

Handbook of Research on

Communication Strategies for Taboo Topics



Geoffrey Luurs

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Handbook of Research on Communication Strategies for Taboo Topics

Geoffrey D. Luurs
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Valerie Cronin-Fisher, Governors State University, USA

Kristy Jagiello, Madison College, USA

Stigmatized disclosures—things we elect not to share when we are worried about disapproval, stereotyping, or judgment—were examined in the context of close relationships. Participants (N = 141) shared examples of stigmatized disclosures they were currently withholding from a close other via an anonymous online survey. Responses were coded to determine topics of stigmatized disclosures as well as reasons for withholding. Four overarching categories of topics were uncovered (societal taboos, personal business, identity, and abuse/trauma), as well as four categories of reasons (self-focused, other-focused, relationship-focused, and information-focused). This data-driven chapter reviews extant literature on disclosure and avoidance, includes an investigation of a wide variety of stigmatized disclosure topics (N = 186) and reasons for withholding them (N = 564), and examines the implications of these findings.

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A Milieu of Taboo: Threat, Avoidance, Power, and Control	26

Chelsea Brass-Rosenfield, Moody College of Communication, University of Texas at Austin,

USA

Taboo topics tend to be issues that one or more parties decide not to discuss openly. The issues that are considered taboo tend to comprise a threat of some kind. Broadly speaking, taboo topics commonly fall under research areas of conflict and topic avoidance. This chapter will use that broadened scope to be able to focus on underlying factors of threat and avoidance such as interpersonal conflict, controlling behavior, and power dynamics. After reviewing those areas of literature, taboo topics will be revisited to highlight how conflict, power, and control concepts can be incorporated into directions for future research and applied settings.

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As taboo language among women and men becomes more common, an understanding of how taboo language is used is necessary. Unfortunately, studies have returned mixed results at once finding taboo language is associated with negative emotions while also finding taboo language is associated with positive emotions. What is understood, however, is the inequity between the genders in relation to taboo language usage. Taboo words and expressions are given weight by cultural norms that have long been established by the patriarchal standards in the United States. These standards trace their roots back to the Puritan and Victorian eras when society dictated that men held more power than women. This chapter explores the literature on taboo language while examining the dyadic representations of the patriarchal norms that punish women for using taboo speech while ignoring taboo language usage by men.

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Organizations spend thousands of dollars and several hours of productivity each day because of destructive conflict. Though conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life, the authors of this chapter advocate for forgiveness as a transformative and prosocial process that organizational members can use to acknowledge transgressions, manage their conflict, and move their relationships toward reconciliation. However, forgiveness can be particularly risky and taboo due to various barriers that make it difficult for organizational members to communicate with one another. The authors begin this chapter by arguing that forgiveness is one productive method for handling conflict, and they review research findings about forgiveness in the organizational context. Following that, the authors detail the barriers to communicating forgiveness and use the risk negotiation framework to explain how organizational members can progress their workplace relationships. Finally, the authors provide directions for future research and strategies for encouraging forgiveness in the organization.

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<i>Jessica Neu, Duquesne University, USA</i>	
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This chapter explores American exceptionalism, which is rooted in the Anglo-Saxon myth and Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism, and expands the concept to imply that those of Caucasian Nationality are a superior body politic. The goal is not to re-write America's story, but to rather use this scholarship to clarify and illuminate portions of America's history that society has ignored and to examine how we have arrived in a historical moment fueled by a sense of passive activism in which fighting for equality is trendy, but not necessarily transformative. American exceptionalism is tied to the notion of White and Black as an

American creation, and the Black body as demonized to prove that American exceptionalism is rooted in the fabric of America's founding and still threads through Democracy today in the form of White supremacy.

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Race and Cultural Taboo: Refugee Disaster Vulnerability and Resilience..... 104

Ming Xie, West Texas A&M University, USA

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This chapter explores the refugee community's perceptions of disasters and crises and how the perceptions affect refugee populations' crisis communication and their emergency preparedness and response. Through in-depth interviews with refugees in the United States, this research identifies the institutional, social, and individual dimensions regarding refugees' crisis communication and disaster preparedness. It aims to re-conceptualize the refugee identity and their social vulnerability and discuss the effective way to integrate cultural understanding and dimension into crisis communication and disaster reduction.

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Communicating Transgender Identity 126

Billy Table, Dell Medical School, The University of Texas at Austin, USA

Robert W. Carroll, The University of Texas at Austin, USA

Madeleine R. Holland, The University of Texas at Austin, USA

This chapter surveys theory and research on transgender identity and disclosures. Historically, transgender people in Western societies represent a highly stigmatized population who are likely to encounter significant communication challenges. Interpersonally, transgender people often grapple with privacy and disclosure, especially in regards to when, where, how, and with whom to disclose their gender identity, as they risk rejection from friends and family and experiencing violence. Thus, insofar as transgender individuals find that conversations about their sexuality and/or gender identity are proscribed by society and carry the threat of stigmatizing or violent personal and interpersonal outcomes, discussion of transgender identity can be seen as a taboo topic. In light of that, this chapter surveys theory and research on transgender identity and disclosures.

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Rising Against LGBT Taboos Through Communication and Social Marketing Strategies: Using Web TV Series to Challenge Discriminatory Behavior..... 153

Mafalda Nogueira, IPAM, Portugal

Mariana Gaspar, IPAM, Portugal

Sandra Gomes, IPAM, Portugal

This chapter builds on how social marketing and its techniques, working on interdisciplinary solutions such as new television formats and narratives, such as web series and transmedia content, become relevant in the fight against LGBT prejudice, stereotypes, and taboos. Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to present the results of a research project aimed at exploring the potential of a web series with LGBT characters, using digital content and fictional narratives with persuasive messages, to alter consumers' attitudes and behaviors in desirable ways and minimize this social problem. The study contributes the literature on social marketing, addressing LGBT taboos and prejudices, a theme that has been scarcely explored in the area. Furthermore, a connection is made between the theme of entertainment-education

content and the potential of digital platforms as social marketing tools.

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Paulo da Silva Quadros, University of São Paulo, Brazil

The goal of this work is to propose a critical reflection on some of the main aesthetic-social ruptures developed by two internationally renowned Brazilian composers of popular music: Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque de Hollanda. Both are considered strong influences in dismantling taboos in Brazilian popular music and culture, surpassing prejudice and racism. Such composers brought a new aesthetic and critical dimension to Brazilian popular songbook, innovating in themes never discussed before, making bridges between popular music and other forms of expressions: theater, cinema, television, literature, poetry, plastic arts, sciences, philosophy, among others. Over the decades, these artists have become reference sources in the struggle for human and civil rights, gender, race and class equality, free expression, and against the power of authoritarian governments in Brazil and in the world.

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Cyberbullying and Family Communication Theory and Research..... 200
Elizabeth A. Craig, North Carolina State University, USA
Josh Compton, Dartmouth College, USA
Geoffrey D. Luurs, Murray State University, USA

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are potent with promise and peril. On the one hand, ICTs provide an unprecedented amount of information, an ability to network across the globe, and interactive entertainment and socializing. On the other hand, the same properties are at risk of misuse to bully, to spread misinformation, and to commit other acts of harm. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the theoretical and conceptual significance of studying cyberbullying from a family communication perspective. The aim is to explain essential features of cyberbullying, to situate cyberbullying as a communication phenomenon, and to propose important conceptual and theoretical frameworks in family communication (including trait verbal aggression, developmental assets, family rituals, family communication patterns theory, and inoculation theory) for future research. The hope is that this chapter will inspire more family communication researchers to better understand, study, and provide solutions for the destructive and harmful effects of cyberbullying.

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For Love or for Business: Taboos of Family Business Communication..... 218
Megan O'Byrne, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, USA
Paulina Swiatkowski, Northern Arizona University, USA
Grant P. Campbell, Expeditionary Warfare School, Marine Corps University, USA

This case study of Dr. Esther Perel's How's Work? podcast focuses on couples who work together. Two primary types of relationships shape the study: those in business together who are blood related and those who are married or partnered. In this work, taboo is constituted as uncomfortable topics that

remain undiscussed. Prior to therapy, Perel's dyads did not openly speak about their issues with one another. What they did do, however, was mentally roll over the issues on their own. Even though both parties deeply considered the taboo issue(s), they did not directly address taboo topic(s) with their partner until they had the opportunity to do so with Perel. To that end, this work is an extension of Roloff and Johnson's research on taboo topics that are left undiscussed until they are carefully addressed in a planned interaction. This chapter contributes to knowledge around taboo topics relevant to family business and how different types of families have differing taboos.

Chapter 12

Family Communication at the End of Life: Breaking the Taboo Through Entertainment Media..... 241

Bonnie M. Nickels, Independent Researcher, USA

Kelly E. Tenzek, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, USA

Communication at end-of-life remains a stigmatized and taboo topic among families. Despite evidence indicating open communication and engagement among family members in the end-of-life process, people still struggle to communicate in this taboo topic. This chapter will review the literature of end-of-life communication among families, including theoretical approaches, challenges and barriers to open end-of-life communication and advance care planning, and depictions of end-of-life in entertainment media. Opportunities to overcome the taboo nature of communicating about death and dying by using media entertainment, specifically film and television, as a conversational platform to launch discussion aimed at overcoming the stigma surrounding death and dying are provided.

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Negotiated Morality, Families, and Communicating About Menstruation: Sites for Moral

Understandings 261

Falon Kartch, California State University, Fresno, USA

In the Western world, menstruation has been branded a taboo topic. The purpose of this chapter is to build an argument for the use of morality as a fruitful lens for understanding menstruation communication within families. This chapter frames familial communication about menstruation as sites for the process of moral communication that have implications for the experiences, communication, and (dis)embodiment of menstruators through analysis of original, qualitative data using the concealment imperative framework and negotiated morality theory. In-depth interviews were conducted with mothers (n=30) who identified as either current or former menstruators. Results indicated family functioned as a site for moral communication when discussing menstrual products and in dialogues attempting to normalize menstruation. Framing family conversations as sites for the co-creation of moral understandings of menstruation offer an avenue from which menstruation can be re-storied, not as a shameful or embarrassing taboo, but as an embodied and powerful experience.

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Mikayla Pevac, The Pennsylvania State University, USA

In the age of the internet, online support groups have been developed to connect those with shared experiences—especially those with experiences that can be considered “taboo.” Because of the high levels of victim-blaming and stigmatization present in the U.S., due in large part to the perpetuation of rape myth narratives, the survivors of sexual assault are often reluctant to share their experiences with others. The fear of further victimization has led some sexual assault survivors to turn to online social media-based support groups for emotional support and understanding from like-minded individuals to fight against the isolation that so many survivors often face. This chapter looks at how online social groups, like those that thrive on Facebook, can provide safe (enough) spaces where survivors can access communal support despite the lurking harassment by online trolls.

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- Challenging the Taboo Against Personal Abortion Accounts: Towards a Discourse of Strong Objectivity..... 302
Lisa Comparini, Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi, USA

The present chapter is an analysis of how 10 women described their positions on abortion prior to and after deciding to terminate an unplanned pregnancy. The discursive features of their pre- and post-decision accounts are contrasted, noting the ways their pre-abortion accounts resembled the generalized, impartial, simplistic accounts that characterize political abortion rhetoric, and how they reframed and reconstructed more experiential, complex, integrated, and objective accounts, which then informed their changed position on the issue of abortion.

Chapter 16

- Communicating Human-Object Orientation: Rhetorical Strategies for Countering Multiple Taboos 322
Kristen L. Cole, San José State University, USA

The Objectum-Sexuality Internationale (OSI) website is the largest source of information representing a community who experiences emotional and romantic desire towards objects. This chapter presents a queer rhetorical analysis of OSI to understand how queer communities that must negotiate multiple taboos (en)counter the public. The author argues that OSI reveals two things about taboo communication: 1) the discursive and material boundaries that constitute the taboo and 2) the rhetorical work required to disrupt these boundaries. The author’s analysis reveals how OSI engages in complex rhetorical practices to lay the groundwork for a queer-posthuman counterpublic—a rhetorical space that disrupts the heteronormative moral divisions and anthropocentric paradigmatic distinctions that constitute certain lived experiences as taboo. Such a move exposes the possibilities and ethical implications at stake in communicating the taboo while outlining an analytic framework for understanding the rhetorical processes that facilitate (en)countering the taboo in public communication.

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- Audio Ageplay and Sonic Spankings: The Rhetorical Work of Podcasts to Demystify Kink..... 344
Jennessa Hester, Texas Tech University, USA

Global perspectives on sexuality are changing, with “deviancies” that were once considered entirely taboo occupying newly uncontroversial roles in society. However, one subset of erotic expression remains largely unacceptable: kink. This totalizing demonization of alternative desire has led many to hide their sexuality from others, creating a crisis of shame rooted in the prohibition of open discourse. Thankfully, research indicates that kinky podcasts might provide a solution to this problem. This chapter examines six such shows—The Dildorks, Why Are People Into That?!, Dudes Spankin’ Dudes, The Big Little Podcast, the Brat Perversions Podcast, and Diaper Girl Gossip—and explains how their rhetorical choices help kinky listeners gain an alternative sexual education, improve their interpersonal communication and community building skills, and achieve personal affectual liberation.

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Grant P. Campbell, Expeditionary Warfare School, Marine Corps University, USA
Paulina Swiatkowski, Northern Arizona University, USA

Extra-relational sexual involvement is generally a taboo topic, with most Americans expecting their partners to remain faithful and monogamous in their relationship. However, while some couples exhibit traditional, monogamous relationships, other couples engage in consensually open arrangements for one or both partners. The spectrum of how relationships manifest make the taboo topic even more complex. This chapter examines episodes of Dr. Esther Perel’s podcast Where Should We Begin? wherein couples seek therapy to discuss their primary romantic relationships after non-monogamy. Using relational dialectics theory, themes were identified through open-coding episode transcripts. Prominent among those codes were identification of relational needs, primary dialectical tensions, and fetishes within the relationships. The communicative practices of couples who experience non-monogamy as a result of open relationships as compared to those who experience affairs are explored throughout the themes.

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Manas Kumar Pal, Birla Global University, India

Although India faces problems of the very high rate of population growth, sexual abuse, rape, teen pregnancy, even a high rate of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV, Indian schools are not yet ready to deliver on the topic to sensitize the young minds. There is no study on whether teachers are imparting this education and most importantly how they are communicating with the young individuals in the classroom. The chapter seeks to find how the taboo topics are discussed in the class and the communication strategies adopted by the teachers. For the study, teachers have been considered as respondents to examine their communication-related challenges and the strategies while communicating with the adolescent student. The study concludes that due to lack of any training, teachers do not know what and how to deliver the topics under sexuality education.

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Garett Lee Parrish, Angelo State University, USA

Autoethnography is an intriguing and promising qualitative research method that gives voice to personal experience to extend psychological and sociological understanding. The author's experience of having a spinal cord injury (SCI) provides the reader with insight regarding perceptions of quadriplegia and informalities of addressing disabilities in communication settings. Education on communication is valuable because it helps people who have not had previous exposure to disabilities understand guidelines for appropriate and ethical behavior when having a conversation with an individual with disabilities. Taboo conversations that are mishandled can lead to adverse physical and mental health outcomes in society. This chapter includes quantitative and qualitative research to provide evidence of these negative social and health outcomes and present communication and coping strategies for dealing with the more difficult conversations associated with quadriplegia and paralysis.

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This chapter explores the communication of grief, often viewed as a taboo topic of conversation. The study connects author/Christian apologist C. S. Lewis's views of grief, as provided in his book *A Grief Observed* to communication scholar Brant Burleson's research on supportive, comforting messages. Loss and grief connected to jobs, grades, missed opportunities, relationship breakups, and so forth are worthy of study because loss affects communication. However, this inquiry examines the loss associated with the death of someone deeply loved. Lewis's reflections on what grief feels like and how it changes

over time are overviewed, as are his reflections on how communication with the bereft occurs and ought not to occur. Burleson's work on supportive communication is summarized, including the comforting effects of messages with religious content. Parallels are drawn between Lewis's ideas and interpersonal communication scholarship on the oft-viewed taboo topic of grief.

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Chandler T. Marr, Arizona State University, USA

Sara V. A. Kaufman, Purdue University, USA

Elizabeth A. Craig, North Carolina State University, USA

It's a painful reality for many pet owners that at some point there will come a time when they must grieve the loss of their animal companion. In fact, the death of a pet is perhaps one of the most common sources of stress that families experience, occurring almost two times more frequently than stress associated with children leaving home. However, the profound sense of anguish one feels after losing their pet is often invalidated, unrecognized, or unsupported by others. Doka refers to this stifling of the grieving process as disenfranchised grief, where individuals are sometimes shamed, dismissed, or discouraged from experiencing/expressing grief. Despite a growing body of literature detailing the experience of pet loss, few scholars have explored how this type of loss is communicatively disenfranchised and managed. Thus, the current chapter surveys scholarship on human-pet relationships and disenfranchised grief in order to develop a research agenda for communication scholars interested in studying disenfranchised grief, pet loss, or the intersection of these topics.

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When God Doesn't Make Sense: Non-Religious Communications at the End of Life 482

Geoffrey D. Luurs, Murray State University, USA

Jillian A. Rosa, Murray State University, USA

Death is a fact of life. Ultimately, everyone will eventually have to face the prospect of their own death or the (forthcoming) death of someone close to them. Therefore, it is important to understand the communication scripts used by families and close friends to talk about death and dying. Talking about death can be difficult for all of those involved. Many people will rely on religious messages; however, for a major section of the population in the United States who are not religious, those messages are both ineffective and inappropriate. The chapter explores the grief communication of non-religious people as they navigated terminal diagnoses and the sudden death of a loved one. Participants were interviewed about the challenges they faced while dealing with messages about death and dying.

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Preface

Cultural rules are a driving force in any society. Laden within those cultural rules are taboo topics and behaviors that dictate what is allowed and what is not allowed by community members. The etymology of taboo finds its origins in Polynesian cultures. “Taboo” marked something as prohibited, or under ritual restriction (Polynesian Lexicon Project, 2010). More specifically modern usage of taboo in the English-speaking world is informed by British explorer James Cook’s recollection of his adventures across the Pacific Ocean and into Tongan society (Beaglehole, 1967). He writes, “Taboo, as I have before observed, is a word of extensive signification. Human sacrifices are called *Tangata Taboo*; and when any thing is forbidden to be eaten, or made use of, they say that is taboo” (p. 129). For the Tongans, food taboos served both a social function and a practical function. In controlling what food could be planted in a particular space and through regulation of what was eaten by community members, they effectively stave off famine and starvation in the name of protecting the tribe. What is forbidden may be protective at the same time.

Contemporarily, taboos function to control our communicative behaviors by defining appropriate, allowed, and polite topics of conversation. We establish those rules at the micro, meso, and macro levels and leverage those rules across the various systems in which we partake. Furthermore, the discussion of taboo in this handbook is enhanced by a similar, but not quite identical topic of stigma. Though not explicitly taboo, stigmatized topics were included in this volume under the broader umbrella of difficult conversations and unspeakable topics. It is for our fear of being stigmatized that many of us are reticent to self-disclose. To borrow from one of the chapters included here, “This handbook on taboo topics offers an opportunity to examine why some subjects are difficult to discuss—why some subjects give many people pause and anxiety, often leading to embarrassment, inappropriateness, and communication avoidance” (Ivy, 2022). The challenge, then, is to bring to light those topics which have long existed under cover of darkness. Though repressing thoughts and messages may be protective in some senses and polite in others, there are very real consequences to the choices we make regarding taboo. Relationships end, important messages go undelivered, and as the chapters in this volume will explicate, taboos can take a toll on our physical and mental health. It is with that in mind that this handbook came together—to make easier the conversations that are hard.

Furthermore, a secondary objective to this volume was to bring in the broad range of voices that represent communication research on taboo topics. Though I, the editor, cannot claim to fully agree with nor understand every argument and position presented in this handbook based on my personal experiences, I can empathize with the effect taboo has on individuals and society alike. A mission of this handbook was to gather scholars from various backgrounds as to include the voices of those who have been told not to speak. That includes both burgeoning and experienced scholars. Scholars within

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the United States and abroad. Scholars from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, sexual orientations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and various other demographics that make each of our experiences with communication taboos unique.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for addressing taboo, but the scholars in this handbook have come together to provide a wide range of perspectives including theoretical foundations, methodological considerations, and experiential knowledge gained from engaging with taboo and its related communication strategies. Most importantly, raw openness to the perspectives and standpoints that are currently obfuscated by the veil of taboo is the very point of the work being done here—To engage with what we can't perceive, to engage with the misunderstood, and to engage with the unspeakable, unfathomable, and most difficult conversations in our lives.

Organization of the book

This handbook of communication strategies is organized into twenty-four chapters that constitute six sections of research. A brief description of each of the chapters follows:

Section 1: Introduction to Communication Strategies for Taboo Topics

Chapter 1 opens our examination of difficult conversations through analysis of stigmatized disclosures within close relationships. The authors identify participants who were currently withholding information from a close Other via anonymous online surveys. Both stigmatized topics and the reasons for withholding the disclosure are discussed. The chapter serves as an exemplary open to our compendium of communication strategies for taboo topics as it explores both stigmatized topics (e.g. societal taboos, personal business, identity, and abuse/trauma) and the reasons why people fail to disclose about those stigmatized topics.

Chapter 2 continues our introduction to taboo by exploring the insidious components of taboo in which the communicative environment is filled with conflict, topic avoidance, and the threat of adverse consequences related to power and control. The author argues that signifying a topic as taboo cannot be simplified in terms of dynamics or antecedents, but rather by the milieu that makes up the communication climate of the relationship.

Chapter 3 takes a critical approach to examine the use of taboo language, especially in terms of gendered differences in allowed use of “curse words” in patriarchal societies. The chapter argues women’s use of uncouth language is monitored, controlled, and punished differently than that of their male counterparts. Given the rules that govern polite discourse, especially within the public sphere, double-standards regarding the use of taboo words are reflective of societal-level power imbalances in the governance of language.

Chapter 4 turns to organizational communication settings in which conflict is an inevitability. In this chapter, the authors argue that forgiveness is a prosocial behavior and can be transformative in moving organizational members towards reconciliation in the face of conflict. Though forgiveness is ideal, various barriers exist which prevent smooth conflict resolution. To alleviate the barriers related to taboo topics and behaviors in organizational settings, the authors utilize the risk negotiation framework as a tool for enhancing one’s workplace relationships.

Section 2: Taboo Identities

Chapter 5 traces the how American exceptionalism has framed racial body politics within the United States. The chapter explores the history of racial relations in the US before ultimately proposing the historical moment to change our currently divided landscape exists through prosocial communication practices that find a common center within civility and understanding. The authors argue that it is through micro-level dialogues that macro level change is possible. Rather than erasing the history of racism, communicating through difference is the key to active change.

Chapter 6 continues the discussion of race through the eyes of refugees. The authors interviewed refugees about their crisis communication strategies and their emergency preparedness and responses. Through those interviews, the authors highlight the institutional, social, and individual challenges that refugees face during disasters. Furthermore, the authors make suggestions to re-conceptualize the refugee identity and their social vulnerability by instituting more culturally sensitive strategies for crisis communication and disaster reduction.

Chapter 7 explores taboos related to developing and disclosing one's transgender identity. Transgender people represent a highly stigmatized population who are likely to encounter significant communication challenges. In interpersonal settings, transgender people are forced to grapple with the issues of privacy and disclosure, especially regarding the revelation of one's gender identity, a task rife with risk of rejection and the potential for violence. In this chapter, the authors suggest several theoretical outlets for future research on transgender identity and disclosure, providing ample room for growth within the field of communication.

Chapter 8 builds upon social marketing and its techniques to examine how web television series and transmedia content can be leveraged to ameliorate taboos related to LGBT identities. The authors use the popular Portuguese web series, *Casa do Cais*, and their portrayal of LGBT characters as a normalizing agent for addressing societal taboos related to gender identity and sexual orientation. *Casa do Cais* uses digital content and fictional narratives with persuasive messages, to alter consumers' attitudes and behaviors in desirable ways and minimize taboo. A connection is made between the theme of entertainment-education content and the potential of digital platforms as social marketing tools.

Chapter 9 takes on the critical reflection of the works of Brazilian musicians Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque de Hollanda. Both artists are considered strong influences in dismantling taboos within Brazilian culture as they continue to challenge prejudicial and racist norms, provided new critical dimensions for analyzing culture, and introduced innovative themes that had previously been lacking in Brazilian popular music. Over the decades, these artists have become reference sources in the struggle for human and civil rights, gender, race, and class equality, free expression, and rising against the power of authoritarian governments in Brazil and around the world.

Section 3: Family Communication

Chapter 10 brings to light the impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on society. ICTs are potent with promise and peril. On the one hand, they provide an unprecedented amount of information, an ability to network across the globe, and interactive entertainment and socializing. On the other hand, the same properties are at risk of misuse to bully, to spread misinformation, and commit other acts of harm. The authors of this chapter consider the theoretical and conceptual significance of studying cyberbullying from a family communication perspective. Their aim is to explain essential

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features of cyberbullying, to situate cyberbullying as a communication phenomenon, and to propose important conceptual and theoretical frameworks in family communication for future research. The hope is that this chapter will inspire more family communication researchers to better understand, study, and provide solutions for the destructive and harmful effects of cyberbullying.

Chapter 11 uses world renowned psychotherapist Esther Perel's podcast, *How's Work*, to assess taboos within family businesses. The authors include two primary types of relationships: Business partners who are related by blood, and business partners who are married or partnered. In the podcast, taboo is constituted as uncomfortable topics that remain undiscussed. Prior to therapy, the dyad visiting Perel's podcast did not openly speak about their issues with one another. What they did do, however, was mentally roll over the issues on their own. Even though both parties deeply considered the taboo issue(s), they did not directly address taboo topic(s) with their partner until they had the opportunity to do so with Perel. To that end, this chapter is an extension of Roloff and Johnson's (2001) research on taboo topics that are left undiscussed until they are carefully addressed in a planned interaction. This chapter contributes to knowledge around taboo topics relevant to family business and how different types of families have differing taboos.

Chapter 12 looks at end-of-life communication as a stigmatized and taboo topic within families. Despite evidence indicating open communication and engagement among family members during the end-of-life process, people still struggle to communicate about this taboo topic. This chapter reviews the literature of end-of-life communication among families, including theoretical approaches, challenges and barriers to open end-of-life communication and advance care planning, and depictions of the end-of-life in entertainment media.

Chapter 13 builds an argument for the use of morality as a fruitful lens for understanding communication about menstruation within families. For many families in the Western world, menstruation has been branded as a taboo topic. This chapter frames familial communication about menstruation as sites for the process of moral communication that have implications for the experiences, communication, and (dis)embodiment of menstruators through analysis of original, qualitative data using the concealment imperative framework and negotiated morality theory. The authors interviewed mothers who identified as either current or former menstruators to find how family functions as a site for moral communication when discussing menstrual products and in dialogues attempting to normalize menstruation. Framing family conversations as sites for the co-creation of moral understandings of menstruation offers an avenue from which menstruation can be re-storied, not as a shameful or embarrassing taboo, but as an embodied and powerful experience.

Section 4: Sexual Communication

Chapter 14 highlights the use of online support groups for sexual violence survivors. In the age of the internet, online support groups have been developed to connect those with shared experiences—especially those with experiences that can be considered “taboo”. Within the context of the United States, discussions of sexual violence come with high levels of victim-blaming and stigmatizing behaviors due in large part to the perpetuation of rape myth narratives. Because of this, survivors of sexual assault are often reluctant to share their experiences with others. The fear of further victimization has led some sexual assault survivors to turn toward online social media-based support groups for emotional support and understanding from like-minded individuals to fight against the isolation that so many survivors often face. This chapter looks at how online social groups, like those that thrive on Facebook, can pro-

vide safe (enough) spaces where survivors can access communal support despite the lurking presence of taboo, stigmatization, and trolling behaviors.

Chapter 15 broaches the taboo topic of abortion. The author interviewed women about their abortion beliefs both prior to and after having decided to terminate an unplanned pregnancy. The chapter contrasts the discursive features of the pre- and post-decision accounts of their experience. Pre-decision communication resembled the generalized, impartial, simplistic, accounts that characterize political abortion rhetoric. However, post-decision messages were more nuanced in how the participants reframe and reconstruct their abortion beliefs to be more experiential, complex, integrated, and objective accounts, which in turn changed their position on the issue of abortion.

Chapter 16 investigates taboo sexual orientation through its analysis of the Objectum-Sexuality Internationale (OSI) website, the largest source of information representing a community who experiences emotional and romantic desire towards objects. The chapter presents a queer rhetorical analysis of OSI to understand how queer communities that must negotiate multiple taboos (en)counter the public. The authors argue that OSI reveals two things about taboo communication. First, the discursive and material boundaries that constitute the taboo, and second, the rhetorical work required to disrupt those boundaries. The author's analysis reveals how OSI engages in complex rhetorical practices to lay the groundwork for a queer-posthuman counterpublic—a rhetorical space that disrupts the heteronormative moral divisions and anthropocentric paradigmatic distinctions that constitute certain lived experiences as taboo. Such a move exposes the possibilities and ethical implications at stake in communicating sexual taboos while outlining an analytic framework for understanding the rhetorical processes that facilitate (en)countering taboos in public communication.

Chapter 17 continues the examination of taboos related to sexual “deviance.” Global perspectives on sexuality remain fluid. Some sexual behaviors that were once considered taboo are now relatively uncontroversial, perhaps even normal. However, one subset of erotic expression remains largely unacceptable: Kink. The totalizing demonization of alternative desire has led many to hide their sexuality from others, creating a crisis of shame rooted in the prohibition of open discourse about one's sexual preferences if they may fall out of line with what is “normal.” Research indicates that kinky podcasts might provide a solution to this problem. This chapter examines six podcasts related to kink—*The Dildorks*, *Why Are People Into That?!*, *Dudes Spankin' Dudes*, *The Big Little Podcast*, *The Brat Perversions Podcast*, and *Diaper Girl Gossip*. These podcasts help to explain how the host's rhetorical choices help kinky listeners gain an alternative sexual education, improve their interpersonal communication and community building skills, and achieve personal affectual liberation.

Chapter 18 also analyzes the impact of podcasts on communication taboos. This chapter uses Dr. Esther Perel's *Where Should We Begin?* podcast to examine sex outside of one's marriage. Extra-relational sexual involvement is generally considered taboo, with most Americans expecting their partners to remain faithful and monogamous in their relationship. However, while some couples exhibit traditional, monogamous relationships, other couples engage in consensually open arrangements for one or both partners. The spectrum of how relationships manifest makes the taboo even more complex. The couples included in this chapter sought therapy to discuss their primary romantic relationships after non-monogamy, including the communicative practices of couples who experience non-monogamy as a result of open relationships and those who experience affairs.

Chapter 19 concludes the section on sexual taboos with an examination of sex education in Indian schools. Although India faces problems of high population growth, sexual abuse, rape, teen pregnancy, and rate of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV, Indian schools are struggling to deliver sex educa-

tion to young people because it is a culturally taboo topic. This chapter explicates the challenges Indian schools face in regards to both controversy over sex education curricula and society resistance towards conversations about healthy sex. Teachers face a multitude of communication-based challenges in navigating this tricky landscape and must meet the needs of students, parents, and the government alike. Due to the lack of proper training, many teachers are not yet ready for the task of delivering comprehensive sex education that can solve the woes that India faces regarding sex-based taboos.

Section 5: Health Communication

Chapter 20 opens the section on health communication with an autoethnography about the author's experience living with quadriplegia. Autoethnography is an intriguing and promising qualitative research method that gives voice to personal experience to extend psychological and sociological understanding. The author's experience of having a spinal cord injury (SCI) provides the reader with insight regarding perceptions of quadriplegia and informalities of addressing disabilities in communication settings. Improving disability communication is valuable because it helps people who have not had previous exposure to people with disabilities to better understand guidelines for appropriate and ethical behavior regarding a disabled person's condition. Addressing disability is taboo for many people, as "speaking on" one's disability can be uncomfortable or even forbidden. Furthermore, because of a lack of guidelines and experience in disability communication, these conversations are commonly mishandled, leading to adverse effects on the disabled person (e.g., excluding the disabled person from the conversation, or asking about the disability at an inappropriate time). Through the authors experience as a quadriplegic, this chapter bolsters traditional research perspectives on disability communication with the personal experience that comes from autoethnographic narratives. The author's hope is that by doing so he can provide the necessary evidence establish coping strategies for disability-based communication taboos, and to ultimately improve communication about and with people with disabilities.

Chapter 21 looks at effective communication in psychiatric settings. Though the patient-provider relationships can provide vast practical benefits to health outcomes in patients, the fragile therapeutic alliance existing between mental health practitioners and patients has been made ever-contentious due to a lengthy history of neglect, abuse, stigmatization, and misunderstanding. In turn, psychiatric and psychological institutions, such as behavioral health centers, struggle to address not only increasing rates of mental illness and suicide, but also the emotional labor exhaustion and social taint experienced by their employees. In turn, this chapter explores the dialectic tensions between mental health providers and patients through considerations of the ever-present materiality of mental illness stigma, psychiatric "dirty work," and social taint as they occur in total mental health institutions.

Section 6: Grief Communication

Chapter 22 opens the final section of this handbook with an exploration of communication on grief. The chapter connects author/Christian apologist C. S. Lewis's views of grief, as provided in his book, *A Grief Observed*, to communication scholar Brant Burleson's research on supportive, comforting messages. Loss and grief connected to jobs, grades, missed opportunities, relationship breakups, and so forth are worthy of study because loss affects communicative behaviors and taboos. The loss associated with the death of someone deeply loved can be intensely difficult to communicate about, leaving the bereaved in a difficult position of taboo topics and emotions. Lewis's reflections on what grief feels like and how it

changes over time are overviewed, as are his reflections on how communication with the bereft occurs and ought not to occur. Burleson's work on supportive communication is summarized, including the comforting effects of messages with religious content. Parallels are drawn between Lewis's ideas and interpersonal communication scholarship on the oft-viewed taboo topic of grief.

Chapter 23 explores the painful reality for many pet owners that at some point there will come a time when they must grieve the loss of their animal companion. In fact, the death of a pet is a common source of stress that families experience, occurring almost two times more frequently than stress associated with children leaving home. However, the profound sense of anguish one feels after losing their pet is often invalidated, unrecognized, or unsupported by others. This chapter expands up what the stifling of grief that Doka (2002) refers to as disenfranchised grief. Disenfranchised grief occurs when individuals are sometimes shamed, dismissed, or discouraged from experiencing/expressing their grief. Despite a growing body of literature detailing the experience of pet loss, improved communication strategies for grief related to pet loss remain necessary.

Chapter 24 closes this handbook with a final examination of communication at the end of life. Death is a fact of life. Ultimately, everyone will eventually have to face the prospect of their own death or the (forthcoming) death of someone close to them. Therefore, it is important to understand the communication scripts used by families and close friends when talking about death and dying. Talking about death can be difficult for everyone involved. The taboo nature of grief communication causes many to rely upon religious messages and tropes that are common within society. However, for a major section of the population in the United States who are not religious, those messages are both ineffective and inappropriate. This current chapter explores the grief communication of non-religious people as they navigated terminal diagnoses and the sudden death of a loved one. Participants were interviewed about the challenges they faced being while dealing with messages about death and dying. The author suggests strategies for grief communication that can be used universally, for those who are religious and for those who are not, to better break down the communication taboos related to the loss of those we love.

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Section 1

Introduction to Communication Strategies for Taboo Topics

Chapter 1

Stigmatized Disclosure in Close Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Stigmatized disclosures—things we elect not to share when we are worried about disapproval, stereotyping, or judgment—were examined in the context of close relationships. Participants (N = 141) shared examples of stigmatized disclosures they were currently withholding from a close other via an anonymous online survey. Responses were coded to determine topics of stigmatized disclosures as well as reasons for withholding. Four overarching categories of topics were uncovered (societal taboos, personal business, identity, and abuse/trauma), as well as four categories of reasons (self-focused, other-focused, relationship-focused, and information-focused). This data-driven chapter reviews extant literature on disclosure and avoidance, includes an investigation of a wide variety of stigmatized disclosure topics (N = 186) and reasons for withholding them (N = 564), and examines the implications of these findings.

INTRODUCTION

Self-disclosure, or the business of revealing personal information about ourselves to one another, is a life-long and relationship-long process (Dindia, 1997). Disclosure has long been characterized as the vehicle for intimacy (Gottman et al., 1976). In close relationships sharing information about ourselves is often what propels us forward, makes us feel closer, and creates ties that bind. It is generally accepted that disclosure is beneficial for relationships and that individuals should be actively practicing openness in order to successfully develop, maintain, and repair our connections with others. In many ways this is

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sound advice: positive disclosure experiences are associated with long-term benefits including higher self-esteem and increased trust within relationships (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010).

Of course, not all disclosure is “good disclosure.” In new relationships, disclosing too much too soon can create distance rather than intimacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973), and when sharing information that falls outside typical social norms, it is not always rewarding or relationship-building (Wortman et al., 1976). Scholars have also pushed back against the idea that close relationships require total frankness to be satisfying (see Afifi et al., 2007 for a discussion of the ‘ideology of openness’). When considering specific types of disclosure that might not be perceived as “good disclosure,” stigma is a useful example. Stigma has historically been defined as an attribute or characteristic — perhaps visible, perhaps concealable — that is perceived as negative or damaging (Goffman, 1963). Disclosure of a stigmatized identity can result in being devalued by the recipient of the disclosure (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013), and these consequences might be particularly salient for individuals in established relationships as a lot is “at stake” in the relationship.

Stigmatized disclosures are things we might elect not to share with others when we are worried our partner might disapprove of (i.e., have a negative opinion about the disclosure) or stereotype them (i.e., lump the discloser in with a widely held but oversimplified understanding of a certain type of person). In other words, although disclosure often leads to intimacy, people may hesitate to disclose some things (or take care in deciding when and how to share them), because they worry about the potential outcome, as it is not always positive for the individual or relationship. The idea that a specific disclosure might be “stigmatized” is subjective — that is, some people may find a particular topic difficult to share while others do not. A wide variety of topics may be considered “stigmatized disclosure” depending on the person, the circumstance, and the relationship, including invisible identities such as mental illness, being from a low social class, having a learning disability, and/or being a member of the LGBTQ+ community (Hudson, 2011). Stigmatized disclosures also pertain to certain experiences including sexual, emotional and/or physical abuse, a traumatic health event (e.g., miscarriage, chronic conditions), or societal taboos (e.g., abortion, sexual behavior, addiction) (Chaudoir, 2010). While previous research has identified some specific topics of stigmatized disclosure, additional work is needed to investigate lesser-known topics, as well as unique stigmatized disclosures based on relationship types (e.g., friends, family, romantic).

The researchers for this chapter were particularly interested in stigmatized disclosure within the context of close relationships; while these relationships often are seen as our “safe place to fall” — where we can truly be ourselves and share almost anything — these are also relationships where we may feel the most is at stake. A close relationship is characterized by strong, frequent, and diverse interdependence, and lasts over a considerable period of time (Kelley et al., 1983). People who choose to withhold stigmatized disclosures from close others (including but not limited to romantic partners, close friends, or family members) are likely doing so for very specific reasons and are making rather deliberate choices. In this chapter the authors review related literature on disclosure in close relationships and stigmatizing disclosures, share the results of their data collection examining a wide variety of (withheld) stigmatized disclosures in a number of different close relationships, as well as the reasons for withholding those disclosures, and examine the implications of their findings.

BACKGROUND

Examining stigmatized disclosure topics and reasons for non-disclosure in this context will help us understand more about related, but distinct, areas such as (family) secrets and taboo topics, as well as topic avoidance in general. Research on topic avoidance focuses on the things individuals try not to talk about — things that are not necessarily secret, and not necessarily “off limits” for both partners, but that an individual is trying to avoid discussing in a particular relationship. Topic avoidance is described as a goal-oriented behavior that involves strategic attempts to keep a conversation away from a given focus (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). We avoid topics for a number of reasons — to protect ourselves, to avoid conflict in a valued relationship, or even out of lack of interest — and in many different relationships (Petronio, 2002). Our strategies range from the indirect (e.g., laughing, hesitation, distraction) to the abrupt (e.g., interrupting, becoming aggressive, leaving) and are associated with varying degrees of relational impact (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). While topic avoidance is not always in relation to a secret, one way people engage in topic avoidance is by keeping secrets.

Keeping a secret has been defined as “a conscious choice to withhold information from a certain person” (Caughlin et al., 2005, p. 47). Scholars have identified several types of secrets ranging from the conventional to the taboo (Vangelisti, 1994). Taboo secrets (e.g., marital problems, sexual preferences, physical abuse) are commonly reported, and it seems that people “place a premium on keeping secrets that help [us] to avoid negative evaluation, prevent stress, maintain privacy, or fend off attacks from outsiders” (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997, p. 701). When examining people’s tendency to reveal a secret to a friend or dating partner over a period of two months, Caughlin et al. (2005) found that in general, the target didn’t react as negatively as they may have initially feared. Still, people were more likely to share their secret “to the extent that they were low in their concerns about (a) negative evaluation, (b) maintenance of their relationship with the potential confidant, (c) maintenance of relationships with other people, (d) communication difficulties when revealing the secret, and (e) privacy” (p. 56). Individuals consider multiple factors when deciding to share or keep a secret, and more information is needed to understand the topics and reasons individuals decide not to share in close relationships. Whereas secrets are conscious choices individuals make to withhold information from another person, taboo topics differ in that the knowledge may not be a secret per se, although the topic is avoided in conversation.

Taboo topics, although nominally similar, are not necessarily ‘taboo’ in the same way that taboo secrets are conceptualized. Instead, they are generally defined as topics that have become “off limits” in a given relationship (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Typically, these topics become verboten due to some level of discomfort for one or both partners (e.g., discussion of prior relationships, conflict-inducing topics), but may not necessarily be negative, embarrassing, or stigmatized. They are taboo specifically in the context of the relationship — both partners generally agree that a topic is off limits in the relationship, even if they might discuss it with other people (e.g., their friends or family members). Taboo topics are different from secrets in that these taboo identities, experiences, or views are known by their close other but are not talked about because it leads to negative and/or uncomfortable interactions.

Stigmatized disclosure is another bird in this flock; when people choose not to disclose to a close other because they are worried about their negative evaluation, judgment, or stereotyping, they consider the disclosure potentially stigmatizing. As noted above, what is considered stigmatized is subjective; whereas one person might be entirely comfortable talking about their mental health struggles, another might be extremely worried about their father disapproving of their taking meds or going to therapy. Stigmatized disclosure is similar to secret-keeping because it involves keeping something to themselves

unless they know that they're "safe" in sharing it, and because it likely involves criteria for determining when to share; yet it is distinct from secret-keeping because not all stigmatized disclosures are necessarily "kept secret." Stigmatized disclosures are similar to taboo topics in that topic avoidance may be mutually agreed upon and certain privacy rules may apply regarding the discussion of the stigmatized topic. Stigmatized disclosure is also distinct from taboo topics because it is not always relationally-dependent. A stigmatized disclosure might just be something that will cause us to be judged negatively on a more general basis (i.e., due to broader social stigma) and therefore nondisclosure is not a reflection of the relationship, but instead the general negative connotation of the disclosure topic.

