researcher might consider adding comment boxes to individual items and asking participants about their impression of an item, for example, who they thought about while answering a question, or asking for additional comments about their response. In addition, a researcher might ask for feedback on the survey itself (the structure, the pace, or the content) at intervals throughout the survey. It should be noted that this is asking for a lot of labor on the part of the participant and should not be asked lightly. Researchers must honor the time and labor that is involved with answering survey questions; my advice is to ask only for feedback that you are willing and able to analyze.

Marginalia challenge researchers' assumptions (about the world, about those they are studying, and about the research process) and bring heighted attention to the ethical dimensions of research. Studies of marginalia extend calls from feminist scholars of color who argue that margins of all kinds should be recognized as locations of political knowledge and power. Writers such as bell hooks (1984), Gayatri Spivak (1990), and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2006) call for attention to the power of "speaking back from the margins" of a group, society, or nation as an essential way to bring greater attention to those who are routinely ignored in political decision making, and indeed, marginalized. This perspective is also part of a long tradition in psychology, including feminist psychology (Unger, 1998) and critical participatory action research (Torre et al., 2012). These writers and scholars all encourage us as researchers to listen more carefully to participants' demands to be heard. Analysis of marginalia provides one of the many available methodological tools to see this promise through.

Q Methodology

Another kind of critical approach to methods can be seen in the body of work using Q methodology (Stephenson, 1953; Watts & Stenner, 2005). While quantitative researchers often focus on "how frequently" or "how much" something happened, Q methods focus attention on the subjectivity of participants and foreground meaning-making within quantitative designs. Q methodology has been used by feminist researchers to challenge assumptions in research designs by turning to participants' definitions as a primary source of interest (Brownlie, 2006; Kitzinger, 1986). In a study of young adults (McClelland, 2014), I examined how participants prioritized and defined dimensions of sexual satisfaction using a Q methods. Rather than predict sexual satisfaction as an outcome or examine correlated variables, I examined interpretations of sexual satisfaction and the priorities that individuals ascribed to "feeling satisfied."

Studies using Q methodology ask participants to sort a set of statements (or other stimuli) from low to high endorsement (e.g., agreement or importance). In my study with young adults, I developed 63 statements concerning a wide range of descriptions concerning possible behaviors, feelings, and experiences associated with sexual satisfaction (for more detail, see McClelland, 2014). Example statements included, "After sexual activity is over, I know I am sexually satisfied when my genitals feel relaxed" and "The emotional closeness I feel to a partner is what makes sex satisfying for me." The first step in this process is called a "Q sort." In my case, this involved me handing participants the 63 statements, each printed on an individual card, and asking participants to sort the cards along a nine-point scale, ranging from *most disagree* to *most agree*, with a mid-point of *neutral*. They were given a prompt that asked: "What is important to you in determining your own sexual satisfaction? Distribute the statements from those that you most agree with to those you most disagree with." Participants were instructed to sort the cards using a quasi-normal distribution, which restricted how many cards they could place in each of the nine categories. This decision was made in order to create an iterative ranking process: each card was evaluated in relationship to the other 62 cards. For all steps of the procedure, I was present, although at a distance from the participant during the sorting procedure, which allowed for privacy since the researcher could not see how the cards were sorted.

The second step in this process is analyzing the Q sorts, which requires a "Q factor analysis." Q factor analysis examines correlations (much like a traditional factor analysis), however, instead of correlating items, this method correlates individuals. That is, Q factor analysis examines correlations between the Q sorts produced by participants and combines individuals who displayed similar sorting patterns into a factor (i.e., they consistently agreed and disagreed with the same statements). These factors are understood to represent a shared subjective interpretation that differs from the other factors in the study. In my study, this allowed me to analyze "groups of participants who make sense of (and who hence Q 'sort') a pool of items in comparable ways" (Watts and Stenner, 2005, p. 68) and, thus, represents a powerful way to examine interpretations of psychological constructs such as sexual satisfaction. I used these and other procedures to determine groups of individuals who placed statements in similar positions during the sorting procedure.

Because Q methodology looks for patterns of interpretation in addition to demographic differences, feminist researchers using this method have been able to explore variability within groups rather than treating demographically similar groups as stable and homogenous (Brownlie, 2006; Darwin & Campbell, 2009). I found that this diverse sample of young adults relied on four distinct ways of defining satisfaction, each related to sexual orientation and/or gender: emotional and masculine; relational and feminine; partner focused; and orgasm focused (McClelland, 2014). Findings such as these require researchers to move beyond simply examining the frequency with which individuals report sexual outcomes, but *how* individuals develop expectations for satisfying sex and how these expectations differ for groups who have less access to power and fewer rights in the sexual domain (e.g., Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008).