For this project, the researchers sought to identify the various types of stigmatized disclosure (i.e., topics) and the reasons people give for withholding stigmatized disclosures from a close other. It is widely noted in communication research that self-disclosure is a key element of relational satisfaction (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010), yet less is known about withheld stigmatized disclosures in close relationships and their potential impact on the health of the relationship. This project creates an opportunity to learn about stigmatized disclosure not only more broadly, but in a variety of relationships, whereas extant research on topic avoidance has been often limited to one specific type (e.g., parent-child, friendship) and a small subset of specific topics (see Dailey & Palomares, 2004). While stigma is fairly well-researched, the process of revealing stigma (or not) with others is not nearly as well-understood in close relationships. In addition, the current project builds on family secrets literature and some of the more focused, topic-specific disclosure literature (e.g., coming out) to create a broader understanding of stigmatized disclosure.

DISCLOSURE IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

For many people, self-disclosure, or sharing something personal with someone else, is an everyday occurrence, but for many it is also fraught with feelings of exposure or vulnerability (Meisenbach, 2010). Disclosure is an "ongoing, ever-changing process that is extended in time and is open-ended, not only across the course of an interaction or a series of interactions, but also across the lives of individuals" (Dindia, 1998, p. 88). This is precisely the rub: disclosure helps individuals develop and maintain intimate relationships, but it can at times require a leap of faith. It has long been argued that disclosure is healthy for individuals and for relationships (Jourard, 1971; Parks, 1982), and with good reason. Self-disclosure may lead to greater relationship satisfaction, trust, and psychological well-being. Disclosing private information that is fretful or traumatic through writing and/or talking has been shown to reduce distress and increase positive health outcomes (Gortner et al., 2006). While self-disclosure is often linked to positive outcomes, not all disclosures are necessarily beneficial, perhaps especially those that are stigmatized in nature.

Stigmatized Disclosure

Stigma refers to a mark of disgrace associated with a particular quality of a person (Crocker et al., 1998; Goffman, 1963). A stigma can be somewhat apparent (e.g., race, some physical disabilities) or potentially "invisible" or concealable (e.g., sexual orientation, addiction, sexual desires, mental illness). Those with concealable stigmas must decide whether, when, and how to disclose, and often anxiously anticipate being found out or isolated by those close to them (Pachankis, 2007). As Quinn (2006) notes, "people with a concealed stigma are also in the unique, but very uncomfortable, position of knowing

exactly what close others think about their stigmatized identity” (p. 8). Research in this area has uncovered a range of outcomes for those who have disclosed stigmatized information, including positive results such as decreased stress, and support from family and friends (Caughlin et al., 2005). Negative outcomes include an increased risk of discrimination and harassment (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Quinn et al., 2004; Rosario et al., 2001), and receiving negative responses to disclosure which are associated with a decreased likelihood of disclosing in the future (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Thus, making decisions about sharing a stigmatized disclosure in close relationships may be more complicated than perhaps more typical self-disclosure. Individuals must contend with social and relational privacy norms while also considering the possible costs and benefits of disclosing.

Costs and Benefits of Disclosure in Close Relationships

Popular culture values open communication within close relationships and frowns upon keeping secrets (Caughlin et al., 2005), but openness is not always well received. When individuals share personal information that is socially devalued and/or not readily apparent to others, disclosure of this information risks several negative outcomes, including social rejection, discrimination, and prejudice (Pachankis, 2007; Quinn, 2006; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). Previous research has shown negative relational outcomes for individuals who do not have a trustworthy and nonjudgmental target, including negative evaluation from the target, rejection, and gossiping (Kelly & McKillop, 1996). In a longitudinal study examining the disclosure of abortion, women who disclosed to an unsupportive target experienced more psychological distress than those who disclosed to a supportive partner or did not disclose at all (Major et al., 1990). Experimental research has also yielded similar findings; individuals did not experience the benefits of disclosure when their target reacted in a neutral or negative way (Lepore et al., 2000; Rodriguez & Kelly, 2006). Therefore, even a neutral reaction from a close other after a stigmatized disclosure can have a negative impact on the individual, their future communication about the topic, and the relationship itself.

Conversely, not sharing a stigmatized disclosure has also been linked with negative individual and relational outcomes. Because American culture views openness as essential to healthy relationships (as discussed above), when individuals perceive their romantic partner is keeping a secret from them, they report a loss in satisfaction, and also report experiencing a form of rejection or exclusion (Finkenauer et al., 2009). Thus, making a decision about revealing a stigmatized disclosure can sometimes be a double-edged sword.

Undoubtedly there are repercussions associated with stigmatized disclosures when they are not received well, and while discussing aspects about oneself that are private and/or stigmatized may not be easy, those who choose to disclose may be afforded favorable outcomes in some contexts. In a longitudinal study, Caughlin et al. (2005) found that while individuals may have internal angst about potentially sharing a secret, those who chose to share experienced better responses from their target than expected. Chaudoir and Fisher (2010) found that positivity experienced from discrete disclosure events can affect future disclosure likelihood and can have long-term psychological benefits. Individuals are sometimes pleasantly surprised at the response to their stigmatized disclosure, which positively impacts their internal thoughts about themselves, as well as their decisions to share their stigmatized disclosure with others in the future (Chaudoir, 2019). Scholars have also noted beneficial outcomes from challenging the target’s perceptions of certain stigmas post-disclosure: research examining mental illness disclosure has revealed that members of the general public were more likely to diminish prejudicial attitudes and discriminating behaviors when they had contact with someone who disclosed a mental illness (Corrigan & Matthews,

2003). Though stigmatized disclosure may not always be the best or easiest option in a close relationship, it is important to consider the potential positive and negative outcomes of a disclosure and the wide range of aftereffects as a result of sharing a stigmatized disclosure. One seemingly important influence regarding the outcome of sharing a stigmatized disclosure is the reaction from the target.

Considering the Target

The target of the disclosure is a prominent factor when an individual is deciding whether they will disclose something stigmatized. Before disclosing individuals should consider how they expect the disclosure to go and what impact the disclosure may have on the discloser, target, and the relationship (Caughlin, 2005). Individuals are more likely to disclose risky behaviors when they think their target will respond in a confirming and challenging way (e.g., actively engaging in discussion, asking questions) after the disclosure (Aldeis & Afifi, 2013). Similarly, when considering disclosure of self-harm to a given target, individuals considered their relational quality and the expected reaction (Armiento et al., 2014). Thus, disclosure may not always lead to the best individual or relational outcome.

Due to gaps in the literature, it is imperative to understand the scope of stigmatized disclosure topics, and the specific reasons why people choose to withhold stigmatized information within close relationships. In an effort to examine stigmatized disclosures and better understand why individuals keep certain things from people they otherwise feel close to, the authors conducted a qualitative, inductive analysis to capture participant experiences without preemptively narrowing the focus. The following research questions were posed:

Research Question 1: What topics do people regard as stigmatized disclosures?

Research Question 2: What reasons do people give for withholding a stigmatized disclosure within a close relationship?

METHOD

Participants

323 individuals responded to an anonymous Qualtrics survey comprised of demographic items, brief quantitative measures, and open-ended questions regarding stigmatized disclosure. The call for participants was posted on Facebook, Twitter, and professional email lists, and people were encouraged to share the call with their own networks. As is common with online data collection, a number of individuals did not complete the survey after initiating it (e.g., people clicking the link out of curiosity); the final data analysis was based on 141 respondents. Seventy-two percent of the sample identified as women ($n = 101$), 23% as men ($n = 32$), and 5% as nonbinary or genderqueer ($n = 4$), transgender ($n = 2$), or intersex ($n = 1$). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 66 ($M = 32.8$). Responses came from across the United States (and three from outside the U.S.), with the highest concentration in the Midwest (45%), Northeast (14%), Southeast (14%), and Pacific Northwest (9%). Eighty-four percent of participants identified as white ($n = 118$), with the remaining 16% identifying as biracial or multiracial ($n = 8$), Black ($n = 5$), Hispanic ($n = 4$), Asian ($n = 2$), or preferring not to answer ($n = 4$). A majority of the sample (57%) were not students, with 29% reporting that they were undergraduate students and 14% graduate students. Approximately half of participants (51%) were employed full time (36% part-time; 13% not employed).

PROCEDURE

After following the link provided in the call, participants read an informed consent document and proceeded to an online survey. They were given a definition and a few general examples of stigmatized disclosure, and were asked to:

Think of an example of something you have not yet shared in a specific close relationship, because you are worried about disapproval, stereotyping, and/or negative evaluation. It can be something you haven't yet shared with anyone, or it can be something you have shared with some people, but just not yet in this particular close relationship.

Once they had an example in mind, they rated their chosen relationship on a brief closeness measure (three items, adapted from Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997) and noted the type and length of relationship they had chosen (e.g., “best friend, 7 years”). The vast majority (87%) of participants reported on a relationship with a family member ($n = 54$), friend ($n = 46$), or romantic partner ($n = 42$); the remainder reported on a roommate, mentor, colleague, etc. These relationships were long-lasting ($M = 15$ years) and very close ($M = 5.9$ out of 7).

In two open-ended items, participants first were asked to share their stigmatized disclosure, and then to supply the specific reasons why they were concerned about sharing the disclosure in this particular relationship. Participants were able to list multiple reasons if applicable. Finally, they rated their disclosure on eight semantic differential items regarding identification, valence, and intimacy (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). When rated on a 7-point scale, participants identified moderately ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.67$) with their disclosures, and rated them as somewhat negative ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.74$), as well as somewhat intimate ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.48$). The examples of stigmatized disclosures represented in this dataset are fairly wide-ranging, and the subjective nature of stigma is front-and-center with this project. As a result, it is not necessarily surprising to see means that aren't far from the middle of the range. These findings are one indication of the wide range of stigmatized disclosures the researchers were able to capture with this project.

When finished with their first example, participants could elect to share a second example of a stigmatized disclosure. This example could either focus on the same target as the first example, or on a different target. Twenty-two participants shared a second example. Participants spent an average of 14 minutes completing the survey.

CODING AND ANALYSIS

The open-ended data on topics and reasons were exported from Qualtrics into a document for coding by all three authors. The authors each read through the document twice to familiarize themselves with the data, and then began open-coding the stigmatized disclosures to generate a list of topics. They met to compare notes and resolve any discrepancies throughout the coding process, in order to complete axial coding and identify common themes. Once the researchers finalized the topic categories, they moved on to the reasons, following the same procedure (open coding followed by axial coding), and they met to resolve any discrepancies and finalize all codes. Thematic analysis is sensitive to experiences as represented by participants, and as such the researchers were careful to preserve and pay attention to

language and word choices during interpretive coding. The authors used a constant comparative process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and when the researchers found codes they did not have in common, they were discussed until consensus was reached.

A note about the stigmatized disclosure topics: when people mentioned multiple issues or topics in one example, which happened frequently, each one was coded separately to ensure that all elements of their response were being captured. For instance, if a participant said that she had been diagnosed with clinical depression and had contemplated suicide in the past, this was broken into two topics (one about the diagnosis, one about suicidal thoughts). Because several participants offered a variety of different topics, the dataset contains 45 more examples than people.

RESULTS

Stigmatized Disclosure Topics

The first research question asked what topics individuals regard as stigmatized disclosures. To answer this question a preliminary list of topics was generated, and a codebook was created to provide definitions of each category. As coding continued, definitions were refined and categories were added or removed as needed; then all disclosures ($N = 186$) were coded a final time into a total of 14 categories (9 disclosures, or 5%, were categorized as ‘other’). Finally, these 14 categories were collapsed into four overarching themes: societal taboos, personal business, identity, and abuse/trauma.

Societal Taboos

Disclosures sorted into the societal taboos category ($n = 80$) included topics that we are often trained not to talk about in (so-called) polite conversation. *Mental health* was the most common topic mentioned ($n = 36$), not only in this category but across all of the data. Disclosures in this theme centered on past or present struggles with mental health, including one’s diagnosis, therapy, medication, and/or suicidal ideation. For example, a 33-year-old man shared that he was keeping his struggles from his best friend: “I’ve experienced symptoms of PTSD and sought professional help for it,” and a 19-year-old woman said, “I have depression and anxiety and suffer from panic attacks, but I tell [my roommate] that they’re only asthma attacks.” Many different struggles were illustrated in the data, including anxiety, depression, self-harm, post-traumatic stress disorder, and disordered eating.

The second most common topic in this category was *sexual practices* ($n = 21$), including disclosures about sexual activity (e.g., “swinging,” infidelity) or desires (e.g., wanting to experiment). In one example, a 39-year-old woman mentioned that she kept from her mother “that I practice kink and BDSM.” Over half of the disclosures in this theme were related to infidelity — either being unfaithful to a prior or current partner (e.g., “cheating in a past relationship”), or being “the other woman” in a prior relationship (e.g., “I’ve had sex with married men”).

The third topic in this category dealt with having had an *abortion* ($n = 9$). For instance, a 45-year-old woman shared something she had not told her mother: “I got pregnant six years ago and decided to terminate the pregnancy.” Also included in this theme were disclosures related to *addiction or substance abuse* ($n = 9$; either the participant’s or a close family member’s). As one example, a 58-year-old woman said that she had not disclosed her gambling addiction to her best friend: “I have not told her that I have a

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gambling problem. She knows that we have money trouble, but not why.” The final topic in this category was *negative opinion of target* ($n = 5$), which centered on being unhappy with some aspect of the target’s personality (e.g., “I think she could be a better friend and person; needs to get her priorities straight.”).

Personal Business

When participants characterized their disclosures as associated with their own decisions or goals, or issues that related to their privacy, these were sorted into the personal business category ($n = 45$). *Personal decisions or goals* was the most frequently mentioned topic ($n = 22$); disclosures in this theme were about decisions (or goals) that the participant had arrived at but had not yet shared in this relationship (e.g., being vegan, having tattoos, getting cosmetic procedures, not wanting to have children). A 22-year-old woman explained her difficulty disclosing to her mother:

My family has put a lot of stress on me about going to medical school because no one else in the family has done anything as prestigious. They are under the impression I am still going to apply. I fear telling them I have no interest in continuing my education in med school. My mother gets very irate if I say anything negative about medical school.

This theme also included several examples of relationship choices more specifically (e.g., the reason for a participant’s divorce). For example, a 30-year-old woman said she hadn’t disclosed to her best friend, “I started seeing someone after separating from my spouse.”

The second most common topic in this category was *medical condition* ($n = 9$), including physical illnesses, sexually transmitted infections, and/or chronic conditions. For instance, a 25-year-old woman shared, “I have been diagnosed with the same STI multiple times,” and she had not told her close friend. The remaining themes in this category were risky behavior ($n = 8$) and sexual history ($n = 6$). The *risky behavior* theme was comprised of disclosures that might imply irresponsible, dangerous, or criminal behaviors (e.g., smoking, getting a ticket for driving under the influence). A 39-year-old woman said she had not disclosed her additional money troubles to her mother: “I have racked up so much debt after she’s been working with me to pay it down.” *Sexual history* included disclosures about one’s previous relationships or sexual experiences (e.g., the age at which someone lost their virginity, number of previous partners). For example, a 39-year-old woman said that she hadn’t disclosed to her husband: “my past sexual history, or at least I minimized it. He asked early on, I lowered my number, then later told him a different number, that still wasn’t really the right one.”

Identity

Disclosures related to important group membership were sorted into the identity category ($n = 37$). *Religion* was the most commonly-mentioned topic ($n = 17$), with the majority of these examples referring to atheism, agnosticism, or leaving the faith in which they were raised. For instance, a 34-year-old man had not told his mother “that I am no longer Christian.” The second theme in this category contained disclosures related to *sexuality* ($n = 12$), which all revolved around sexual orientation (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual). A 41-year-old woman shared that she had not told her husband (whom she has known for 12 years), “I am bisexual; I have known that I was bisexual for 25 years.” The third theme focused on *gender or intersex identity* ($n = 8$; coming out as nonbinary, transgender, or intersex). An 18-year-old

man said: “I am a stealth passing transgender man in my workplace. I identify to my other coworkers as a gay man, but none of them are aware of my transgender status.”

Abuse/Trauma

The final category was comprised of disclosures about being the target of abuse or trauma ($n = 15$). The theme of *sexual trauma* ($n = 9$) included examples of past sexual assault or sexual abuse, whether once or multiple instances (e.g., “I was sexually harassed as a child by a family member”). Similarly, the theme of *physical or emotional abuse* ($n = 6$) included disclosures about being the target of physically violent or emotionally abusive behavior. For example, a 33-year-old woman said that she had not told her partner of four months: “I just got out of an emotionally abusive relationship.”

Reasons for Withholding Disclosure

To answer the second research question, the reasons participants gave for withholding the disclosure in this particular close relationship were coded using the same procedure as above: the researchers read through all reasons ($N = 564$), generated a preliminary list of categories, and constructed a codebook. As the researchers continued coding, they refined the category scheme and then performed a final round of coding for every reason in the dataset. A total of 20 types of reasons were given for withholding disclosures (9 reasons, or 2%, were categorized as ‘other’). These 20 categories were condensed into four overarching themes: self-focused reasons, other-focused reasons, relationship-focused reasons, and information-focused reasons.

Self-Focused Reasons

Reasons in this category — which were plentiful — were focused on protecting oneself, performing impression management, or working on privacy or boundary management ($n = 254$, or 45% of all reasons). The two most frequently mentioned reasons (not only in this theme, but across the entire dataset) were judgment or disapproval ($n = 75$), and negative light ($n = 71$). The *judgment or disapproval* theme centered around being judged or evaluated negatively or being disapproved of in some way. For instance, a 37-year-old woman said that she had not disclosed something to her daughter because of “judgments about my relationship and how crazy it sounds,” and a 40-year-old woman said she was not disclosing her mental health struggles to her brother because of a worry of “being made to feel inferior.” The second theme, *negative light*, included reasons expressing worry that the target would perceive them differently than before (usually in a negative way), or that they would be stereotyped. As an example, a 39-year-old woman who had had an abortion, mentioned that one of her reasons for not disclosing to her best friend was being concerned about “being seen as a monster.” Similarly, a 29-year-old woman said, “This particular friend has a very nice and put together life, and I didn’t want to be seen as an ‘other’ or stereotyped in some way.” This theme also included several examples focused on wanting to avoid being pitied (e.g., “I don’t want my friend to feel sorry for me”).

The third reason in this category involved *privacy/boundary concerns* ($n = 36$), focusing on reasons regarding a desire to avoid invasive questions (e.g., “too many personal questions”), or a desire to keep something private. For instance, a 22-year-old man said, “My family problems are private, and I don’t normally share them with anyone outside my family.” This theme also included several reasons focused

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on unsolicited or unwanted advice (e.g., “I don’t really feel like being problem-solved or dissected”) and gossiping or telling others (e.g., “I live in a small town, and I don’t want people to talk about it”).

The next two reasons both centered around emotions. *Negative emotional response* referred to a desire to avoid becoming the target of someone’s anger, disappointment, sadness, or other negative emotional reaction ($n = 31$). A 19-year-old woman said of her boyfriend, “I’m afraid he will get mad at me,” and a 41-year-old woman said of her partner, “He will be exasperated with me.” On a similar note, *internalized negative emotions* referred to self-directed negative thoughts or emotions, such as shame, guilt, or embarrassment ($n = 26$). For instance, a 41-year-old man shared, “I feel ashamed and weak,” and a 39-year-old woman said, “I am still appalled that I did it; it completely violates my moral and ethical code.”

The final reason, *fear of repercussions*, focused on avoiding any tangible negative outcome of the disclosure, such as exposure, retribution, or punishment ($n = 15$). For example, the woman above who struggled with a gambling addiction said, “She has loaned me money that I told her I needed for bills and if she finds out why, she won’t loan me any again.” A 41-year-old man shared that he had a “fear of negative consequences for my job.”

Other-Focused Reasons

When participants expressed qualities of the target that made disclosure undesirable, or when they were concerned about protecting the target (or another person), these were categorized as other-focused reasons ($n = 164$, or 29% of all reasons). The two most commonly mentioned reasons in this theme were protection of target ($n = 48$) and target wouldn’t understand ($n = 47$). *Protection of target* was centered around a concern for the target’s well-being, including worries about creating undue stress or emotional burden for the target. For example, a 41-year-old man relayed that he was not sharing something with his father due to “his health status and not wanting to cause further concern,” and a 33-year-old genderfluid participant withheld being trans from a friend because “I’m afraid it will be awkward or uncomfortable for her.” *Target wouldn’t understand* included reasons stating that the target either wouldn’t understand the issue or the severity/importance of the issue, or that the target would misunderstand or misinterpret what they were being told. For instance, a 37-year-old woman said of her boyfriend, “I don’t want him to think that I am something I am not,” and a 33-year-old man said of his best friend, “I don’t want them to think I’m a danger to them or myself.”

The third reason, *we are different* ($n = 20$), asserts a fundamental difference between the participant and the target; a concern that they come from very disparate perspectives (e.g., “they are very conservative,” or “she is homophobic”). A 56-year-old woman said of her newfound biological brother, “he was raised differently and is VERY intolerant.” The fourth reason, *previous negative response*, included reasons that focused on a bad experience in the past with this topic and/or this target ($n = 19$). Some reasons in this category mentioned the target reacting poorly about another person but the same topic (e.g., “she has said negative things about other survivors”), some mentioned the target saying something judgmental or hurtful to the participant in the past (e.g., “my husband is not good at being an empathetic listener”), and some noted having a bad experience disclosing to someone else in a previous instance (e.g., “in the past people have thought I was lying about it”), which impacted their decision to withhold the disclosure in this relationship.

Similar to protection of target, some reasons focused on *protection of a third party* ($n = 17$), typically because the third party was part of the disclosure in some way (e.g., “I was concerned about how my family might be perceived”). For instance, a 29-year-old woman was worried that her mother-in-law

“might tell my partner that she is not welcome around the family.” The final reason in this theme, *target will proselytize/try to change my mind*, centered around not wanting to be lectured, proselytized to, or manipulated ($n = 13$). By way of example, a 34-year-old woman shared, “I’d rather not deal with my dad trying to re-convert me every time I talk to him.”

Relationship-Focused Reasons

Reasons that centered around qualities of the relationship, or an anticipated impact on the relationship that makes disclosure undesirable, were categorized as relationship-focused reasons ($n = 70$). Three-quarters of the reasons in this theme fell into the category of *undesirable relational impact* ($n = 53$), which included not disclosing because it would make the relationship awkward, difficult, strained, or distant. For instance, a 41-year-old woman said about her very close friend, “if they react the ‘wrong’ way, it would change our friendship, and I’d rather not share this at all than risk it.” Similarly, a 33-year-old woman was keeping a disclosure from her sister because “it would cause a rift in our relationship.” This category also included worries about being treated differently (e.g., “she’ll never treat me the same,” or “she will become awkward around me when alcohol is included”) and concerns about outright relational termination (e.g., “I don’t want to lose her as a friend,” or “she might divorce me”).

The remaining reasons in this theme were loss of trust ($n = 11$) and relationship factors ($n = 6$). *Loss of trust* dealt with worries of being trusted by the target less than before, or not at all. For example, a 42-year-old man said of his boyfriend, “He would feel that I’m untrustworthy,” and a 23-year-old man said that his romantic partner “might not trust me as deeply as she currently does.” Finally, *relationship factors* included reasons based on the newness of a relationship, the lack of intimacy in a relationship, and so on. A 21-year-old man in a new romantic relationship (five months) said that he was keeping his depression from his partner because he is “not sure when to disclose this information,” and a 33-year-old woman said that her relationship with her partner of four months “is still new and undefined.”

Information-Focused Reasons

Reasons in the final category centered around perceptions about the information itself (with regard to disclosure) that made sharing undesirable ($n = 67$). Nearly half of the reasons in this theme dealt with feelings of *dread or anticipated exhaustion* ($n = 33$), in that participants expressed that either the target or the conversation will be unpleasant, or that the disclosure will create conflict, or cause stress or discomfort. In short, many participants just felt they “weren’t up to it” when it came to disclosing this particular information. For example, a 22-year-old woman said of her grandparents, “I don’t want to have to justify my decision and argue with them,” and a 44-year-old man said disclosing something to his wife would “cause endless talking with no purpose.”

The next two reasons, irrelevant/none of their business ($n = 12$) and conversational appropriateness ($n = 12$), focus on how well the disclosure would fit in with this relationship or a given conversation. Reasons coded as *irrelevant/none of their business* were those that participants felt were simply inappropriate for a particular context or relationship (in other words, “why would I tell this person that?”). For instance, a 39-year-old woman hadn’t shared her unconventional sexual practices with her mother because it is “not necessary to share sex info with my mom.” Reasons focused on *conversational appropriateness* were more concerned with the idea of a disclosure being perceived as “weird” or “too

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much information” in a given context (e.g., “there’s never been a great reason to bring it up,” or “the information was not particularly relevant, and might seem out of place if I brought it up”).

The last two reasons in this theme were general societal stigma ($n = 6$) and hypocrisy/changing mind ($n = 4$). Some participants withheld their disclosure simply due to *general societal stigma*, meaning that they were concerned about broader social stigma related to the topic. For example, a 31-year-old woman who had not shared with her sister that she had had an abortion said, “It’s a highly stigmatized decision, especially when you’re like me and don’t have any qualms about it. We’re ‘supposed’ to be upset about abortions, but I wasn’t and am not.” Similarly, a 36-year-old woman said she had not disclosed her cosmetic procedures to her husband (or anyone else) “because of the popular stigma of Botox or other cosmetic fillers as vain or unnatural.” The final reason, *hypocrisy/changing mind*, referred to participants being concerned about looking foolish if they ended up changing their mind later, especially if they weren’t fully committed to the idea (e.g., “I might change my mind about my ideas and feelings”).

DISCUSSION

The current investigation provides a new understanding of the topics of withheld stigmatized disclosures, and the reasons individuals decide not to share with a close other. Overall, the relationships participants reported on were long-lasting and deemed very close, and were fairly equally divided between family, friends, and romantic partners. This is essential when making sense of our findings, as it suggests that sharing a stigmatized disclosure may not be best for the individual or the relationship. The following sections situate the findings from the current project within existing stigmatized disclosure research in the context of close relationships, and provide new information to move the study of stigmatized disclosure forward.

Topics of Stigmatized Disclosure

The first research question focused on stigmatized disclosure topics withheld from a close other. Four distinct categories of stigmatized disclosure emerged, including societal taboos, personal business, identity, and abuse/trauma. Participants recalled a wide range of topics that highlight the complexity of stigmatized disclosure, in that these topics touch on issues of culture, privacy, and the dark sides of close relationships.

Societal Taboos

When reflecting on their withheld disclosures many individuals noted societal taboos including mental health, sexual practices, abortion, addiction or substance abuse, and negative opinion of target. The negative connotation associated with many participants’ disclosure topic may have kept individuals from sharing with others close to them. These findings are in line with research by Brouwers et al. (2019), who found that individuals often do not share their mental health struggles with others at work due to discrimination and the overall negative attitudes held for people with mental health issues. Individuals worried about changing the way their target may see them due to mental health issues, even at the expense of additional support (Brouwers et al., 2019).

Personal Business

Another category of topics reported by participants was personal business, which consisted of four themes: personal decisions, medical condition, risky behavior, and sexual history. Topics deemed personal business were situated as personal in addition to stigmatized. Afifi et al. (2005) found that Individuals were motivated to conceal or reveal information based on privacy rules (e.g., what is acceptable to talk about in certain relationships, the desire to protect others), and were less likely to share secrets. Many of our codes within in this theme were personal in nature, such as sleeping with a married person, loosening the boundaries of a romantic relationship, or not wanting children. All of these topics raised additional privacy concerns beyond the individual disclosing, thus making it a topic participants did not disclose to a close other.

Identity

Another important area of stigmatized disclosure topics centered around identity, and resulted in three themes: religion, sexuality, and gender or intersex identity. Identities identified by participants consisted of invisible identities that can be concealed from others, which gave participants the ability to withhold this part of themselves. Public identification of a stigmatized identity has often been met with discrimination and judgment, which has resulted in many individuals with stigmatized identities to conceal their identity to avoid negative interactions and mental health difficulties (Bry et al., 2017).

Abuse/Trauma

The fourth category of stigmatized disclosure topics consisted of two themes, sexual assault and physical or emotional abuse. Participants did not want to share that they were abused by another close other, or witnessed abuse in their close circle (e.g., family, romantic partner). These findings are consistent with existing research as 40% of women never disclose sexual violence experiences to anyone (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2010). This culture of silence exists largely due to (fear of) reactions of disbelief or blame experienced by women who decide to share their experiences publicly (Lisak et al., 2010).

Reasons for Withholding a Stigmatized Disclosure

Self-disclosure is often described as voluntary communication of private information about the self that is unlikely known already (Bowman, 2009). Individuals consider a multitude of cost/benefit factors when deciding to make a disclosure or not including “cultural norms, gender, context, the risk-benefit ratio, and others” (Kennedy-Lightsey et al., 2012, p.666). When asked to provide a reason as to why participants decided not to share their stigmatized disclosure, four themes were discovered in the data: self-focused reasons, other-focused reasons, relationship-focused reasons, and information-focused reasons. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the reasons that participants gave in this investigation reflect reasons found in related areas of research, including motivations for topic avoidance (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000).

Self-Focused

Reasons categorized as self-focused included concerns about judgment or disapproval, being seen in a negative light, and privacy or boundary control. These reasons support previous findings regarding the management of stigmatized disclosures. Haverfield and Theiss (2016) found that the ways individuals manage personal information in close relationships can impact personal factors like self-esteem, which may also be related to feeling judged or viewed negatively. Individuals may also manage these disclosures to strategically manage their identities. For example, individuals may choose to (or not to) disclose their sexual identity as an attempt to influence the way their close other perceives them (Orne, 2011).

Other-Focused

Participants also reported other-focused reasons, including perceiving the target as different than themselves, feeling that the target wouldn't understand or would try to change their mind, a previous negative response from the target, and protecting either the target or a third party. Previous research has investigated the ways individuals consider their relational partners' reactions before disclosing, finding that the expectation of a positive or supportive response is associated with a greater likelihood of disclosure (Greene et al., 2006; Legate et al., 2012), while an anticipated lack of support may cause them to avoid the disclosure (Evans & Broido, 1999).

Relationship-Focused

The third category consisted of three themes, including undesirable relational impact, loss of trust, and relationship factors. Especially given the context of the study, where participants were specifically asked to focus on one of their close relationships, it is unsurprising to see that many of them were concerned about how their disclosure might impact their relationship, or how elements of their relationship influenced their reluctance to disclose. In fact, as the relationships represented here were all rated as very close ($M = 5.9$ out of 7), and yet included at least one salient withheld disclosure, these findings may provide support for extant challenges to the ideology of openness (Afifi et al., 2007).

Information-Focused

Finally, reasons were considered information-focused when they cited conversational appropriateness, general societal stigma, hypocrisy, a feeling of dread or anticipated exhaustion, or framed the disclosure as irrelevant to the target. These findings are consistent with other work focusing on reasons not to share a stigmatized disclosure. Specifically, we can draw upon Petronio (2002) and Andalibi and Forte's (2018) disclosure and decision making model (DDM). Andalibi (2020) applied the DDM to investigate reasons women decided not to share a pregnancy loss, and found similar themes including: self related factors, audience related factors, and network related factors, which suggests that individual characteristics and relationship factors play a large role in deciding to share a stigmatized disclosure. An interesting separation between this study and that of Andalibi (2020) was the notion of time, as the time elapsed since the pregnancy loss occurred served as a reason not to share (i.e., too soon or too much time had passed to make the disclosure). The element of time did not emerge as particularly salient in the current project, as a great number of these reported stigmatized disclosures focused on identity or ongoing situations,

and not necessarily one particular event suspended in time. However, the current findings support the DDM and extend the understanding of stigmatized disclosure beyond online disclosures.

Additionally, Jonzon and Lindblad (2004) found that receiving negative or unsupportive responses when sharing stigmatized information is in fact common, which counters the notion that self-disclosure is a positive experience. Individuals consider the target/stakeholders when deciding whether or not to share because if the target is not supportive or understanding, they will not feel comfortable disclosing (Brouwers et al., 2019). While the majority of close relationship research highlights the importance of self-disclosure in building and maintaining relationships (Chadoir & Quinn, 2010), our findings suggest that for certain topics in some relationships disclosure may not be the best option for individual and relational health.

Connections to Communication Theory

The current investigation employed inductive analysis to establish codes, themes, and categories to provide the greatest opportunity to identify a new understanding of stigmatized disclosure in close relationships. Inductive analysis is useful as it helps condense raw data into a clear and organized summary and aids in developing a framework for understanding experiences and processes (Thomas, 2006). While inductive analysis is an essential feature in understanding phenomena and allowed the researchers to interpret the data for a new understanding of stigmatized disclosure in close relationships, it is valuable to consider the implications of these findings in relation to existing communication theories. Specifically, two theories prove particularly useful as they provide opportunity for future investigation: communication privacy management theory, and the intersectional theory of closeting.

Communication Privacy Management Theory

Communication privacy management theory (CPM) provides a dialectical framework for researchers to make sense of privacy management structures within relationships and larger groups (e.g., families), and how individuals decide (or not) to make disclosures. There are three main elements of CPM that aid in the understanding of stigmatized disclosure and the regulation of private information: privacy ownership (boundaries of private information), privacy control (privacy management engine), and privacy turbulence (privacy regulation breakdowns) (Petronio, 2013). When an individual does not make a disclosure, boundary protection is intact (Petronio et al., 1996). There are two main factors that have been found to inform individual choices to keep privacy boundaries protected: target characteristics and anticipated ramifications (Petronio et al., 1996). Petronio et al. focused on children's disclosure of abuse and found that individuals who believed that their target did not care or would not understand their situation did not disclose. Also, if the child worried about losing their boundary control (i.e., the target would share their personal information without consent) they did not disclose (Petronio et al., 1996).

CPM has also been used to understand contextual factors that impact disclosure. CPM has been employed to investigate cultural elements that impact close relationships including health communication (Petronio et al., 2004), and online social media privacy concerns (Mohamed, 2012). Petronio forwards that researchers should examine how privacy management decisions are made by different populations within different contexts (Child & Petronio, 2011), and the current project serves as a helpful step in that endeavor.

Intersectional Theory of Closeting

McDonald et al. (2020) present a new critical approach to studying self-disclosure through the theory of closeting. While the term “closeting” is primarily used to understand sexuality or gender identity, the current theory situates closeting as the communication processes through which individuals reveal or conceal stigmatized, invisible differences which can be applied to many identities and contexts (McDonald et al., 2020). Specifically, the intersectional theory of closeting:

Contributes to existing disclosure research by (a) highlighting that intersecting forms of difference impact the implications of revealing and concealing information; (b) showing that normativity heavily influences which information is assumed and, therefore, need not be disclosed; (c) establishing that stigma shapes the positive and negative impacts of revelation and concealment; (d) demonstrating that disclosure can have political purposes; and (e) linking the individual, relational, organizational, political, and cultural implications of disclosure. (McDonald et al., 2020, pp. 96-97)

The intersectional theory of closeting provides 15 axioms to consider features of the closet as well as closeting in social interactions (e.g., coming out of the closet—revealing difference—can have both extreme negative consequences and positive impacts, Individuals negotiate closeting differently, depending on their ability and desire to pass as a member of a more privileged group) (McDonald et al., 2020). In addition to providing 15 axioms, this theory is relevant to stigmatized disclosure research in close relationships because it provides a framework for understanding intersectionality and moving beyond categories alone. Closeting theory focuses first on the stigmatized disclosure/identity being closeted and doing so primes the researcher to better understand the differences among contexts (e.g., why some identities/experiences are closeted in some relationships and contexts but not others). Focusing on the closeting process allows researchers to examine how multiple intersecting differences “including behaviors (e.g., sexual practices) and experiences (e.g., pregnancy, trauma), intersect with more extensively researched categories of difference (e.g., gender, race)” (McDonald et al., 2020, p. 97). Thus, employing a theory such as this is incredibly useful in understanding many influential levels (identity, relational, contextual, and societal) individuals experience when considering whether to share a stigmatized disclosure.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Research on revealing a stigmatized disclosure has found that deciding to share is not a one-time experience, but something faced regularly (Chirrey, 2003). A key element in disclosure outcomes is the ability the discloser has of successfully predicting the reaction of their target, and that their target is a nonjudgmental confidant (Caughlin et al., 2005). Self-disclosure is not a matter of black and white, and it is imperative for individuals to understand disclosure outcomes are variable on individual, partner, and relational factors. Particularly, this project sheds light on the fact that individuals can report close relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners without telling them *everything*. Extant research acknowledges that it is possible for relational partners to disclose about some information while avoiding others (Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000). Some individuals may not share because of larger repercussions a disclosure may have, but that is not necessarily a reflection on the closeness or satisfaction of the relationship.

The current study has practical significance for individuals managing stigmatized disclosures in their close relationships, particularly for the target. Knowing what types of stigmatized disclosures are often withheld can help targets manage interactions in which a relational partner discloses. For example, knowing that a certain topic may be hard to share can allow them to tailor their reaction (i.e., to be more supportive). Similarly, if they know that individuals tend to have certain reasons for avoiding disclosure, it could impact their communication even before these disclosures. For instance, one reason that the current participants cited for withholding disclosure was in acknowledgment of a previous negative reaction by the target. The knowledge that one's reactions to stigmatized topics in general can prevent close others' future disclosure about those topics may cause targets to consider their reactions more carefully (e.g., if a parent knows that abortion is a stigmatized disclosure that a child might withhold, the parent might avoid speaking negatively about abortion in general).

Further, knowing that there are multiple reasons for withholding disclosure may help prevent potential targets from taking it personally if they ultimately find out a close other withheld stigmatized information from them (e.g., not automatically assuming that the discloser believes that the target is judgmental). Additionally, it is important to note that relationship satisfaction looks different within each relationship. Relationships may be thought of as microcultures, where relational identities are unique in that they are the product of their past, present, and future (Wood, 1982). This notion provides insight as to how each relationship differs, and whether and how they navigate stigmatized disclosure may also differ and yield a range of relational outcomes.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While we were able to reach a large sample of individuals to gain topics of stigmatized disclosure as well as the reasons they did not share, we were unable to have an interactive conversation with participants. Engaging in phone, videoconference, or face to face interviews may have provided additional insights, particularly regarding the intersectionality of their stigmatized experience/identity. Also, our sample was largely women, and while this has benefits in understanding women's unique stigmatized experiences/identities, it is also beneficial to examine the experience of a variety of gender identities. For instance, research on heterosexual same-sex male friendships has found that despite the benefits of intimate friendships (e.g., positive affect, feelings of understanding) men reported emotional disclosures (e.g., fear and sadness) as inappropriate conversation topics (Bowman, 2009).

This project provides a snapshot of where these participants were in their disclosure process, and longitudinal work may yield additional findings if they chose to disclose at a later date. Future research should examine a wider range of identities to identify any unique features in stigmatized disclosures. Investigating a range of identities and the intersection of culture and relationship characteristics may provide valuable relational and cultural communication findings.

Although the current results identify topics of stigmatized disclosures and reasons for withholding them, it would be beneficial to investigate the relationships between these elements. For example, future research could investigate whether similar reasons tend to be reported for certain stigmatized disclosure topics, or the connections between the reported valence of the disclosure and the reasons for avoiding it. Another avenue of research could consider the relationship type and how it impacts the topic or reasons for avoiding disclosure.

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Future research should employ communication theories such as the intersectional theory of closeting to further consider identity, intersectionality, and power regarding stigmatized disclosure communication. Employing this theory in future investigations would allow for more information to be gathered about the complexity of society, elements of close relationships, and privacy when deciding whether, when, and how to share a stigmatized disclosure.

Additionally, it may be fruitful to examine the implications of sharing a stigmatized disclosure in more detail — for example, investigating the impact of a detailed disclosure through storytelling. Andalibi et al. (2018) found that some stigmatized disclosures are shared in a vague way or in a small statement, and future research should investigate if disclosing using a story is more cathartic than not sharing or sharing in a vague way.

CONCLUSION

The current study expands stigmatized disclosure research by exploring a range of close relationships and the stigmatized disclosures that are withheld. The study uncovered that while participants kept certain stigmatized experiences and/or identities private within these relationships, they still considered these relationships to be very close. Additionally, this project highlights the necessity of intersectional research in close relationships, as the topics and reasons uncovered in the current study suggest that deciding to withhold or share a stigmatized disclosure is not simply a cost/benefits analysis, but is layered with individual, relational, and cultural factors. We urge close relationship researchers to continue examining the complex issues of disclosure, which includes non-disclosure.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Concealable Stigma: An identity or characteristic that is likely to be perceived negatively, but is not immediately visible (e.g., sexual orientation, mental illness, addiction).

Secret-Keeping: Choosing to deliberately conceal a piece of information from a particular person.

Stigmatized Disclosure in Close Relationships

Self-Disclosure: Sharing one's own personal information with another person.

Stigma: A mark of disgrace associated with a particular characteristic of an individual.

Stigmatized Disclosures: Things that individuals might choose not to share with others because of concern about disapproval, stereotyping, or judgment.

Taboo Topic: Something society views as a “no no” and is off limits for discussion.

Target: The recipient of a disclosure.

Topic Avoidance: Goal-oriented behavior that involves strategically keeping a conversation away from a certain focus.

Chapter 2

A Milieu of Taboo: Threat, Avoidance, Power, and Control

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ABSTRACT

Taboo topics tend to be issues that one or more parties decide not to discuss openly. The issues that are considered taboo tend to comprise a threat of some kind. Broadly speaking, taboo topics commonly fall under research areas of conflict and topic avoidance. This chapter will use that broadened scope to be able to focus on underlying factors of threat and avoidance such as interpersonal conflict, controlling behavior, and power dynamics. After reviewing those areas of literature, taboo topics will be revisited to highlight how conflict, power, and control concepts can be incorporated into directions for future research and applied settings.

INTRODUCTION

What makes certain topics taboo? One oft-cited definition of *taboo topics* are topics considered off-limits by at least one partner (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). The goal of this chapter is to situate taboo topics in a broader, deeper context of hierarchical power dynamics within non-hierarchical relationships. This chapter may draw on examples from and comparisons to different types of close relationships, however the focus will mostly pertain to romantic relationships.

One person in a relationship may simply choose to avoid bringing up a subject due to the fear of eliciting a negative reaction (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Roloff & Ifert, 2000; Vangelisti, 1994). Taboo topics can be created as attempts to stem otherwise ongoing negative impacts of serial arguing (Roloff & Johnson, 2001). At a minimum, a taboo topic may be considered a topic that has been deemed unimportant (Roloff & Ifert, 1998). The more threatening the topic, the more likely there is a tacit, implicit agreement not to speak of it (Roloff & Ifert, 1998, 2000). In other words, a threat might be related to an issue that would be a source of conflict if raised explicitly, and of which withholding the topic can be a means of avoiding conflict and its negative effects (Roloff & Ifert, 2000). This chapter will attempt to

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demonstrate that neither the presence nor the absence of conflict is necessarily problematic; however, there may be contextual factors that could illuminate when avoidance is a concern worth examining.

An important contextual factor is the presence of certain kinds of power dynamics. The existence of power is not necessarily problematic (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). For example, a power imbalance is intrinsically hierarchical in a parent-child relationship, however, it may be problematic in a romantic partnership. Power dynamics are consequential if power is employed as a means of controlling another person in service of one's own individual goals, especially if it is at another's expense. One important distinction of the original definition by Baxter and Wilmot (1985) is that taboo topics are considered a type of information control, which will be discussed further in the next section. An overview of relevant conflict perspectives and power dynamics will be provided to draw a contrast in understanding how a milieu of control is different from situations characterized by the presence of interpersonal conflict that naturally occurs in everyday life.

Additionally, an overview of topics related to unresolved conflict is necessary to highlight the problematic aspects of a lack of conflict. Understanding conflict and conflict avoidance can help with understanding some of the foundations of a relationship. A milieu of power dynamics and conflict avoidance helps to understand what makes some topics taboo, and specifically, what makes some topics so taboo that they become unspeakable. To illuminate the strength of power dynamics, one example provided will be the *chilling effect*, a form of topic avoidance regarding complaints of controlling behavior (Aloia & Worley, 2019; Cloven & Roloff, 1993, 1994; Makoul & Roloff, 1998; Roloff & Cloven, 1990; Roloff & Solomon, 2002; Samp & Solomon, 2001; Solomon et al., 2004; Solomon & Samp, 1998; Worley, 2016; Worley & Aloia, 2018). Within the chilling effect, it is possible for taboo topics to thrive if any perceptions voiced that are at odds with a controlling and/or more powerful person could be perceived as an act of insubordination (e.g., Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). If a dynamic of subordination is not mutually consented to by both partners, then expectations of subordination would naturally be a source of conflict in that subordination may be inherently problematic in the context of a romantic relationship.

Consequently, this chapter will also provide an overview of *coercive control*, a pattern of coercive, controlling behavior (Stark, 2013). What characterizes coercive control is a power imbalance where one person enacts a pattern of controlling behaviors overreaching into multiple aspects of another's life (Stark, 2013). In these situations, there are implicit agreements to avoid topics that could be a potential source of conflict (Gelles & Straus, 1988; Stets & Straus, 1990). In other words, if raising complaints is perceived as an act of insubordination, then confrontation could escalate to a dangerous situation. In cases such as these, conflict avoidance would be a rational short-term strategy.

Finally, the discussion will include a reflection on the importance and difficulties of studying a topic that tends to be characterized by an absence of behaviors. Recommendations for further research aims to help with illuminating these underlying dynamics that are foundational to the nature of the relationship. In sum, the objective of this chapter is to explore these topics together to establish the possibility that the presence of avoidant behavior and controlling behavior, especially if asymmetric and in excess, demonstrates the necessity of studying taboo topics in context.

BACKGROUND

Typically, the more intimacy is present in a relationship, the more topics there are that two people can speak about (Altman & Taylor, 1973). However, taboo topics are topics that are considered off-limits

and to be avoided, and exist in friendships (Goodwin, 1990), families (Vangelisti, 1994), and romantic relationships (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). The presence of taboo topics is negatively associated with relational satisfaction (Vangelisti, 1994) and can exist as a relational irritant or a reminder of the presence of short-term or long-term unresolvable disagreement (Roloff & Ifert, 1998).

One of the first works on taboo topics as it relates to romantic relationships discovered six themes: “the state of the relationship, extra-relationship activity, relationship norms, prior relationships with opposite-sex parties, conflict-inducing topics, and negatively-valenced self-disclosures” (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 253). The study’s results emphasized the topics which were least able to be resolved. Relational status is deemed the most pervasive form of a taboo topic. The reason most frequently cited is the fear that an explicit relationship talk would lead to the destruction of the relationship (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985).

Additionally, taboo topics have communicative dimensions of explicitness and formality (Roloff & Ifert, 1998). Taboo topics typically involve agreements not to speak of a topic, however the agreement itself could be explicitly spoken or unspoken (Roloff & Ifert, 1998, 2000). For example, a conversation can occur when one partner tells the other, “I just don’t want to hear about your previous relationship with your ex-boyfriend anymore.” This would be an example of an explicit conversation with a goal of taking a topic off the table. A topic that is made implicitly taboo could be a serious issue where both partners do not speak of the problem whatsoever (e.g., not discussing a current affair with an ex-boyfriend). One example of a reason to not speak of an affair explicitly is the possibility that both partners have the mutual goal of keeping their relationship together, but they do not want to tend to several issues involved if the problem was dealt with in a formal manner out in the open. Rather than have a formal discussion to take the topic off the table, there can be indirect communication such as non-verbal cues (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006; Hall et al., 2005; Pruitt, 1971). Subsequently, if indirect communication is not successful as an implicit agreement, a formal, explicit discussion to make a topic taboo could be viewed as a last resort (Roloff & Ifert, 1998).

That communicating in an explicit manner is costly is likely tied to the reasons that topics that are implicitly taboo are more associated with those issues that constitute a threat to the existence of the relationship (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Roloff & Ifert, 1998). Additionally, it is possible that there may be a difference in individual goals. Baxter and Wilmot’s (1985) work suggest that some partners experience taboo topics adversely while others find avoidance to be an effective strategy. Those who choose not to talk about relationally threatening topics may do so if they fear their efforts will be ineffective, thus some may consider avoidance a successful remedy (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Roloff & Ifert, 1998). However, there are relational consequences for unresolved issues:

By placing a topic off limits, intimates are openly acknowledging that (a) there is an issue about which they disagree, (b) they are unable and/or unwilling to resolve it, and (c) for some time, there will be no further attempts to resolve it through open discussion. Although such a view may be realistic and pragmatic, it implies a somewhat pessimistic assessment of the future of the relationship. Unless the disagreement simply fades away, it will be an ongoing, albeit unaddressed, source of dissimilarity. On the other hand, the somewhat ambiguous nature of an implicit agreement affords greater optimism and flexibility. The full extent of the disagreement is not openly acknowledged, and because future discussion is not explicitly banned, the topic may be more easily reintroduced. (Roloff & Ifert, 1998, p. 193)

This quote indicates certain motives and attitudes regarding the nature of taboo topics. Though there is some mutuality involved in an agreement, the impacts may be experienced differently.

Specifically, certain avoidant behaviors may be problematic when keeping topics taboo benefit one party's goals at the other's expense (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Staying in a relationship with a less invested partner may place the burdens of relational maintenance on the one who is more invested (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Rusbult & Verette, 1991; Van Lange et al., 1997). Rusbult and Van Lange (2003) imply the possibility of a power imbalance present: "the more dependent partner has less say in decision making, carries the greater burden of interaction costs (is more likely to accommodate, sacrifice), and is more vulnerable to possible abandonment" (p. 364). This phenomenon implies an asymmetric dynamic in which one person is disproportionately tasked with maintaining the relationship. In a context such as this, conflict avoidance could be considered a relational maintenance strategy (Leo et al., 2019).

Before a topic becomes taboo, it is common for the topic to be a source of serial arguing. Serial arguments are associated with an ongoing theme of unresolved conflict and with negative outcomes on both a relational level (Johnson & Roloff, 2000) and an individual level (Roloff & Reznik, 2008). One factor that appears to affect serial arguments is whether an individual believes that a conflict can be resolved, termed *perceived resolvability* (Johnson & Roloff, 2000). If the conflict is not easily resolved, but the individual wishes or has no choice but to stay in the relationship, then that serial argument can become a taboo topic (Roloff & Johnson, 2001). Given the potential impacts of serial arguing, it is understandable that some couples make a topic taboo; unresolved issues are very common in relationships in general (Gottman, 1999). Relationships commonly have some taboo topics (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1985), conflict avoidance (e.g., Driver & Gottman, 2004; Gottman, 1993), serial arguments, and unresolved issues (Gottman, 1999; Gottman & Silver, 1999). The presence of these occurrences in isolation may be relatively benign as Gottman (1999) states that two-thirds of couples have unresolved conflict.

Unresolved issues that have been deemed taboo in the past may not always be taboo should circumstances change. Roloff and Johnson (2001) report a dearth of research on what happens after a topic becomes taboo in terms of whether a topic may be brought up again, and if so, under what circumstances. If new information comes to light or the issue is later deemed to be more serious, then the issue may be raised again. However, there are challenges with attempts to rectify unresolved issues, like attempting to bring taboo topics back to the table. For example, if there is a sustained perception that the relationship cannot withstand arguing about the taboo topic, it is less likely to be reintroduced (Roloff & Johnson, 2001). Perceiving a topic like speaking of relational status to be potentially threatening can be reasonable as earlier work did find that broaching that subject could be associated with a subsequent breakup (Baxter, 1984). In that case, if the goal is to maintain relational status quo (even if for different reasons), then keeping a topic taboo may make sense in context. The reintroduction of a taboo topic could have adverse and imbalanced impacts on the individual with the burden of maintaining the relationship with accommodating behavior (Rusbult & Verette, 1991).

When conflict avoidance is employed for fearing harm or loss (i.e., at the expense of one partner in particular), then at the very least the quality of the relationship may suffer. Unresolved issues can also create considerable relational damages (Baumeister et al., 1990). Conversely, resolving issues by voicing a complaint is positively associated with a relationship's long-term and short-term outcomes (Rusbult et al., 1986). If there are behaviors co-occurring like defensiveness, stonewalling (i.e., hostile withdrawal), and contempt, then it may be problematic in terms of the quality and trajectory of the relationship (Gottman, 1993). In more recent reflections on the research, Roloff and Reznik (2020) state, "Individuals may intend withdrawal to be insulting and emotionally arousing to partners . . . withdrawal

may be an indirect method used to hurt someone at the expense of effective communication” (p. 166). At an extreme, conflict avoidance may be a necessary means of compliance due to the presence of a credible threat (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). In other words, just the mere fear of harm or loss could pose a credible threat, sufficient in being able to obtain compliance from another (Dutton & Goodman, 2005).

Those who are conflict-averse simply avoid raising a topic if they naturally avoid conflict for its own sake (Roloff & Cloven, 1990). However, if a threat is communicated with a pattern of coercion and controlling behavior, then there could be a risk of abuse (Stark, 2013; Johnson, 2008; Myhill & Hohl, 2019). Taboo topics may implicitly invoke a threat of harm. A goal of this chapter is to argue that to fully understand kinds of information control like taboo topics, it is necessary to understand and recognize the differences between control and conflict, as well as the ability to see how the presence of certain power dynamics can have an impact on conflict mitigation. Sustained research on taboo topics might aid an understanding of these issues if a pattern of concern can be accurately identified.

CHALLENGES TO STUDYING TABOO TOPICS

Broadly speaking, there is more research to be done on taboo topics on several levels. This chapter will attempt to situate taboo topics under the conceptual umbrella of informational control, communicate the differences between taboo topics driven by conflict or control, and provide examples of the multitude of situational factors that hinder or help the ability to understand and identify taboo topics.

This chapter will address several issues with understanding taboo topics in close relationships. Definitionally, there is criticism that the line of research on taboo topics becomes intermingled, or at least not clearly delineated from, other forms of information control such as secrecy, privacy, and the often related but broader construct of topic avoidance (Crowley, 2017). Methodologically, failing to adequately measure relational power and whether relationship dynamics are characterized by expressed conflict or by controlling behavior greatly limits the ability to study taboo topics if the dynamics are subtle and covert (e.g., Crossman et al., 2016). Theoretically, taboo topics need critical perspective to understand the way in which social networks, societal, and socio-economic conditions can serve as exogenous factors that can contribute to perpetuating power dynamics within the relationship (Moore, 2017; Moore & Manning, 2019). Topic avoidance and taboo topics are common; however, without adequately tending to these other factors it would be difficult to understand that taboo topics has the potential to be the tip of the iceberg of deeper, fundamental, and potentially more serious relational problems.

Definitional Challenges

Taboo topics are considered a form of information control (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Crowley (2017) states that information control could include “limiting information shared with others” or those concepts that fall underneath “all of which share the common element of not being fully open with others” (p. 203). The broader construct of information control includes taboo topics and topic avoidance (Afifi & Guerrero, 1998), as well as similar concepts such as secrecy and privacy (Crowley, 2017). Though taboo topics are considered closely tied to topic avoidance and have considerable overlap, there is some debate as to whether taboo topics are a type of topic avoidance (Crowley, 2017). It may be helpful to make a distinction between symbolic acts and process. Taboo topics themselves are subjects, a potential communicative message, whereas topic avoidance is a general communicative behavior. Nonetheless,

understanding the lines of research on topic avoidance is still instrumental as topics that are taboo can still be implicated in other forms of topic avoidance. For example, the chilling effect is considered a type of topic avoidance specifically regarding controlling behavior. The chilling effect is a communicative process of complaints being withheld (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Roloff & Cloven, 1990). The complaints withheld may be related to a subject that has been made taboo (Cloven & Roloff, 1994; Roloff & Ifert, 1998).

Similarly, other forms of information control may also be communicative processes that involve topics deemed taboo. For example, family secrets can be considered a taboo topic. Research on how secrets are kept has shown how secrets can greatly impact interactions and even define those relationships (Vangelisti, 1994). Additionally, research on family studies of secrecy has helped in delineating the form of information withheld (i.e., from whom), the type of information, and the function it serves (i.e., whom it may be protecting; Vangelisti, 1994). Literature like this helps to situate taboo topics as potential topics of information control in forms of topic avoidance, secrecy, and privacy.

Concepts related to control can exist in a broader category termed social control (Edinger & Patterson, 1983). Control is tied to the vertical dimension of close relationships (Hall et al., 2005) in that it can include possessing the motive and power to be able to control others. Seeking influence in one's environment is the natural human instinct to feel one has agency in their environment, and its absence can impact one's worth and self-esteem (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). Mutual influence is typically associated with positive relational outcomes (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Control typically includes exercising agency and making an assumption that agency is present for both parties is a critique of the current state of the literature of information control (Crowley, 2017). This chapter does not seek to deny the use of the term information control. However, given its ties to vertical dimensions involving power and influence, forms of information control necessitate the application of a critical paradigm. Without tending to issues of power, it makes it difficult to fully understand forms of information control.

Many of the fundamental problems underlying the ability to understand taboo topics in context share many of the same fundamental problems with other forms of information control and topic avoidance. For these reasons, these other related constructs will be used as examples in this chapter for illustration of their shared contextual challenges. This chapter will spend a considerable amount of space devoted to the multitude of factors that can contribute to conflict and factors that may impact its mitigation in attempts for a deeper understanding of the processes surrounding taboo topics.

Contextual and Situational Challenges

Context matters as there are critical, foundational differences between relational communication processes of relational dynamics that are characterized by expressed mutual conflict versus a pattern of exercising unilateral control. Controlling behavior at an extreme can serve to silence conflict (Dishion & Snyder, 2016). Examining power can help illuminate some of the more subtle, insidious, and covert processes that may be able to successfully obviate conflict. These underlying factors are important in understanding why some topics become and stay taboo. Without tending to power dynamics, it would be difficult to understand other communicative aspects including, but not limited to, motive, goals, and influence.

The experience of conflict is normal as it occurs naturally as an intrinsic aspect of being in close relationships with others (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). Close relationships tend to be interdependent, and conflict can be especially fraught with regard to romantic relationships where unions tend to be more voluntary and involve additional factors such as love and intimacy (Samp & Solomon, 2001). Withhold-

ing complaints commonly occurs as a form of topic avoidance, and in some contexts, it is functional to withhold complaints to avoid conflict (Aloia & Solomon, 2013).

In close relationships like families and couples, there are specific boundary rules about what kind of information is shared and who has a right to disclose (Petronio, 1999). At an extreme, there might be a kind of milieu of taboo topics where any topic that could create conflict could be deemed taboo. In highly controlled environments any complaint could be considered taboo due to the consequences of disclosure (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018; Stets & Straus, 1990). One only needs to establish a credible threat for future compliance-gaining. The experience of fear and credible threat may be more common and under-reported in populations experiencing psychological aggression and controlling behavior without the presence of physical abuse (Crossman et al., 2016; Myhill & Hohl, 2019).

From a methods perspective, these kinds of processes are difficult to research in a laboratory in a cross-sectional study if the compliance gained earlier preempts something that could be observable. For example, instead of interpersonal conflict there could be intrapersonal, internalized conflict that obviates expression of complaints and conflict (e.g., Honeycutt, 2003; Honeycutt et al., 2015). What may be self-reported are taboo topics. However, the kind of factors that may play a role in how topics become taboo or stay taboo could be impacted by intransigent conflict and unilateral, asymmetric control patterns (e.g., Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Conflict and control may reflect the underlying assumptions and dynamics foundational to the relationship.

Conflict and Avoidance

The definition of conflict employed for this chapter is based on the presence of conflict as dependent on perceiving incompatible goals. Central to conflict is the idea that there is a struggle over who has the power to make a decision (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). There is a dimension of mutuality to conflict. If a partner's actions did not impact the other, then "a person who is not dependent upon another—that is, who has no special interest in what the other does—has no conflict with that other person" (Braiker & Kelley, 1979, p. 137). In other words, engaging in conflict could be one partner who seeks change or influence, and another who resists. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, in one of the earliest studies of taboo topics, some partners complained about the inability to discuss a common taboo topic like relational status, while others find that keeping a topic taboo serves them well (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). If there are no changes in these kinds of relational power dynamics, a taboo topic may successfully be kept off the table (Rolloff & Johnson, 2001).

Conflict tends to cause uncertainty, and frequently involves the experience of turbulence, which can occur when those who are interdependent encounter a conflict in goal attainment (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Feeling in control of one's life is necessary for mental well-being and self-worth (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). As such, conflict commonly includes upsetting emotions like anger. However, the experience of anger can be functional (Smith Slep et al., 2016).

Although anger and conflict can be functional, the research on the impact of conflict is mixed. For example, the mere presence of conflict, even the frequency of conflict in general, may not be as associated with relational harm than other concurrent behaviors such as stonewalling and contempt (Gottman, 1993). Conversely, Driver and Gottman (2004) find that those who were able to sustain positive regard for each other, employ humor, and maintain positive affect tend to serve as relational protective factors. Prosocial behaviors appear to moderate the experience of conflict. These areas of research suggest that

positive affect can make a difficult situation better, and conversely, negative affect can make a difficult situation worse.

In general, as opposed to positive affect and positive regard, conflict associated with aggression may be related to more relational harm (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). For example, some people who possess views of fighting as positive may be desensitized from being able to recognize their own aggression or correctly interpret the aggression of others (Aloia & Solomon, 2015). For these reasons, embracing conflict wholesale as good may be a problematic position without regard for other concurrent circumstances. The *perception* of how the conflict could play out appears consequential and could even be more consequential than the *presence* of conflict (Crohan, 1992; Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). The frequency of conflict does not appear to be as predictive of relational consequences as attitudes towards the resolvability of conflict (Malis & Roloff, 2006). Partners who believe that conflict can be resolved tend to be associated with reporting marital happiness as opposed to those who believe conflict cannot be resolved. Additionally, those couples report feeling it is healthier to resolve conflict than avoid it (Crohan, 1992).

However, context also matters as there may be conditions under which conflict avoidance is useful and instrumental. In terms of general avoidant tendencies, some couples are functionally compatible if conflict avoidance is mutually preferable (Pike & Sillars, 1985). In another example, some couples factor in timing and may decide to postpone conflict to a time that is more conducive to a productive discussion (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). Conflict may also be postponed in the intermediate time period due to stress at the moment, like an acute illness. The tendency to avoid conflict and accommodate in the short-term is termed protective buffering (Coyne & Smith, 1991; Suls et al., 1997). Protective buffering is a form of coping that may be functional in the short-term, but may be associated with long-term consequences if problems continue unaddressed (Suls et al., 1997).

Though conflict avoidance may be functional in the moment and intermediate future, unresolved issues may have long-term consequences. A general tendency to avoid conflict has been found to be associated with lower relational satisfaction. For example, newlywed couples who believe in avoiding conflict in general reported feeling less happy in the relationship than those with less conflict avoidant attitudes (Crohan, 1992). Additionally, forms of information control like topic avoidance and having family secrets are also associated with lower relational satisfaction (Caughlin, 2004; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Vangelisti, 1994). Although short-term conflict can be associated with temporary dips in relational satisfaction, conflict over the long-term is seen as promoting overall relationship satisfaction, mutual understanding, trust and intimacy (Braiker & Kelley, 1979).

Individuals experiencing anger towards another may confront their partner after multiple perceived provocations (Baumeister et al., 1990), and only then may decide to speak out on a topic previously deemed as taboo (Roloff & Ifert, 2000; Roloff and Johnson, 2001). Speaking out could be functional as communicating a problem is associated with attenuating the consequences of mulling over a problem (Cloven & Roloff, 1991). Before engaging in conflict, some people rehearse what they would say, also known as imagined interactions (Honeycutt & Bryan, 2011; Honeycutt et al., 2015). In some situations where individuals feel threatened, they may decide to hold back or hold off on speaking up. Regardless of the presence of threat, individuals generally weigh the risks against the benefits of whether to confront another (Stutman & Newell, 1990).

However, for the purposes of personal safety, there are potentially more straightforward situations where conflict avoidance is necessary, such as in the presence or threat of aggression (e.g., Gelles & Straus, 1988; Stets & Straus, 1990). Additionally, continual arguing is associated with a relationship becoming destabilized, and as such, avoiding topics like complaints if there is a sufficient fear regard-

ing those consequences (Cloven & Roloff, 1991; Roloff & Johnson, 2001). For example, if a person needs to stay in a romantic relationship because of other socioeconomic concerns, they may decide to not speak of a topic deemed taboo. It would be difficult to understand if a person's long-term goal of accommodating an aggressor overwhelms the need to stand up for oneself in the moment or solve a potentially intractable relational problem. In another situation reintroducing a taboo topic could be seen as relationship repair as a relational maintenance strategy, and a means of increasing relational satisfaction (Dainton et al., 1994). Bringing taboo topics into the context of the research on the consequences of conflict and conflict avoidance helps to illustrate that treating topics as taboo could be seen as functionally protective depending on the context of particular, concurrent short-term and long-term goals. In sum, functional concerns and instrumental goals can play a role as romantic relationships and taboo topics do not exist in a vacuum.

Control and Credible Threat

To understand taboo topics as a kind of information control, it would be helpful to understand the nature of controlling behavior. The next section of this chapter will convey the need to examine the "control" aspect of "information control." There are acceptable forms of social control such as interpersonal influence and individual assertiveness (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006). The possession of influence over another is not inherently negative. On the contrary, the ability to influence another, especially in a state of interdependence, is necessary for goal and need attainment (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). The ability to influence others requires the use of compliance-gaining strategies that vary in their effectiveness as well as whether those attempts are more or less prosocial (e.g., Berger, 1985). Being a competent communicator is also associated with being successful in both possessing and exercising control of oneself and one's own environment (Parks, 1994). Conversely, lacking self-control is tied to being unsuccessful in verbal communication. For example, people rate individuals who communicate aggressively as being less credible and lacking valid arguments (Guerrero & Gross, 2014; Infante et al., 1992).

In addition to benefiting the individual, mutual interpersonal influence also has a significant role to play in the relational outcomes of satisfaction and commitment. For example, a related concept of influence is mutuality, such as both parties accepting influence. Mutuality is considered to be related to maturity in relationships:

The ability to develop relationally depends on mutual empathy, mutual empowerment, and responsibility to both self and others. It is shared positive power. Relational theory underlies effective conflict resolution, of the collaborative kind...When people work in teams in organizations, the ability to use mutual, or both/ and power, is necessary. Yet this kind of mutuality is often not valued as much as the more masculine either/or power. (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018, p. 115)

This quote exemplifies the use of power in a horizontal nature, like accepting mutual influence rather than the motive to use the vertical dimension of power that is more unilateral in nature. In fact, some definitions of power include possessing the ability to resist influence (Raven, 2008). In general, not accepting another's influence and bids for attention are generally associated with relational decline (Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 2000).

Rather than "both/and" power mentioned above, conflict commonly occurs as the result of a power struggle. Power struggles are at the top of the list of themes of some of the most intractable forms of

conflict (Miller et al., 2007). Power struggles may be out in the open in behavior that seeks out ways to shut down conflict in a manner that is clearly coercive (Dishion & Snyder, 2016). One definition of coercion can aid in the process of understanding the dark side of control as a means of obviating conflict: “As described in several key and classic volumes, coercion involves the use of aversive strategies to thwart conflict, aversive demands, or unpleasant tasks or situations” (Dishion & Snyder, 2016, p. 52).

The successful use of coercion by the sender of a message depends on the perception of a credible threat by the receiver (e.g., Dutton & Goodman, 2005). Coercive, controlling behavior early in the relationship could exist as a form of *incipient coercive control* (Johnson, 2008), that could gain prominence in a relationship, reinforcing coercive patterns, dynamics, and interactions over time. It is possible for topics to become taboo early in a relationship. This may happen after some period of time of serial arguing (Rolloff & Ifert, 2000) or an indirect, nonverbal indication that a topic is not to be discussed, such as with the silent treatment (e.g., Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006).

Understanding motive is especially important if one partner intends to control the other person as controlling behavior can be an early warning sign of abuse. If one person is able to exercise unilateral control, and aggression is present, this is a risk factor for serious harm (Johnson, 2008; Johnson & Leone, 2005). Isolated incidents of aggression are common in romantic relationships (Malik et al., 1997). However, in the United States, a pattern of intimate partner violence (IPV) can impact one in seven men (13.9%) and almost one in four women (23.2%; Black et al., 2011). A smaller proportion of the IPV population are subject to behavior that is intended to seek unilateral control by threatening and monitoring them (Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Black et al., 2011; Stark, 2013). This is termed *coercive control* (Stark, 2007) or *intimate terrorism* (Johnson, 2006, 2008). Understanding power and control is instrumental in examining more covert forms of aggression. This is exemplified by critiques of the 1st edition of the most widely used measure of aggression, the Conflict Tactics Scale, which found that the measure overemphasized conflict and did not adequately account for controlling behavior (Cook & Goodman, 2006). Controlling behavior is now seen as a key factor of creating risk assessments for interpersonal violence (Messing & Thaller, 2013), and may even be considered “the golden thread”, instrumental to understanding ties that can create a more accurate and reliable abuse risk assessments (Myhill & Hohl, 2019).

However, in terms of interpersonal control, control is a situated concept and difficult to define, conceptualize, and operationalize. For example, in reviewing the literature on dominance, Burgoon and Dunbar (2006) cite the challenge of discerning who has the power to control interactions, as dominance and power can be considered intrinsically perceived. In other words, power and control is often subjective and relative to the dynamics within the dyad. These insights also demonstrate how it can be difficult to observe. For example, an individual who enacts domineering behavior in observed interactions may appear to be more in control, however it could be the one with more relaxed behavior that could have more power in relational interactions (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006). In other words, measuring outward forms of dominance like domineering behavior as a means of *seeking* control is not necessarily an effective means of measuring the possession of control.

Put together, a picture of how taboo topics could be the tip of the iceberg may be made clearer. The next section will tend specifically to issues of power and how it relates to conflict avoidance and controlling behavior. Specifically, one area of topic avoidance that can help illustrate taboo topics situated within the context of power is the chilling effect.

Critical Perspectives

Power is a broad concept with many definitions. There are multiple bases of power (e.g., French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1990, 2008), theories of power (e.g., Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Lawler & Bacharach, 1987; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008), and methods of which to conceptualize and operationalize power (for a recent review, see Solomon & Roloff, 2019). Power is particularly relevant to taboo topics as it relates to topic avoidance in the form of the chilling effect. The chilling effect literature exemplifies how taboo topics can be situated within the context of power dynamics, and how related concepts underneath information control can be useful in terms of breadth and depth in exploring taboo topics.

Additionally, there are many ways to employ a critical perspective. Critical theories tend to involve the multitudes of ways in which power is constructed in ideological systems (Lannaman, 1991), institutions (e.g., gender; Wood, 1995; Mumby, 1993), and day-to-day communication (e.g., Suter, 2018). Power bestowed on individuals can also be iterative and bidirectional as forms of societal and interpersonal power can be mutually reinforced. For example, Moore and Manning (2019) state, “it might be beneficial to examine how power manifests in everyday, mundane interactions” (p. 44). One section of a chapter would not be enough space to convey the importance of incorporating critical theories, perspectives, and methods (see Moore, 2017; Moore & Manning, 2019; Suter, 2018; Suter & Norwood, 2017). As such, this section will demonstrate an illustration of how critical perspective could be applied by research that has included power dynamics into types of informational control.

Taboo topics can be aided by critical perspectives to have a clearer understanding of how power dynamics within relationship patterns can be impacted by exogenous factors. For example, individuals may be dependent on their partner for reasons outside of the relationship (e.g., raising children, financial constraints), *nonvoluntary dependence* (Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Nonvoluntary dependence is associated with relational stability (Crowley, 2017; Johnson, 1991), and as such, can complicate the ability to analyze traditional outcome variables like this and relational commitment. Without tending to internal and external factors concurrently, it would be difficult to see how the presumption of agency as a given makes it difficult to understand various forms of information control (Crowley, 2017).

Taboo topics can exist anywhere in society and throughout close relationships, but the chilling effect is a specific phenomenon that incorporates critical perspective into its assumptions in the sense that an imbalance of power has an impact on whether someone voices a complaint about another’s controlling behavior in romantic relationships (Aloia & Worley, 2019; Cloven & Roloff, 1993, 1994; Makoul & Roloff, 1998; Roloff & Cloven, 1990; Roloff & Solomon, 2002; Samp & Solomon, 2001; Solomon et al., 2004; Solomon & Samp, 1998; Worley, 2016; Worley & Aloia, 2018). The chilling effect is a related concept to taboo topics as both are forms of information control (Crowley, 2017), however, the withheld complaint of controlling behavior could also be considered a taboo topic. From a broader perspective, the goal of this section is to shed light on how imbalanced power dynamics may foster an absence of conflict and impede successful problem-solving. Specifically, the chilling effect will be explored as a means of understanding how information control constructs can incorporate power dynamics and how power can be operationalized. In terms of measuring power, the chilling effect typically employs methods and measures that tap into dependence power and punitive power.

Dependence power is related to the amount of autonomy maintained within the relationship, and whether a partner believes they have better alternatives. As such, dependence power would be strongest if a partner believes they do not have viable alternatives (Solomon et al., 2004; Rusbult and Martz, 1995).

The amount of dependence power that enables controlling behavior is associated with whether one partner believes the other would be willing to end the relationship. Solomon and Samp (1998) find that this form of power alone could be associated with perceiving problems in the relationship as less severe.

Punitive power refers to one partner's capacity and ability to punish another (Lawler & Bacharach, 1987) and is related to the other's general fear of harm or retaliation (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Solomon & Samp, 1998). In earlier research in the field of interpersonal violence, Gelles and Straus (1988) determine that partners would go out of their way to be proactive about avoiding any issues that could potentially elicit aggressive behavior from their partner. A critical point here is that any kind of conflict in an abusive relationship could result in aggression, however of particular concern is that which is perceived to directly threaten the aggressor's control of the relationship (Coleman & Straus, 1986). In this context, any complaint that could result in harm could possibly be considered a taboo topic.

These two forms of power help provide an understanding about whether a partner perceives a credible threat for non-compliance, resisting influence, expressing complaints, or voicing dissent. For example, Cloven and Roloff (1993) find that punitive power amplifies the dependence power's impact on the chilling effect. There is still more research necessary to ascertain under what conditions these forms of power may interact to achieve compliance, or whether there need only be a certain amount of one kind of power that can achieve unilateral control over another.

In the context of a power imbalance, an individual perceiving the threat of harm or loss may interpret behavior differently than others. For example, dependence power and punitive power are both positively associated with more benign attributions and negatively associated with ratings of the severity of hypothetical problems (Samp & Solomon, 2001; Solomon & Samp, 1998). More committed partners participate in more positive illusions, derogating and ignoring other alternative partners (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). In the context of a power imbalance, playing down problems by means of making generous attributions may continue to be at the expense of the less powerful partner. A more committed partner may be faced with shouldering the emotional burdens of their relationship, likely making more sacrifices in accommodating their less committed partner (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Concurrently, the more committed individual is less likely to discuss problematic issues in order to maintain that relationship (Rusbult et al., 1994). To draw a contrast, individuals who perceive their partners have relational alternatives are still likely to voice complaints if they perceive their partner is highly committed (Roloff & Cloven, 1990; Roloff & Johnson, 2001).

To be able to cope with relational instability, studies point to activities of mental discounting (e.g., Aloia & Worley, 2019; Makoul & Roloff, 1998; Roloff & Solomon, 2002; Samp & Solomon, 2001; Solomon et al., 2004; Solomon & Samp, 1998; Worley & Samp, 2016; Worley & Samp, 2018). This could be considered a way in which a person could convince themselves that serious relationship problems do not exist. As such, mental discounting can make issues related to topic avoidance, like the chilling effect and taboo topics, more difficult to examine. For example, Solomon et al. (2004) find less evidence of the chilling effect within married couples, and concluded that this may be a result of the less powerful partner minimizing and rationalizing grievances.

If the mention of a power imbalance is taboo and attempts are made to bring it out in the open (e.g., Roloff & Johnson, 2001), it may very likely be difficult or impossible to resolve, given that the issues most related to intractable conflict has to do with power struggles (Miller et al., 2007). If the person wants to stay in the relationship, their burden to bear is to keep a topic taboo (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). This may be especially so if conflict in the past resulted in the more powerful partner possessing the specific interaction goal of benefiting themselves by hurting their less powerful partner (e.g., Bevan,

2010). This also creates a challenge in recognizing more threatening taboo topics as they tend to be more implicit (Roloff & Ifert, 1998). For example, covert communication can often be indirect, such as communicative silence like the silent treatment or subtle forms of nonverbal communication like tone of voice, or use of threatening gestures (Pruitt, 1971; Wall, 1985). These examples demonstrate that there might even be topics that are so implicitly taboo that one could convince themselves over time that problems at the beginning are not serious. It is possible that if mental discounting is occurring, then a topic that could be a subject of serial arguing at the beginning (e.g., Malis & Roloff, 2006), then subsequently become a taboo topic (Roloff & Ifert, 1998), and may be later considered unimportant and hence not worth bringing back to the table (e.g., Roloff & Johnson, 2001).

Under certain power imbalanced dynamics, any grievances may be subject to becoming taboo topics. If arguing could harm the relationship (Roloff & Ifert, 1998) and there is fear that the relationship cannot withstand disagreement (Roloff & Johnson, 2001), it seems most topics of disagreement could be subject to becoming taboo. However, the existence of a power imbalance could indicate not just whether complaints are expressed (e.g., Samp & Solomon, 2001; Solomon & Samp, 1998), but whether complaints are even perceived. If this is the case, it is possible that a topic is so implicit it may have even ceased to exist as a perceived taboo topic. Sensitive topics may not be perceived that may otherwise exist as a known taboo topic or a source of open conflict in other relationships. A critical perspective can also trouble a “learned helplessness” narrative in aiding the understanding that downplaying the severity of conflict is how a less powerful person can exercise internal agency by reframing the issue in an otherwise helpless situation (i.e., the situation as being helpless, not the person). These are examples of why tending to issues of power is vital to understanding interpersonal conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018).

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter has demonstrated that taboo topics cannot be simplified in terms of the foundational dynamics, antecedents, and other concurrent factors that can be internal or external factors to the relationship. Other factors could serve to either create the conditions for a topic to become taboo or reinforce the topic staying off the table. Additionally, this chapter cited several examples that resisting confrontation and leaving a topic untouched may serve important, instrumental needs like personal safety. Taboo topics may be able to aid in relationship assessments but may also be a sign of deeper troubles that may or may not be resolved (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Miller & Roloff, 2006; Miller et al., 2007; Roloff & Johnson, 2001). With this in mind, future researchers should consider the following:

Researchers must consider cultural competence and positionality, especially in terms of one’s own ideology (Lannaman, 1991). For example, as a researcher in academia in the United States there is a risk of unintentionally assigning positive ideological value to individualistic notions of independence. The need to be culturally aware can help in understanding that some forms of dependence are very real constraints (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Breaking taboo may involve real loss of other aspects of their life. Questioning one’s positionality is important from a critical perspective. The level of reflection on the plethora of assumptions that could be made can be humbling, and maintaining curiosity for other internal and external variables to test could likely help move the field forward.

If tending to issues of power, it is important to avoid jumping to conclusions about the less powerful person. This is especially so if one is not aware of the big picture circumstantially, unlikely to be knowable to an outside observer. Additionally, empirical research design normally seeks to control external

variables, which makes the specificity of one person's circumstances challenge the generalizability. However, common themes may be found through clever research design and a variety of methodologies. As such, the rest of the recommendations of this section pertain to challenging other underlying assumptions. The next section will provide more specific recommendations in the form of directions for future research.

The first assumption to challenge is to assume the less powerful person in a relationship to be acting irrationally or helplessly (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Consider the possibility that it would be presumptuous to assume to know their legitimate lack of power in a situation (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006). This can lead to improper measurement of power, as well as doing a disservice to researchers by taking that logical shortcut. Instead, it would be helpful to first make the assumption that a person could be seen as acting rationally if an outside observer was aware of all of the circumstances involved in the bigger picture. A researcher should consider it a responsibility to acknowledge that it could be dangerous, or at least unhelpful, to assume irrational behavior without examining further. As seen in earlier sections of this chapter, conflict avoidant behaviors, like not bringing up taboo topics, could be considered a relational maintenance strategy (Leo et al., 2019). Conflict avoidant behavior would be rational if stonewalling is present, as conflict is not likely to be resolved, at least without intervention (Gottman, 1999; Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). If one wants to or feels like they need to stay in a relationship, motivated reasoning regarding conflict avoidance could be considered a practical approach given certain circumstances, such as having nonvoluntary forms of dependence.

Another assumption to question is the idea that someone is acting irrationally when they may be coping with exceptionally difficult circumstances. For example, after reflecting back on his career, stress and coping expert Lazarus (2000) defends the use of denial as functional. Lazarus challenged the assumption that denying problems was pathological or childish, and defended its use as self-protective by describing it as a functional means of coping in the face of threat, especially if that person is powerless or the threat unavoidable. As such, one recommendation to consider is the possibility that one may attempt to justify their own want or need to stay in a relationship for other reasons (e.g., Crowley, 2017; Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Additionally, to assign value to an individual's decision not to leave a threatening situation as irrational as a researcher is to risk projecting one's own cultural values onto the participants. Furthermore, think of one's own assumptions about how one would act in given circumstances—that one may also be subject to denial, and to think otherwise could be denial that anyone could be at risk of being powerless in a situation.

Within the field of interpersonal control, motivated reasoning amidst threat could be found in several studies. As mentioned earlier, an imbalance of power and a credible threat was associated with mental discounting of hypothetical problems (Samp & Solomon, 2001; Solomon & Samp, 1998). Roloff and Cloven (1990) express the ways in which control by a powerful other may result in creating a situation where the less powerful person could convince themselves not to make complaints regarding controlling behavior:

*Perhaps partners with superior alternatives exert control through their indifference (e.g., lack of affection, excessive independence, minimal respect, and interest in other romantic involvements), rather than through more direct or even indirect power tactics (cf. Folger & Poole, 1984). If their superior perceived alternatives to lead to the chilling effect, they do not have to act in a controlling fashion. **Their relational counterparts have persuaded themselves** [emphasis added]. (p. 72)*

Motivated reasoning may be a way in which individuals respond to threat by minimizing what would otherwise be a source of conflict. A commonly cited reason for not bringing a taboo topic back on the table is due to unimportance (Roloff & Johnson, 2001). This could be tied to how relationally threatening taboo topics can result in implicit agreement (Roloff & Ifert, 1998). Taken together, people who feel threatened may not be able to articulate complaints, let alone express them, if they have persuaded themselves otherwise. By this logic, choosing to avoid conflict may reduce feelings of powerlessness by persuading oneself that a complaint is not worth voicing. Insights such as these make studying forms of information control such as taboo topics important but difficult.

In sum, consider the critiques of presuming agency (e.g., Crowley, 2017) as well as the opposite tendency to assume an individual has none (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018; Rusbult & Martz, 1995), and how these underlying assumptions can be problematic and consequential in research. Consider the possibility of rational behavior in context, and that it may not be a mystery, but it is not straightforward or simple either. As such, it is the researcher's job to accommodate for what other variables could explain a given behavior. This is what can bring more depth and meaning to this area of inquiry.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Applying critical perspective is more than just incorporating issues relating to power into a study. Hopefully, future research can find more ways to incorporate different measures of power. A critical prism can also relate to, but is not limited to, epistemology, theory, methodology, and choice of research and demographic methods (e.g., race/ethnicity, marital status, parental status, socioeconomic status, etc.). The study of taboo topics could perhaps aid the literature by its potential to provide a glimpse of potentially problematic communication patterns earlier in dating relationships. Additional research could also help in understanding what happens before future harm and the confounding factors of nonvoluntary forms of dependence.

Nonvoluntary dependence is an important measure when assessing power imbalances. The literature mentioned in this chapter demonstrates how it would be difficult to understand topic avoidance in a power imbalance without accounting for forms of nonvoluntary dependence. For example, nonvoluntary dependence can stand alone as a variable associated with relational stability (Johnson, 1991). Those interested in research on this topic might consider how this could serve as a confounding factor if relational outcomes were to be equated with the health of the relationship. It is recommended that researchers in this area of inquiry carefully consider what variables need to be controlled for, to choose outcome variables carefully, and have appropriate rationale for its usage.

Additionally, cultural and demographic considerations are important in understanding any kind of research that involves forms of nonvoluntary dependence. Specifically, it would be difficult to generalize as college students are not as likely to cohabitate and have commingled their financial resources (Crowley, 2017; Rusbult & Martz, 1995). There simply needs to be more funding and other incentives to ensure a representative sample and to provide adequate compensation for certain populations like the vulnerable and hard-to-reach. Otherwise, the body of research is at risk of a dearth of insights that could be unique to those isolated (e.g., socially, geographically, culturally, economically, etc.). To generalize in any areas that touch these risk factors is to risk leaving some populations in the dark, as well as jeopardizing the accuracy of research in this area by generalizing based off of the experiences of college students.

However, college students can still be studied in terms of dating and early relationship interactions. In the context of early interactions in a relationship, taboo topics might have the potential to serve as a canary in the coal mine for relationship problems down the road. Future research could include inquiries into whether there are problematic taboo topic patterns such as an increased number of taboo topics, extending the work on the negative consequences of reintroducing taboo topics (e.g., Roloff & Johnson, 2001). Currently, the line of research that exists already can aid practitioners, such as the conditions under which taboo topics could be brought back to the table (e.g., Roloff & Johnson, 2001).

Additionally, the critical perspectives mentioned in this chapter support a recent call to rethink how to study forms of information control, pointing at critical issues such as challenging presumption of the personal agency of individuals, as well as the need to cease privileging explicit acts of information control (Crowley, 2017). Again, most relationships have some kind of topic that is off limits, but in context, taboo topics may have the potential to help researchers who study distressed relationships.