Researchers working with children and young adults could use Q methods in a variety of ways when studying development. For example, sorts can be done with pictures rather than words, allowing children and/or those with lower reading skills to present a mosaic of images that might represent complex ideas about what feels important to them right now (e.g., Allgood & Svennungsen, 2008; Taylor et al., 1994). In addition, with an eye toward examining the development of expectations over time, researchers working with children and adolescents could ask participants to sort stimuli (images, text, and sounds) using a longitudinal design (i.e., multiple times over the course of a year or several years). These sorts could be analyzed for the changes to specific factors, emergence of new factors, and the development of (or restriction) concerning ideas about oneself.

In studies of sexuality, researchers might ask young people to reflect on how they make decisions about sexual experiences and within the sort might be cards related to parents, peers, messages learned at school, among others. In cross-sectional designs, young people can also be asked to reflect on how they sort the cards in the present moment and then also sort the cards as they would have 5 years ago or 5 years in the future. This design allows a participant to demonstrate how they see ideas developing and changing in the moment and could enable a researcher to better understand those aspects of sexuality development that might be difficult to talk about or that might be confusing to think about when asked about in an interview situation. Q methods allow for a kind of privacy-in-public that allows a participant to "sort their thoughts" while also being able to communicate complex ideas to a researcher.

Interview Data: Examining Adaptation to Injustice

Lastly, I draw our attention to critical methods when analyzing qualitative data. I return here to the image of cellophane that I discussed earlier in this chapter

(McClelland & Fine, 2008). We developed the metaphor of cellophane as one way to talk about dilemma that faces researchers when participants discount or downplay their experiences of trauma or discrimination, and, instead, say that everything is "fine" or that their experiences are "no big deal."

In a study of young bisexual women, my colleagues and I (McClelland et al., 2016) studied how young bisexual women described experiences of discrimination. In that study, we focused on those moments when participants told us that they were "fine," "used to it," or when negative interactions were "not that bad." The interviews held important insights into the messages young queer women had heard about themselves, which we argued created an environment in which discrimination became normalized. As a result, discriminatory messages were perceived as part of the normal social landscape and truly something that is "not a big deal" (Baker, 2008, 2010; Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016). For example, when a participant says, "Everything is fine," this comment might be recorded as an endorsement of a positive attitude (i.e., everything is actually fine). However, additional questions of when, why, and how this particular statement was used and what else it might stand in for, contribute insight into the person and what they feel "fine" about. In our analysis, we focused on developing an analytical strategy that moved beyond participants' surface-level descriptions to explore language choices, silences, and gaps in communication in participants' accounts. Using a critical methods perspective, we aimed to represent individuals' experiences, as well as focus on how they represented (or did not represent) their experience.

Linda Alcoff (1991) reminds researchers to attend to the "discursive context" in which words are spoken and to not forget that we cannot always see or hear the relevant environments of those who are speaking. Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson (1997) argue, too, that, "part of being a feminist means not validating, but directly *challenging* women's taken-for-granted experience" (1997, p. 572, emphasis in original). Hollway and Jefferson (2000) and Josselson (2004) also argue that qualitative approaches have been useful in exploring the meanings and layers of phenomena, but may be limited when we commit to "telling it like it is" (Midgley, 2006). As a result, critical researchers face a difficult task: balance the desire to recognize the specific perspective of individuals and their accounts, with the task of documenting and critiquing the conditions in which they live and survive, even when the participant disagrees (e.g., Josselson, 2011).

Feminists have argued that unequal status due to gender, race/ethnicity, and colonial histories are especially important to consider when examining language (Lather, 1993; Spivak, 1988, 1993). As this work has moved into feminist psychology, researchers have analyzed aspects of power, status, and socialization in what participants talk about and how they talk (Boonzaier, 2008; Owen, 2012; Ussher, 2004; see also Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2000). This perspective demands not only attention to "context," but also how language is used (or not used) to communicate. Participants' communications (in surveys, experiments, or interviews) may be motivated by, and may be constrained by, several social forces that are not clearly visible (e.g., not feeling safe or being in a low status position) and, in addition, may be outside the participant's or the researcher's awareness. In other words, a critical methods perspective demands researchers ask a set of questions about the situation, the person, and participants' many social roles.