Researching taboo topics can also be helpful as an observable behavior within distressed relationships that involve the hostile avoidance of stonewalling. If there is a hostile avoidance of problems in a relationship, this specific kind of avoidance can predict relationship demise (Gottman, 1999). Stonewalling is also considered to be a power tactic used as a form of controlling behavior, given the refusal to engage or accept influence, regardless of how one might be approached (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). A similar behavior, the silent treatment, can be insidious as refusing to engage and communicate can serve as a “symbolic form of threat comes from silence, which can convert its target from personhood to nonperson (or object status, with concomitant loss of belongingness and protection accorded members of the same social unit)” (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006, p. 287). Researching taboo topics as a measurable form of topic avoidance could aid the understanding of avoidant behaviors and other forms of information control.

Understanding controlling behavior is seen as important in examining whether abuse exists and under what conditions it can develop, as demonstrated earlier in this chapter. Examining patterns of information control may be a way to understand such complicated and nuanced issues in relationships. Additionally, these differences are necessary to understanding that there are a variety of relational patterns that can exist. It is critical to understand that there are different types of relationships (e.g., Kelly & Johnson, 2008), and that differences in this area could make attempts to generalize consequential. Instead, researchers need to continue to provide research questions that can complicate simplistic notions of avoidant behaviors and disrupt a unidimensional understanding of relationships.

Lastly, consider searching for patterns in dyadic communication that promote conflict avoidance that are not related to couple problematic dynamics. For example, it would be dangerous to assume the perception of threat or the presence of fearing conflict is necessarily attributed to the power dynamics and controlling behavior mentioned in this chapter. For example, a fear of conflict can be associated with familial conflict patterns from childhood (Aloia & Worley, 2019; Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). The chilling effect is common for people who greatly fear conflict, which could occur regardless of the other partner (Roloff & Cloven, 1990). A person could even stand to benefit from their partner not bringing up a source of contention, a kind of opportunism that does not equate to a pattern of control either. In other words, where there is control, there is likely to be conflict avoidance, but conflict avoidance does not necessarily predict control. This is why it is important to study these constructs together to get a more accurate measure. In other words, it is important to understand not only what is problematic, but also to avoid overgeneralizing or problematizing certain aversive behaviors in isolation from other factors.

CONCLUSION

The implications of this chapter are clear: these are subtle yet insidious dynamics that constitute an environment where dissent can be squashed and speaking up could be consequential. Conflict avoidance is not only rational, it may be imperative in some situations. Research in this area can aid practitioners in counseling and education sectors on the subtleties and nuances of early warning signs of controlling behavior in dating relationships.

Answers to these research questions could potentially provide valuable insights for applied settings. For example, if a couple approaches a counselor for services, the counselor should first assess issues of power and control, similar to the methods of discernment counseling. The dynamics of abuse and controlling behavior outlined in this chapter may illuminate that interventions like counseling may be ineffective at best, with the possibility of being extremely dangerous in other cases. Assessing issues of power imbalances and coercive, controlling behaviors should be carried out as any intervention in those cases run the risk of extreme harm. A counselor should be able to understand their limits if even carrying out services at all could put one of the partners at risk of harm.

In exploring the importance of the nuances necessary for a sophisticated approach to studying taboo topics, it is worth reiterating that the informational control concepts mentioned in this chapter can exist in any relationship. In other words, the frequency of conflict or even occurrences of controlling behavior are not necessarily problematic in isolation. One needs the whole picture, or at least some basics about the foundation, to be able to understand relational dynamics. Perhaps a thoughtful approach to research design can situate taboo topics to be the identifiable tip of the iceberg in understanding the nature of different types of relationships.

Lastly, there is a pervasive public concern regarding the presence of conflict and not enough curiosity for the functions conflict serves. Managing and coping with conflict constructively can be a part of promoting healthy relationships and individual well-being. Researching taboo topics in context may be one way to further the understanding of the complexities between conflict and the effects of mitigation. Doing so may help bring to light that a certain amount of control might result in living under a milieu of taboo.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Chilling Effect: Withholding complaints about controlling behavior.

Coercive Control: A specific pattern of coercive, controlling behavior. This usually includes attempts to control more than one area of someone's life.

Dependence Power: The extent to which one feels more dependent than their partner.

Nonvoluntary Dependence: Dependence on a partner for reasons unrelated to the relationship.

Perceived Resolvability: The belief an interpersonal conflict cannot be resolved.

Punitive Power: The capacity one person, party, or organization to punish, and/or the perception associated with fear of harm or retaliation.

Taboo Topics: Topics that are considered off-limits by at least one person.

Chapter 3

Taboo Language: Patriarchal Oppression of Women's Use of Profanity

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ABSTRACT

As taboo language among women and men becomes more common, an understanding of how taboo language is used is necessary. Unfortunately, studies have returned mixed results at once finding taboo language is associated with negative emotions while also finding taboo language is associated with positive emotions. What is understood, however, is the inequity between the genders in relation to taboo language usage. Taboo words and expressions are given weight by cultural norms that have long been established by the patriarchal standards in the United States. These standards trace their roots back to the Puritan and Victorian eras when society dictated that men held more power than women. This chapter explores the literature on taboo language while examining the dyadic representations of the patriarchal norms that punish women for using taboo speech while ignoring taboo language usage by men.

INTRODUCTION

When I was seven-years-old, my two-year-old male cousin called our grandmother a “witch.” My family, including my parents, laughed at my cousin’s expletive. Ever the one to be the center of attention, I proceeded to call my mother a witch. To my complete dismay, my remark did not elicit the same amused response from my family members. It would be the only time in childhood that I would suffer corporal punishment at the hand of my father. In that moment, I could not understand the difference between my cousin’s playful insult and my own. My cousin, in his cherubic masculinity, was embraced and covered in kisses, while I, with my less-than-ladylike language, was covered in tears and red welts. Little did I know that the patriarchal society I was born into earned me that punishment. Though my seven-year-old self could not identify it at the time, the cognitive dissonance I experienced trying to reconcile being told

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I could be anything or do anything I wanted when I grew up, while my language, body, and behaviors were policed based solely on my gender, was considerable.

Taboo words and expressions are given weight by the cultural norms that have long been established by the patriarchal standards in the United States. These patriarchal standards trace their roots back to the Puritan and Victorian eras when society dictated that men had more power than women by the virtue of men being male. Given this inequity between the genders, men were and continue to be permitted to use taboo language with little-to-no ramifications. While these social norms excuse taboo speech in men, they, sadly, do not excuse taboo language usage in women. On this subject, Hughes (2015) demonstrates that “American English is now the variety showing the most innovation in swearing and foul language... [but] within this speech community there has developed the censoring force of political correctness” (p. xxi). The political correctness that is associated with taboo words and expressions in the United States is due in part to the patriarchal society’s objective in marginalizing women and placing higher value on men. Taboo language is not taboo due to its intrinsic value. At their core, taboo words and expressions are considered taboo primarily because society has deemed them as such, highlighting the division between genders, age, social positions, and class ranks (Hughes, 2015).

Though taboo language is an integral part of language and language development, not all taboo language is created equally. Within taboo speech there are different levels and types of taboo words and expressions. For example, “darn” and “damn” just like “shoot” and “shit” express the same general emotions. However, darn and shoot are considered less offensive and are often used by individuals who do not wish to be considered coarse. While darn and shoot might be considered taboo based on the speaker’s age or gender, for example, a two-year-old who yells shoot might be reprimanded by their parent, damn and shit are considered taboo regardless of the speaker’s age or gender.

Types of taboo language include blasphemy (i.e., goddamn, Jesus Christ); sexual and ancestral references (i.e., cunt, bastard); excretion and scatology (i.e., piss, shit); and ethnic, racial, and gender slurs (i.e., bitch). Slurs are words that are utilized in an effort to incense subsets of a population of marginalized individuals. The purpose of a slur is to act as an instrument of division which aims to stigmatize individuals by treating them as less than human. Slurs can cause a significant amount of not only emotional but also mental damage. According to Bergen (2016), slurs are given the most power due to their ability to impart the most harm. While a deep understanding of slurs and their usage is important, particularly given their substantial social impact and connotations, slurs will not be referenced, nor will the weight of these words be taken into consideration in this chapter.

In an effort to examine taboo language usage in the United States, this chapter aims to explore the literature on taboo language. More specifically, this chapter will examine the dyadic representations of the patriarchal norms that punish women for using taboo speech while ignoring its usage in men. This chapter will examine the definitions and roots of taboo language, provide a short history of taboo speech in the United States, consider why and how taboo language is utilized, reflect on the normative barriers that impact taboo speech usage, before finally providing several examples of instances in which women have been criticized for their utilization of taboo language.

WHAT IS TABOO LANGUAGE?

Principally, taboo language is a harmless social construct (Bergen, 2016; Read, 1934). Deemed unacceptable through a population’s accepted cultural norms and societal expectations (Jay, 1999), the taboo

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nature of a word simply does not lie in the word itself. Instead, the taboo lies in the “attitudes that people have towards these words” (Read, 1934, p. 264).

Taboo Language Defined

Since Patrick’s (1901) study on the psychology of taboo language usage, taboo language has been identified by several names including profanity, obscenity or obscene language, bad words or bad language, cursing or curse words, and swearing. In addition to the different naming conventions, taboo language also has a multitude of definitions. Initially, taboo words and expressions were associated with blasphemy, having their roots in religious associations. Eventually, however, taboo words and expressions would come to include words connected to the bodily functions associated with the sexual and excremental processes. This is significant given the United States is often viewed as being sexually repressed.

One of the earliest definitions of taboo speech refers to it as an “ejaculatory or exclamatory use of a word or phrase” (Patrick, 1901, p. 114). This definition of taboo language focuses primarily on religious and sacred objects and outlines seven classes of taboo language, including the names of God, angels, and devils; names connected with sacred rites; names of saints, biblical characters, and holy persons; names of sacred spaces; words associated with the time after death; vulgar words; and expletives (Patrick, 1901). The use of taboo words and expressions was believed to be “a primitive and instinctive form of reaction to a situation which threatens in some way the well-being of the individual,” which would often complement anger or a high degree of emotion (Patrick, 1901, p. 124).

Moving away from the divine and toward the corporeal, Read (1934) contends that taboo speech “has its root in the fear of the mysterious power of the sex impulse” (p. 266). The author notes that taboo language provides the speaker with a “fearful thrill” from “speaking the forbidden” (Read, 1934, p. 264). Steadman (1935) adds that taboo speech also includes words associated with disease, animal and insect names, dirtiness, and odors. While Mohr (2013) argues that taboo words and expressions reference those “body parts, actions, and excretions that culture demands we conceal” (p. 6).

Taboo language, which has been regulated since Biblical times, also includes references to animal names and psychological, physical, or social deviations; ancestral allusions; vulgar terminology; and slang (Jay, 2009). Referencing its Anglo-Saxon roots, Jay and Janschewitz (2012) maintain that the taboo words and expressions that are in vogue in modern times are often over hundreds of years old. For example, fuck is believed to date back to the 1400s, with its first appearance in a dictionary occurring in 1598 (Dictionary.com, 2018).

According to Feldman et al. (2017) and Foote and Woodward (1973), taboo language is merely taboo due to situational factors. This means that taboo words and expressions find themselves outside the boundaries of what society deems as acceptable. Taboo speech is not always considered insulting and can have both negative and positive connotations (Jay, 1999; Stapleton, 2020). For example, one person remarking on another person’s appearance with, “Shit, you look great!” is both complimentary and positive.

Taboo Language Learned

Children learn taboo words and expressions at a very young age. Though taboo language usage in young children differs from that of adults, children begin to use taboo words and expressions by age 2, with an adult-like usage by ages 11 or 12 (Jay & Janschewitz, 2012). It is believed that children learn taboo

language from their parents as well as through socialization with their peer groups (Jay & Janschewitz, 2012; Read, 1934).

Though the use of taboo speech is essential to language, usage is often not without its consequences. Children learn when it is and is not appropriate to use taboo language. This occurs when a child is punished by their parents or teachers or stigmatized by their peer groups after using taboo speech. In this regard, children not only begin to learn how to censor themselves from using taboo language, but as they get older, they also begin to censor those around them who use taboo words and expressions (Bergen, 2016; Read, 1934). This censoring is passed on to the individual's own children, who in turn censor their children, who censor their children, and so on.

Given that expectations differ between the genders, males and females are socialized differently as children. This limits young children's opportunities (Mulvey & Killen, 2015), which in turn is impacted by the societal ideologies that dictate that taboo speech by its very nature is more acceptable for boys than it is for girls. As such, gender plays an essential role in how taboo language usage is censored in children (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Lakoff, 1973). Where boys are rewarded for acting and speaking coarsely, girls are compelled to exhibit self-control or face potentially severe repercussions if they fail to do so. Girls, who are expected to act like a lady, must resign themselves to conduct that falls within the boundaries of society's views on how females should behave (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Lakoff, 1973; Wood, 2019). In this manner, girls are expected to "shrink themselves" in comparison to boys, which not only impacts a girl's physical and intellectual abilities, but also their language choices (Eltahawy, 2019, p. 57).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TABOO LANGUAGE IN THE UNITED STATES

Though it has almost always been deemed improper for women to use taboo language, historically, it has been deemed fashionable for men to use taboo words and expressions (Patrick, 1901). However, by the late-nineteenth century the use of taboo language by both genders had fallen out of fashion (Fine & Johnson, 1984). In 1901, one of the earliest studies on the use of taboo speech which aimed to examine the root cause of taboo language usage by men was published (Patrick, 1901). Though over a century has passed since that publication and the use of taboo words and expressions by both genders has expanded, scholars still consider the use of taboo language in the United States to be a "major societal issue" (Rassin & Muris, 2005, p. 1670). Furthermore, researchers argue that taboo language can cause severe social issues in the home, school, and workplace (Jay, 2009).

The acceptance of taboo speech usage in society has oscillated throughout history (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019). During medieval times, the use of taboo language among men was considered acceptable. However, as the Puritans migrated from Europe to the United States, they brought with them the beliefs that taboo speech is immoral (Hughes, 2015). The Puritan era beliefs regarding taboo language would carry over to the Victorian era, and words and expressions that were considered taboo would be shunned (Hughes, 2015; Mohr, 2013).

The banishment of taboo language became evident through the printing of dictionaries during the eighteenth century (Dictionary.com, 2018). As many dictionaries were intended to be used by school children, printers omitted words that were considered taboo (Read, 1934). For example, the first dictionary to be printed in the United States, Samuel Johnson, Jr.'s, *A school dictionary, being a compendium*

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of the latest and most improved dictionaries (1798), omitted words “without which no person can either write, or speak...with purity or elegance” (Read, 1934, p. 272).

By the mid-nineteenth century, many of the taboo words and expressions that are in use today, were being utilized in much of the same way (Mohr, 2013). However, the Comstock Act of 1873 made it illegal to sell, lend, give away, possess, exhibit, or publish any publication which included taboo language (Library of Congress, n.d.). Individuals convicted of breaking this law could be sentenced to six months to five years of hard labor in a penitentiary or fined \$100 to \$2,000, roughly \$2,275 to \$45,000 in today's dollars.

While it was still considered inappropriate for women to use taboo language in the early twentieth century, scholars argue that it was the advent of World War I in 1914 which brought an increase in the frequency of taboo language into everyday speech (Mohr, 2013; Read, 1934). However, it would take the Vietnam War in 1955 and the Women's Liberation Movement in 1967 to usher in a new period of taboo language usage in the United States (Fine & Johnson, 1984). Not only would the use of taboo words and expressions in public among men increase, but women would also begin to use taboo language publicly (Hughes, 2015; Mohr, 2013).

During this time, two landmark cases would further set the stage for taboo language acceptance in the United States. The first case was brought against the U.S. Post Office by Grove Press, Inc., in 1960 when, under the Comstock Act, the Post Office seized copies of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) for including taboo language (Grove Press, Inc., v. Christenberry, 1960). The Circuit Judge in this case found in favor of Grove Press, Inc., which was a significant blow to the Comstock Act.

The second case, *Cohen v. California*, came before the Supreme Court in 1971. In response to the ongoing war in Vietnam, Paul Robert Cohen wore a jacket which displayed the phrase “Fuck the Draft” as he walked through a Los Angeles Courthouse in 1968 (*Cohen v. California*, 1971). Cohen, who was arrested and sentenced to 30 days in prison, argued his First and Fourteenth Amendment rights were violated as he was simply expressing his thoughts on the war (*Cohen v. California*, 1971). The Supreme Court found in favor of Cohen, arguing that his right to freedom of speech was infringed upon, which ultimately paved the way for future taboo language cases in the United States.

While these cases and other similar cases have led to the repeal or amendment of parts of the Comstock Act, the Act remains law. However, the Supreme Court continues to uphold American citizen's First Amendment right of the freedom of speech. This was the case in 2017 when Brandi Levy, a 14-year-old Pennsylvania high school student, brought a case to the Supreme Court. After not making the varsity cheerleading team, Levy in her anger posted “Fuck school, fuck softball, fuck cheer, fuck everything” on social media (*Mahanoy Area School District v. B. L.*, 2021; Roebuck, 2021). Though Levy posted the missive outside of school hours and off school grounds, the school suspended her from the cheerleading team for one year. Levy took her case to the Supreme Court, which found that the teenager's First Amendment rights were violated by the school (*Mahanoy Area School District v. B. L.*, 2021; Roebuck, 2021).

UNDERSTANDING TABOO LANGUAGE USAGE

Since 1901, studies on taboo language have either aimed to identify why individuals use taboo language or to explain the perception of taboo language usage and the individuals who use it. Scholars have established both positive and negative motivations for using taboo language (Jay, 1999, 2009; Mohr, 2013; Stapleton, 2020). These motivators include anger (Fine & Johnson, 1984; Jay, 1999; Patrick,

1901; Rassin & Muris, 2005; Rieber et al., 1979), humor (Jay, 1999; Jay & Janschewitz, 2012), and habit (Fine & Johnson, 1984; Rassin & Muris, 2005; Rieber et al., 1979); or to be shocking or insulting (Jay, 1999; Rassin & Muris, 2005) or to alleviate pain or tension (Fine & Johnson, 1984; Mohr, 2013; Rassin & Muris, 2005).

According to Jay (2009), there are approximately 70 different taboo words and expressions used in the English language. The author contends that the top ten taboo words have remained predominantly the same over the course of a 20-year period from 1986 to 2006. The top 10 words include “*fuck, shit, hell, damn, goddamn, Jesus Christ, ass, oh my god, bitch, and sucks*” (Jay, 2009, p. 156).

Mohr (2013) identified six words that linguists argue are considered the most taboo in the English language, noting that English’s most offensive words are often used in a nonliteral sense. These words include “*cunt, fuck, cock (or dick), ass, shit, and piss*” (p. 17). Though there is some overlap between Jay (1999) and Mohr (2013), Mohr (2013) includes piss as taboo, while Jay (1999) does not. Jay (1999) does agree, however, that cunt and cock, in the form of cocksucker, have a place on the list most taboo words, but argues these highly offensive words occur intermittently in everyday speech.

Most scholars agree that fuck is one of the most taboo words in the English language (see Jay, 2009; Mohr, 2013; Rassin & Muris, 2005; Wood, 2019). Dictionary.com (2018) notes that the word’s countless uses also makes fuck one of the most common words in the English language. Mohr (2013) argues that fuck is able to “access one of our deepest taboos and bring it to light in a way that no other word could or can” (p. 7). Wood (2019) adds that fuck’s effectiveness lies not only in the fact that it is taboo, but also in its ability to deny power from the listener.

In July 2020, a reporter overheard Representative Ted Yoho refer to Representative Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez as a “fucking bitch” after they ran into each other on the steps of the Capitol Building in Washington, DC (Lillis, 2020). Yoho’s slight against Ocasio-Cortez aimed to deny Ocasio-Cortez her power as one of the more famous members of Congress. Though *The Hill* attributed the remarks to Yoho and several news outlets reported on the commentary, in their initial reporting, *The New York Times* chose to refer to the comment as a “pair of expletives” (Broadwater, 2020a, 2020b). It was not until Ocasio-Cortez took to the House floor and spoke the words out loud that *The New York Times* finally put them in print (Broadwater & Edmondson, 2020). While Ocasio-Cortez was merely repeating Yoho’s commentary and said the taboo language in an effort to bring light to how women are treated both within Congress and the United States, *The New York Times* referred to Ocasio-Cortez’s speech as “norm-shattering” while continuing to attribute it as a “sexist vulgarity” to Yoho (Broadwater & Edmondson, 2020, para. 2). This is an example of the power of fuck and the differential treatment that men and women receive when using taboo language.

It is the power that fuck and the other taboo words and expressions hold that makes them some of the most suppressed and policed words and expressions in the English language (Bergen, 2016; Hughes, 2015; Wood, 2019). Taboo language’s power to offend is determined by several attributes. The most obvious of which is the word itself (Jay, 1999, 2009). For example, a speaker who chooses to use damn in conversation would arguably offend fewer listeners than a speaker who opts to use fuck. The speaker’s tone of voice when using taboo words or expressions also provides the language its power (Jay, 2009). In modern times, for example, bitch has achieved a colloquial, almost endearing affectation. Friends may refer to each other as bitch, as in, “Bitch! Are we going out tonight?” However, if those same friends are in the midst of an argument and one friend calls the other a bitch, the tone of anger in the speaker’s voice will indicate that bitch is not being used in an endearing manner.

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The level of offensiveness taboo language conveys depends on the speaker-listener relationship (Jay, 2009; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Additionally, the utilization of taboo language is found to be more tolerable if the speaker and listener share the same gender (Jay, 2009; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Moreover, it is not only expected that speakers do not use taboo language in formal settings (Jay, 1999), but taboo language is also discouraged by individuals who have higher social rankings than those below them (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019). For example, teachers who are ranked higher socially than students will often discourage the use of taboo language by students.

Cultural norms dictate that it is often socially acceptable for men to use intense language but not women (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Lakoff, 1973). As a result, women tend to have a stronger reaction to taboo language and use taboo language less frequently than men (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Rieber et al., 1979). This aids in the creation of two distinct languages: women's language and men's language (Lakoff, 1973). Women's language, which objectifies women, finds its foundation in denying women the means of expressing themselves in a forceful manner (Lakoff, 1973). This objectification is enforced by both men and women and sustains the patriarchal attributes which deny women the means of strongly expressing themselves.

Rassin and Muris (2005) note that individuals who use taboo language understand they will not achieve their goals solely by using taboo words and expressions. Instead, the authors argue that taboo language can help individuals strengthen an argument (Rassin & Muris, 2005). I would argue, however, that men use taboo language to not only differentiate themselves from women but also because, unlike women, cultural norms provide men the freedom to use taboo language to symbolize their power within the patriarchy.

NORMATIVE BARRIERS

Hughes (2015) contends that Puritanism has been "vigorously thrown off, especially in the period since the 1960s" (p. xxii). Jay (1999) argues that "women can curse more openly in public and in the modern workplace, and men can no longer use obscenity as freely as in the past" (p. 166). However, taboo language continues to be given weight by the cultural norms that have long been established by the patriarchal standards in the United States. For example, in 2015, Mike Huckabee, former governor of Arkansas, publicly castigated women in New York for using fuck in a professional setting (Henderson, 2015). While Huckabee noted that it was shocking that both men and women use taboo language in a professional setting, he chose to call out the women by noting it was trashy behavior (Henderson, 2015). While Patrick (1901) bemoaned the use of taboo speech by men, over a century later this example illustrates it is still more acceptable for men to use taboo language than it is for women.

Since men can use taboo language with little fanfare, taboo speech is still viewed primarily as a masculine endeavor. This is indicative of men, by sheer virtue of being male, possessing more power than women (Durham & Kellner, 2012; Eltahawy, 2019; Lakoff, 1973; Wood, 2019). Consequently, those in positions of authority, such as parents, teachers, and governments, are expected to not only instill but to also reinforce the patriarchal norms that denounce taboo language usage by women (Bergen, 2016; DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019).

Ultimately, women's language denies women the opportunity to express themselves in the same manner as men (Lakoff, 1973), and the use of taboo language by women impacts the listener's impression of the speaker (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Stapleton, 2020). However, it is unclear how those impres-

sions are actually impacted. DeFrank and Kahlbaugh (2019), for example, found that taboo language usage equates to less favorable impressions of the speaker, particularly when it comes to “intelligence, trustworthiness, proneness to anger, deviancy, politeness, offensiveness, aggressiveness, and likeability” (p. 136). However, Feldman et al. (2017) found that taboo language usage has a positive correlation with honesty on an individual level and integrity on a societal level, and Stapleton (2002) argues that taboo language usage can “enhance speaker evaluations” (p. 383). These findings directly counter DeFrank and Kahlbaugh’s (2019) finding, leading one to question which finding is valid.

Still, it is worth noting that trial attorney and behavioral analyst Wendy L. Patrick (2021) contends that men find women who use taboo language to be unattractive. This line of argument would imply that a woman’s physical appearance should be the primary concern of women in their choice of speech. As a trial attorney, Patrick (2021) may be taking this stance as a way to prepare women who have to go to trial, particularly since Patrick (2021) adds “the best practice is to err on the side of caution, and assume that when it comes to the relationship between profanity and positive impression, less is more” (para. 9). However, one can argue that as a trial attorney, Patrick (2021), in her elevated role in society, is also enforcing patriarchal social norms.

The inequities that exist in the English language imply that women should be considered inferior to men. This is accomplished via terminology which creates the pretense that women exist only to be defined by men (Lakoff, 1973). For example, at no point in a man’s life does his title change. However, when a woman marries, she becomes defined by that marriage and that man through the adoption of the new title Mrs., which is often followed by the man’s name. Though one could argue that Ms. eliminates this issue, this title has only been in regular use since the 1970s. Though female identity is impacted by these language variables, a woman’s identity also encompasses her personal beliefs, norms, and behaviors (Jay, 1999). Throughout her life, cultural norms impact those beliefs, norms, and behaviors, and as a young child, a woman is taught that she is held to a different standard than her male counterparts. One of the norms that reinforces this thinking is the structure of the English language. Masculine word forms tend to be viewed more positively than feminine word forms, which in turn impacts women’s importance and role in society (Koupal et al., 2014; Lakoff, 1973). An older individual who is unmarried, for example, has two different names with two different connotations based on gender. For men, that word is “bachelor,” and for women, it is “spinster.” Though each word indicates an unmarried older individual, the male version is celebrated by patriarchal societies, while the female version is shunned.

Mass media plays a significant role in disseminating normative information to the public on a regular basis. It is through mass media messaging, such as messaging that is found on television and in the news, movies, music, and advertising that cultural norms and societal expectations are communicated and social discourse is maintained (Durham & Kellner, 2012). By preserving the patriarchal status quo through upholding gender norms, mass media continues to reinforce these expectations by ensuring that the patriarchy continues to dominate the societal strata. For example, the trope of the “out-of-control ‘train-wreck girl!’” is often utilized by the media to warn female viewers and readers of what behaviors are to be avoided in society (Wood, 2019, p. 611). This trope communicates to the audience that respectability is important and “this is not the kind of woman you should admire” or aspire to emulate (Eltahawy, 2019, p. 75).

The power imbalance that occurs between the genders and which is permeated through the media, may lead to women feeling as if they must acquiesce to the patriarchal norms. Though men rarely face repercussions for using taboo language (Jay, 1999), women are taught to refrain from using taboo speech because not doing so could risk significant social ramifications. For example, a woman who uses taboo

language and faces a fallout among her peers might be stigmatized and excluded from her peer group (Mulvey & Killen, 2015).

FUCK THE PATRIARCHY

The Victorian sensibilities of the mid- to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries dictate that while it is acceptable for a man to use taboo language it is unacceptable for a man to use such language in the presence of a woman (Hughes, 2015). It is also deemed unacceptable for a woman to use taboo language altogether (Hughes, 2015). For this reason, one of the earliest studies to differentiate taboo language usage between the genders was not published until 1935 (Steadman, 1935).

Wood (2019) laments, “composure, which – for good reason – public women have carefully crafted in order to be taken seriously by cis-gendered, white, straight, middle-class men does not always seem to work, because the rules of ‘affective (in)justice’ seem to be constantly shifting” (p. 613). Though the constantly shifting rules make adherence tenuous, one could argue that it is not in actuality the constantly shifting rules that are the issue at hand. Rather, it is the patriarchal culture and its associated norms that force the rules to shift which are the underlying issue. While women continue to abide by the norms set in place by the patriarchy, the rules will continue to work against equality in language between the genders. As such, the root cause of this issue must be addressed.

In one of the only research studies to explore why women utilize taboo language, Rassin and Muris (2005) hypothesized that there would be a positive correlation between women’s swearing and aggression and that swearing was indicative of unhappiness, frustration, and negative life satisfaction. While the authors found that women swear to express negative emotions, they also found that there is no correlation between swearing and negative life satisfaction (Rassin & Muris, 2005). What is notable about this study, however, is not the findings themselves. Instead, what should be taken away from this investigation is that two male researchers hypothesized that women who swear must be unhappy in life.

The patriarchal policies that police women’s language do so in an effort to enforce civility and decorum among women, while ignoring such attributes among men. For example, a woman who utters a well needed or deserved fuck in the company of others might receive a stern look or a listener might reprimand her with the dreaded “Language!” in an effort to remind her that she is a lady in polite company. This was no better illustrated than in 2017 when 13-year-old Millie Bobby Brown tweeted a photo of herself as Eleven, the character she portrays on the popular Netflix show *Stranger Things*. Brown, who was dressed in 1980s attire, tagged the tweet “Bitchin,” a popular 1980s colloquialism and a line she spoke in the show (Hunt, 2017). Shortly after Brown tweeted the photo, Netflix US responded to her tweet with a tweet of their own in which they simply replied, “Language” (Hunt, 2017). Though the responses to Netflix US’ tweet indicate the levity that was assumed to be intended on Netflix US’ part, those whose speech has been policed with the reply “Language!” may understand the nuance of Netflix US’ response.

This exchange between Brown and Netflix US is further notable given the utilization of female television and movie characters of questionable moral standards who use taboo language. These characters are often utilized by mass media to regulate female language by stigmatizing women who use taboo words and expressions. Cultural norms, which are developed and maintained through social discourse, are perpetuated, and strengthened through the mass media (Durham & Kellner, 2012). These norms dictate that women must avoid taboo language. By furtively enforcing these proper and improper mannerisms, the mass media continually reinforces that women who use taboo language are part of the out-group.

Maintaining the patriarchal status quo through upholding the male norms that have been in existence in the United States since its founding, mass media continues to reinforce these norms by ensuring that the patriarchy continues to dominate societal expectations.

It is not through coincidence that many taboo words and expressions are representations of female body parts or sexual acts. Men have conceived these words to vividly describe what is owned and controlled by women but what men derive pleasure from. Yet women are expected not to lend voice to these words for fear of being viewed as ill-mannered or disgraceful (Eltahawy, 2019; Hughes, 2015). Instead, this language implies male prejudice and privilege which is used to control women's voices and bodies (Hughes, 2015; Koupal et al., 2014). By reclaiming these taboo words or using them against the patriarchy, women make the decision to reject the power of the male-centered society and liberate themselves from the inequitable social prohibitions on their language (Fine & Johnson, 1984). This is particularly noteworthy since, as Eltahawy (2019) argues, "decorum rules...were created by men and for men to control a place that they imagined would always be for and about men" (p. 69).

IMPLICATIONS

Due in part to patriarchal social norms, a woman who holds an elevated position in society often becomes newsworthy when using taboo language. In recent years, several female politicians have made headlines for their use of taboo speech. What makes these stories particularly noteworthy, however, is not only the fact that the stories are critical of the women who use taboo language, but the stories are often written by male journalists.

One such example of this intolerance occurred in June 2017 after Senator Kirsten Gillibrand spoke at the Personal Democracy Forum at New York University. Gillibrand used fuck twice during her speech (Nazaryan, 2017). Though this was not the first time Gillibrand used taboo language in a speech, in a *Newsweek* article devoted solely to Gillibrand's use of fuck, writer Alexander Nazaryan (2017) argued that Gillibrand would "have to tone down her cursing" if she wanted to be the 2020 Democratic Presidential candidate (para. 1).

This story on Senator Gillibrand is notable given that almost four years later, Nazaryan (2021) would write an article recollecting his time as a journalist during the Trump administration and would fail to denounce any of President Donald J. Trump's taboo language usage. Additionally, Nazaryan (2021) failed to criticize the use of taboo language by Former President George W. Bush, noting that Bush's greatest contribution to the United States was to recognize that President Trump's inaugural address, "was some weird shit" (para. 9). Finally, Nazaryan (2021), seemingly reveling in his own use of taboo language, recounted a story in which he told White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow that he was not interested in "his fucking Netflix queue" (para. 14). In not one of these instances, does Nazaryan (2021) hold the same obvious disdain for taboo language usage that he held for Gillibrand when recounting her NYU speech.

A second example occurred in January 2019 shortly after Representative Rashida Tlaib was sworn into Congress. Tlaib referred to President Trump as a motherfucker (Fandos, 2019). The backlash from both Republicans and Democrats was swift. What makes this instance notable, however, is that during this same time, Representative Steve King questioned when the terminology "white nationalist" and "white supremacy" became offensive in the United States (Gabriel, 2019, para. 14). According to a study by *Media Matters for America*, Tlaib's use of motherfucker garnered five times more news coverage than

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King's remarks (Power et al., 2019). Additionally, Tlaib also received more pushback from Congress than King did for his commentary. Though one might argue that "white nationalist" and "white supremacy" are not considered taboo, the doctrines with which they are associated convey ideals that are considered taboo in a Democratic society.

A final example of taboo language usage by a woman in a political role occurred on December 15, 2020, after a tumultuous Presidential Election. Jen O'Malley Dillon, President-Elect Joe Biden's campaign manager and incoming deputy chief of staff, sat for an interview with *Glamour*. At one point in the interview, Dillon referred to Republican lawmakers as "a bunch of fuckers" (Doyle, 2020, para 44). Two days later after receiving significant backlash from Republican lawmakers, Dillon walked back her comment (Forgey & Choi, 2020). Though it may have seemed as if Dillon was apologizing for her use of taboo language, in actuality she was steadfast in her initial sentiment. Instead, Dillon apologized for her word choice. Though politicians are often critical of each other, it was not Dillon's criticism of Republicans which resulted in the party's ire, it was her taboo language choice.

One might argue that politics is fraught with sniping. As such, these examples of women using profane language may be solely impacted by the women's status and their roles in the United States' political system. However, women who do not hold political roles have also found themselves in the middle of the proverbial shitstorm. As Eltahawy (2019) demonstrates, this is particularly "instructive in the era of Trump – a man who has torpedoed the notion of civility – [that] women are still expected to be polite and demure" (p. 59).

A notable example of this hypocrisy occurred in August 2020 when rappers Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion released their song "WAP." WAP, an acronym for wet ass pussy, garnered criticism for being too vulgar (VanHoose, 2020). Though "WAP" debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard Top 100, several Conservative politicians and pundits took offense at the song. Rappers CeeLo Green and Snoop Dogg also went on record to criticize the song. Though Cardi B is no stranger to controversy, the backlash was severe as well as striking given that most Conservative politicians and pundits chose to overlook Donald Trump's 2005 comments regarding grabbing women by the pussy while he was running for President in 2015. Moreover, CeeLo Green faced his own scandal when he claimed rape cannot occur if the victim is unconscious and Snoop Dogg has his own song entitled "Pay For Pussy." This double standard is indicative of the patriarchy continuing to police women's bodies and language while aiming to utilize them at their discretion.

Another example of a nonpolitician female facing backlash for utilizing taboo language occurred in April 2021 after the University of Arizona's women's basketball team faced the University of Connecticut in the Final Four. After Arizona's win, basketball coach Adia Barnes was caught in a private moment with her team using taboo language as well as taboo hand gestures (Cluff, 2021). Though Barnes has not apologized for using the taboo speech and gestures, she has addressed the incident on Twitter and in several interviews.

It is worth including that even when a woman does not use taboo language, she may find herself criticized for the mere suggestion of taboo language usage. This was the case for Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in January 2019. During an interview with late-night show host Stephen Colbert, Colbert asked Ocasio-Cortez, "on a scale from zero to some, how many fucks do you give" regarding the pushback she was receiving from her fellow Representatives (Blotnick et al., 2019). Ocasio-Cortez responded, "I think zero" (Blotnick et al., 2019). Utilizing sensationalized headlines, this interaction led to several news outlets on both sides of the political aisle implying that Ocasio-Cortez used the profane language, removing Colbert, a male, entirely from the discourse (see Folley, 2019; Galioto, 2019; Kew,

2019; Moore, 2019). Ocasio-Cortez called out the discrepancy through a series of Tweets, commenting, “I actually didn’t say this, so while I know ‘brown women cursing’ drives clicks, maybe you accurately quote the whole exchange instead of manipulating people into thinking I said this sentence instead of just the word ‘zero’” (Ocasio-Cortez, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Society gives language its power. For this reason, taboo language is necessary in upsetting the social order that has been ordained for so long by the patriarchal norms in the United States. Self-censorship by women in regard to their language choices reinforces the patriarchal power structure as women willingly give up the power of their voice. By challenging gender norms through the use of taboo words and expressions, women challenge patriarchal norms that aim to continue to keep them subjugated to men. The English language not only reinforces this method of thinking through its positively framed masculine words, negatively framed feminine words, and gender-specific microaggressions, but also through its rules regarding taboo language usage among women and men.

Patriarchal social norms cultivate these biases against women. This in turn impacts women’s overt and covert attitudes and behaviors toward taboo language. Fears of being viewed as ill-mannered or disgraceful are enforced by individuals in positions of authority, such as parents, teachers, and governments via gender norms which are learned at a very young age. These norms provide that men have more innate power than women for no other reason than being men. Given that the rules of decorum are created for and to benefit men, through using taboo language women can reject the ideals of modesty and politeness that have been assigned to them. This will ultimately aid in the rejection of the power structure of patriarchal norms.

Koupal et al. (2014) write, “language rules are not neutral but deeply ideological” (p. 296). As such, the Puritan view of taboo language in the United States continues to suppress women’s voices. While one could argue that debating the nuance of the English language’s rules might be a worthless and menial endeavor, languages, like humans, evolve over time. This evolution can bring both equitable and inequitable changes that are reflective of the social changes of the time (Rieber et al., 1979). For example, bitch has historically been referred to as a female dog. However, bitch became taboo and an insult men used toward women. Although bitch can still be considered an insult, in more recent times, the word has taken an endearing turn among friends. While one simply cannot assume that bitch will remain endearing or even continue to have taboo-related connotations, this change in its usage is indicative not only of the power of language to evolve, but also the power of the social order to disrupt the patriarchy.

Jay and Janschewitz (2008) maintain that “our use of and reaction to swear words tells us who we are and where we fit in a culture; in short, our identities are marked by our use of swear words” (p. 275). Women who choose not to use taboo language or find it offensive in other women who do, should ask themselves why they have this response. If the answer is, “because society tells me it’s wrong,” the woman should recognize they are being subservient to the patriarchy.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Comstock Act: Drafted by anti-vice activist Anthony Comstock and passed by the United States Congress on March 3, 1873, made it illegal to send, sell, lend, give away, possess, exhibit, or publish any material that was deemed illicit, including information on contraception and abortion. Individuals found in violation of the law could be sentenced to six months to five years of hard labor in a penitentiary or fined \$100 to \$2,000.

Fuck: Believed to date back to the 1400s, with its first appearance in a dictionary occurring in 1598. Fuck is considered a powerfully offensive word and one of the most commonly used taboo words in the English language. In the literal sense, fuck refers to the act of having sex. However, fuck is also utilized as an expletive which expresses intense emotions, including anger, fear, displeasure, happiness, etc.

Norms: Sets of social standards that dictate the expectations on how a group should behave.

Patriarchy: A social structure in which men are the dominant gender and hold the primary power.

Puritanism: A religious movement that occurred between the 16th and 17th centuries in response to the ostentatiousness that accompanied Roman Catholicism. Puritans believed in strict moral austerity regarding individual conduct and religious matters.

Taboo Language: Language that is restricted by society due to its subject matter or perceived offensiveness.

Victorian Era: The period between 1837 and 1901 in which Queen Victoria reigned over England. During this period, gender norms, including those in which men work and women child rear, would be introduced and defined as would austere morality in the United States.

Women's Liberation Movement: A political movement in the United States that occurred between the late 1960s and the early 1980s that called for equality for women.

Chapter 4

Using the Risk Negotiation Framework to Explore the Taboo Aspects of Forgiveness Among Organizational Members

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ABSTRACT

Organizations spend thousands of dollars and several hours of productivity each day because of destructive conflict. Though conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life, the authors of this chapter advocate for forgiveness as a transformative and prosocial process that organizational members can use to acknowledge transgressions, manage their conflict, and move their relationships toward reconciliation. However, forgiveness can be particularly risky and taboo due to various barriers that make it difficult for organizational members to communicate with one another. The authors begin this chapter by arguing that forgiveness is one productive method for handling conflict, and they review research findings about forgiveness in the organizational context. Following that, the authors detail the barriers to communicating forgiveness and use the risk negotiation framework to explain how organizational members can progress their workplace relationships. Finally, the authors provide directions for future research and strategies for encouraging forgiveness in the organization.

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life because organizational members confront and negotiate their individual and professional values, engage in collaborative activities, and assess and manage the pressure and strain placed on them by their organizations (Jameson, 2020). On an individual level, the amount of time and activities organizational members perform in close proximity with their coworkers make the organizational context ripe for the emergence of conflict (Garner & Poole, 2013). Conflict, especially destructive conflict, is costly to organizations' time and productivity. According to the CCP Inc.'s Global Human Capital Report (2008), when organizations experience destructive conflict, they lose up to \$359 billion dollars in productivity or an average of 2.8 hours per week attempting to resolve conflict. Similarly, Menon and Thompson (2016) found that \$8,000 dollars are wasted per day when organizational members avoid addressing workplace conflict.

Though researchers have discovered that constructively managing conflict by acknowledging the presence of conflict, seeking mutually agreeable solutions to their disagreements, and building new ideas from their disagreements offer the best chance for individual and organizational success (Jameson, 2020; Rahim, 2002), these strategies might fall short of the full potential of restoration to their workplace relationships (Fehr & Gelfand, 2020; Jameson, 2020; Paul & Putnam, 2016). Though conflict can be difficult to resolve (Miller et al., 2007), in recent years, researchers have positioned the expression of forgiveness and restorative justice among organizational members as a vital and transformative communication strategy for acknowledging, soothing, and managing these inevitable conflicts (Kelley et al., 2019; Madsen et al., 2009; Paul & Putnam, 2017).

What happens, then, to organizational members when expressing forgiveness is off-limits, awkward, or considered taboo? What happens when people experience hurt feelings or loss of face due to a hurtful act from their coworkers and they lack the wherewithal, opportunity, or means to receive forgiveness that might restore their relationship? What happens when organizational members engage in offensive behaviors but are unable to acknowledge it or lack the incentive from their organizations to seek forgiveness from their coworkers? What happens when members experience barriers to forgiveness? In situations like these, seeking or granting forgiveness might be taboo and difficult or impossible to grant (Roloff & Ifert, 2000; Waldron & Kassing, 2011, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to explore how forgiveness expressed among organizational members might be thwarted, stifled, or considered too risky because it is a taboo topic. Prior to our discussion of the taboo nature of forgiveness among organizational members, we will synthesize existing literature about forgiveness and restorative justice that organizational members express to one another, apply the Risk Negotiation Framework to explore the risks inherent in communicating forgiveness, and organizational and individual strategies for encouraging forgiveness.

BACKGROUND: FORGIVENESS AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN ORGANIZATIONS

Growing in popularity among researchers from myriad disciplines such as communication studies, psychology, political science, economics, and neuroscience, just to name a few, forgiveness is a considerably important topic for organizations (Aquino et al., 2003; Griffen et al., 2016; Worthington & Wade, 2020). Aquino and colleagues (2003) argued that forgiveness matters in organizations because it is a manner of

people repairing damaged relationships and working through the painful and counterproductive thoughts and emotions accompanying that damage. Additionally, it is a way to nurture workplace relationships, and it is through forgiveness that organizational members can offset hostility and negativity in their organizations. Waldron and Kloeber (2012) determined that forgiveness is important for workplaces because it is a hopeful and constructive response to the inevitable harm and harmful encounters at work. Likewise, forgiveness is necessary in creating a virtuous work environment and because forgiveness can foster constructive behavior among organizational members. It is clear, then, that as forgiveness research has increased, so has the opportunity for organizations to observe and reap the benefits of forgiveness as a constructive response to conflict and perceived injustice (Goodstein & Aquino, 2010; Palaski, 2012).

Defining Forgiveness among Organizational Members

Considered a coping mechanism initiated through communication that organizational members use to understand, acknowledge, and manage hurtful situations with their colleagues (Paul & Putnam, 2017; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012), scholars define forgiveness as a prosocial change occurring in relationships after acknowledging a transgression, extending mercy, and renegotiating their relationship (Fehr & Gelfand, 2020; Kelley & Waldron, 2006). That is, “forgiveness in organizations occurs, then, when emotional, attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioral changes transpire after harm or wrong-doing has been experienced” (Cameron, 2007, p. 132). For example, organizational members saying that they are sorry after an argument or admitting that they were wrong during a meeting are ways that people express forgiveness in the organizational context. When defining forgiveness, it is important to highlight the features of forgiveness and provide boundary conditions, making it easier to differentiate forgiveness from other closely aligned constructs.

First, forgiveness involves a cognitive process in which victims perceive moral injury from an offender, believe they have a moral right for retribution, and eventually relinquish their anger, hurt, resentment, and desire for revenge (Aquino et al., 2003; Bies et al., 2016; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). Recent theorizing has positioned conditionality as a cognitive process in which individuals extend mercy and absolve their victims of wrongdoing, without attaching qualifiers or conditions to the process of forgiveness (Faldetta, 2021; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). Second, researchers believe the forgiveness process involves an affective feature whereby individuals react to their hurt before replacing their negative emotions with positive or neutral emotions (Aquino et al., 2003; Bies et al., 2016). Third, the forgiveness process encompasses the behavioral component of communicating in an intentional manner to explicitly acknowledge wrongdoing and deciding against seeking retribution. The forgiveness process also involves relational partners negotiating the meaning and terms of their relationship because of that wrongdoing (Aquino et al., 2003; Bies et al., 2016; Bright & Exline, 2011; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). Fourth, the forgiveness process shapes and is shaped by a larger social context. That means that forgiveness occurs at the intrapersonal, relational, organizational, and collective levels (Aquino et al., 2003; Bright & Exline, 2011; Fehr & Gelfand, 2020; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). A fifth feature is that forgiveness is distinct from the related constructs of reconciliation, forgetting, condoning, and excusing (Bies et al., 2016; Bright & Exline, 2011; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). These other constructs described by researchers fall short of the relational consequences of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a more encompassing relational process because it can eventually lead to favorable outcomes for relational partners (Kelley et al., 2019; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012).

Another aspect of forgiveness worth mentioning is that the forgiveness process among organizational members is different in noteworthy ways from the forgiveness process among friends, family members, and romantic partners. These distinctions make forgiveness more complicated and potentially taboo in the workplace. As Waldron and Kelley (2008) pointed out, forgiveness among organizational members is unique because of the tension between public and private spheres of relational experiences, the power differential sometimes defining workplace relationships, and the formal and informal rules limiting certain behaviors.

The tension between the public and private realms of relational experiences creates situations in which coworkers confront and navigate their difficulties in view of or in earshot of other coworkers. In this sense, rather than coworkers navigating their conflict privately, as in other interpersonal relationships, their disagreements might filter through the organization's grapevine. The power differential defining many workplace relationships, particularly supervisor-subordinate relationships, marks a distinction from other interpersonal relationships in that more powerful people in a workplace relationship might shame less powerful people (Zheng et al., 2018). The more powerful organizational members conceivably feel less compelled to grant or seek forgiveness while the less powerful organizational members might feel obligated to actively engage in the forgiveness process. For example, victims with lower hierarchical status than their offenders, who perceive high levels of procedural justice in their organizations, are likely to express forgiveness to their victims (Aquino et al., 2006). Clearly, then, the power dynamic of organizational relationships complicates the forgiveness process because power can make people more vulnerable than they are comfortable appearing and it can create situations in which the more powerful person in the workplace relationship places undue pressure and strain on the less powerful person (Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). A third distinction between workplace relationships and other interpersonal relationships is that workplace relationships consist of various formal and informal rules complicating organizational members' opportunities and efforts to communicate forgiveness. For example, expressing negative emotions or spending time talking about non-work matters might create more problems than communicating forgiveness can solve.

Relating Forgiveness with Restorative Justice

In recent years, scholars have positioned forgiveness within the larger construct of restorative justice (Bies et al., 2016) and they have argued that it serves as an antecedent to the organizational practices leading to a forgiveness climate (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). Closely linked with restorative justice, in which organizational members engage in dialogic communication to repair their relationships (Paul & Putnam, 2016, 2017), forgiveness offers organizational members opportunities to enhance their workplace relationships, find meaning in their work, and accomplish their professional goals (Basford et al., 2014; Cameron, 2007; Fehr & Gelfand, 2020). Within the restorative justice framework, the victim, offender, and broader community create a climate in which all parties act on values of generosity and justice for all involved.

The belief is that if the victim and offender share similar values for treating each other with respect and dignity and it aligns with societal or community values for reintegrating offenders into the community, restorative justice can be a powerful process for enhancing goodwill and working toward reconciliation (Bies et al., 2016; Paul & Putnam, 2016). Though admirable, restorative justice in the organizational context can be complicated because it requires all parties to willingly participate, something difficult to achieve due to organizational structures, policies, and power differences (Bies et al., 2016).

Relevant Literature about Forgiveness among Organizational Members

Empirical research about forgiveness has yielded a wealth of knowledge claims in a variety of related disciplines in recent years (Griffen et al., 2020). However, in the organizational context, researchers have discovered that forgiveness is associated with myriad individual, dyadic, and organizational outcomes (Fehr & Gelfand, 2020; Palanski, 2012). For example, when organizational members perceive themselves as benefiting greatly in their peer coworker relationships, they are more likely to ask for forgiveness following a transgression and seek forgiveness from their coworker (Westerman, 2013). Working from the notion that leaders who emphasize the welfare of their followers by demonstrating forgiveness (Caldwell & Dixon, 2010), researchers have found that organizational members are also likely to forgive when they perceive their leaders as ethical leaders, demonstrating humility, and expressing *agapao* (moral) love (Verdoold & Van Dierendonck, 2010). Similarly, Kim et al. (2018) discovered that transformational leadership is associated with organizational members' forgiveness expression, which, in turn, is associated with organizational members' innovative behavior. In other words, organizational members express forgiveness to one another and engage in creative productivity when they perceive their leaders as transformational.

Discovering that members' willingness to forgive correlated with members' job satisfaction, reduced job stress, and increased performance of organizational citizenship behaviors, Cox (2011) reasoned that forgiveness provides strong benefits to individuals as they construct supportive and forgiving organizational climates. The creation of forgiveness climates is associated with learning behavior, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and reduced intention to leave the organization (Guchait et al., 2016). Forgiveness is also helpful for mitigating antisocial workplace behavior, as Eaton and Struthers (2006) reported that organizational members' forgiveness predicted reduced psychological aggression. All these results lend support to the construct of a forgiveness culture in which empathic and benevolent responses to conflict form normative behaviors toward reconciling damaged workplace relationships (Fehr, 2011). Fehr and Gelfand (2012) articulated that the three values of justice, compassion, and temperance provide the basis for forgiveness cultures, which provide organizational members the basis for behaving in positive, prosocial, and conciliatory ways toward their colleagues.

As the research results about forgiveness among organizational members demonstrates, when individuals engage in the forgiveness process, they tend to experience personal, relational, and organizational benefits (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Griffen et al., 2020). The personal benefits that individuals experience tend to be reduced guilt and increased confidence in themselves due to the constructive nature of the forgiveness process. Similarly, individuals report improved mental and physical well-being from expressing forgiveness (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Griffen et al., 2020). The relational benefits that individuals experience include improved relationship quality (Waldron & Kelley, 2005) and commitment (Karremans & Van Lange, 2008). The organizational benefits individuals experience supportive and generally positive organizational climates promoting forgiveness (Cox, 2011; Fehr & Gelfand, 2012).

Forgiveness as Taboo: Describing the Barriers to Communicating Forgiveness

Though scholars have theorized and discovered many benefits and ample evidence supporting how organizational members express forgiveness and the outcomes of their efforts (e.g., Fehr & Gelfand, 2020), forgiveness is often easier said than done due to various individual, relational, and organizational risks involved that might limit opportunities for organizational members to repair and restore their relation-

ships (Fehr & Gelfand, 2020; Raj & Wiltermuth, 2016; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). The fact remains that forgiveness is a difficult, risky, and potentially taboo topic of discussion among organizational members. In this section, we draw from many sources describing the difficulties and constraints that individuals might experience when thinking about and/or communicating forgiveness to others. In so doing, we weave together literature from multiple disciplines to highlight why forgiveness is difficult and risky for organizational members.

Using Bies et al.'s (2016) systems perspective on forgiveness in organizations, we synthesize organizational members' constraints about communicating forgiveness into individual, dyadic/relational, group, organizational, and cross-cultural explanations for why forgiveness is a thorny process fraught with risk and taboo. By using the systems perspective, we can highlight that, though forgiveness is often helpful, beneficial, and even a desirable communication process to encourage for organizations and their members, "forgiveness may not always be the desired response within organizations and may even have the potential to do harm" (Bies et al., 2016, p. 73). Therefore, it is best to consider the constraints to forgiveness as interconnected and interdependent with one another, as "forgiveness can best be understood as part of an interconnected system of contextual factors that can exert powerful influences over employees' behaviors and social interactions" (Bies et al., 2016, p. 4).

Individual Barriers to Forgiveness

Individual barriers are personal inhibitions toward communicating forgiveness due to personal beliefs or perceptions. The individual level encompasses organizational members' evolutionary and biological bases of forgiveness and their cognitive and emotional constraints (Bies et al., 2016). Researchers have reasoned that on a personal level, people might be reluctant due to their biological or evolutionary makeup. That is, people might be predisposed to seek revenge, increase hurt in their relationships, or soothe the hurt feelings they experience with others (Bies et al., 2016). When looking at individuals' cognitive reasons against expressing forgiveness, personality characteristics and relationship orientation, and their values and beliefs help explain their actions. For example, individuals' narcissistic personality traits, their attachment styles, their belief in a just/unjust world, and their anger regarding transgressions might make communicating forgiveness more difficult and riskier than those without narcissistic traits.

Additionally, as other scholars have pointed out, individuals might find difficulty forgiving others because they are unable to forgive themselves, making it difficult to seek mercy and forgiveness from others (Stone, 2002). Similarly, Waldron et al. (2019) articulated that forgiveness is difficult because individuals might re-experience the pain during the forgiveness process that it was intended to alleviate. That is, forgiveness perpetuates the same sense of injustice that created hurt feelings and relational harm. People also believe that they have an easier time retaining the hurt instead of talking about it, that others might perceive them as accepting the behavior of their offender, and they believe that no models exist for demonstrating how forgiveness takes place (Stone, 2002). Additionally, in their foundational discussion of forgiveness, Enright and The Human Development Study Group (1991) articulated that individuals voice several philosophical objections to expressing forgiveness. They believe that individuals see forgiveness as a weakness, as a power play between social interactants, a reversal of societal justice, a block to personal justice, and perpetuating injustice. They also stated that people perceive that forgiveness can induce inferiority in the other and the self, and can be disrespectful to others, can lead to alienation, and make people hypersensitive to hurt. These beliefs all represent how people have trouble communicating forgiveness, making it a personal taboo topic.

Dyadic/Relational Barriers to Forgiveness

Reasoning that individuals' interactions with their transgressors or victims make forgiveness taboo and difficult, dyadic/relational barriers describe aspects of the relationship that stifle forgiveness. Exline et al. (2003) noted that victims can perceive offenders as untrustworthy, especially in situations in which the offenders possess greater status or power than the victim, in which case, the lack of trust and the power differential obstruct the process of healing wounds. Similarly, Bies et al. (2016) surmised that perceptions of power within the workplace relationship can create situations in which more powerful people in the relationship are less inclined to seek or express forgiveness, whereas the less powerful members might feel that they need to offer or express forgiveness to maintain their organizational standing. Zheng and colleagues (2018) confirmed these suspicions when they found that victims with low power in the organizational hierarchy were unable to induce compliance from their offenders by expressing forgiveness to them. Additionally, people are reluctant to express forgiveness because they fear that the offenders will repeat their transgressions. Similarly, victims demonstrate reluctance to offer forgiveness because they believe they will appear weak in the eyes of their offender or close associates. Another wrinkle is that victims might believe they lose their benefits of being a victim if they offer forgiveness to their offender because in many circumstances, victims gain sympathy and comfort from their associates because of the victim's hurt.

Bies et al. (2016) explained that conflict can extend past direct participants in a dispute and involve people indirectly related to the conflict (e.g., coworkers, customers, managers). Though helpful at times because third parties can provide support and multiple perspectives (Folger et al., 2009; Odden & Sias, 1997), Bies et al. (2016) suggested that the presence of these third parties can inhibit the forgiveness process because outside parties who possess knowledge of the transgressions taking place in a relationship might exert pressure on individuals to become stubborn about offering forgiveness. In other situations, third parties can create political issues among organizational members in which they pressure their coworkers to refrain from offering forgiveness because the third party can benefit from the tension among their coworkers. Yet another reason why individuals showcase reluctance to extend forgiveness is because they believe that justice will be unserved. That is, they believe that their actions of offering forgiveness will be insufficient for restoring fairness in their relationship (Exline et al., 2003). One final reason serving as a barrier to forgiveness is that the costs of forgiving can outweigh the benefits of it. Like other reasons, there are circumstances in which the process of forgiveness might be inappropriate or awkward, which can prove costlier than allowing the relationship to stall or remain in a state of disrepair (Stone, 2002).

Group Barriers to Forgiveness

According to Bies et al. (2016), the composition of work groups can often hinder the expression of forgiveness among organizational members. In this sense, organizational members conceivably identify so strongly with their work groups that they create competition with other groups. This sense of competition creates the view that people from opposing work groups are different or are outsiders. When people perceive their coworkers as outsiders or as different, it might reduce the empathy needed to communicate forgiveness. If empathy is lacking, or missing altogether, organizational members lack the incentive to exert effort toward repairing any hurt that comes between members of different work groups.

Additionally, geographical distance between organizational members serves as a potential constraint to forgiveness expression. Though the distance might reduce the amount of interaction, thereby reducing conflict, it is reasonable to believe that geographic distance decreases the amount of time necessary for strong workplace relationships to develop (Sias, 2009; Sias & Shin, 2020). If relationships are lacking thorough development and intimacy, organizational members might lack the incentive or desire to communicate forgiveness to another if transgressions occur. Also complicating forgiveness expression is the use of communication technologies, as they can create confusion and frustration, especially when organizational members choose technology that is insufficient for communicating their messages to one another (Bies et al., 2016). For example, communicating forgiveness through text messaging might pose a difficult challenge for individuals, especially if each person needs to explain themselves and use effective nonverbal cues to match the intimacy of the moment.

Organizational Barriers to Forgiveness

From an organizational perspective, researchers have reasoned that forgiveness is difficult, in part, due to the involuntary nature of workplace relationships. For instance, Waldron and Kloeber (2012) stated that forgiveness is difficult between coworkers because it takes considerable time to adequately address wrongdoing and to work toward reconciliation, if reconciliation is even sought. Similarly, Bies et al. (2016) concluded that the configuration of tasks and the physical setting of the workplace reduce meaningful connection. In other words, the workplace often creates a situation in which it is difficult for organizational members to develop the intimacy necessary to make forgiveness worthwhile or appropriate. Additionally, after transgressions occur, people might be forced to work together before their wounds sufficiently heal. Other aspects of the organizational context complicating and constraining forgiveness might be the formal dispute mechanism that organizations use to manage problems between organizational members, the control structures to create conformity to the organization's mission, corrective policy goals, and the organizational culture and climate (Bies et al., 2016).

For example, Fehr and Gelfand (2020) suggested that, at the organizational level, organizational members might be restrained from seeking or granting forgiveness because of their organizational climate, HR practices, the cultural context, leader characteristics, and forgiveness interventions. If present, these conditions precede forgiveness, but if absent, organizational members are less likely to engage in the forgiveness process. Relatedly, Pearce et al. (2018) discovered that organizational members withhold forgiveness because they perceive the transgression to be particularly harmful or to protect themselves from further hurt. It seems reasonable, then, that communicating forgiveness is a complicated act that can become more complicated if it becomes a taboo topic for organizational members as they navigate the complexities of their professional identities and their workplace relationships.

Cross-Cultural Barriers to Forgiveness

As Bies and colleagues (2016) noted, organizations are situated within a larger cultural landscape in which organizational members' values and beliefs influence their behaviors within their organizations. They noted that the cultural values of individual-collectivism play a role in the expression of forgiveness. Though research evidence is limited, there is evidence suggesting that people holding collectivist cultural values might be more likely to forgive others than people holding individualist cultural values. Further creating difficulty in the forgiveness process is the cultural expression of honor. Summarizing

research regarding transgressions, Bies et al. (2016) speculated that organizational members from honor cultures might be more inclined to escalate conflict due to perceived slights, which reduces the likelihood of members communicating forgiveness to their colleagues.

RISK NEGOTIATION FRAMEWORK FOR EXPLORING FORGIVENESS

In their foundational summary of forgiveness, Kelley and Waldron (2006) recommended that scholars explore how organizational members seek and grant forgiveness to one another. Specifically, they implored researchers to explore the barriers to forgiveness and the possible interventions to those barriers. To assist in discovering greater knowledge about the forgiveness process, they forwarded face management, rules, uncertainty management, account-making frameworks, dialectical theory, and turning points as useful explanatory lenses for explaining the forgiveness process. One useful communication framework for exploring how forgiveness becomes a taboo topic is the Risk Negotiation Framework (Waldron & Kassing, 2011, 2018).

The Risk Negotiation Framework begins with the notion that, like conflict, risks are an inevitable component of organizational life. Organizational members encounter risk whenever they experience challenging, dicey, and/or difficult situations. Waldron and Kassing (2011) explained that risk occurs at individual, relational, organizational, community, and societal levels, with each level being nested in the larger level above it. In this sense, forgiveness can be positioned as a communication behavior having major implications for each level, but especially the individual, relational, and organizational levels (Fehr & Gelfand, 2020; Kelley et al., 2019).

At an individual level, organizational members risk threats to their identity or organizational standing by engaging in the forgiveness process (Raj & Wiltermuth, 2016). In other words, organizational members might believe that seeking forgiveness could make them appear self-serving to the victims of their transgressions or it could increase the difficulty of admitting their mistakes. In exploring how the forgiveness process can be risky at the relational level, organizational members risk complicating and damaging their relationships with their coworkers if they lack the skills to competently discuss their conflict (Roloff & Ifert, 2000) and, in turn, begin the process of repairing their relationships (Kelley & Waldron, 2006). For example, Exline and colleagues (2003) suggested that forgiveness is a risky endeavor when forgiven offenders are untrustworthy and yield power over the people that they offended. In this way, communicating forgiveness might put victims at risk for future transgressions. Finally, at an organizational level, the forgiveness process presents risk because it can hinder productivity and derail organizational members' focus from their tasks (Paul & Putnam, 2017).

After accounting for the levels at which risks occur, Waldron and Kassing (2011) asserted that historical factors between organizational members and their organizations, the context, and risk perceptions all influence organizational members' responses to risk. In describing the historical factors, Waldron and Kassing (2018) explained that historical factors, workplace incidents, and work experience combine to inform organizational members' perceptions about risky organizational events, situations, and circumstances. The historical factors involve relational histories between organizational members that precipitate conversations, encounters, and possible conflict. Workplace incidents are situations occurring in the past that predispose organizational members toward perceiving something as risky. These histories and incidents combine to inform organizational member's work experiences, precipitating their sensibilities

about what is risky about their workplace. In other words, these historical factors can complicate organizational members' decision making and actions toward expressing forgiveness with their coworkers.

In responding to risk, organizational members engage in a four-phase communication cycle in which they attend to the risk, clarify their understanding of it, transform the risky situations they encounter, and work toward maintaining or stabilizing the risk they experience. When organizational members attend to the risk, they assess the type of risk that they are perceiving and judge the magnitude of that risk. In this manner, they assess how risky expressing forgiveness is for them, and adjust accordingly. Following the attending phase, organizational members engage in sensemaking whereby they "explore the meaning and magnitude of risk (Waldron & Kassing, 2011, p. 16). As a collective process, sensemaking is the phase where organizational members communicate their assessment of risk and work toward common meaning about their experiences.

In the third phase of the Risk Negotiation Cycle, organizational members engage in transforming, in which they alter their risky situations. Though transforming can change the risky situation in negative and positive ways, transformative behaviors can preserve identities, maintain or strengthen workplace relationships, and change organizational practices. When organizational members reach the fourth phase of the Risk Negotiation Cycle, they engage in a communication act of maintaining. When organizational members express maintaining, they stabilize risk and realize that their efforts in assessing and managing risk have resulted in some degree of change. In the maintaining phase, it seems that organizational members can use forgiveness to stabilize their workplace relationships, mitigate the risk of communicating forgiveness, and sustain their relationships at a desired level of intimacy.

The communication strategies comprising the cycle, according to Waldron and Kassing (2011) can increase risk, gain relative safety, or optimize risk. When organizational members perceive an increase to their risk, they perceive that they have lost something valuable during their communication encounters. In this sense, their communication strategies might have been ineffective, which exasperates the risk that they initially perceived. This might occur if attempts at communicating forgiveness progress poorly or in unanticipated ways. When organizational members gain relative safety, they might arrive at the conclusion that their initial assessment of risk was influenced by misunderstanding or misperceptions about the situation. When they feel relative safety, organizational members are less vulnerable to the risks compromising their organizational encounters. Optimization is an outcome that "transcends concerns about safety and risk (Waldron & Kassing, 2011, p. 18). When they achieve an optimal outcome, organizational members have possibly gained new communication skills, strengthened their relationships, or altered the procedures underlying their organizational tasks. All of this suggests that, when conflict occurs in the workplace, while the communication exchange may be risky, people who are more willing to cooperate with others in moments of conflict are more willing to forgive others (Ayoko, 2016). Therefore, in perceiving the risk inherent in handling conflict and engaging in forgiveness, organizational members must attend to and make sense of how forgiveness might affect themselves, their workplace relationships, and their organizations (Fehr & Gelfand, 2020; Waldron & Kassing, 2011).

STRATEGIES FOR MITIGATING RISK IN COMMUNICATING FORGIVENESS

Individual Strategies

At an individual level, organizational members should feel empowered and emboldened to reduce the awkwardness and risky nature of expressing forgiveness. We encourage organizational members to write about their experiences, engage in unconditional forgiveness, create imaginative forgiveness, plan their conversations, use person-centered communication, and treat their forgiveness processes as a learning process.

Research evidence suggests that individuals benefit from expressive writing about transgressions and offenses. For example, in an experimental investigation of expressive writing interventions, Romero (2008) discovered that individuals writing about severe offenses experienced greater levels of perspective-taking than individuals writing about mild or moderate offenses. Additionally, Romero (2008) found that individuals writing about expressing empathy to their offenders reported fewer avoidance behaviors and greater perspective-taking. Furthermore, Barclay et al. (2016) reported from their experiment about expressive writing interventions that when people perceive a resolution to their complaints, it mediated the relationship between expressive writing and forgiveness expression. The implication is that organizational members should engage in expressive writing because it can help them facilitate the forgiveness process (Barclay et al., 2016; Romero, 2008).

Second, as we will also mention as an organizational strategy, organizational members can practice unconditional forgiveness by displaying mercy and acceptance toward their offenders. To put unconditional forgiveness into practice, organizational members forgive without expecting compensation nor making demands of the people that wronged them (Faldetta, 2021). To truly engage in unconditional forgiveness, organizational members must acknowledge the faults of their offender and work toward relieving themselves and their offender of the weight of the transgressions. Relatedly, we encourage organizational members to engage in imaginative forgiveness. As Kelley et al. (2019) described, imaginative forgiveness is more than a simple communication strategy for managing conflict. Imaginative forgiveness involves both relational partners recognizing harmful conduct, experiencing emotions and making sense of them, engaging in perspective-taking, experiencing transformation within their relationship, and reimagining their relationship. By engaging in imaginative forgiveness, Kelly et al. (2019) argued that individuals “view themselves and their relational worlds in a way that encourages and enables the co-creation of shared, relational humanity” (p. 104).

We also encourage organizational members to plan their forgiveness communication strategies to achieve their desired success and to be viewed favorably by their relational partners. By planning their communication strategies, organizational members increase the likelihood of their coworker perceiving more favorably their attempt to discuss the taboo topic of forgiveness. Therefore, people should assess their feelings, plot their actions, and consider the consequences of their conversations about the taboo topic of forgiveness. As Roloff and Johnson (2001) discovered in their study about reintroducing taboo topics into relationships, the strength of relationships helps determine the appraisal of the attempt to reintroduce a taboo topic. In this way, organizational members are at an advantage when communicating forgiveness with a coworker with whom they are interpersonally close.

In managing the inherent risk of seeking and granting forgiveness, organizational members must assess their own skills for acknowledging when they have transgressed against a colleague. Recognizing their own strengths and limitations when handling conflict with their colleagues will be useful for navigating

risk and preventing escalation to their conflict (Jameson, 2020). Furthermore, using person-centered communication to engage in difficult conversations about transgressions and conflict is useful for restoring justice in a relationship and working toward forgiveness (Paul & Putnam, 2016). Considering these insights, we encourage organizational members to consider why they desire to forgive and to view forgiveness as a learning process. As Faldetta (2021) stated:

Forgiveness in the workplace can also be a learning process where organizational actors may learn to look for future possibilities for benign co-existence or cooperation with those who have wronged them, and where offenders remember their wrongdoing but, at the same time, they are freed of the fear of possible punishments. (p. 10)

Organizational Strategies

Organizations, specifically, their leaders and managers can take the initiative in removing the risky taboo nature of expressing forgiveness among organizational members. They can take that initiative in a variety of ways, including setting the foundation for forgiveness, displaying transformational leadership behaviors, apologizing, establishing forgiveness cultures, and implementing forgiveness training interventions. As Palaski (2012) noted, managers need to set the foundation for communicating forgiveness long before transgressions occur. In doing so, leaders create open channels for communicating forgiveness and they make forgiveness part of the normative behaviors expected of each organizational member. Additionally, leaders modeling transformational leadership behaviors to show concern and regard for their followers can be helpful for helping followers become the best versions of themselves (Kim et al., 2018; Palaski, 2012). It is especially worthwhile for leaders to display transformational leadership behaviors because they associate with organizational members' forgiveness expression (Kim et al., 2018). That is, leaders serving as models and inspirations for their followers can increase the likelihood of their followers expressing forgiveness to one another following a transgression.

Leaders can also encourage forgiveness by apologizing. Basford et al. (2014) found that leaders' apologies are associated with their followers' forgiveness, which in turn are associated with trust, satisfaction, leader-member exchange, and commitment. Expounding on leaders' apologies, it appears that leaders can establish a norm in which they apologize for their mistakes, which will create a workforce more accepting and understanding of mistakes. These outcomes suggest that apologies are helpful for developing stronger relationships with their followers and helping them remain content and committed. Furthermore, using guidance from Faldetta (2021), leaders should communicate unconditional forgiveness to their followers to restore their relationships and to establish guidance for unconditionality.

All these leadership actions can function toward developing a forgiveness culture predicated on restorative justice, compassion, and temperance (Fehr, 2011; Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). That is, when organizational members commit themselves toward including victims, offenders, and all relevant stakeholders in their conversations about forgiveness, ease the pain of their colleagues, and practice restraint, the organization is in a useful place for establishing a norm of forgiveness. Those core values underlying forgiveness can put the forgiveness culture in action through helping, building, and creating (Fehr, 2011). When organizational members engage in helping behaviors, they assist one another and make sacrifices to ensure the health of their workplace relationships. Engaging in building behaviors establishes strong and dense social networks through repairing and reconciling relationships. Finally, organizational members enacting creating behaviors allows for the emergence of new opportunities because organizational members release themselves of the burden of their conflict, restoring their cognitive resources (Fehr, 2011).

Finally, at an organizational level, organizations must be aware of the strain, hurt, and intense emotions that their members face daily (Cameron, 2007). Therefore, organizations should provide training about appropriate methods for constructively handling the risky nature of conflict and forgiveness. In this training, organizations should encourage their members to engage in scenarios in which conflict and transgressions are likely to occur and provide them solutions and strategies for successfully navigating those scenarios. For example, Madsen et al. (2009) proposed a forgiveness intervention system consisting of three levels: individual, dyadic, and organizational/cultural. At the individual level, facilitators should ask organizational members about their perception of offenses in the workplace, their assessment about the justification of the offense, and how sustained the injury is from the offense. At the dyadic level, Madsen and colleagues (2009) suggested that facilitators assess whether the offense was made to a members' identity or their actions, how they react to their offense, and whether a history exists in the coworker relationship creating the climate for transgressions. At the organizational/cultural level, trainers can assess whether forgiveness is a core value, if trust can be retained, and if coworkers can continue working together following their transgressions. Overall, organizations and their members should realize that conflict is inevitable. Reframing conflict as constructive and potentially transformative is a useful strategy to ensure that their members and the organization remain successful (Cameron, 2007; Fehr & Gelfand, 2020; Folger et al., 2009).

Formal dispute mechanisms can function toward rectifying conflict and encouraging forgiveness. Though there are times when formal dispute mechanisms exacerbate conflict (Bies et al., 2016), they can be helpful for people moving past conflict in a constructive manner. We recommend that members use formal disputes when possible for working through the hostility of conflict and moving toward the comfort of forgiveness. In this way, members have a formal process behind them helping them work past feelings of vulnerability that might occur when seeking or providing forgiveness.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS AS A TABOO TOPIC

Though researchers have helped the academic study of forgiveness flourish across myriad scholarly disciplines (Griffin et al., 2020), there are many new avenues of research that scholars can explore. First, communication researchers should explore the extent to which forgiveness is a taboo topic among organizational members. The opportunity to quantify how risky and taboo forgiveness is allows researchers to better assess the problem it poses to organizations and their members. Additionally, assessing the extent to which forgiveness is taboo allows researchers to explore individual, relational, and organizational outcomes that might be associated with taboo topics.

Second, researchers should continue exploring organizational members' values and behaviors to further understand how they contribute to forgiveness cultures. By assessing how organizational members feel and assessing forgiveness, it can allow researchers to develop firm knowledge claims about why forgiveness is possibly taboo and difficult to communicate in the organizational setting. Relatedly, researchers exploring organizational members values and behaviors can determine how sustainable forgiveness cultures are and the effect they have on organizational and individual outcomes (Fehr & Gelfand, 2020; Griffin et al., 2020)

Third, given the discussion about forgiveness interventions (e.g., Madsen et al., 2009), researchers should determine how forgiveness training contributes to organizational members' own forgiveness intentions, their competence in communicating forgiveness, and the effect that the training has on the

strength of relationships among organizational members. Likewise, given the promising results of writing interventions (e.g., Barclay et al. 2016; Romero, 2008), researchers should assess the topics that organizational members should write about, the feelings they develop from their writing, and the outcomes associated with writing about forgiveness. These interventions hold promise, so new research about helping organizational members realize their own ability to reconcile their hurt, or the hurt they have caused, and to write their feelings and thoughts about it, could be fruitful for all organizational members.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have described that conflict is a ubiquitous and uncomfortable occurrence in organizational life. However, we positioned communicating forgiveness as a helpful path toward constructively managing conflict. Though researchers have discovered many advantages and benefits of expressing forgiveness in the workplace and practitioners have advocated strongly for forgiveness (Fehr & Gelfand, 2020; Fehr et al., 2010), it is a risky and potentially problematic communication process (Waldron & Kassing, 2011). We described that forgiveness is a taboo topic among organizational members and we detailed the many barriers toward reconciling workplace relationships after a transgression. Using the Risk Negotiation Framework, we explained why forgiveness is risky and taboo, before describing the communication strategies that organizations and their members can use to alleviate their concerns, overcome the obstacles to expressing forgiveness, and build organizations predicated on the constructive and prosocial process of forgiveness (Waldron & Kloeber, 2019).

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Barriers: Personal, dyadic, or contextual features that make communicating forgiveness difficult.

Conflict: Perceived incompatibilities arising between organizational members.

Peer Coworker Relationships: Connections between organizational members at the same hierarchical level.

Risky Communication: Message exchange that is fraught with challenges and potential face threats.

Supervisor-Subordinate Relationships: Connections between organizational members in which one person has authority over the other.

Transgressions: Offenses that occur in relationships.

Workplace Relationships: Connections between people who hold membership together in an organization.

Section 2

Taboo Identities

Chapter 5

Racism in the United States: Messy Conversations About Exceptionalism, Passivity, and Why America Has Yet to Overcome

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores American exceptionalism, which is rooted in the Anglo-Saxon myth and Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism, and expands the concept to imply that those of Caucasian Nationality are a superior body politic. The goal is not to re-write America's story, but to rather use this scholarship to clarify and illuminate portions of America's history that society has ignored and to examine how we have arrived in a historical moment fueled by a sense of passive activism in which fighting for equality is trendy, but not necessarily transformative. American exceptionalism is tied to the notion of White and Black as an American creation, and the Black body as demonized to prove that American exceptionalism is rooted in the fabric of America's founding and still threads through Democracy today in the form of White supremacy.

INTRODUCTION

The historical narrative of African American history has made racial inequality a taboo topic as it violates the narrative of the current majority of White America. Recently I engaged in a round table diversity discussion at a local seminary. The seminary president asked for African Americans to share their personal testimonies concerning racism in America. I shared a recent experience concerning a flat tire on one of my vehicles. Due to the recent wave of incidents of police brutality, I became concerned, and even fearful while changing my tire. My fear was that the police would come to help me, and in

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some twist of events, their help would turn into violence. I had done nothing wrong in that given moment, nor do I possess a criminal record of any sort. Yet the story of police brutality in America is not confined to those with nefarious intent or abhorrent backgrounds. When I shared my concern with one of the gentlemen at the table with me, a young white male, acknowledged my pain. In the moment he acknowledged America's history of abuse to African Americans but then he confessed, "I understand what you are saying and that makes me feel sad, but I can't allow it to interfere with my life." This young man could not allow himself to consider the suffering of others, even when, to some degree, his success was based on that suffering. This example personifies why racial inequality in America remains a taboo topic in 2021. Discussions about ongoing issues of discrimination and persecution are too uncomfortable for White America to emotionally grapple with and take action against. In other words, if a White American emotionally sits with the notions of continued systemic racism, they may feel called to action to help change the current narrative which is too inconvenient for many. Black Americans are situated at the epicenter of this taboo topic, but when they do attempt to approach the topic with their White counterpart, they are often dismissed and labeled as unwilling to let go of the past.

In this chapter, we question the philosophical implications of dialogic civility on institutional communication in the area of diversity and inclusion. In other words, how can achieving a better understanding of the philosophical history of systemic racism in America help us to create communication strategies to address this taboo topic? This chapter explores American exceptionalism as defined by Douglas (2015) which is rooted in the Anglo-Saxon myth and Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. Therefore, American exceptionalism is synonymous with Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism indicating a broad term beginning with those of Anglo-Saxon descent but expands to imply that those of Caucasian nationality are a superior body politic. We will connect the theme of American exceptionalism to the notion of White and Black as an American creation, and the Black body as demonized to prove that American exceptionalism is rooted in the fabric of America's founding and continues to weave through democracy today in the form of White supremacy.

When exploring the history of racism through narrative analysis, it is important to note that our goal is not to rewrite America's story. Rather, the use of this analysis is to clarify and illuminate portions of America's history that we have ignored and to examine how we have arrived in a historical moment fueled by a sense of passive activism in which fighting for equality is trendy, but not necessarily transformative. Our hope is that by doing so, we may present a path that will ultimately determine how to move forward. In other words, we seek to answer why, in the year 2022—despite ongoing calls for racial equality, and justice—are Americans still marching for liberation and equality as African Americans are treated as subhuman? The taboo nature of addressing the deeply rooted history of racism is particularly "messy" because it suggests the notion of a new beginning, a new chapter in history, or a new story that has yet to be told, which can prove challenging for the public as some may not want to acknowledge or embrace the change they are directly confronted with.

This chapter explores the notion that origins matter and therefore, how origins of racial inequality in America guide our understanding as to how and why systemic racism is still an omnipresent and taboo topic in the present day. Telling these stories of origin will help White America understand the "how" and the "why" of the history of systemic racism, which will not rewrite history or change past behavior, but provide powerful knowledge that can help individuals come together to bridge communicative gaps in this taboo topic. The stories help to unveil and illuminate daily microaggressions that still pull the undercurrent of racism in America.

WHAT IS RACISM?

Arendt (2000, 1963) refers to racism as the “one great crime in America’s history” and has subsequently created the “color question,” which is a uniquely American question as it concerns the history and politics of the Republic. It is separate from the color problem of world politics, which originated in European nations as America was not involved in this particular color problem. Arendt (2000, 1963) cautions that the ongoing, unresolved color problem within the United States may prevent the nation from being an ongoing world power. Resulting from racism or this uniquely American “color problem” is the fact that African Americans have become not the only minority in the United States, but the most visible. Arendt (2000, 1963) notes that because African Americans are sometimes viewed as representing “new immigrants,” they thereby arouse the most profound xenophobic sentiments from others.

In other words, to form a community, there must be a common identity and also a common enemy. African Americans, in their heightened visibility, became the common enemy. While African Americans may be the most visible minority in America, their visibility is often seen and heard but dismissed based on the viewers’ or listeners’ own prejudice or hermeneutic of African American culture based on a stereotyped history, thereby presenting an ongoing dichotomy of the omnipresent, invisible African American body. Therefore, how can African Americans be seen and heard in a way that does not immediately discredit their appearance or mute their words? To fully answer this question, we must first explore the origins of the color question which was born with America’s founding.

THE HISTORY OF RACISM WITHIN THE HISTORY OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS

Narrative ground gives us the ability to form some sense of unity, which is why President Biden made his appeal to the historical narrative found in the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet continuously ignoring African Americans, whether literally or through decades of suffrage, has kept us in a “Groundhog Day” of suffering. Walter Kaufmann, in his prologue to Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, states, “We are not so rich that we can do without tradition. Let him that has new ears listen to it in a new way” (Buber & Kaufmann, 1971, p. 31). With fear and trembling we need to explore the narrative of America, its dark history, with hopes of brightening our future.

Douglas (2015) explores the grand narrative of American exceptionalism, stating that America’s myth of “exceptionalism” is originally rooted in race, and the primeval origins lie with the Anglo-Saxons. The myth begins with Tacitus’ *Germania*, written in 98 C.E. Tacitus, a Roman historian, “offered an ethnological perspective” which became the basis for Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism (Douglas, 2015, p. 4). In *Germania*, Tacitus paints a portrait of the ancient German tribes. He says that they had within them a natural inclination for freedom (Douglas, 2015, p. 5). He goes on to describe the tribes’ liberated system of government. Because of their love for freedom, Tacitus describes a governmental system that mirrors our own. Douglas (2015) suggests that our current styles of Westernized government have their influence in the description provided by Tacitus.

At first glance this narrative seems to be flawless, with liberty and democracy being its fruit. Tacitus’ description of the system, however, would give rise to a more nationalist perspective. Douglas (2015) writes, “along with playing a role in determining systems of governance, it laid the foundation for the subjugation, if not elimination, of certain peoples: those people who were not members of the “unmixed race” that Tacitus described” (Douglas, 2015, p. 6). If the morality were in their blood, and if virtue

flowed through “Anglo-Saxon veins,” then the purity of their race was a must (Douglas, 2015, p. 6), thereby situating Anglo-Saxons as the superior race 1,678 years before the Declaration of Independence was signed.

To ensure that her connection between America’s politics and laws were seen as spurious, Douglas (2015) then turns to the Founding Fathers. Thomas Jefferson, a Founding Father, who is now known to have had a Black slave by the name of Sally Hemings with whom he created a whole family, believed the narrative of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. Jefferson said, “Tacitus I consider as the first writer in the world without exception” in a letter to his granddaughter (Douglas, 2015, p. 11). Jefferson also studied Anglo-Saxon language, as he considered it a hobby and even a necessity owing to its impact on modern English, thereby establishing the framework not only for the Declaration of Independence but also for the notion of American exceptionalism as defined by Douglas (2015) as it is conceptually rooted in Anglo-Saxon superiority.

When examining the origins and subsequent centuries of racism in America, Arendt states, “we can only conclude that the institution of slavery carries an obscurity even blacker than the obscurity of poverty; the slave, not the poor man, was ‘wholly overlooked’” (Arendt, 1963, p. 71). Arendt (1963) also refers to the notion of American exceptionalism as she notes how the atrocities of racism date back to the Founding Fathers’ reluctance to heed Jefferson’s call for the abolition of the crime of slavery, and henceforth Whites have largely been unwilling to address miscegenation laws.

As Arendt (2000, 1963) states, it seems that the “American Revolution was achieved in a kind of ivory tower into which the fearful spectacle of human misery, the haunting voices of abject poverty, never penetrated ... their sound realism was never put to the test of compassion, their common sense was never exposed to the absurd hope that man, whom Christianity had held to be sinful and corrupt in his nature, might still be revealed to be an angel” (p. 273). This violation of democratic principles and the original crime in America, slavery, serves as the precipice for the racial legislation that has perpetuated racism and discrimination throughout the country’s history. “The principle of the equality of all men has been belied by the simultaneous and intentional enslavement of a significant portion of the population” (Gines, 2014, p. 67). In other words, rooted in American exceptionalism, slavery did not simply revoke a person’s liberties, but it completely decimated an entire race’s ability to fight for freedom—something even citizens of third world countries under tyrannical rule were privileged to. However, how does a nation progress when the previously enslaved, but now often impoverished or subjugated group, fight for equality in the modern era amongst a majority group who learned from history that this minority group was nothing more than a stereotype?