When asked about whether they had ever faced discrimination as a result of their bisexuality, the young women in my study consistently said "no." In our analysis, however, we examined how participants came to see negative experiences surrounding their bisexuality as normal and expected. Participants filled our ears with examples of negative interactions with peers, disrespectful comments from family members, or slurs heard from strangers. Nearly all participants described hearing derogatory remarks regularly, but they did not see this as a form of sexuality-based discrimination. Typical responses from participants included: "Ye – um … not – I mean, not personally, somebody has never, like, come up to me and been, like, telling me straight up, discriminating me." This young woman's statement that she had not faced discrimination, followed by retreat ("Ye – um … not – I mean, not personally"), exemplifies responses concerning what "counted" as discrimination. This is not surprising if one considers the term "discrimination" as signaling a prototypical standard, such as being refused a job or housing, which these young women may have not yet encountered. However, we heard story after story of young women being called "dyke," being ridiculed in public, getting "weird looks," and a slew of negative experiences concerning their sexuality.

Why do participants acknowledge negative experiences but minimize reporting the discrimination they face? While sexism and heterosexism are important political tools to aid individuals in recognizing discrimination, these tools also position the individual as damaged as a result of being discriminated against. As a result, it becomes more difficult when these experiences become so normal as to be invisible and/or they become associated with being damaged (Fine, 2012). Laina Bay-Cheng (2015) argues that the neoliberal discourse of choices and the capitalist discourse of "empowerment" have made it impossible for young women to acknowledge feeling out of control of their sexuality and have imposed extremely stiff fines (in the form of negative self-concept) if one is to imagine oneself as disempowered. These and other cultural discourse norms are too infrequently acknowledged as shaping what can and cannot be imagined, much less spoken, in research contexts. This presents psychologists with a set of methodological dilemmas when studying unjust circumstances.

The findings from my study of bisexual young women builds on previous research concerning individuals with marginalized identities who also frequently minimized their experience of discrimination (Crosby, 1984; Major et al., 2002). Individuals internalize negative messages about bisexuality and this, in turn, affects their ability to perceive future events as discriminatory. The use of a critical perspectives in the analysis of the interview data was key. While participants disavowed or minimized their experiences of discrimination, we did not. Participants also described negative comments they heard as "not a big a deal," but, in our analysis, we called attention to these comments as requiring psychological labor, even if the person did not themselves tell us about this labor or see it as difficult. Critical methodological approaches require that researchers attend to moments when individuals do not insist on better treatment or more resources, but, instead, report being satisfied with the *status quo* (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crosby, 1984; McClelland, 2010).

When individuals downplay or trivialize injustices, the question remains: How can one ask people to report on what, to them, has become normal? This presents a methodological dilemma to those who are interested in documenting discriminatory experiences or individuals' responses to discrimination. When individuals stop recognizing situations, experiences, or people as injurious, researchers face a set of potential silences that can too easily be misinterpreted. When turning to adolescents and considering these questions of adaptation, one might also wonder how much time it takes for adaptation to injustice to occur? In my own research with young people aged 16–24 years old, I have seen the ways that young people come to think of negative experiences as normal. But this should live alongside the other examples of young people being incredibly angry and mobilizing their anger toward social change. Examples such as the SPARK Movement (sparkmovement.org) and the Everyday Sexism Project (Bates, 2016) highlight how anger is not absent, adaptation is not complete, and young people are a force to be reckoned with.

Conclusion

Critical methods contribute to the project of developing empirical procedures that simultaneously prioritize developing knowledge claims (*What do we know?*) and developing skepticism about this very knowledge (*Who is missing? What have we missed?*). Rather than just addressing these important questions within a limitations section, or in pilot-testing measures, or while recruiting a "diverse sample," critical methods – and the skepticism they bring – can and should be employed throughout every step of the research process. The four examples I present here demonstrate that without attention to social norms and silences at several steps in a study, researchers risk overlooking many aspects of young people's lives, particularly the ways that inequality shapes development and the expectations that young people develop for their sexual futures.

Critical methods are crucial to study the sexual development of children and adolescence. This kind of approach enables a researcher to be in relationship with participants and take young people's role in the research process seriously and treat them as interlocutors. Critical research methods can help teach young people that their perspectives are important and valued. In addition, studying children and adolescents' sexuality requires that the researcher attend to uncertainty and messiness in people's lives. Research with people at this early developmental stage should build in flexibility and to the methodological approaches that allow young people to share the contradictions and messiness that is part of being a person and often a part of being a young person. Sexuality research with young people also often lives in the realm of the imagination and fantasy, which inevitably requires that researchers develop methods that can attend to this kind of unruly material.

The four methods I discuss in this chapter are just a few of the possibilities for critical researchers looking to attend to uncertainty and multiplicity in their studies of sexual development of children and youth. Other methods include critical participatory research (Torre et al., 2012), critical mixed methods (Shammas, 2017), and the long history of feminist ethnographic practices (Behar & Gordon, 1995), just to name a few. My hope is that researchers are inspired by this body of work on critical methods. With these tools in mind, researchers are encouraged to set off to understand and also feel humbled by the enormity of what it means to understand the experience of another.

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