HOW RACISM CONTINUED AFTER 1776

Despite having a key role in the founding of America, Jefferson did attempt to resolve segregation, but his efforts went largely ignored by his colleagues. It was not until Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and the reconstruction period began that any official documentation condemning racism began to circulate. Nevertheless, post-emancipation writers who did not wish to seek equality amongst all races were still able to disseminate their vitriol to the masses, thus vocalizing a clear counterargument to Lincoln’s proclamation. Muhammad (2019) cites one post-emancipation writer who drafted an article entitled “Terrible things await a nation bent on handing ballots to beasts,” which read, “seeing, then, that the negro does, indeed, belong to a lower and inferior order of beings, why in the name of

Heaven, why, should we forever degrade and disgrace both ourselves and our posterity by entering, of our own volition, into more intimate relations with him” (p. 18)? Although the nation set forth on a path of reconciliation, these words were enough to keep trepidation about the necessity or benefits of equality alive in the minds of many.

According to Muhammad (2019), every attempt by African Americans to achieve equality has inevitably resulted in even worse conditions than they experienced in slavery. “There can be no doubt that for centuries to come the task of weaving these African threads of life into our society will be the greatest of all American problems” (p. 19). This notion implies that even from the early history of a nation that was proclaimed to be a single “nation under God with liberty and justice for all,” there were many people who used their rhetoric to spread an alternative or contrary narrative to that of unity and inclusion.

As the reconstruction period progressed and the nation remained divided with their opinions of how to view and treat African Americans, the slavery problem became the Negro Problem when social issues arose surrounding how, and in which places, African Americans would enter the modern world as citizens. As African Americans attempted to integrate into society for generations to come, the theme of Black crime—specifically, Blacks as thieves, rapists, and murderers—became a counter-discourse that framed theoretical cultural differences between races.

Furthermore, the victimization of an African American child whose ancestors were former slaves “tied them to both an exceptional past and a peculiar present” (Muhammad, 2019, p. 101). This peculiarity stood in contrast to European immigrants, whose history of persecution and subjugation seemed to be washed away by the shores of Ellis Island. In other words, social reforms and social justice was considerably more forgiving of the European immigrant than of the African American migrant. This is due to the demonizing of African Americans since their arrival on American shores, thereby never establishing a common narrative ground. Du Bois (1903; 1968), in his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*, describes the immediate over-policing of African Americans after emancipation. Du Bois (1903; 1968) says that emancipation of slaves would naturally cause an increase in crime. Slaves had nothing after the emancipation. The property that was promised to them was not given to them and the few social programs that existed did little more than feed the pockets of the White government officials who ran them. Seeing African Americans as less than moral allowed White America to enslave, then release, them with no resources and then demonize them for criminal behavior. Du Bois (1903) explains how a natural distrust arose which created a cycle that continues today. He writes, “natural viciousness and vagrancy are being daily added motives of revolt and revenge which stir up all the talent savagery of both races and make peaceful attention to economic development often impossible” (p. 117). Therefore, even if there is a moment of just policing or judgment, it is difficult to see owing to the pre-existing mountain of inequity.

Continuing this theory, Gines (2014) explains that throughout the early centuries in America, an unsubstantiated White fear existed that prompted Whites to think that freedom and equality for all would somehow threaten White domination, subsequently destroying society. This arbitrary fear resulted in the South choosing to “subjugate rather than elevate the masses” (Gines, 2014, p. 48). This subjugation, whether arbitrary or intentional, frames the argument that from the founding of America, the theme of American exceptionalism promotes the belief that African Americans, born in the United States, do not have the same unalienable rights as White U.S. citizens. This is essentially, Gines (2014) asserts, a fact, not an opinion, but challenges readers to question whether this ought to be the case? The assertion is unequivocally “no.” African Americans should not be denied U.S. citizens’ rights. Yet the disparities persist. Why? Why, after nearly two-and-a-half centuries do some U.S. citizens still believe that they are

somehow superior or entitled to more or different inalienable rights compared to those of their neighbor. And why, after countless years of protests, awareness, marches, movements, benefits, books, songs, etc., do we still exist in a historical moment where racism is just as evident, palpable, and yet taboo as during a Civil Rights era sit-in? We cannot ignore the advancements that have been made over centuries, but despite how far Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., marched toward Washington, Americans are still so many miles away from achieving that commonality of brotherhood that the early Christians developed long before the birth of this nation of immigrants.

As time moves further and further away from Jefferson's decree, a prominent trend in America is a hegemonic society proudly declaring in daily colloquial practice, "I'm not racist." Yet this sentiment often lands as obsolete when America still has a blatant systemic racism crisis. Arendt's distinction between race thinking and racism can help us understand this behavior. Race thinking is largely a "matter of free opinion, while racism is more ideological because it permeates public opinion and leads people to abandon concrete facts for racist principles" (Gines, 2014, p. 83). Even though Americans may proudly declare themselves free of any bias, or even wear a T-shirt declaring that everyone should be equal, actually voiding themselves of all "race thinking" means they must engage in conversations regarding race and equality with people of all ages, races, and ethnicities; actively working to bring change and equality to the workplace; and be a part of community organizations that promote inclusivity. Until then, passive or active "race thinking" is going to continue to serve as a spectrum segue into racism. In other words, "race thinking," or passive engagement in racism, serves as an opposition to equality, thereby serving as an entry way for racism, which is ideological, or a more active approach to inequality, to continuously infiltrate American society.

Throughout history, Americans have theoretically accepted the principle of equality, but rejected this principle in practice. Examples range from the birth of America with the foundation of freedom and the principles of equality coexisting with the development of racialized slavery, to modern day in which country singer Morgan Wallen publicly used the "N-word" and was condemned by his record label but subsequently saw his album reach number one on iTunes, thereby achieving the highest commercial success of his career (Hughes, 2021). These examples help us to understand how, throughout history, "race thinking" rooted in American exceptionalism that implies Caucasians are the superior races results in a racism that is deeply ingrained in American history and continues to the present day, and also to provide clear insight into why movements such as Black Lives Matter have failed to lead to a true revolution involving significant change.

However, as we begin to examine how American exceptionalism has evolved from 1776, through the Civil Rights era and into present day, it is important to examine the way in which activists have attempted to enact systemic change. While those in power can speak verbosely to motivate the masses, violence has remained at the core of many efforts toward equality as it serves as a metaphor of desperation of all contributing parties, regardless of belief. Arendt (1970) states, "Violence is distinguished by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is close to strength, since the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength." Moreover, further examining the presence of violence in the fight for racial equality again captures a "unity of contraries" (Arnett, 2017) as one group desperately fights to "matter" while another group fights to resist change.

Why Violence Does not Help Taboo Discussion

In the summer of 2020, when the BLM protests began as peaceful demonstrations, but erupted in violence across the country, Americans opposed to the movement quickly pointed to acts of looting, arson, and aggression as perfect anecdotes to immediately and swiftly delegitimize the movement, so as not to provide credence to the motive behind the movement. In other words, the BLM opposition could focus on the violence to perpetuate African American stereotypes instead of discussing and delving into the depths of the emotion, anger, and desperation of the protestors who felt the pangs of centuries of discrimination weighing down on their shoulders as they verbally and non-verbally acted to say, “No more,” “Enough is enough,” and “A change has not come, and it must.”

However, in 2016, NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick began kneeling during the national anthem before football games in protest of social injustice and police brutality. Kaepernick’s action became wrought with controversy, and while some stood in solidarity with Kaepernick, he was eventually cut from his team and is an early example of the now-trendy “cancel culture.” The implication behind canceling Kaepernick is that Americans were not ready for change. They were not ready to have the uncomfortable conversations about the taboo topic of social injustice that could actually result in change. They were not ready to acknowledge their own prejudices. They wanted to continue to deny their difference. However, if Colin Kaepernick attempted and was shunned for silently and non-violently protesting systemic racism and police brutality, and BLM protestors were denounced and criminalized for marching with several demonstrations turning violent, how exactly are African Americans supposed to frame their revolution if subsequent attempts several centuries long—including the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s—still result in unarmed African Americans dying by the hands of law enforcement, egregious disproportionate criminal convictions, and unequal access to education and employment? Why is violence not seen as an act of desperation that is able to begin conversation on this taboo topic?

Violence does not equal power. Violence does not result in power. According to Arendt (1963), violence is a result of power being jeopardized and ends in power’s disappearance. She continues that power resides with the people and violence lies outside of the political. Power evolves only if people come together, unified under the same cause or action, and power will vanish if the group disbands. As violence lies outside of the political, power lies within the political communities and does not encapsulate any form of violence but notes that there may not be a political sphere without violence in the private realm. Therefore, how do Americans reconcile and unite after protests that result in violence which, in one regard, delegitimizes the movement, but occurs as a reaction to fear and anger pent up over centuries of being denied equality?

The violent acts that occurred during the BLM protests can be described as an act of counter-violence—a retaliation against the violence of the Other. In this example, protestors were retaliating against violent police brutality, but also the violent treatment that minorities have endured since America’s conception. The Other, in this sense, is both a single person as well as a historical metaphor. This “violence of the Other is not an objective reality except in the sense that it exists in all men as the universal motivation of counter—violence; it is nothing but the unbearable fact of broken reciprocity and of the systematic exploitation of man’s humanity for the destruction of the human” (Gines, 2014, p. 99). Since violence already exists within most of our institutions, including the police, military, prisons, etc., acts of violence are inevitable, but the question of whose violence will be endorsed and whose will be condemned is always an unknown variable. Condemning the violence of the oppressed is to provide a taciturn endorsement of the violence against the oppressed (Gines, 2014).

What is missing from violence, extreme behaviors, and even mass protests are what Massingale (2010) deems racial reconciliation. Racial reconciliation does not attempt to eliminate racial differences, but rather the eliminate the “stigma and privilege associated with race. Racial reconciliation is the process of healing the estrangement, division, and hostility between racial groups by severing the linkage between race and social, cultural, and/or political subordination and dominance” (Massingale, 2010, p. 90-91). A reflection on racism must acknowledge that racial reconciliation requires not just dialogue and an evolution of personal sentiment, but it also requires social transformation, which cannot be achieved through violence. The dismantling of a taboo topic, or even beginning to address one, requires truth-telling and affirmative redress. This truth-telling must be in the form of a radical recognition of the historical events and decisions that contributed to the current systems of White privilege. It is a challenging of dominant social narratives that obscure these dangerous memories of history and the way these memories impact the present. Authentic racial reconciliation must also include “affirmative redress” which seeks “to rectify the harms caused by a long history of race-based unjust enrichment and unjust impoverishment” (p. 100). Massingale (2010) continues by stating that without a firm commitment to direct action to right past and present wrongs and acknowledge those who have been harmed, “verbal apologies or statements of regret over racial injustices are empty rhetoric, if not worse” (p.102).

This reconciliation leads to a lament in privilege which is composed of realization, acknowledgement of the past and the burden of another, forthright and confession of human wrongdoing. Lament of the racially privileged is a stance against further wrongdoing. This process permits truthful and direct acknowledgement of social estrangements and one’s participation in them. Therefore, lament gives rise to acts of compassion and bonds of solidarity. Compassion is the motive for moving beyond social boundaries set by culture and customs. Real compassion is something visceral as it arises from suffering by providing a space for individuals to enter this place of suffrage. Compassion is a gut-wrenching response to human suffering as it propels an individual to act, thereby serving as the counterpart of racism. Compassion leads to a feeling of sorrow which propels individuals to cross a metaphorical bridge that results in action. Compassion is not a mere feeling of sympathy but a commitment to the common good. This is where White Americans intentionally place themselves into the racist world of the oppressed and personally try to understand their pain instead of trying to ignore or cancel Black Americans.

Do Protests and Movements Truly Promote Change and Equality?

The basic laws of the American democracy promise equality related to opportunity and rights. However, Arendt (2000, 1963) is careful to explain that equality lies within the body politic and discrimination is part of society. Society is the middle ground that people encounter when they leave the private realm of their home, but before they reach the political realm of equality. Society, or the social sphere, leads people to vocations and to be in the presence of another’s company. Once someone enters the social sphere, they are intrinsically attracted to those with whom they feel similar, thereby creating groups and associations within society. Once these groups of perceived similarities form, people naturally discriminate against others who are not part of their inner circle. This discrimination can be based on a person’s profession, income, ethnicity, race, etc. However, if discrimination ceased to exist completely, Arendt (2000, 1963) argues that the important advantages of a “free association and group formation would disappear” (p. 238). In other words, with discrimination holding as much power and importance in the social realm as equality does in the body politic, how do Americans, as a society, uphold discrimination as a social right, thereby confining it to the social sphere and preventing it from entering into the political and private

spheres, where, as Arendt (1963) cautions, and we as a society have seen, acts of discrimination become destructive. Discrimination in the social realm allows us to identify and assimilate with similar groups, but until Americans stop discriminating on the basis of race and ethnicity, and these discriminations exist within the private, social, *and* political, we will continue to experience incidents such as the January 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection, murders of unarmed African Americans, police brutality, and even inequality within the workplace tied to hiring practices and wage inequality.

Despite the videos of blatant racial inequalities that lead to marches, protests, pledges of solidarity, T-shirts, fundraisers, social media posts, benefit concerts, etc., Dr. King's dream has yet to come to fruition. That is not to say that there has been no progress towards equality. There are more minorities holding political office than ever before. Companies are beginning to create more equal employment opportunities for minorities, and African Americans are beginning to get more leading roles in Hollywood. However, the KKK is still active. Neo-Nazi groups, alt-right groups such as Breitbart, and pro-discriminatory laws are still very much a part of modern American society, thus perpetuating continued systemic racism and injustice each and every day. Therefore, what is it about these movements, marches, and demands for change that is seemingly ineffective? Why does it seem that any advancement toward genuine, cultural, and system change washes away in the laundry when the protestors come home and remove their BLM T-shirts?

The historical moment that we are currently situated in is polarized by extremes of American exceptionalism and what has come to be labeled the "woke" movement. Seemingly unwilling to wrestle with the tension that lies in the middle of these extremes, Americans stand on a ground of individualism instead of unity. This disconnect polarizes and politicizes beliefs instead of situating them amongst the Other, and above all, creates spaces that lack a common center. Buber (1965) explains how communities thrive when there is a common center to unite differences because communities cannot exist or be sustained on individual personal relationships. This is because, without a common center, there is nothing to unite people despite their differences, and this provides a reason or value in the need to work together as a community.

Buber (1965) goes on to say that both monologue and dialogue are necessary in a given situation to promote progress and change. Arnett, Arneson, and Bell (2006) continue this conversation by stating, "monologue is the narrative ground upon which people gather their identity ... people do not live for, die for, or kill for dialogue; they live, die, and kill for monologic ground that sustains identity" (p. 13). Whereas monologue is connected to a specific worldview and an individual's identity, dialogue "begins when the conversation commences" (p. 10). Furthermore, continental dialogue takes into consideration that of narrative ground, narrative conviction, and narrative identity. By each participant acknowledging the narrative ground upon which the Other stands, there is space for narrative bias within the conversation, but it does not hinder the opportunity for growth and change. "This narrative ground constitutes monologic conviction, which finds transformation through revelatory surprise. Dialogue cannot be demanded; it is an unexpected disruption of a monologic position. This disruption only commences when one acknowledges the monologic ground of another" (p. 13). In other words, communicative agents do not need to completely agree with one another, but they must acknowledge the narrative ground under everyone's feet, thereby understanding the ethic, sentiment, and values that motivate them. When one acknowledges and listens to the perspective of another, one need not completely agree, but the tributary leading to the common center can still begin to form.

However, it is common to see an individual fight to protect one's own narrative ground after acknowledging a differing perspective of another. Change, after all, can be challenging, uncomfortable, and strange.

America witnessed this type of action unfolding again during the BLM protests when businesses were looted, protestors were beaten, and property was burned. White supremacists and those opposed to BLM do not understand or acknowledge the importance of the narrative ground under which the protestors stood. African Americans have attempted to tell their story through their monologic worldview. W.E.B. DuBios in his 1903 canonical work *The Souls of Black Folks* coined the term “Double Consciousness”. Double Consciousness refers to the need for African Americans to live in the majority White world and understand white culture, while simultaneously holding their own identity. The monologic nature of African Americans is born of the inability to have real heartfelt conversations with members of White America. It is the one-sided conversation that leads to a circular racial narrative in the United States.

Black Americans have tried to traverse the monologue process into that of a dialogue in which all participants do not have to empathize with being an African American in America but must acknowledge the narrative ground under a Black man’s feet. White America failed in this undertaking. Instead of having this dialogue, society sought a path of passive activism. White America watched *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, listened to hip-hop music, and voted for Obama, allowing them to point to clear pieces of evidence to prove that they are not racist. However, the problem lies within the notion that this passive activism does not equate to systemic change. For the purposes of this chapter, passive activism describes commonly seen behavior in which White Americans place themselves adjacent to a racial cause. This behavior could be participating in a protest, wearing a BLM tee shirt, or adorning a lawn sign that promotes equality. However, their superficial activism becomes passive when their shirt goes in the laundry and no dialogue has occurred to promote systemic change.

WHY ARE WE MISSING THE HISTORICAL MOMENT?

For the active activists who are begging for change, despite how many miles, marches, or chants are shouted, there is not going to be an Amendment that serves as a proverbial magic wand that creates cultural change and erases systemic racism. Change must occur on an individual level that spreads through the public and becomes systemic. While some activists spend their days working in the public sphere to create policy change, too few individuals—specifically, White individuals—are grappling with the tensions that lie outside of their hegemonic landscape. However, instead of confronting the uncomfortable sentiment buried in that tension, they resort to passive activism where their participation in a march or adornment of a BLM yard sign admonishes their guilt while never forcing them to confront the tension outside of their norm, which is where true systemic racism remains situated.

Systemic racism reform will happen when individuals engage in a dialogue with those whose beliefs differ from their own, and this dialogue must be grounded within the historical moment. All members of society, regardless of race or belief, must listen to the historical moment and respond accordingly instead of scapegoating, wearing a T-shirt, and talking *at* the Other instead of *with* the Other. Arnett and Arneson (1999) note that to listen and respond to a historical moment, one does not have to like or approve of it, but that any historical moment must be taken seriously and not ignored. “The surest way for opportunities within a given moment to lose ground is for those who do not like the present to act as if they live in another time. Change comes from meeting reality, not from acts of denial” (p. 38). Furthermore, society has to understand why the current situation exists in order for change to occur.

However, a major barrier to change occurring is that White America too often colloquially proclaims that they do not understand why African Americans allow themselves to continue to exist in poverty,

persecution, and inequality. If a person wants to get ahead in life, then it is simply up to them to propel their status. In other words, those who carry this pejorative stance do not understand the current conditions by which systemic racism lives and breathes. They do not understand why and how African Americans must still overcome far more adversity and indifference than their White counterparts to excel in life. They do not understand why or how an African American's presence is still questioned in public places. Arnett and Arneson (1999) define this type of thought as ideology. "When a person relies upon an ideology, he or she attempts to make life conform to his or her a priori interpretation" (p. 38). Instead of attempting to understand the perspective of the Other, these people rely on their own historical hermeneutic to drive their ideology of systemic racism, thereby substituting a reality rooted in historicity for that of their own.

Americans, with this egregious lack of perspective, do not choose to possibly admit that *they* are the problem. They are a vital reason that systemic racism still exists. Organizations like Breitbart or the KKK are loud and generate scandalous news headlines, but they make up a significantly small portion of Americans. Systemic racism lives and breathes in between the relativism of David Duke and Ibram X. Kendi—White Americans who do not understand the current societal conditions for African Americans, the history of these practices, or why activists insist there is still so much work to be done. This demographic, who insist they are not racist, perpetuate systemic indifference that continues to breed hate, discrimination, and inequality into every corner of America. If Americans cannot discern a way to articulate questions relevant to this given historical moment, they will fail to create a dialogue that addresses this moment. These questions must then progress to a dialogue that works from a narrative perspective with the "assumption that openness in interpretations and action, not predetermined dictates, are historical keys" (Arnett & Arneson, 1999, p. 38). This dialogue would not exist to change the African American's history, but it would serve as a turning point for unity as it creates a common ground for people of all races to stand on and perpetuates a new way of understanding, discussing, and addressing systemic racism.

NEW APPROACHES FOR ADDRESSING THIS TABOO TOPIC

Instead of finding a common center—something to unite Americans during this deeply divided historical moment in which nearly all elements of the private, social, and political are becoming politicized—Americans are remaining steadfast in their interpersonal relationships and hurling hate speech toward those who do not agree with their personal beliefs, as evidenced by the marked increase in hate crimes targeted toward minority groups across the country as well as ongoing epithets displayed on public and private minority spaces. This common center that we must strive to achieve is civility. Because this concept can be perceived differently by each individual, for the purpose of this chapter, we define civility as a common center as a means to approach a taboo topic as a metaphysical communal consciousness.

In other words, when people interact, their actions, speech and rhetoric must reflect this communal consciousness or common center of civility by not allowing personal prejudice or preconceived notions to cause a person to commit physical, emotional, or spiritual violence or behave in a manner that usurps the future potential of a Black America. In practice, this common center implies that people of any ethnicity can communicate, work together, or simply coexist in a space that permits freedom to flourish and suspends any biases toward the Other. This common center does not demand that we all exhibit uniform behavior. It does demand that we are all rooted in the historical narrative of the United States,

the narrative of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Historically, this is the narrative we only extended to Anglo-Saxon White males who practiced some form of Christianity, but our model proposes that we intentionally approach all interactions with this common center in mind as a way to address the taboo topic of racial inequality with dialogic civility. This dialogue does not imply that people need to discuss racial injustice, argue about who is to blame for past history, or even discuss how racism is present in their own lives.

What it does require is for people of different ethnicities to engage in dialogue that recognizes the value that someone can add to your temporal moment without regard for ethnic background. If a person recognizes another's value be it at work, school, or in the community, two people can overcome differing beliefs by appreciating what that person can offer to them in a given temporal moment. If the relationship then traverses to a place where each person develops a form of respect for the other, then conversations can be engaged with the intent of persuading and educating the other about one's belief about racial inequality. If people do enter these conversations, dialogic civility can emerge that leads to a better understanding of how and why the Other believes a certain way about this taboo topic. It is this understanding through education, not domination, that will help society achieve and maintain a common center that sees the Other. We must work together as a collective whole because without a community, *all* individuals cannot achieve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Without this center, the conversation to promote active social justice reform can never move forward; instead, it moves in circles. When examining the relationship between this cyclical monologue and American exceptionalism, it is important to note that throughout history, individualism in the West only became possible as economic progress became greater. However, if a person does not have the resources to ignore other people, they cannot live a life of individualism. In other words, in a country with a unique ideology, African Americans were denied the opportunity to become individuals. They were left behind. They were ignored by those with the means to become individuals, thereby situating the notion of progress with only majority groups. The notion of situational progress will continue to be stunted when two opposing sides of a moral issue continue to argue their opinion of "right and wrong" rather than beginning a dialogue *with* and *about* the Other.

Change comes from multiple dialogues on a micro level that, over time, have an impact on a macro level. Change does not lie within the extremes of a movement or society. In other words, the KKK are not likely to sit down with the founders of the "1619" movement and derive moral ground to stand on collectively. To rhetorically abolish systemic racism, society must confront it "with contrary action, practices, and stories, which then disrupts rhetorical connections between felt guilt and imposed guilt" (Arnett, Arneson, & Bell, 2006, p. 18). Americans are stuck in what Arnett, Arneson and Bell (2006) label a moral cul-de-sac as they do not want to admit their biases, which would truly begin a dialogue of change, so they seek passive activism to make it appear that they are doing their part in the fight against racism. As a result, individuals continue to be stuck in a passive loop, or cul-de-sac, that they must communicate their way out of.

According to Arnett, Arneson and Bell (2006) "prescriptive imposition of communication ethics works from the assumption that a universal correction communicates a social good that redirects the other person, altering the 'wrong' or unethical behavior" (p. 62). The Black Lives Matter movement and subsequent speeches, protests, etc., are demanding a universal correction to systemic racism. Their cries for justice, equality, equal pay, equal treatment from law enforcement, and equal access to universal needs such as health care and education can be heard from Anchorage to Augusta, and they are condemning the behavior of those who promote White supremacy, categorizing them as both wrong and unethical.

However, White supremacists simply denounce protestors' behavior and invoke blame onto them for creating their own problems related to persecution instead of considering life from the vantage point of the Other. This notion of blame, or scapegoating, instead of an individual looking inward to their own thoughts and behaviors, is intertwined, and wrapped in the American identity of American exceptionalism. The practice of the scapegoat was one of sacrifice and transmission. Baldwin (2018) describes this scapegoat function of American society, stating, "any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the Black man has functioned in the White man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations" (p. 9). This becomes the explanation for the societal upheaval experienced during the June 6, Capitol insurrection, an incident that further served to polarize notions of racism and perpetuate the taboo nature of systemic racism as Americans could not agree on the underlying motives for the insurrection.

In other words, White supremacists do not believe that their hatred for other races is wrong or unethical. They justify their behavior and stand proud in their beliefs, citing rhetoric dating back to the writers of the Reconstruction Era, which states that they must protect their country against African Americans, and even further back to the Declaration of Independence, which only included landowners as free men. The words penned in black ink on that document proved bleak for the Black community, but this document still maintains its sentiment for White supremacists 245 years later: Make American Great Again.

As evidenced by the increased activism in the wake of George Floyd's murder, too often Americans only feel a call to be attentive to the Other after high profile incidents. However, as time moves on from a horrific, visible act of racial injustice and the proverbial social tension temperature lowers, white Americans become less vocal and less vigilant of systemic racism. Therefore, Black Americans are forced back into facing daily microaggressions which are brief and common daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that are derogatory or racial in nature. These daily acts serve to keep Black Americans marginalized regardless of their socio-economic status or level of education.

Instead of allowing the cultural movement perpetuated by Black Lives Matter to dissipate, Americans must come together and capitalize on the increased attention toward systemic racism in America and situate practical and sustainable strategies that make the narratives outlined throughout this chapter part of common historical knowledge and understanding across all cultures, races, and ages. By creating a system that propagates a permanent practice vocalness and vigilance instead of the temporary practices that currently exist, Americans will be able to approach the taboo topic of systemic racism with an arsenal of a comprehensive history and realization that American liberties allow for differences of thought while still recognizing value in the Other.

The assumption must be made in every sphere of influence that the birth defect of American historical racism is at work. Whether active or dormant, it demands constant vigilance to ensure that it is not the antecedent to strategic responses in any environment. Since discrimination is woven into the fabric of American history and society, the goal in addressing the taboo topic of racial injustice is to increase white America's knowledge of the history and obstacles that Black America understands all too well. Society needs a platform by which to normalize this knowledge in a way that it becomes parallel with the knowledge of any other historical topic. In other words, White Americans must be willing to understand and approach the historic details outlined in this chapter in the same manner that they engage with knowledge about D-Day, the Great Depression, or the Cold War. We do not assume that this influx of knowledge will profoundly or immediately change individual's minds about racial inequality. It will

not stop school board members from running on platforms against the teaching of critical race theory (CRT) in school or keep KKK members from demonstrating.

However, increasing knowledge and awareness about African American history will help to decrease the taboo nature surrounding the topic of systemic racism because it will provide citizens with the “why” and the “how” of African American history, which is paramount in understanding why African Americans are still subjected to discrimination regardless of their age, economic status or level of education. We must also realize that purposeful redundancy leads to the shaping of the American consciousness.

Currently Americans are inundated with content. Whether it is in the form of social media articles, gossip news columns, podcasts, news apps, television or print journalism, Americans are exposed to more content in a 24-hour period than ever before. However, discussions and images of systemic racism and/or racial injustice appear in higher frequencies across each the aforementioned platforms following high-profile incidents such as the murder of George Floyd and subsequent BLM protests in the summer of 2020. While we are not denouncing the importance of news outlets and content platforms increasing the visibility of racial injustice in these moments, what is missing from this fervor are daily, sustainable, colloquial ways to discuss systemic racism. Approachable, relatable community members be them from universities, churches, non-profit organizations, or public or private sector representatives need to tell the stories lifted up in this chapter. They need myriad platforms in the form of podcasts, TV talk shows, YouTube videos, and even TikTok videos with a dual agenda. The first would be to tell these stories repeatedly. Historical narratives that highlight why daily microaggressions of racism still occur across America and historical narratives that explain why it is harmful for a white individual to declare “I don’t see color, I’m not racist” must become understood in the hegemonic sphere. The second aspect of this forum would be to provide a model for this discourse.

Through an examination of scholarly research throughout this chapter on violence (Arendt), monologue vs. dialogue (Arnett, et al.) and the importance of seeing the Other (Buber), we understand that change is not going to come from the extreme. Change must come from the center; a common ground built on a dialogic civility that acknowledges the Other. Therefore, this platform will model how to achieve this notion by bringing together multi-racial panels to have honest, transparent, and vulnerable dialogues surrounding daily racial microaggressions that plague our everyday. Black Americans must discuss why, regardless of their education level or socio-economic status, the narratives outlined in this chapter paired with daily microaggressions are precisely why they still feel persecuted in the current historical moment. Furthermore, white Americans must be vulnerable in this dialogue to acknowledge their white privilege and, regardless of their previous beliefs surrounding racism, they must *hear* the stories being told to them and be honest about their own conceptions and questions surrounding race relations.

White Americans will thereby gain an understanding of *why* and *how* microaggressions impact Black Americans but also learn to embrace the plurality of culture, of tradition, of the Other. This knowledge or awareness may not pose a drastic change in a person, but it will change their mindset and that nuance can prove powerful. Consider, for a moment, how impactful these micro changes could be to tackling microaggressions. If we all walked down the street and passed each other with a smile instead of trepidation; if we did not dismiss a dialect because it sounds “foreign,” but instead acknowledged its origins; if first glance did not invoke a thought of stereotypes, but one of history; if we apply the dialogic civility heard on these new platforms just once a week. To achieve this mindset, Americans must understand stories of origin. These stories must become common knowledge, not a taboo topic.

CONCLUSION

It is critical not to erase or forget African American history. It is also critical not to attempt to rewrite history. Our job is to understand this historical moment a little better in which the issue of race is calling forth our attention to examine unreflective privilege. The notion of individualism has dominated the age of modernity. Individuals are focused on themselves and are motivated to act in a way that helps themselves and not the Other. The notion of passive activism allows Americans to traverse through social justice as individuals, thereby creating a façade of progress that assumes you can get rid of evil simply by moving in a different direction.

As we grapple with the question of unity and race in America, the notion of identity springs forth from the discussion. Narrative ground gives a sense of identity both collectively and in our individual lives. The American narrative fights in both the racial sense and issues of class. To survive the tensions of racism and classism, we must “free ourselves of the myth of America and try to find out what is really happening here” (Baldwin, 1993, p. 22). The capitalistic narrative of America asserts that with hard work everyone can make it. If we reverse this notion, we find that there must be something inherently wrong with the one who does not. When we insert this notion into issues of race, we come away with racism.

The challenge we propose is for Americans to discover or return to a moral ground of trust and love that is not enveloped in superiority, but rather only requires a sense of affirmation and love for the Other which begins with the individual but transcends through all of society. Americans must not merely geographically, but metaphysically come back to a place of community and trust. Individuals must trust that the love and togetherness can be discovered and flourish in a community and does not require them to assert themselves over another. Nouwen (1992) refers to this process as the return home. Returning home requires us to develop a trust which leaves us free to abandon the life of comparison that fosters racism and to lift one another without fear of defilement. It is this deep level of introspection that will allow us to see ourselves, and in doing so, to see and hear our fellow man.

Americans must approach the Other with clear eyes, an open heart, and a willingness to work together to build a common center rather than passively claiming not be a racist. Change does not come from extremes. Change comes from the nuanced tension of the center. If Americans received daily content on how to address the taboo topic of systemic racism, we could collectively understand how, although we ourselves did not sign the Declaration of Independence, that within our heritage lies American Exceptionalism and it is now up to us to do better and become exceptional Americans.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

American Exceptionalism: Conceptually implies that those of Caucasian Nationality are a superior body politic and is tied to the notion of White and Black as an American creation.

American Myth: An illusion that Americans hold onto in which they believe that they are omnipotent that robs us of the contemplation necessary to see ourselves and others. According to Baldwin,

belief in the American myth derails society from transforming America into the institution we claim to want it to become.

Dialogue: An unexpected disruption of monologue that begins when the conversation ends. Dialogue takes into consideration that of narrative ground, narrative conviction, and narrative identity.

Monologue: The ground upon which people gather and sustain their identity. This monologic ground that holds their identity is what people will live, die, or kill for.

Morality: The base that cements a person into their core beliefs and value systems. Morality is tied to community, tradition and whether or not an individual can acknowledge the Other or is rooted in individualism.

Passive Activism: Supporting a social cause through participation in sponsored events or donating money to an organization and allowing that behavior to admonish any guilt from not forcing dialogue or conflict to create meaningful, systemic change.

Race Thinking: Not as ideological or overt as racism, race thinking is either active or passive belief that White America is superior to that of any other race or ethnicity within the United States because America was founded by White individuals.

Unity: What occurs when we see ourselves in the Other. The ability to come together as a single body politic and collectively address the overwhelming circumstances that currently confronts society.

Chapter 6

Race and Cultural Taboo: Refugee Disaster Vulnerability and Resilience

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the refugee community's perceptions of disasters and crises and how the perceptions affect refugee populations' crisis communication and their emergency preparedness and response. Through in-depth interviews with refugees in the United States, this research identifies the institutional, social, and individual dimensions regarding refugees' crisis communication and disaster preparedness. It aims to re-conceptualize the refugee identity and their social vulnerability and discuss the effective way to integrate cultural understanding and dimension into crisis communication and disaster reduction.

INTRODUCTION

In the field of emergency management and crisis communication, disaster preparedness has been a critical component. Multi-hazard Mitigation Council estimated that six dollars are saved in disaster repairs for every dollar spent on prevention and mitigation (Gall & Friedland, 2020). In this research, disasters include weather-related disasters such as tornados, flooding, and other types of disasters, including the current pandemic COVID-19. Disasters of various types and complexities demand that preparedness professionals reach out to all citizens. The Federal Emergency Management Agency conducts annual national household surveys to track progress in disaster preparedness for individuals and communities. However, immigrants and refugees are typically thought of as being more vulnerable to disasters. By definition, a refugee is “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a

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particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2010, p.3). Because of the cultural and language barriers, refugee communities may be treated as social outcasts and hard to reach for disaster planners, managers, and responders (Warner & Engel, 2014). Also, due to the language barriers and limited access to information technology, there is still a significant gap in understanding the refugee populations’ crisis communication, risk perception, and disaster preparedness at the local level. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) claimed that the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of resettled refugees remains unknown, and it is imperative to meet refugees’ healthcare and everyday needs (CDC, 2020).

Within a specific community, cultural values, norms, and taboos influence and shape community practices, resources, and interactions, selecting, rearranging, or rejecting different types of information. A community that copes with disasters and crises depends on cultural understandings, community structure, and economic interests. Beliefs, persuasions, customs, norms, or taboos might prevent people from cooperating in actions that seem beneficial from an outsider’s view during natural disasters or public health crises (World Disasters Report, 2014). For instance, during a public health crisis, refugee populations’ interpretation of illness and well-being might differ from biomedical explanations. The lack of understanding of the cultural differences might lead to the vulnerable or marginalized groups missing out on emergency preparedness planning and response assistance.

Also, refugee identity has been a worldwide race taboo. In Europe, the refugee crisis is associated with social turbulence. In 2015, Europe saw a sharp rise in the number of refugees from war-affected countries. Media portrayed refugees as invaders and threats to the host countries’ physical, economic, and cultural well-being (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018; Zunes, 2017). Also, the word “refugee” has been a controversy that emerged in the U.S. public sphere. Refugees were described as homeless, aimless, with little material possessions. The term “refugee” is directly related to a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness that contradicted the value of self-sufficiency and prosperity of the United States (Masquelier, 2006). They are always viewed as others in the host country. Thus, it is vital to understand how race and cultural taboos are perceived and communicated and impact crisis communication and disaster preparedness. The purposes of this research are: (1) to understand the risk perception and the culturally specific needs of refugee communities in response to disaster threats; (2) to understand their survival networks and the associated cultures among themselves; (3) to provide and improve the future crisis communication and emergency management policy-making; (4) to enrich the academic literature on social vulnerability and community resilience in crisis communication and emergency management research.

BACKGROUND

Literature has shown that people are disproportionately impacted by natural and human-made disasters (Donner & Rodríguez, 2008; Gaillard, 2010; Hansson et al., 2020). Generally speaking, the social vulnerability paradigm examines how people are differently vulnerable, how the vulnerability is related to complex systems of stratification, the unique coping capacities of people within communities, and how the unequal social, economic, and political relations influence, create, worsen, or potentially reduce hazards and vulnerabilities (Fordham et al., 2013;). Numerous empirical studies have reported evidence of race, age, and gender discrimination, and differentiation in the effects of disasters throughout all phases of disasters (Aldrich, 2012; Eisenman et al., 2007; Kim & Bostwick, 2020; Spialek et al., 2021; Taylor-Clark et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2013). Because of refugees’ unique backgrounds and experi-

ences, they are almost always more vulnerable compared to other populations in the host countries. Also, scholars have identified vulnerable populations' remarkable recovery, adaptability, and resilience to disasters and discussed strategies to improve refugees' coping mechanisms for disasters (Aldunate et al., 2019; Alencar, 2018; Uekusa & Matthewman, 2017). Uekusa (2017) argued that some socially vulnerable groups might be more resilient because they have dealt with social inequalities and earned strength before disasters. His research identified the nonlinearity, complexity, and contextuality of social vulnerabilities in disasters and suggested that refugee populations were active agents in disasters rather than powerless help seekers (Uekusa, 2017). Their cultural values and attitudes of supporting each other can be valuable community resources to mobilize for disaster reduction planning.

Refugee Identity as a Taboo

Social identity theory suggests that individuals categorize themselves as members of different social groups. The cognitive process provides a sense of belonging and self-esteem for individuals. It also creates differences between groups and similarities among the group members (Taifel & Turner, 1979). Based on social identity theory, scholars have explored the adverse outcomes stemming from intergroup differences and outgroup prejudice and the interaction between social context and identity shifting (AbuJarour et al., 2018; Oppedal et al., 2017; Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al., 2021).

Compared to other types of cultural or race identities, the diasporic identity of the refugee has more political, legal, and social meanings. From a legal perspective, the refugee's identity is granted by the host country and is related to the eligibility of receiving government assistance and other benefits. When governmental agencies set up criteria regarding refugees' eligibility, there is an inherent suspicion, even denial about these individuals' motives and honesty. A news report by USA Today stated that more Americans believed that many people who apply for refugee status or asylum were simply taking advantage of generous U.S. laws to sneak into the country (Gomez, 2018). Also, refugee identity is more like a category and label from others rather than a self-construction. The identity has been linked with negative narratives and framing. For example, the term "refugee crisis," which can be easily found in political, media, and everyday discourse, describes refugees as a burden of the host country (Gale, 2004; Maneri, 2021). Refugees are always connected to the presumption of loss of human rights and dignity, dependence on social benefits, and economic inactivity (Ostrand, 2015). In addition, media discourse, increasingly social media, has played a critical role in constructing social identity and influencing human attitudes and behaviors (Lido et al., 2021). Scholars claimed that refugees were always described as powerless and trauma victims and linked to social unrest, violence, looting, and lack of social responsibility, which caused ambivalent even hostile public attitudes towards refugee populations (Leudar et al., 2008; Martin, 2016).

Because of the hostile environment and negative images, refugees have been an invisible and silent group in the host society, lacking the opportunities to express themselves and get their voices being heard. Their identity becomes a type of taboo that hinders their resettlement and integration into the host country. Accordingly, Lido et al. (2021) suggested that if refugees can be framed as future citizens and resilient humans doing necessary jobs and as a vital part of the national economic growth, they would be associated with positive attitudes and outcomes. In addition, with the development of information technology, scholars have started paying attention to the role of social media in promoting refugees' positive images and self-representation (Alencar, 2018; Godin & Doná, 2016).

Refugees' Social Vulnerability

The social vulnerability approach emphasizes historical context and social structure as well as “social processes contribute directly to the creation of risk” (Fordham et al., 2013, p.12). Scholars recognized the impact of social factors on disaster management and have established a comprehensive framework of social vulnerability index that can be used to measure and quantify vulnerability among diverse populations and places (Adger, 2006; Cutter et al., 2003; Spielman et al., 2020). The index consists of many dimensions— sensitivity, exposure, and adaptive capacity (Adger, 2006). Its purpose is to describe a macro-level of characteristics of a community and provide a generalized and objective tool for policy-makers and service providers regarding hazard planning and management. However, Spielman et al. (2020) have criticized that many dimensions and indexes cannot be directly and objectively measured). For example, the quantified index might not capture the reasons why some people did not take protective actions during disasters. Especially for vulnerable populations, the micro-level of individuals' vulnerability is significantly impacted by their cultural background, experience, and social contexts. Specifically, compared to the native-born population, immigrants and refugees are affected more by disasters because of the structural inequalities prior to disasters (Donner & Rodríguez, 2008; Lemyre et al., 2009; Scurfield, 2008; Uekusa, 2017). Therefore, this research adopts the social vulnerability paradigm as a context-based framework to examine individuals and communities' experiences and interactions with society. This framework focuses on all the social, cultural, political, and economic factors that impact individuals and communities' capacity to cope with disasters and risks. It is an appropriate framework to explore the culturally specific needs of refugees and their perceptions.

Linguicism

The language barriers and cultural differences are all factors that might hinder their abilities for disaster preparedness. For example, language barriers and institutionalized “linguicism” are typical structural and the most noticeable disadvantages (Uekusa, 2019). Linguicism emphasizes language-based structural discrimination, which could happen in interpersonal communications, economic activities, and governmental services. Linguistic minorities always face political, economic, cultural, and social disadvantages in the host country. Especially during disasters, linguicism creates barriers for mass communication and interpersonal communication. Previous research has suggested that some disaster warning systems lacked multi-language outlets (Senkbeil et al., 2014).

Language is critical for refugee individuals, and linguistic minorities might have difficulties understanding the key disaster terms and critical information in dominant languages. Donner and Rodriguez (2008) pointed out that language barriers might lead to misunderstanding hazard warnings and create difficulties in seeking and applying for assistance. Also, language barriers can hinder linguistic minorities from expressing and communicating their feelings and navigating and negotiating the resources and support such as governmental disaster relief aids and insurance reimbursement. Some scholars have explored the strategies of information seeking for minority populations. Convergence theory focuses on how individuals make sense of competing information by collecting and contemplating information from different sources and discussing this information with family, friends, and neighbors (Anthony et al., 2013; Sellnow et al., 2019).

Cultural Isolation

Berry's (1997) acculturation model suggests that both the cultures of refugees' country of origin and the host country determine whether they will integrate, assimilate, separate, or marginalize in the host country. Specifically, an individual's level of cultural adaptation depends partly on two independent processes: the degree to which native identity is maintained and the degree of contact with the host culture and micro-cultural groups (Berry et al., 1987). First, assimilation involves attempts not to maintain an identity with his/her native culture but to adapt to the host culture and actively participate in the dominant society. The second outcome, integration, occurs when some people balance their identity with their native culture and the interaction with the host culture. That is, "the individual develops a kind of bicultural orientation that successfully blends and synthesizes cultural dimensions from both groups while maintaining an identity in each group" (Neuliep, 2015, p.440). When people have low levels of contact with the host culture while keeping a close interaction with, and reaffirmation of their native culture, the outcome of acculturation is called separation; that is, separated subjects interact almost exclusively with their group while avoiding a close connection with members of the host culture. Finally, marginalization occurs when the individuals choose not to bond with their native culture or host culture. According to Neuliep (2015), these floating lives "experience alienation from both cultures. Often, they feel a sense of abandonment" (p. 441).

During the acculturation process, refugees might face identity conflict, instability, and confusion, accompanied by feelings of invisibility, marginalization, and alienation (Tandon, 2016). Because of the discontinuity of their lives, and identity loss, reconstruction is a never-ending process for them. For example, they have difficulties establishing trust and reciprocal relationships with local resources and services (Strang & Quinn, 2021). In addition, the acculturation process impacts not only refugees' cultural identity but also how they perceive and conceptualize risk differently (Lindell & Perry, 2004). Mitchem (2003) studied tornado warnings and found that African Americans could not understand the differences between watches and warnings and therefore did not fully comprehend the magnitude of risk. Uekusa (2019) found that refugees might lack the confidence or are hindered by their cultural norms to ask for help during a disaster. Regarding the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, refugees have had misconceptions that the virus test and vaccine required insurance or social security information.

Social Marginalization and Exclusion

In addition to language barriers and cultural differences, immigration and foreign policies, media, and the power relations in the host society also create social marginalization and exclusion, leading to refugees' negative coping mechanisms. As a displaced population, refugees have been marginalized in the host countries in many different ways. For example, UNHCR reported that 70% of refugees live in countries with restricted right to work; 66% of refugees live in countries with restricted freedom of movement; and 47% of refugees live in countries with restricted access to bank accounts (UNHCR, 2021).

In the United States, the Trump administration significantly cut the number of refugees allowed in by more than 80% (Snow & Watson, 2020). Then-President Trump issued a series of executive orders to narrow the eligibility, restrict work permits for refugees, delay their employment authorizations, and cancel assistance programs. These executive orders connect refugees with the geopolitical issues of border security and public safety as well as the term such as "America first." The negative sentiment implicitly alienates refugees as others even threaten and increases refugees' vulnerability. Because of

these restrictions, many refugees have to work in the informal economy. When disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic happened, the informal economy was significantly impacted, and socio-economic consequences, such as loss of income, evictions, school closure, denial of access to health and social services, and rise xenophobia, likely to lead to loss of livelihood and poverty.

One main point of the social vulnerability paradigm is that all the vulnerable factors of a particular group or community are not new phenomena during disasters. Instead, linguisticism, cultural isolation, and social marginalization all exist as a consistent framework and social structure before disaster strikes. The label “refugee” has been naturally connected to a negative image and a stigma of vulnerability. Because of the lack of resources, refugees are viewed as passive people waiting for assistance and lacking preparation, coordination, and initiative. It is crucial for emergency and disaster management professionals to incorporate the socio-economic dimensions and the vulnerable factors in hazard planning, preparation, mitigation, and response practices. Effective communication and refugee empowerment need to understand the refugees’ situation and continuous emotional engagement.

Race, Culture, and Effective Crisis Communication

The social vulnerability framework emphasizes refugee communities’ empowerment and capacity building. Individuals and communities’ vulnerability factors and resilience capacity shape how they access, understand, and act on information before, during, and after disasters. It has to be noted that an individual or a community can be vulnerable and resilient simultaneously (Uekusa & Matthewman, 2017). On the one hand, some refugees’ vulnerabilities might be compounded and exacerbated in disasters. On the other hand, the recognition of their vulnerabilities can be an approach to increase their resilience. In this process, communication can either increase or decrease people’s vulnerability to disasters (Hansson et al., 2020). Communication and information management is essential component for disaster preparedness (Keeney, 2004). Communication between service providers and communities is crucial to facilitate coordination and address emerging issues. On-time communication provides necessary information for community members regarding the current situation, available resources, and the immediate actions they need to take.

Communication is a meaning-making process constituting societies, cultures, and identities (Hansson et al., 2020). The community and connection building in disasters carries a part about emotion and feelings helpful in raising risk awareness and strengthening preparedness (Wendling et al., 2013). Lemyre & O’Sullivan (2013) asserted that the interaction between the individuals and the social environment influences individuals’ risk perception and disaster preparedness. Because of their cultural and linguistic diversity, refugees often have limited knowledge and trust in disaster management agencies (Ogie et al., 2018). Yong et al. (2020) did comparative research between immigrants and Canadian-born individuals and found that social trust, interaction with friends, and neighborhood contact affected certain preparedness behaviors.

Scholars also found that race and cultural backgrounds influenced people’s communicative behaviors. Social identities, including race and cultural backgrounds, impact individuals’ connection with the community and their cognitive capabilities and responses to information on risks. Studies on the 2005 Hurricane Katrina survivors found that African Americans relied on interpersonal networks and were less likely to use the Internet for information seeking (Hansson et al., 2020; Spence et al., 2007). In contrast, the Vietnamese community was less suffered from Hurricane Katrina than African Americans because of the community support (Airriess et al., 2008). A study on the 2008 Hurricane Ike in Texas

showed that the legal status among undocumented residents influenced their evacuation behavior (Wilson & Tiefenbacher, 2012).

Effective communication must be based on the adequate competence of all the involved communicators. In the 1990s, researchers assessed disaster research in the United States and recommended several ideas to transform the circumstances of socially vulnerable populations: adopt a participatory view that involves stakeholders; address social equity issues; consider economic vitality by including the full range of businesses of all socio-economic levels; recognize local stakeholders' quality-of-life issues; retain and enhance environmental quality (Mileti, 1999). Disasters require empowering vulnerable populations such as refugees so that they can express their opinions and have their voices be heard (Todorova, 2019). From the activist perspective, giving voices to refugees, providing access to media, and acknowledging the power structure of the host society can arguably promote a more inclusive environment (Seuferling, 2019). Nikunen (2019) explored how refugees have been viewed as voiceless in Finland and the importance of a space for recognition of refugees' voices. For example, social media activism can extend the discursive and visual space for refugees to express themselves, embody good citizenship, and strengthen their connection with the host country.

Overall, the existing literature has revealed the positions of marginalization and othering of refugees in the host countries. They were always reminded to be grateful for being in the host country (Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011). Disaster reduction relies on raising awareness, increasing knowledge, improving preparedness, and creating resilient communities. A resilient community is based on effective communication and a comprehensive understanding of all community members' emergency management capacity, stigma, and empowerment. Due to the uniqueness of refugees' cultural and social identities, it is necessary for the host country and the service provider to explore their perceived knowledge and barriers to their ability to deal with disasters and discuss strategies of integrating cultural values into emergency management decision-making and practices. As Amrith (2014) suggested, the refugee phenomenon demands knowledge and insights from various fields of research, including "history, political theory, law, development studies, and environmental science" (p.1152).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research was an exploratory study. After the Institutional Review Board approved the research design, the interview participants were recruited through purposive sampling and multiple sources: refugee communities, local emergency management offices, and voluntary organizations. Inclusion criteria for the research participants include government-assisted refugees aged 18-70 years old. Six refugee individuals from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, agreed to participate and consented, as shown in Table 1. They have been living in the United States for two to six years. Some of them have been granted refugee status, and others were in the process of obtaining asylum status. In addition, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security report, most refugees who arrived in the United States and were granted refugee status in 2017-2019 are from Africa, East Asia, and Central Asia (Baugh, 2020).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of research participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Languages Spoken	Length of stay in the US
RP01	Male	31	Mandarin English	2 years
RP02	Male	45	Swahili French English	6 years
RP03	Male	31	Arabic Kurdish English	5 years
RP04	Male	40	Lao English	4 years
RP05	Female	36	Lao English	4 years
RP06	Female	28	French English	3 years

It must be noted that the recruiting process did not go smoothly. Many refugee individuals were reluctant to participate in this research for various reasons. First, they were afraid that the publicized paper would negatively impact their legal status, especially for some of them still waiting for their green card. Second, some individuals expressed their concerns that they could not communicate well with the researcher or did not think they could contribute to this research. Therefore, the small sample of this study is reflective of the challenges faces refugees and will serve as pilot research which will continue and expand by recruiting more research participants from various backgrounds.

A set of open-ended interview questions were created prior to the interviews based on the review of literature. Interview questions focused on how particular individuals and their respective communities responded to disasters, what challenges they faced, their key issues of concern, and aspirations looking forward. Participants were interviewed in English. Although their English competence varied, the researcher was able to understand and communicate with them fully. All interviews were informal and open-ended, conducted by Zoom or in-person. The interviews ranged between 30 to 90 minutes, based on the length the participant wished to speak. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used. The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to examine and explore what the individuals have experienced, coped with, and negotiated disasters. In-depth interviews were able to explore the experiences of vulnerable individuals in authentic ways.

This research aimed to explore and understand the lived experience of refugee individuals in dealing with disasters. Data analysis began with reading through the transcribed texts and generating a list of significant statements, that is, statements about how individual refugees experienced disasters. The two researchers read and reread the transcripts several times separately to immerse into the participants' experiences. Then the two researchers coded the data by identifying significant statements. After a list of significant statements had been made, the researchers worked together and sorted the relevant texts into repeating ideas and then combined repeating ideas across transcripts. Then, a master list of repeating ideas was compiled and grouped into coherent categories. After identifying themes and sub-themes, the researchers grouped the codes with themes related to either a textual description of "what" participants experienced or a structural description of "how" participants experienced it. Themes were then

described in detail using quotations from participants to reveal their experiences and give a detailed, thick description. Finally, a composite description of the phenomenon was proposed, or the essence, as Creswell (2014) labels.

FINDINGS

Overall, the findings revealed that the research participants had experienced various difficulties in dealing with disasters. A thematic analysis of the data built upon repeating ideas and concepts has developed four major themes; (1) lives with instability; (2) understanding crisis: information and misinformation; (3) institutional assistance: support and obstacles; (4) community and social support. Below we address each theme and explain the essential ideas.

Lives with Instability

The research participants have been in the United States for two to six years. However, they are still facing a lot of uncertainties and interruptions regarding employment and legal status.

RP01 arrived in the United States in September 2019 and submitted his asylum-seeking petition to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in February 2020. When this research interview was conducted in July 2021, he was still waiting for the interview with the USCIS. The interview is a process for the U.S. immigration official to decide whether a person qualifies for the protection of the United States according to U.S. immigration and refugee law. He said,

I have been waiting too long and right now, what I can do is only to not think about it. I don't know whom I can ask for the information about my case status. I have heard from some people that they have waited for five years. Just for the interview. I am kind of desperate, and it is like I am floating in the air. I don't know when I can be on the ground. I even thought that someday I might be kicked out of the United States. If I am denied, I don't know where I can go. So, it is good that I don't have family here, just myself.

In addition to the tedious regulation, the research participants also experienced much instability in housing and employment. Especially when the COVID-19 happened, they were significantly impacted. RP02 has worked for a local food-processing plant on an hourly salary for several years before the COVID-19 pandemic. He does not have a car, and he shared the ride with his coworkers for commuting. He also lives in the same host family with his coworkers. In January 2021, one of his coworkers at the same house who had shared the ride with him tested positive for COVID-19. Suddenly, he had to stop working, although he tested negative. At first, the factory manager said that his position would be kept for him. He said, "I was hoping that I would be able to go back to work if the second time I still test negative. But I need to wait for two weeks to get the second test." However, right after he got his second test, the plant was closed because of the pandemic. In the past several months, he has not been able to find stable work. He states,

I have tried many jobs here, moving company, logistics factory. Some jobs I just could not do. Some are not safe. I don't have income now. I received the government's assistance for several months. But

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last month they stopped paying us the money. Right now, I need to work harder to find a job. I need to make a life on my own.

In 2016, the state of Texas refused to accept Syrian refugees and withdrew from the federal refugee resettlement program. In January 2020, the Governor of the state of Texas, Greg Abbott, announced that Texas would not accept refugees in the year 2020 (Fernandez, 2020). The state-wide anti-refugee policies also significantly influenced the political and social environment around refugee communities and individuals. RP06 said, "I was so shocked when I heard about the news. Sad, also. I guess maybe somebody here thinks we are threats? I don't know." She also mentioned that the increasing anti-refugee sentiment in the United States made her worried about her cousins who were waiting for resettlement in the United States. She said,

I am so grateful that I can be here now. But there are still a lot of people dying in my country. I really worry about my cousins. They have waited for many years to come to the United States. But now I don't know can they still come; can we get together?

Understanding Crisis: Information and Misinformation

During crises and disasters, refugee communities and individuals' perceptions and behaviors are impacted by diverse information resources. Sometimes the opposite information from different resources also caused confusion and hindered their action from following the authority's guidance and instruction. It is difficult for refugee individuals who have limited language competence and cultural knowledge of the host country to navigate the numerous information sources and identify the correct and reliable ones. RP04 stated, "Sometimes I just don't know the information is right or wrong. I feel like some information looks very true. But later on, I was told it was wrong. I don't know what I can believe." RP03 expressed a similar idea. He said, "To be honest, I don't believe any news I saw on the Internet. If I saw something I am interested in, I always go to other places to check if it is true."

During disasters, crisis communication and information flow aim to prevent or lessen the adverse outcomes resulting from a crisis, creating a rational understanding of the risk and encouraging the information receiver in taking actions such as preparedness planning, evacuation, and shelter seeking. Without credible information, individuals cannot change their behaviors and take action. RP01 commented on his experience during the COVID-19 pandemic,

I saw many crazy news on Twitter. Like people drank and injected disinfectants into their bodies to fight COVID. I don't understand why Twitter allows this kind of information. And because of this, people are doing wrong things. For myself, I always check both information in English and Chinese. My friends in China always remind me to wear masks when I go everywhere. But here, I felt awkward sometimes because nobody wore masks.

Also related to the pandemic, RP03 felt that a lot of people, including himself, have relied too much on social media to get the perceived correct information, and he thought that social media had too much misguiding information. He said that he still did not know whether he should wear masks in the public space because of "all the conflicting information." It is difficult for people who have limited knowledge

and access to the correct information to identify trustworthy and truthful information from false or misleading ones. RP01 even mentioned the anti-Asian sentiment on social media and how it impacted his life,

I don't know how it started. Maybe when Trump said that it is a Chinese virus. I saw a lot of news that Asian people are attacked. It made me and my Asian friends very nervous. Right now, if I go outside when somebody is near me, I feel nervous because I think that guy might attack me suddenly. So, most time I try to ask my friends to go somewhere with me together.

In contrast, RP02 mentioned the factual news information he received and useful tools on social media, such as Facebook Preventive Health. Facebook Preventive Health provided health-related suggestions, such as vaccines and health screenings based on geo-targeted locations, based on user's age and gender. RP02 stated, "I attended a health information workshop in my neighborhood. They told us Facebook has a new tool. It can remind us about health checks or something else. I just started using it, and I kind of like the personalized information on it." RP06 commented on the COVID-19 case map and expressed that the map was a valuable tool to let him know where he should avoid going. Some other research participants also expressed their appreciation for all the social media platforms they can use. RP03 said, "Before I came to the U.S., I did not have a cell phone, and there was no Wi-Fi in the [refugee] camp. Every day I was just hoping I could receive some information about when I could leave. I don't know what happened outside the camp."

Institutional Assistance: Barriers and Obstacles

In addition to the contradictory information flow, the research participants have experienced various difficulties during their resettlement process and have various understandings and perceptions about the emergency management and assistant system in the United States. Before individuals are classified as refugees, there is a long process for them to go through eligibility interviews, security checks, and medical exams. When refugees are granted the status and arrive in the United States, the resettlement programs from the U.S. government provide basic resources such as housing, a small amount of money for food and clothing, and some information orientation. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of information from authorities has caused many issues for refugee populations to take action and to protect themselves. RP02 thought the COVID virus test required health insurance. Similarly, RP01 explained the reason why he did not get his COVID-19 vaccine until July. He said,

I don't know where I got the idea. Maybe because I know the medical service here is very expensive. I thought if we wanted to get the vaccine shot, we needed to have health insurance and social security number, which I did not have then. Right now, I am still waiting for the immigration interview. And I cannot afford the health insurance. Until July, a friend got his vaccine and told me that he did not show anything to get it. So, I immediately when to the place to get the vaccine.

Another obstacle for refugees to receive governmental assistance is a general mindset in the United States that refugees have received too many benefits as well as financial and social assistance from the government. When the Governor of Texas issued the anti-refugee announcement, he said that "I am putting my citizens first. We have challenges in the state of Texas that these very same nonprofit organizations must address" ("Why Texas Is Saying 'no' to All New Refugees," 2020). The statement

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explicitly distinguishes refugees as outsiders of the United States, threats, and economic drains. The restrictive refugee policy and the environmental pressure make refugee individuals hesitant to speak out their opinions and feelings in public. RP03 stated, “Right now, I can legally stay in the U.S., but I think I will not become an American and [will not] belong here forever.” The political and social context influences refugees’ perceptions and experiences, and consequently, their behaviors in crisis communication and in dealing with disasters.

Community and Social Support

Although there are many institutional barriers, refugee individuals have their social network and support during crises and disasters. Local organizations and communities have played a critical role in refugees’ integration into the host society. Both RP02 and RP03 mentioned the programs organized by the local nonprofit organizations several years ago. RP03 said,

I remember about four years ago when I just arrived here. A local organization gave me a lot of help. They provided me with a place for a short-term stay. They helped me to buy cheap furniture. And I attended their job training meetings. But since last year, probably because of the virus, everything has been gone.

However, the growing political hostility toward refugees impacts refugee populations, the community, and local organizations that are serving refugees. Some organizations had to end their many year-long refugee resettlement programs because of the government’s lack of resources and support. The researchers’ connection with the local nonprofit organizations indicated their hope to reform the governmental resettlement service infrastructure during the research process. The connections with families and co-ethnic groups have been the most critical resources for refugee individuals’ resettlement and integration. RP06 had the experience of getting support from people of the same country of origin. She stated, “When I just came to the U.S., I got the most help from a friend who came from the same country with me. He taught me a lot of things. I learned English with him.” RP02 got support from his family. He said,

I have a sister who has been here for six years. I think she and her family is the most important support for me. When I lost my job, I could not afford the house rent anymore. My sister picked me up and I have stayed with her since March. Without her, I really don’t know where I can go and stay.

The connection with home culture and co-ethnic groups can also hinder refugees’ actions during disasters. Because of the different perceptions of community support and asking for help, refugee populations might be reluctant to seek assistance when disaster happens. RP02 stated,

In my home country, when some bad things happen, we don’t have the organizations like here to help us. We, most time, rely on our families. I remember there was a flood in my village. My family was stuck on the top of our home for two days. Nobody came to help us. Finally, my uncle and his sons came and helped us. And when we have some difficulties, we always ask for help from the family members first. We have a saying that the shame of a family cannot be shared with other people. Something like that. And asking for help looks like you are weak and a loser. So, I took a long time to feel comfortable about talking about my feelings and the difficulties with people that I didn’t know before.

The above statements demonstrate that both the family and co-ethnic networks' supportive function and the related conflicting values within the group influence refugee individuals' perception and behaviors during disasters as well as their engagement with the host country and society.

DISCUSSION

This research has revealed various challenges and obstacles that refugee populations have experienced regarding their crisis communication and disaster management. The research findings highlight the existing institutional and social gaps regarding the assistance and service needed by refugee communities.

Institutional Barriers

Citizenship and legal status are the foundation for refugee individuals to engage with the host society. The research findings indicate that unstable immigration policies, political environment, and nationalist sentiment have significantly impacted refugee populations' well-being and lives in the United States. Some politicians' statements have mischaracterized refugees in the host country. Refugees are viewed as outsiders and threats rather than people who can contribute to the host country's social and economic development.

The political environment also creates a gap between the governmental agencies and local organizations serving refugees. Many local nonprofit organizations have faced unprecedented challenges in maintaining their programs because of the lack of funding. The research findings suggest some approaches overcome the institutional barriers: (1) recognize and highlight refugees' resilience and contribution to the host country; (2) improve the initial placement and resettlement procedures; and (3) establish joint sponsorship programs in collaboration with private and nonprofit sectors. As Simich et al. (2002, p.604) suggested,

If refugees migrate to certain urban centres for social support from family and an ethnic community as well as for employment opportunities, they actually have the same priorities that the resettlement program is supposed to have – they are seeking to rebuild self-sufficiency rather than rely on government support.

For example, resettling refugee individuals at places with their families and co-ethnic groups can decrease their need for government assistance as well as increase their coping capacity in dealing with disasters. Therefore, both the main institutions and community at large need to change the mindset of viewing refugees as a financial and social burden and impose long-term investment strategies by integrating refugees into the host country and society. More importantly, integrating and involving refugee individuals and communities into the decision-making process, such as resettlement planning and emergency planning, can influence effective policy-making. Their involvement would be helpful to design customized services that recognize their various status, diversity, and service needs.

Effective Communication during Crisis

Effective communication can empower individuals and communities regarding structural, psychological, and resources factors. Effective communication needs to be based on a mutual understanding among communicators. Previous studies have found the key dimensions for individuals' acculturation and in-

tegration: language, cultural knowledge, and safety and security (Alencar, 2018). As Ager and Strang (2004) suggest, “cultural knowledge refers to refugees obtaining knowledge of the dominant culture as well as non-refugees acquiring knowledge of the circumstances and culture of refugees” (p.4). Refugees have taken along with their experiences and adapted to living in the host countries. Their cultural traditions and current legal status impact their willingness and attitude to communicate with the host society.

Another point related to effective communication is public trust. Previous studies have suggested the use of information technology in crisis communication. Within the context of disasters, both the positive and negative impact related to information technology needs to be recognized. Information technology, especially social media, provides critical information for refugees to navigate during disasters. Social media also provide channels and platforms of interaction with both host and home societies. People are all influenced by advanced technology in many ways. However, information from unreliable and unofficial sources significantly impacts the circulation of critical information and might lead to harmful misconceptions. It is more critical for decision-makers and service providers to grasp the creation, circulation, and manipulation of information during disasters, communicate risk information, and provide timely and credible information. For example, Sharma et al. (2017) have suggested that accurate and credible information could help control virus spread and associated anxiety during the pandemic. This research resonates with this statement and has a similar finding regarding how misinformation could impede individuals’ response to disasters. In the communication process, public authorities and local organizations can use information technology and direct refugee individuals to trusted sources for critical information seeking to promote interactions between them and other organizations.

Refugee Community’s Empowerment and Resilience

This research finds that local nonprofit organizations and communities provide services and resources that can mobilize host communities to support refugees and facilitate the engagement between the host communities and refugees. Also, as mentioned above, previous research has suggested the role of ethnic communities in providing information and resources. Simich et al. (2002) pointed out that most refugees have violent and traumatized experiences, and people who have the same background and experiences could meet the idiosyncratic needs of refugees. This research finds that the political and social context of the host country matters for refugees’ disaster vulnerability and resilience. As Alencar (2018) found in her research on refugees in Sweden, the support from the host country would create a sense of belonging to the host country. To improve the refugee community’s resilience, it is critical to creating a space where refugees can contribute and be active actors. However, the research finds that refugee individuals have experienced language barriers, discrimination, prejudice, racism, social isolation, and difficulties accessing social services. Compared to other types of immigrants, refugees have much fewer resources, and high service needs to help them settle down in the host country and deal with disasters. Scholars have suggested that people who have immediate access to language training, employment, housing, and education upon arrival would settle and integrate into the host country more successfully (Nakhaie, 2018). In this process, local nonprofit organizations and communities can play a critical role in facilitating a formal network of social relations and a resource hub. These organizations can help refugees to adapt and integrate by providing resources such as language and skill training, cultural knowledge of the host country, laws, and employment. During disasters, these organizations can be critical information and service providers. More importantly, these organizations can be agents to present a positive image of

refugees in the host country, mitigate racism, discrimination, and the negative and stereotypical impression of refugees.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The current research findings provide rich information on how refugee populations experienced disasters. However, several limitations should be noted regarding the current study. First, the small number of research participants might not be generalized to a broader refugee community. The research participants were volunteers and were recruited from convenient and snowball sampling. Compared to the whole refugee population, they might have higher educational levels and English competence to communicate with the researcher. The researchers recognize the diversity and heterogeneity of refugee populations regarding culture, education, gender, and age. The researchers will try to reach out to individuals with limited English competence and various educational backgrounds for further research. This process might be necessary to include cultural insiders, who have a refugee background, to assist the recruitment and interview process.

This research also suggests future research direction focusing on the interaction among the dimensions of institution, society, and individuals regarding refugee communities' vulnerability and resilience. In addition to refugee individuals, the researchers will expand the research scope by including refugee community leaders and emergency managers, all important actors in the disaster cycle. It would be helpful to include them in the research to fully understand the community social capital development and the policy-making and implementation in emergency management and crisis communication.

CONCLUSION

This research explores how refugees' social, cultural, and racial characteristics impact their communication during a crisis and disaster preparedness. Disasters intensify the need for the whole society to manage cultural diversity and maintain social cohesion (Bouchara, 2021). The research finds that refugee individuals and communities still lack the necessary competence and resource to engage with the host country. Because of their various experiences, histories, and perceptions, refugees' disaster preparedness and resilience relies on an inclusive social environment in all social actors. Resources, such as local emergency managers, community organizations, family, and co-ethnic groups, can work together and incorporate cultural understanding into the emergency management and crisis communication process.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Community Resilience: The capacity and sustained ability of a community to use its resources and assets, to respond to and recover from adverse situations, and to improve its physical and social environment.

Crisis Communication: The process to collect and disseminate information to address a crisis situation. It includes the technologies, systems, and protocols that enable individuals and organizations to effectively communicate during a crisis.

Disaster Preparedness: The knowledge, capabilities, and precautionary actions, including physical preparations and trainings for emergency actions, that are taken in the face of potential disasters. Preparedness efforts range from individual-level activities, to household actions, community efforts, and governmental strategies.

Linguicism: Discrimination based on language, dialect, and the characteristics of speech.

Misinformation: False or inaccurate information that is misleading and presented as fact.

Refugee: People who have been forced to flee and cannot return their country because of conflict, persecution, war, or violence.

Social Identity: A sense of belonging to the social world, a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership. The main argument of social identity theory is that group members of an in-group will seek to find negative aspects of an out-group, thus enhancing their self-image.

Social Vulnerability: The potential negative effects on communities caused by external stresses. Social vulnerability involves a combination of factors inherent in social interactions, systems, and institutions.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Demographic Questions

- What is your age? (19-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55+)
- Where are you from?
- What is your ethnicity?
- What is your highest education attained (<high school, high school, some college/associate's degree, Bachelor's degree, Graduate degree)?
- How long have you been in the United States (Less than 1, 1-4, 5-10, 10-20, 20+)?
- How much is your household's monthly income?
- Do you own or rent the place where you live?

Disaster Experience

- What kind of disasters or crises have you experienced since you arrive in the United States?
- How did you deal with the disasters/crises?
- What kind of problems did you face during the process?
- What kind of support did you receive during the process?
- What lessons did you learn from the process?
- How did previous crises and disasters impact you and your home?
- What is the biggest challenge for you to prepare for disasters?
- What is the biggest misconception you have encountered in your community surrounding disasters, including COVID-19?
- What kind of resources and support would be helpful to improve your disaster preparedness?

Perceptions

- How would you rate your perception of risks?
- What are the differences of perception of risks in your home culture and in the United States?
- How would you rate the disaster preparedness of yourself and your family?
- How would you rate the disaster preparedness of your community?
- How can people in your community find empowerment during this time?
- Who do you think should be responsible of taking care of you and your families during disasters?
- What is the proper way of dealing with the crises?
- What are some trusted community resources everyone should keep on their radar?

Chapter 7

Communicating Transgender Identity

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ABSTRACT

This chapter surveys theory and research on transgender identity and disclosures. Historically, transgender people in Western societies represent a highly stigmatized population who are likely to encounter significant communication challenges. Interpersonally, transgender people often grapple with privacy and disclosure, especially in regards to when, where, how, and with whom to disclose their gender identity, as they risk rejection from friends and family and experiencing violence. Thus, insofar as transgender individuals find that conversations about their sexuality and/or gender identity are proscribed by society and carry the threat of stigmatizing or violent personal and interpersonal outcomes, discussion of transgender identity can be seen as a taboo topic. In light of that, this chapter surveys theory and research on transgender identity and disclosures.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, transgender people in Western societies represent a highly stigmatized population who are likely to encounter significant communication challenges (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer & Frost, 2013). Interpersonally, transgender people often grapple with privacy and disclosure, especially regarding when, where, how, and with whom to disclose their gender identity, because they risk being rejected by friends and family and experiencing violence (Redfern & Sinclair, 2014). At the root of this potentially difficult disclosure is the historical conflation of conversations about sexuality and gender identity and

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conversations about “abnormal” sex (Bethea & McCollum, 2013; Riggs et al., 2015). Embedded in moral, religious, and/or gendered concerns, sex talk outside of what is seen as normative (i.e., between heterosexual, married, monogamous people with reproductive capacity) is frequently avoided in Western cultures (Rubin, 2002). This often leads health-care providers, educators, and families to struggle with how to have conversations about these important considerations. Additionally, as seen in recent years, violence against trans women of color and other ethnic minorities has risen to epidemic levels (Human Rights Campaign, 2019; Paz & Astor, 2020). Thus, insofar as transgender individuals find that conversations about their sexuality and/or gender identity are proscribed by society and carry the threat of stigmatizing or violent personal and interpersonal outcomes, discussion of transgender identity can be seen as a taboo topic.

Although the literature on communication and transgender identity has expanded in the past decade, more work is needed to explore the domains of theory and empirical inquiry in interpersonal contexts as they relate to the transgender experience. In light of that, this chapter surveys theory and research on transgender identity and disclosures. Specifically, there are four foci: First, to establish context, the authors elaborate the argument for identifying and coming out as transgender as a taboo topic, including a discussion of definitions, operationalizations, and history of key terms. Next, the authors explore a brief review of extant literature. This includes a discussion of meaningful contexts and relationships in which taboo topics and disclosures surrounding transgender identity may occur, as well as a review of the small, but meaningful, interpersonal and health communication theory and research related to transgender identity. The authors share reviews of a variety of existing communication theories alongside arguments for why each can be useful in advancing knowledge on transgender identity and disclosure. Finally, the authors offer a discussion of future directions and methodological guidance.

ORIENTATION TO DEFINITIONS

First, it is important to address some definitions of key terms to orient readers to the discussions to follow within this chapter. A quick Google search will show that multiple definitions and operationalizations drive discussions around these topics, often with overlapping or unclear explanations. To establish continuity across academic work, as well as to drive understanding of this chapter and why trans identities may be seen as taboo, it is important to clarify perceptions and their places within larger discussions. To that end, this chapter will discuss common definitions, gender transition, and historical considerations.

To begin, *gender* refers to individuals’ psychological, social, and cultural characteristics, which are constructed and communicated via a variety of channels that may include expressions, traits, and social roles and are often, though not always, associated with one’s sex (Gilbert & Scher, 2009). Relatedly, *gender identity* is an individual’s internal sense of their gender, which does not necessarily align with their sex. In the case that individuals’ gender identity and their sex do match, they are called *cisgender*; people who sense that their sex and gender identity are not the same fit broadly under the term *transgender* (Adams et al., 2015). As noted by Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) (2021), there is a growing vocabulary of terms that are used to categorize and describe transgender identities. The terms described in this chapter define some but not all of these evolving terms, as evidenced by their frequently updated glossary (PFLAG, 2021). Some terms include: male-to-female, or transwoman, and female-to-male, or transman; gender variant or *gender non-conforming* (GNC) individuals also fall under the transgender umbrella. GNC individuals reject dichotomous categories of gender and identify

on a continuum between masculine and feminine, as both masculine and feminine, or as neither—having no gender (i.e., *agender* individuals). Terms for GNC identities include *genderqueer* or *nonbinary* (those who challenge constructs of the gender binary) and *gender fluid* (those with a flexible or varying gender identity). Recent estimates suggest that around 1.55 million individuals identify as transgender in the United States (Flores et al., 2016; Herman et al., 2017).

Additionally, various cultural and ethnic definitions add depth and greater understanding to this discussion. A term used by some Indigenous communities, *Two Spirit* individuals are those whose beliefs, expression, or behaviors may be perceived by others to be atypical of their sex (Jacobs et al., 1997); who identify as having both a masculine and feminine spirit; and/or who occupy multiple sexualities or gender identities. In India, the term *hijras* may be used to describe transgender identities and communities (Kalra, 2012). And, as de Vries noted (2015), trans people “experience multidimensional aspects of identity and structural inequality,” (p. 23) yet researchers typically only consider White, middle-class, and heterocentric cultural narratives. Thus, to best understand definitions and orientations toward the trans community globally, cultural definitions must also be considered, especially in light of recent trends toward violence (Ritsock et al., 2019), stigmatization (Chakrapani et al., 2020), and marginalization (Sifat, 2020) of *Two Spirit* and *hijra* communities resulting from colonization, insufficient mental health resources, and inadequate legal protections.

What Is Gender Transition?

In addition to defining their identity, many transgender individuals will embark on a transition, and the experience of transitioning can look different from person to person. What unites their experiences is the process of, over time, “becoming on the outside the person they feel they are on the inside” (Table, 2020, p. 7). Transitioning involves becoming more satisfied with one’s gender identity, expression, and social recognition and frequently encompasses mental, physical, and legal changes (Bizic et al., 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Both the internal and external experience of gender transition reflect a complex and unique evolution because embodied processes of changing one’s gender and identity usually occur incrementally, intentionally, and visibly.

Medical transition is defined as an individual seeking medical assistance to affirm their gender identity through hormone regimens, surgeries, voice therapy, and cosmetic enhancements (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.; Radix, 2016). Medical transition is a part of an embodied transition in which one seeks treatments so that their physical sex characteristics better match their gender identity (Radix, 2016). Gender confirmation surgery (GCS) includes top surgery to enhance or reduce one’s breasts, and/or bottom surgery, which involves alterations to one’s genitalia to match desired aesthetic and sexual functions. Other treatments involved in medical transition can include hormonal blockers that delay puberty and production of estrogen or testosterone for transgender adolescents; vocal therapies to change the pitch of one’s voice; epilation to reduce facial or body hair; and hormone replacement therapy, a regimen of injections, pills, or topical creams that contain hormones such as testosterone or estrogen.

Although there have been advances in the diversity and availability of medical technologies for gender transition, not all transgender individuals seek medical intervention to transition (Bariola et al., 2015), and medical transition is not financially affordable for all who desire to do so. Access to these types of procedures can be challenging given the high out-of-pocket cost and that very few insurance plans cover them; denials of care are frequent despite federal and state laws prohibiting health insurance companies from rejecting coverage for medically necessary transition-related care (Stroumsa, 2014). This is con-

cerning given that many mainstream representations of transitioning privilege medical interventions “as the primary evidence of a legitimate transgender identity” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 347). The focus on the physical and medical transition and systemic barriers to access all contribute to an increased level of stigma and social taboo, which surrounds individuals as they navigate transition and disclosure of their identity, either with or without medical intervention.

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF TRANSGENDER IDENTITIES

Beyond clinical considerations of transgender identities are larger sociopolitical considerations that drive perceptions of transgender individuals. Transgender and nonbinary individuals have appeared in literature and art since before the days of Ancient Rome. Although the term “transgender” was coined in 1965 by psychologist John F. Oliven (Lennon & Mistler, 2014), individuals have been defying gender norms for political, religious, and personal power for centuries.

In modern times, the American transgender identity conversation began with Christine Jorgensen, an ex-GI who transitioned from male to female in December 1952 (Steinmetz, 2014). During this public transition, Christine was referred to as a “transvestite,” and many in the media questioned whether she could be “cured or treated” (Steinmetz, 2014). What followed was decades of conversation around topics such as transsexuals and how they were something to be corrected. In 1987, some progress was achieved by the removal of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and the addition of transsexualism, then termed gender identity disorder (GID; Steinmetz, 2014).

In 2013, the DSM was further updated, and GID was replaced with the diagnosis of gender dysphoria, but for many, the decades of stigmatizing conversation around these identities did irreparable harm. In recent years, the trauma continues. Transgender characters on television are often fetishized (e.g., Sophia Burset on *Orange is the New Black*, played by actress Laverne Cox) or are positioned at the center of courtroom battles (e.g., Gavin Grimm v. Gloucester County School Board); being out, non-passing, and transgender is politicized and, in turn, has the potential to be dangerous or deadly for transgender individuals.

Owing to overt and covert acts of discrimination, transgender people experience chronic stress, fear, and emotional exhaustion (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer & Frost, 2013). As an example, recent anti-transgender legislation bills, such as Texas’ HB 1399, seek to ban GCS, hormone therapy, and puberty-suppressing treatments in individuals under the age of 18 (Munce, 2021). However, as Megan Mooney, past president of the Texas Psychological Association, argues, “transgender children know they’re transgender long before 18” (Munce, 2021). As such, denying transgender individuals access to gender-confirming care prolongs the period of psychological distress associated with gender dysphoria. Limiting health-care access and education for transgender adolescents can have negative mental health consequences in that it can lead to perceptions that the world is against them or views their gender identity as “wrong.” Along with the uncertain state of transgender rights in the United States in 2021, transgender people are frequent targets of violence, discrimination, and job loss, accompanied by little to no legal recourse for justice (Redfern & Sinclair, 2014).

Compared to the cisgender population, the transgender population represents a disproportionately burdened community that experiences higher rates of depression, substance abuse, human papillomavirus-related cancers, violence, and murder (Budge et al., 2013; Hutchison et al., 2018; Sevelius, 2013). Of particular impact on this community is the phenomenon of homelessness, which affects one in five

transgender individuals over the course of their lives (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.). Finally, with 2021 proving to be a record-breaking year for anti-transgender legislation (Krishnakumar, 2021), the taboo nature of identifying as transgender has taken center stage. Unfortunately, as will be discussed here, there is a lack of understanding about this population, directly connected to an underdeveloped literature, which contributes to misinformation, confusion, and exclusion.

TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AS A TABOO TOPIC

Thus far in this chapter, in the literature cited, some language and definition slippage is evident in that researchers use the terms interchangeably, even switching between how these identities are discussed in terms of stigma and taboo. At the core of this chapter is the question of whether trans identities are taboo or not. Yet as seen historically with how trans individuals have been treated and considering the connected nature of the terms ‘stigma’ and ‘taboo,’ in this chapter the authors argue that transgender identities are taboo topics that are contextually dependent and conversationally derived. Through this lens, researchers can shift the focus beyond general assumptions about transgender identities and begin to explore why and how the identity may be constructed in such a way that it is considered taboo. Understanding their points of distinction as offered by the literature may be useful in the present discussion.

Many operationalizations of stigma derive from Goffman (1963), who described it as a discrediting mark of disgrace upon a person, quality, or circumstance. Baxter and Wilmot (1985) conceptualized taboo topics as “an interaction topic that is perceived as ‘off limits’ to one or both of the relationship parties” (p. 254). Connecting the two, Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997) argued that taboo topics refer to “activities that are stigmatized by one’s family or by society, secrets about extramarital affairs, substance abuse, finances, sexual preferences, illegalities, mental health, physical and or psychological abuse” (p. 686). Indeed, several authors employ the term ‘stigma’ to explain ‘taboo,’ especially when discussing non-Western cultures and sexuality (i.e., self-disclosure patterns in China, Chen, 1995) and sexual minority identities (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Ward & Winstanley, 2003). However, Meisenbach (2010) broadened our understanding of both stigma and taboo by arguing that stigmatized identities are not static but rather dynamic and “are shifted by discourses and material conditions” (p. 272). This is important because it frees stigma and taboo from the taxonomy-like lists of qualifying events or conditions that both concepts previously relied upon and instead allows them to exist in the same conceptual space as reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive constructs. This new orientation allows us to draw out the distinction between stigmatized identities and taboo identities as well. With this more flexible framework, we can understand that a stigmatized identity is positioned as an identity possessing a devalued trait (Pachankis, 2007), as compared to a taboo identity, which is more closely aligned with an “unthinkable” action that violates norms (Fershtman et al., 2011, p. 140). Both definitions are contextually derived, but stigmatizing identities are defined by society at large, with taboo identities being defined by more micro-contexts, such as families and romantic relationships.

Several studies focused on LGBT identities have exemplified the idea that norms within close relationships shape what is viewed as taboo. For example, consider LGBT youth within their families. Research demonstrates that identifying as LGBT is stigmatizing (Ballester et al., 2021; Doyle et al., 2015), yet depending on the family’s norms, the identity may not be taboo. Furthermore, research on coming out as transgender to close relationship partners (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2017) and family members (Betha & McCollum, 2013; Riggs, vonDoussa, & Power, 2015) shows that often, the conversation

can be highly stressful, risky, conflict inducing, or destructive; according to Baxter and Wilmot (1985), these are characteristics of conversational taboo topics within close relationships. By contrast, though, families exist wherein LGBT identities are welcomed and communicated openly, while in others, LGBT identities are shamed and rejected (Norwood, 2012). Thus, being gay or transgender can be considered stigmatizing within the general societal bounds but *within that family*, the identity may or may not be taboo. The distinction within communication literature highlights how stigmatized identities that are taboo are referred to as taboo topics instead of taboo identities, but still they are identities that are not to be discussed (Baxter & Wilmot, 1984; Dillow et al., 2009).

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

To better understand transgender identities as taboo topics, it is important to first understand how current researchers discuss identity development and what these insights can add to this conversation. This can help us to more fully grasp how the taboo nature of transgender identity fits within the larger experience of communicating about that identity within close relationships and society at large.

Several scholars have proposed identity development models specific to transgender individuals (Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Devor, 2004; Lev, 2004; Pollock & Eyre, 2012). Such models are focused on the initial stages of identity development, including how individuals socially disclose their transgender identity or “come out.”

Specifically, Diamond (2000) argued that sexual identity development is the process by which sexual minorities begin to acknowledge their sexual orientation. For many, the LGBT identity construction process begins with a questioning of their sexuality and ends with adoption of an identity label that represents their sexual orientation (Diamond, 2000) as a part of their transgender identity. In developing his model on LGBT identity development, D’Augelli (1994) quickly pointed out the social invisibility of sexual orientation and the unique social and legal issues associated with coming out that often serve as barriers to an individual accepting their own LGBT identity. For many, the fear of homophobia and heterosexism incite fear and panic when they first develop feelings of a homosexual nature (Lorde, 1983; Pharr, 1988). On average, researchers have come to a consensus that formation of an LGBT identity begins in childhood and continues throughout one’s life span (Calzo et al., 2011; Carver et al., 2004). One longitudinal study showed that on average, LGBT identity and attractions are consistent over time (Rosario et al., 2006). Rosario et al. (2006) found that 57% of the 156 LGB(T) youths in their study reported LGB identity consistency over time. The changes in identity they did find concerned those who identified as bisexual or both bisexual and gay or lesbian identifying more strongly as wholly gay or lesbian over time (Rosario et al., 2006). Their findings echoed previous work by Diamond (2000), who found that although changes in sexual attractions over time were small, the chances of changing identity were higher for bisexuals and women. As Diamond (2000) noted, the findings of consistency held in concert with tides of change speak to a fluidity of sexual identities, where sexual attraction might not necessarily change but the label applied to the identity attributed to that attraction may shift over time. The question of why sexual identity fluctuates remains open. Complicating some empirical attempts to address this question is the fact that an LGBT identity is multifaceted and develops beyond just “coming out.” As such, measuring an LGBT identity has proven difficult, and no centrally agreed upon measure or method has evolved as of this writing. Additionally, the ever-evolving process of transition makes the investigation of the experience difficult. Some research has been conducted on gender transition and

life course, including transition later in life (Fabbre, 2014; Pang et al., 2019), disclosures and influential relationships (Nuttbrock et al., 2009, 2012), and coping processes (Witten, 2004), though more work is needed to empirically validate which markers are paradigmatic of the gender transition trajectory beyond initial identity development. Saewyc (2011) argued that when measuring one's orientation or identity, researchers must consider the multifaceted nature of these constructs, in that attraction, identity, and attraction-related behaviors are not always concordant with one another. To that end, Diamond (2003) advocated for a developmental milestone perspective that incorporates the view that once the sexual orientation has unfolded during adolescence, it remains stable, consistent, and enduring throughout one's life but is susceptible to changing social norms and opportunities for relationships, though researchers' response to this suggestion has been uneven (Saewyc, 2011).

DISCLOSURE OF TRANSGENDER IDENTITY

At any stage in their identity development, transgender people may grapple with privacy and disclosure, especially regarding the logistics (i.e., when, where, how, and to whom) of their disclosure because with disclosure comes the risk of social ostracization and/or the onerous task of being asked to continually explain what transgender means. However, should individuals decide to transition, the early stages of that journey may involve plans for and experiences of coming out to family, friends, and colleagues and subsequent seeking of community support (Budge et al., 2013; Carroll et al., 2002; Denes & Afifi, 2014). The external feedback (positive and affirming, and also negative and denying) from individuals' social environments will increase as the transition progresses and becomes public to more people. The visibility and intentionality of transition may contribute to increased stress, given that increased visibility can result in a concomitant rise of stigmatizing reactions in the environment, and unplanned and planned disclosures of one's gender identity may occur as the subject becomes increasingly noticeable. As their gender presentation changes, individuals may be asked to navigate invasive questions about their health and identity from social contacts with intimacy ranging from close personal connections to strangers. These questions may decrease in frequency if and when an individual reaches the milestone in their transition of being able to pass socially, or to be "passing," which means to generally be perceived as cisgender based on physical and behavioral cues. As one's transition progresses, those close to the individual will hopefully cope and shift their communication to suit the transgender individual's needs and preferences; families and partners will construct meanings of what has occurred over time (Folkman, 2011), and some may experience a transition in the family relational identity (Zamboni, 2006) as roles and names change.

However, this transition process may very well take place in an environment of chronic stress, leading identity development processes to proceed more chaotically and as nonlinear trajectories. This is occasioned by the fact that coming out and living as transgender can be dangerous or impossible for some individuals, depending on a variety of factors. For example, research has shown that transgender individuals of color face higher rates of violence (Human Rights Campaign, 2019; Paz & Astor, 2020). Still, we know that those who cannot come out owing to fear of rejection from their family or community, or of criminalization, for whatever reason, often experience depression, low self-esteem, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation (Herek et al., 2009). In the following section, the authors further explore the impact of stress and relationships on transgender individuals and their identity development.

TRANSGENDER MINORITY STRESS AND IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS

Because close relationships are most frequently the site of disclosures about transgender identity, it is possible to turn to the rich body of knowledge generated by minority stress theory (MST), which may give us some insights into how taboo surrounding transgender identity may affect trans people and their relationships, in spite of the general lack of research in this area. MST (Meyer, 1995; 2003; Meyer & Frost, 2013) suggests that transgender health disparities can be largely attributed to stress induced by a transphobic society—a society in which discrimination, stigmatization, and harassment of transgender people is troublingly frequent (Lombardi et al., 2002; Meyer, 2013). Living in a transphobic society means that transgender individuals (a) experience objectively stressful external events; (b) hold expectations that these events may occur and thus maintain a heightened vigilance toward detecting them; and (c) may internalize transphobia, resulting in the personal endorsement of negative attitudes toward transgender individuals (Meyer, 2003). The marginalizing experiences noted in (a) and (b) may take place in relationships (or lack of relationships) with friends, family, coworkers, and health-care providers, and these interactions (or lack thereof) in turn have an impact on how people manage adversity and experience life transitions. Examining intimate relationships and families may provide additional insight.

Intimate Relationships

Researchers have linked the presence of minority stress, and in particular internalized homophobia and transphobia, to decreases in “outness” or the degree to which an individual has disclosed their sexual orientation (Vale & Bisconti, 2021a). Similarly, lower levels of “outness” related to individuals’ sexual orientation have been associated with lower levels of relational satisfaction, lower levels of relationship quality, and increased levels of conflict severity. Still, it is challenging to draw any unequivocal conclusions about the effect of being in a sexual minority relationship on that relationship’s quality (Ballester et al., 2021; Totenhagen et al., 2018; Vale & Bisconti, 2021b). For example, in Lehmillier and Agnew’s (2006) study of men in relationships with men, the authors found being in a sexual minority relationship was linked to decreased levels of relational investment while, contradictorily, also linked to higher levels of commitment. Thus, the impact of minority stress on marginalized relationships may vary by the facet of relational quality being considered. However, at this highest level, the research suggests that the experience of minority stress is linked to decrements in relationship length and quality (Doyle & Molix, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015). Gamarel et al. (2014) found that in dyads of trans women and their cisgender male partners, higher trans stigma in either partner was associated with lower relationship quality for both partners. In addition to these individual-level stressors that transgender individuals may experience, there are also unique stressors that present themselves to couples involving one or more sexual and/or gender minority persons. These are called couple-level stressors and are events that a couple engages with together, rather than separately (Frost et al., 2017). Examples of this might be a couple where one person decides to start, or is in the process of, transitioning. This can be taxing on both parties, which may be involved in changing physical intimacy, joint finances that may be called upon to support transition, and the emotional labor that both parties must undertake (Pfeffer & Castañeda, 2019).

The transition process may also contribute to stress via the introduction of new forms and heightened levels of uncertainty. For example, during transition, sexual intimacy may decline as partners struggle to find new words to communicate their sexual desires and boundaries and to find new ways to meet each other’s needs (Hines, 2006; Pfeffer & Castañeda, 2019). If a partner does transition, this may also

bring the enactment of normative gender roles into question. Research suggests that trans individuals may lean into stereotypical performances of gender more heavily as they transition in response to the constant questioning of their gender (Iantaffi & Bockting, 2011). Division of household labor is one area in which stereotypical gender enactments may present themselves most starkly and is often a site of intense conflict. As such, shifts in who does what, and how both partners feel about those shifts, need to be constantly negotiated as they evolve over time (Pfeffer & Castañeda, 2019). An additional set of joint stressors that couples including a transgender individual may face are those related to discrimination from housing providers or employers when the individual comes out (Bethea & McCollum, 2013; Lenning & Buist, 2012; Pyne et al., 2015), which may force transgender couples to relocate or meaningfully shift spending patterns. Furthermore, transgender people who wish to become parents may find their pathway to parenthood particularly challenging, with some adoption agencies being allowed to discriminate against transgender people, ask insensitive questions about how a child came to be part of the family, or make rude remarks about the same. Moreover, some aspects of raising a child, such as pregnancy or breastfeeding, might serve as painful reminders of one's current embodiment (Pfeffer & Castañeda, 2019).

Family of Origin Relationships

Family of origin relationships may also be uniquely affected by transgender individuals and their decisions about whether to transition (Norwood & Lannutti, 2015). One's *family of origin* is defined as a group related by blood, marriage, or adoption; the siblings and caretakers that one lives with from their youth to young adult ages; and one's first social environment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Simpson, et al., 2007). When a trans individual discloses their identity to members of their family of origin, they generate an event that may change the family system and potentially introduce stress into the system as well. Some family members have supportive reactions to these disclosures (Norwood, 2013a; Norwood & Lannutti, 2015), whereas others struggle to accept or understand this change (Grossman et al., 2005; Israel, 2006; Norwood, 2013a, 2013b), with some going so far as to liken the experience to that of experiencing the death of the family member even though they are still very much alive (Norwood, 2013a; Zamboni, 2006). Norwood and Lannutti (2015) highlighted a point of contrast between sexual minorities' and transgender individuals' experiences of coming out: In interviews with family members of transgender individuals, family members shared that they would have preferred that person to have come out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, rather than trans, because of the fact that those sexual identities are less stigmatized than transgender identities. Indeed, it seems that it is not just trans individuals who are acutely aware of the taboo nature of this topic, but their families are too, as well as the repercussions. Indeed, many transgender people experience some form of family rejection (Lenning & Buist, 2012) and subsequent physical displacement resulting from coming out, with this experience being particularly prevalent for transgender women (Waters et al., 2017). Research confirms that fear of familial rejection and loss of material support from family members is one of the most frightening aspects of disclosing a trans identity (Bethea & McCollum, 2013; Devor, 2004; Lev, 2004; Riggs, vonDoussa, & Power, 2015). Anticipating this rejection, trans people often delay coming out or transitioning to protect their family bonds (Hines, 2006; Hubbard & Whitley, 2012), which speaks to how powerfully taboo the trans identity can be. The stress of having a transgender family member may also extend to other members of the family via courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963). Courtesy stigma can be understood as the feeling that associating with a stigmatized individual will negatively affect a nonstigmatized individual and has

been linked to nonstigmatized individuals discouraging the disclosure of stigmatizing identity aspects by others with whom they associate (Smith & Hopper, 2010). This discouragement may inhibit transgender individuals from speaking to their other social connections or health-care providers, both of whom may be important providers of emotional and informational support.

Chosen Family

Because of frequent experiences of family rejection, it is not uncommon for transgender people to pursue support systems beyond their traditional family structure, such as chosen families (Norwood, 2012, 2013b). LGBTQ scholars have explored the concept of chosen families as seeking emotional, financial, and tangible support from a close network of friends, as well as kinships with fluid boundaries, which are “symbolic demonstrations of love, shared history . . . and other signs of enduring solidarity” (Weston, 1997, p. 109). Support systems such as the chosen family offer social support and integration of one’s transgender identity. Researchers have shown community and peer support through affirmation of identity to contribute to resilience for transgender individuals (Breslow et al., 2015; Pflum et al., 2015). Pinto et al. (2008) found that for African American and Latina transgender women, social networks of other transgender individuals facilitated coping strategy development and in-group identification. According to Bockting et al. (2013), a peer community creates an affirming environment in which stigma-free reflections of gender expression allow transgender individuals to develop self-confidence outside of dominant cultural norms. Furthermore, chosen families and peer support can remediate stressful reactions from transgender individuals’ families of origin. Singh and McKleroy (2011) reported that in addition to seeking the support of other transgender individuals, accessing health care and financial resources, finding pride in one’s identity, and navigating family-of-origin relationships allowed transgender individuals to be increasingly resilient in the face of trauma. Thus, the authors asserted that when possible, maintaining a connection with one’s family of origin can serve to promote resilience and buffer stress for those who are transitioning. Finally, it bears noting that more recent examples of minority stress being applied to investigations of transgender individuals’ lives do exist and include topics such as trans-affirmative narrative exposure therapy (Lange, 2020); transgender minority stress and its associations with anxiety, depression, and well-being (Hunter et al., 2021); transgender students who leave college before graduating (Goldberg et al., 2019); increasing resilience in transgender children (Toomey, 2021); and connections to disordered eating patterns (Cusack et al., 2021).

GOING FORWARD: THEORETICAL EXPANSION

Researchers have used several theories within and beyond the communication discipline to investigate stigmatized and taboo identities in interpersonal contexts and grow lines of inquiry, but these theories do not sufficiently include transgender voices, or only do so in the margins. Scholars have called for accountability to increase diversity in our research (e.g., Afifi & Cornejo, 2020), and in this chapter we aim to offer promising theoretical approaches and proposals for future research to expand communication scholarship on transgender experiences.

Disclosure and Privacy Theories

As mentioned previously, the question of whether to disclose one's transgender identity is an important decision that transgender individuals encounter as their identity develops. Several privacy and disclosure theories demonstrate the complex process of information exchange and the factors that influence whether one discloses. However, very few works involving communication-specific theories of disclosure are focused solely on the experiences of transgender individuals. The first theory one might turn to in expanding the theoretical basis of this literature is Greene's disclosure decision-making model (DD-MM, 2009), which illustrates the decision-making process one may go through when deciding if and how to disclose meaningful health-relevant information: first, one assesses information and synthesizes what one knows about it to decide whether this information is relevant and how stigmatizing it is; then, one assesses the potential receiver of the information and evaluates their relationship to the person and their reaction to the information; and finally, one factors one's confidence in the receiver's response into the decision about whether to disclose, as well as one's own disclosure efficacy (i.e., how ready or confident one is to disclose the information). Friley and Venetis (2021) applied the theory to the context of transgender individuals deciding whether to disclose their gender identity to medical providers. Their findings show that transgender individuals are less likely to risk disclosing to medical professionals unless they perceive that their gender identity is medically relevant to avoid stigmatizing reactions, and that visibility (or whether an individual will be perceived as cisgender) also increases the likelihood of disclosure.

Related to the DD-MM, communication privacy management theory (CPM; Petronio, 2002; Petronio & Sargent, 2011) also positions the idea that revealing private information is risky as one of its central tenets and may further theoretical coverage of trans identity as a taboo topic. Two of the other tenets of CPM are that a) people believe they own and control access to their private information, which they protect through a set of metaphorical boundaries, and that b) people make decisions about sharing or "co-owning" that private information and adjusting boundaries, based on a set of factors, most notably including an assessment of the risk-to-benefit ratio of revealing that information (Petronio, 2002). Two recent studies have shown that CPM may be useful for research on transgender identities. Helens-Hart (2017) applied CPM to examine disclosure and privacy management strategies of sexual minorities in the workplace and noted that risk assessment played a meaningful role in influencing whether one disclosed information about their identity—maintaining their professional image and assessing whether their employment was at risk were both considerations. CPM was also used to research privacy management on social media during gender transition and seeking online support (Coker, 2021) and further highlighted how, to protect private information, people construct metaphorical boundaries (in this case, dual or private social media accounts) driven by privacy rules such as risk–benefit to disclosure, which inform subsequent boundary management.

This research is an important expansion in the literature considering that disclosures, which may be necessary for access to a variety of relational, psychological, and material resources, often leave people vulnerable, and so they may be avoided. Thus, understanding the criteria at play in individuals' decisions to alter boundaries and share private information is paramount in understanding why people may choose to keep information about their gender identity private when possible. CPM may be of further use theoretically in examinations of coming out and being outed, specifically as it relates to privacy violations surrounding one's gender identity committed by co-owners (i.e., "outing" someone) and the boundary turbulence or relational ramifications that may ensue. In families, sudden boundary shifts may occur when private information suddenly becomes public information, such as a child's decision to transition

(Greene et al., 2003; Petronio, 2002). Following this, the relationship must adjust, likely via explicit communication, to arrive at new rules under which to operate so that individuals again feel in control of the privacy boundary. Examining how transgender individuals navigate privacy in their close relationships can yield helpful information for families seeking information about managing private information as well as counseling professionals who are advising families on how to navigate such conversations.

Uncertainty Theories

Outside of theories related to privacy and disclosure, the field of communication also offers theories that may help us to understand some of the stress and uncertainty that accompanies the process of revealing a transgender identity. Two theories that offer promise for greater understanding of that uncertainty are the theory of motivated information management (TMIM; Afifi & Weiner, 2004) and relational turbulence theory (RTT; Solomon et al., 2016). TMIM approaches the management of taboo or stigmatizing information and uncertainty with an analysis of information-seeking behavior. The theory describes multiphase processes that individuals experience when deciding whether to seek out, avoid, or provide information. For information seekers, the phases involve interpretation (what kind of information is needed and what emotions are emerging), evaluation (can the information be acquired), and decision (what strategies are used to seek or avoid information); for information providers, evaluation and decision phases also involve assessment of efficacy, or whether information can be provided, and how the seeker will manage the information. Afifi and Weiner (2006) have applied this lens to the study of sexual history discussions, and Kosenko (2010, 2011) has found themes of uncertainty in safe sex discussions among transgender adults, though it has yet to be applied in research on the close relationships of transgender individuals. Studying gender transition as a source of uncertainty involves high stakes and could also have important contributions for TMIM. Specifically, TMIM could be used to investigate instances in which a transgender person aims to collect information from a loved one about whether it is safe to disclose their gender identity. If safety is a concern and their gender identity is being questioned, it is likely that uncertainty is high and in their outcome assessment of the situation they would consider all aspects of their own communication, coping, and target efficacy.

Although TMIM has the potential to frame early relationship conversations and uncertainty, RTT could be employed to examine how, after coming out or going through GCS, trans people's relationship routines and intimacy may fluctuate in unpredictable ways. RTT proposes that people fall into unconscious routines in their relationships to accomplish their goals, and during times of change, these routines break down and create opportunities for couples to communicate and reaffirm their commitment and coordination (Solomon et al., 2016). RTT provides a perspective that can be useful to uncover the communication in family and romantic relationships of transgender individuals as they experience transitions.

Additional Theoretical Perspectives

Beyond the domains of uncertainty and disclosure, there are two more communication-based theories that may be useful for future investigations. Research employing a turning points theory and, relatedly, a turning points analysis illuminates meaningful or pivotal events that bring about changes in relationships (Baxter & Braithwaite, 1999; Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Researchers have charted closeness, commitment, and satisfaction over the trajectory of relationships (Lloyd & Cate, 1985; Mongeau et al., 2013), and this area of research demonstrates how turning points can affect the relationship positively or negatively

depending on how partners manage such events. Examining the shifts within the close personal relationships of transgender individuals alongside their identity development could merge parallel lines of research. Investigating individual and relational shifts during identity development could provide deeper insight into how gender transition could bring about reciprocal changes in individuals and their partners.

Another underutilized theory that highlights the intersection of relational and identity transitions is communication theory of identity (CTI; Hecht, 1993), which posits that identity is cocreated in relationships and that identity emerges through our communication with others. Changes in an individual's identity as they perceive it involves socially situated and relationally communicated shifts in identity, as well as individual self-exploration. Although research employing CTI in the context of transgender identity is sparse, Nuru (2014) employed CTI to investigate individuals' challenges in coming to terms with their transgender identities through narrative and storytelling. With this perspective, they were able to pinpoint identity gaps or areas in which individuals' gender identity felt uncertain or invalidated in their relationships. As such, CTI could prove another useful avenue for generating new and important knowledge related to the communicative experiences of transgender individuals in relationships.

Challenges for Future Research

As with any field of inquiry, there are myriad avenues for development of knowledge regarding transgender identities and many places in which existing knowledge leaves improvements to be desired. The first of these is in distinguishing transgender from cisgender LGBTQ experiences, and this has been called to the forefront of communication research. Although some scholars have begun to set agendas for expanding work focused on queer populations (Lannutti et al., 2021), frequently transgender issues have been explored in the margins of this scholarship and seldom within communication studies-focused scholarship. Although the experiences of the LGBTQ and T are similar in that they are non-normative (Stryker, 2008) and taboo, continuing to conflate them in research will wash out the nuances that transgender experiences can bring to research on sexual and gender minorities. Further, in 2018, Kosenko and Nelson, as well as others, argued that existing research on transgender populations has focused enough on sexual and mental health and that continuing to focus solely on these aspects of health risks fetishizing and pathologizing the community (Ussher et al., 2020). Thus, our focus must be expanded here as well. Care needs to be taken to avoid perpetuating stigma through research orientations, questions, and methods (Greene & Magsamen-Conrad, 2014). This means taking varied methodological approaches (i.e., beyond qualitative work), applying different theories beyond MST, and asking questions beyond those that researchers feel will be easily funded by grant-awarding institutions such as the National Institutes of Health or the National Science Foundation.

Intersectionality, Discrimination, and Taboo

A consideration that contributes to transgender identity being viewed as taboo is the ways in which one's transgender identity intersects with their racial or ethnic background, socioeconomic status, education level, gender presentation, and so on. Blosnich (2017) wrote that intersectionality is about the "and"—scholars must acknowledge that understanding the overall impact of stigma requires recognizing that an individual may be transgender, Black, chronically ill, and homeless. At once there are "simultaneous and reciprocal interactions of multiple personal and social identities an individual has across the lifespan" (Blosnich, 2017, p. 30). The reality for trans individuals who experience layers of discrimination brings

about magnified chronic stress. For example, transgender people of color experience higher rates of poverty, unemployment discrimination, substance abuse, and HIV infections than do White transgender individuals (Dean et al., 2000). Because of this, it is critical that future studies to investigate transgender experiences include these variables. Relationship researchers focused on trans samples should also remind themselves to be inclusive of intersectional experiences including diversity in sexual orientations. Studies focused on transgender individuals tend to solely concern heterosexual relationships, in spite of the fact that there are transgender individuals of all sexual orientations (Pfeffer & Castañeda, 2019).

Additional macrolevel variables that should be considered include language and larger social structures. As Tompkins (2014) argued, there can be no advancement of sex-positive transgender politics without artful examination of the language used within and around the community. In her article, Tompkins discussed how phrases such as “tranny chaser” can inform discourses of desire and attraction toward transgender individuals by perpetuating dangerous stereotypes that erase identities and create a culture of denial. Similarly, Wesp et al. (2019) suggested that to advance understanding of the transgender community, there must be an examination of the larger oppressive structures that produce power and inequalities that exist, as is particularly evident in the realms of social and health inequality.

Methodological Considerations

As inquiry surrounding the experiences of transgender individuals continues, researchers have a few methodological considerations that should inform their studies. Because scholarship focused on sexual and gender minorities has frequently consolidated LGB and T within samples, more work is needed to validate measures with solely transgender samples and create measures tailored to transgender experiences. Bauerband et al. (2019) have begun this work with their study comparing variance in discrimination and vigilance scales across transgender and cisgender LGBTQ individuals and between transgender identities, finding that transgender individuals reported more vigilance and discrimination than cisgender individuals in the study. Another methodological barrier perpetuating inconsistencies is the larger debate surrounding measurement of sex and gender in communication scholarship. As it stands, the literature on transgender individuals tends to reify gender binaries by focusing exclusively on trans men and trans women and excluding those who identify as gender fluid or gender nonbinary (Pfeffer & Castañeda, 2019). Failing to include demographic questions about participants’ gender or only asking about sex, without even specifying if the sex in question is current or that assigned at birth, obscures the presence of transgender people in our data sets. Given that transgender individuals often feel hesitant to publicly identify themselves as such (for reasons previously elucidated), it is difficult to generate large data sets of transgender individuals and even more difficult to employ random sampling techniques to determine what a representative sample of transgender individuals truly looks like. Items including cisgender man, transgender man, cisgender woman, transgender woman, nonbinary, agender, and an option to type in one’s gender or select “multiple” is one suggestion of how to remedy this. Another solution to this issue is to examine the multiple layers of social influences, conflict, and support transgender people experience throughout their identity development rather than assuming a uniform process that all individuals move through (Lindley et al., 2021). Through expanding research methodologies in these ways, researchers can, as de Vries (2012) argued, “build upon intersectional models that link multifaceted social positions to institutional and structural inequalities, challenge binary divisions, and bring marginalized groups to the center of analysis” (p. 23).

Support Intervention Strategies

Although it may be tempting to propose interventions to more effectively support transgender individuals in managing stigma based on the extant literature on LGB support interventions, some caution is warranted in this endeavor. As Norwood and Lannutti (2015) pointed out in their study of transgender individuals' experiences with coming out to their families: "Despite similarities in experiences, gender identity and sexual orientation are quite distinct and likely function differently" (p. 51).

For example, even when family members are accepting of their loved ones' transgender identity, the same support given to a queer individual may not always be perceived as effective or helpful by a transgender individual (Table, 2020). More research on individual coping skills, peer support, and chosen families is needed to test the impact of social support interventions on physical and mental health outcomes during transgender individuals' transition and beyond. Because available social support may be inconsistent or lacking for many transgender people, more intervention programs should include the instruction of individual coping skills. From their study on gender nonconforming youth, Grossman et al. (2011) recommended learning task-oriented coping skills to improve mental health outcomes. Studies utilizing one-on-one peer support interventions, as modeled by Brashers et al. (2017), provide a framework to design similar programs for individuals going through gender transition. In Brashers et al.'s study, individuals with HIV were coached by peers on communication skills to garner more effective ways to ask for support and build social networks. Individuals in the peer support intervention increased their satisfaction with their support systems and decreased their depression symptoms and illness uncertainty compared to a standard care control group. Researchers have raised the idea that interventions that provide gender-affirming and competent care are critically needed (Friley & Venetis, 2021; Table et al., in press). Additionally, Tompkins et al. (2015) found that although prior contact and perspective taking are helpful in reducing stigma toward the transgender community, there is still much work to be done in understanding how to humanize the community for those who are prejudiced.

Widespread development and implementation of transgender support programming and peer coaching in partnership with clinical or counseling service providers can lead to better mental, physical, and relational outcomes for trans individuals and also highlight a shift toward holistic trans health care.

A FINAL NOTE

In this chapter the authors address serious topics and inequalities within our larger society, which may leave some feeling at a loss for where to begin the desperately needed work of undoing some of these harmful circumstances. For readers of and contributors to academic spaces such as this, there is a unique opportunity to be part of what must be a multifronted solution. To truly support the transgender community, journal editors, book editors, and others in power must continue to craft inclusive calls for special issues, encourage submissions, and support research (both in speaking, writing, and funding) that heuristically adds to the conversation. In exploring transgender identities as taboo topics, in this chapter the authors attempted to shine a light on individuals who have been both silenced and misunderstood. By being more intentionally inclusive and increasing the visibility of the transgender community, researchers and academics alike can help address some of the misinformation, confusion, and stigma that lead to the disproportionate inequalities and exclusion identified in the research reviewed here. The hope is

that chapters like this may act as an exemplar: a beginning that others can replicate, add to, and debate. Truly, the work is just beginning, but with sustained and collective power, the narrative can be shifted.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Coming Out: Coming out or coming out of the closet is a metaphorical phrase that refers to the processes of self-disclosure and self-discovery that LGBTQ people experience as they share their gender identity or sexual orientation openly with others.

Couple-Level Stress: Sources of minority stress affecting both members of a dyad, rather than an individual, potentially including experiences such as gender transition, loss of income, or loss of housing.

Gender: Individuals' psychological, social, and cultural characteristics, which are constructed and communicated via a variety of channels that may include expressions, traits, and social roles and are often, though not always, associated with one's sex.

Gender Identity: Individuals' internal sense of their gender, which does not necessarily align with their sex. In the case that individuals' gender identity and their sex do match, they are called cisgender; people who sense that their sex and gender identity are not the same fit broadly under the term transgender.

Heterosexism: Prejudice or discriminatory acts against queer individuals centered on social and cultural assumptions that heterosexual or straight people are normal, natural, and superior to non-heterosexual people.

Minority Stress: Unique and additional sources of pressure, tension, and/or strain associated with belonging to a marginalized, stigmatized, or underrepresented social identity, often stemming from anticipated discrimination, material discrimination, or self-directed negative attitudes.

Transgender: An umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity does not align with one's sex they were assigned at birth.

Transphobia: Prejudice, discriminatory acts against transgender and gender nonconforming individuals taking form as negative attitudes, mistrust, fear, disbelief, and hatred; transphobia manifests as reactions of disgust, discounting pronouns and identity, verbal and physical harassment, as well as denial of housing, employment, or health care because someone is transgender.

Chapter 8

Rising Against LGBT Taboos Through Communication and Social Marketing Strategies: Using Web TV Series to Challenge Discriminatory Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This chapter builds on how social marketing and its techniques, working on interdisciplinary solutions such as new television formats and narratives, such as web series and transmedia content, become relevant in the fight against LGBT prejudice, stereotypes, and taboos. Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to present the results of a research project aimed at exploring the potential of a web series with LGBT characters, using digital content and fictional narratives with persuasive messages, to alter consumers' attitudes and behaviors in desirable ways and minimize this social problem. The study contributes the literature on social marketing, addressing LGBT taboos and prejudices, a theme that has been scarcely explored in the area. Furthermore, a connection is made between the theme of entertainment-education content and the potential of digital platforms as social marketing tools.

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INTRODUCTION

It is unquestionable that the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI+) community is now more visible than before, due to changes in legislation, the role of various pro-LGBTI+ organizations and the representation of this community in the media (Burgess & Baunach, 2014). Moreover, there is also an increased number of media content (news, advertising, tv series) featuring LGBTI+ people, but the community is reported to be represented with a skewed and reductive image, failing to embody the majority of existing identities within the queer spectrum and making most groups in this community vulnerable and victims of homophobic behaviors (Fryberg & Ownsend, 2008; Nölke, 2018). Homophobia has historical and cultural roots that promote certain stereotypes and, consequently, prejudices that are difficult to erase (Costa, Bandeira, & Nardi, 2013; Madureira, 2007). Exaggerated portrayals of LGBTI+ characters often emerge, perpetuating negative stereotypes (Fryberg & Ownsend, 2008). For example, gays and lesbians are often perceived as promiscuous and sexually deviant (Levitt & Klassen, 1974), gays as melodramatic (Madon, 1997) or lesbians as masculine and aggressive, (Geiger, Harwood, & Hummert, 2006). In this sense, the weak or poor representation of the LGBTI+ community in the mass media, makes it difficult to reduce stigma. Hence, this community still faces astounding challenges and draw backs worldwide, particularly in Europe, where homosexuality is still a taboo subject in many of the countries. As reported by the 2021 Rainbow Europe Map, one can observe an almost complete stagnation on human rights of LGBTI+ people across Europe (ILGA Europe, 2021). Concerned that, in the last year, hardly any positive changes were achieved in the 49 European countries under study, ILGA-Europe highlights that only three moved up in the ranking: Albania, Finland and Portugal, due to small changes implemented.

This chapter aims at shedding some light on this topic, by presenting a case study on how a web series developed in Portugal targeted to young generations, representing the daily lives of five LGBTI+ friends – *Casa do Cais* – was received by its audience. It builds on the importance of finding innovative ways to communicate with this public, in alternative television genre entertainment-education formats, very much directed to their preferences and habits. The case study explores the potential of using web series such as *Casa do Cais* as social marketing tools aimed at promoting changes in the perceptions and attitudes of the audience, towards LGBTI+ community.

Given the empirical context of this study, it is worth mentioning that in the last decade, some important milestones were achieved for Portuguese LGBTI+ citizens, such as the approval of marriage between same-sex couples, in 2010, the end of their exclusion from access to adoption, in 2016, and the expansion of access to medically assisted procreation techniques to women, regardless of their marital status and sexual orientation, in 2017. However, despite the progress made, there is still much evidence that Portugal is far from achieving equality on the social level, discriminating against LGBTI+ people in structural sectors, such as health, education, housing, work, and politics, but also to their representation in conventional marketing campaigns. Hence, LGBTI+ subjects are still considered as a taboo domain across the country. According to the 2020 Annual Report of the Observatory of Discrimination on the basis of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 40% of the people surveyed admitted that they felt discriminated against by at least one of their everyday contexts, 30% claimed having been victims of some kind of abuse, and the Victim Support Service of the ILGA Portugal Association assisted 2,432 people, related to incidents of homophobia or transphobia occurring in Portuguese territory. In the Diversity at Work 2021 study (ManpowerGroup, 2021) around 50% of Portuguese respondents reported preferring to hide their sexual orientation in a job interview. Also, and given the target audience of this study, it is

important to stress that 28% of young people between 15-17 years old hide their sexual identity at school (ILGA Portugal, 2020). Such evidence of discriminatory behavior against LGBTI+ people in Portugal impels this community to feel they must hide their sexual orientation to avoid being confronted with harmful social situations, such as those mentioned above.

We suggest that social marketing, here conceptualized as the adoption of marketing strategies and tools to create programs designed to change beliefs and influence changing behaviors of a given target audience, can contribute to reduce prejudice and taboos related to LGBTI+ groups and society's well-being (Andreasen, 2006). This approach can help solving social problems, through the dissemination of knowledge, that can even support the development of new policies against behaviors harmful to society (Lefebvre, 2011), such as homophobia and transphobia. Our point of departure is the recognition that in the last decade, new ways of watching television have emerged, namely the web series (Grandío, 2012), and the use of the entertainment-education genre on television (Tufte, 2005), which has opened new doors to social marketing. In this context, the study of fiction web series that also have educational purposes becomes relevant.

The chapter is organized as follows. It first reviews the theoretical frameworks adopted to explore the potential of using web TV series as social marketing tools to reduce prejudice against LGBTI+. This is followed by the research methodology employed to build the case. It then introduces the *Casa do Cais* case study and the data analysis. Finally, the last sections provide a set of solutions and recommendations and concluding remarks.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section is divided in three main theoretical frameworks. First, as this research is focused on LGBTI+ related taboos and prejudice, it is crucial to understand the magnitude and main implications of this social problem. Secondly, the social marketing framework is presented given its potential and contribution to solve this problem, in the sense that it entails not just a theory or a set of techniques, but a process for developing social change programs. Lastly, the third section explores the role of the new media and new entertainment-education genres as social marketing tools to combat LGBTI+ prejudice and taboos.

LGBTI+ Prejudice and Taboos: What Do We Know?

It is unquestionable that prejudice and discrimination are complex social problems (Campbell & Brauer, 2020), difficult to tackle and solve. The literature on the topic reveals a lack of consensus on how to combat prejudice that goes beyond the scientific areas of social psychology and sociology. Most research is based on theories of increasing contact, in the sense that social interaction between members of different social groups may improve intergroup attitudes and combat prejudice and negative attitudes and behaviors. Pettigrew (1998) reports on different studies where intergroup interactions resulted in positive attitudes towards different groups, such as the elderly, ethnic groups, immigrants, homosexuals, the mentally ill, disabled persons, and people diagnosed with AIDS.

There is a lack of empirical evidence, however, that the proposed prejudice reduction techniques, in fact, contribute to reduce prejudice in the real world (Paluck, 2016; Campbell and Brauer, 2020). According to Campbell and Brauer (2020), previous research was not sufficient to change behaviors, since "good ideas do not always lead to proper behaviors" (p. 613). Many behavior-change campaigns

based on providing information or raising awareness were considered ineffective. For example, in Albaracín's et al (2005) study on the effectiveness of HIV-prevention interventions, the authors stressed the importance of social environment influence, particularly the normative behaviors in the targeted social groups (belonging or reference).

Broadly speaking, prejudice encompasses all the negative preconceptions that human beings hold towards a specific social group. This can take the form of sexism, racism, homophobia, among many others, and supports the existence of discriminatory practices against this same group (Pinsky, 2001). In this sense, discrimination represents prejudice in action (Madureira, 2007). Looking at homophobia, transphobia and prejudice against LGBTI+ people, the problem is complex and multifaceted. Homophobia can be defined as "the fear and hatred towards homosexuality" (Andersen, 2000, p. 94). This works as a system of social control that, in addition to alienating homosexual individuals and affecting the way they relate, also reinforces sexism towards women (Andersen, 2000). Transphobia, in turn, is the feeling of restlessness, or even repulsion, towards those who hold non-normative expressions of gender identity and expression (Hill, 2002; Hill & Willoughby, 2005). Thus, transphobia involves feelings of disgust towards male women, female men, transvestites and transgender and/or transsexual people, who form the trans group. In addition to transphobia, this anti-trans prejudice manifests itself in two other forms: sexism and gender-based insults (Hill & Willoughby, 2005). In sum, the literature regarding prejudice, homophobia and transphobia, shows that LGBTI+ people are often exposed to alienation, insults, and hateful behaviors from society, which calls for the need to design and employ innovative set of strategies and programs to fight against such prejudice and promote positive social behavioral change.

Social Marketing: "Marketing Lens to Social Challenges"

One such program is the social marketing framework, aimed at developing and integrating marketing tools and strategies to influence behaviors that benefit communities for the greater social good. Wiebe (1951) stated: "why don't you sell effectively [values like that of] fraternity like you sell soap?" (p. 679), taking the first steps in the study of the marketing of social causes. Wiebe's question followed a study of four social campaigns that the sociologist had carried out, which concluding that the mass media can sell social ideals and shape behavior, but that they should only expect results comparable to those of a commercial advertiser when conditions are similar (Wiebe, 1951). That is, the closer a social cause campaign is to a product campaign, the easier it will be successful. However, its effectiveness is more limited. Later on, Rothschild (1979) supported this idea and presented some reasons why non-commercial marketing objectives are more complex than traditional ones. Some of these reasons relate to the low involvement between the audience and the reported social problems, the lack of lasting engagement with these issues, the lack of personal benefits in adopting more positive behaviors from the point of view of the campaign's author, the costs that this change in behavior often entails for target consumers, the low benefit/cost ratio that comes with this change; society's low demand for solving this problem and the lack of segmentation and targeting of a campaign, to name a few.

Despite doubts surrounding Wiebe's (1951) initial concepts, the idea of social marketing developed new contours, and Kotler and Zaltman (1971) decided to formally define it as "the planning, implementation and control of programs whose objective is to influence the acceptance of social ideas, taking into account the product, price, communication, distribution and marketing research" (p. 5). Thus, the authors presented a pioneering definition of social marketing, based on the concept of social advertising, and established that this would involve the explicit use of marketing skills to help translate social action

efforts into more efficient programs that induce a desired response in the public, creating the bridge between acquired knowledge and useful implementation of this knowledge at the service of society (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971).

One of the consequences of this definition being so rooted in social advertising is the dominance of the downstream marketing approach, which focuses on tactics and individual influence, neglecting the structural factors. Those structural factors are the responsibility of the State and institutions, but which fall under a different category called upstream marketing. According to French and Gordon (2015), upstream social marketing is a set of strategies to influence structural changes in wicked problems mainly by top level decision-makers whereas downstream social marketing is more related to individual behavior change. Andreasen (1994) was, thus, the first to develop a holistic approach to social marketing, considering upstream and downstream factors (French & Russell-Bennett, 2015) and arguing that the definition of Kotler and Zaltman (1971) was maladjusted, raising some problems. Andreasen distances himself from the definition proposed by Kotler and Zaltman (1971), defining social marketing as “the adaptation of commercial marketing techniques to programs designed to voluntarily influence the behaviour of the target audience, in order to improve their well-being and the society of which it is part” (Andreasen, 1994, p. 110). Under Andreasen’s definition, social marketing is not just a theory or a set of techniques, but a process for developing social change programs (Andreasen 1994, 2002; Hastings & Saren, 2003). Later, Dann (2010) defined social marketing as “the adaptation and adoption of commercial marketing activities, institutions and processes as a means of inducing behavioral changes in a target audience, temporarily or permanently, to achieve a social objective.” (p. 151). The author replaced the term “influence” with “induce”, since this change endows social marketing with greater persuasive power through a specific course of action. In this context, “induce” is a term with a less passive approach than the previous one, suggesting a more active orientation of the proposed social change.

In 2013, the International Social Marketing Association (ISMA), the European Social Marketing Association (ESMA) and the Australian Association of Social Marketing (AASM) presented a new definition, with the objective of reaching a consensus, based on influence: “social marketing seeks to develop and integrate marketing concepts with other approaches to influence behaviors that benefit individuals and communities for the greater social good” (ISMA, ESMA, & AASM, 2013, p. 1). These entities also emphasized that “the practice of social marketing is guided by ethical principles. It seeks to integrate research, best practices, theory, audience and a vision of partnership to inform the realization of sensitive and segmented social change programs for competition that are effective, efficient, equitable and sustainable” (p. 1). French and Russell-Bennett (2015) further added that the value of social marketing lies in the fact that it applies a “marketing lens” to social challenges. This process is based on an exchange of social offers, which are presented in the form of ideas, systems, products, services, and policies, which are valued by citizens and which simultaneously influence their behavior.

Regardless of all the multiple definitions proposed, social marketing has received growing attention, which is reflected by a sharp increase in the number of articles and chapters published, conferences, associations created, such as the International Social Marketing Association. Currently, its contribution to the health and well-being of citizens is recognized by many governments and public entities, as well as its power to promote behavior change. However, the most significant sign of this growth is probably the migration from social marketing at the individual level to an application at the institutional level (Andreasen, 2002, 2003). Although social marketing has proven to be an effective catalyst for positive change, both at the individual level and at the level of social policy, some image issues and ethical concerns still affect this discipline. There are, therefore, several barriers that are imposed against social

marketing, namely the lack of appreciation of this area at the highest levels of management, the lack of positioning of social marketing, which is not well defined and distanced from competing areas, poor communication of success cases driven by social marketing and the lack of academic status in this area (Andreasen, 2002). This lack of definition regarding the nature and focus of social marketing can perpetuate the risk of it being understood as a limited field, without significant contributions to social policies and interventions (French & Russell-Bennett, 2015). Regardless of this ongoing debate, social marketing is recognized as a set of tools that can be applied whenever there is a socially critical behavior, identified in a certain target audience, which can be transformed. In this sense, the domain of social marketing is wide. Although it is more common to apply these techniques to end consumers, such as teenagers who smoke or mothers whose children need to be vaccinated, this approach can also be applied to other problems and organizations. The principles of a successful social marketing campaign can be used to influence all these actors (Andreasen, 2002), whether they are non-profit, profitable or part of the media (French & Russell-Bennett, 2015).

Kotler and Roberto (1992) established the central elements of a social marketing campaign: the cause, which makes up the social objective and which will solve a problem; the agent of change, that is, the individual or organization seeking social change; the target, that is, the individuals, groups or populations that are the target of the social campaign's appeals; the channels, made up of all the communication and distribution channels through which the change agent and its target communicate; and the change strategy, which establishes the direction of the program adopted by the change agent to introduce the transformation in the behavior of the target individuals. Years later, Andreasen (2002) proposed six benchmarking criteria that all social marketing campaigns must meet in order to be successful: (i) Behavior change as the basic criterion to be defined for designing and evaluating social marketing programs; (ii) Audience research to understand the target audience before the intervention, to pre-test the campaign elements to be implemented, and to monitor the implemented actions; (iii) Segmentation and targeting, which ensures maximum efficiency and effectiveness, especially when resources are scarce.; (iv) Exchange as the central element of the strategy, involving the creation of attractive and motivational exchanges with the target audiences; (v) Marketing mix, or the so-called 4 Ps of marketing, entailing the creation of attractive benefit packages (products), minimizing costs (price), facilitating exchange (place - distribution) and communicating (promotion) powerful messages through the means best suited to target audiences; and finally (vi) Competition faced by the desired behavior. One important point raised by Andreasen (2002) is that many social marketing campaigns are frequently grounded on an isolated P – that of Promotion, whereas effective social marketing campaigns are more holistic approaches to behavior change than just the use of social advertising. Hence, campaigns based only on communication do not constitute social marketing campaigns. The power of such campaigns is manifested especially when they constitute integrated actions, which go beyond advertising (Andreasen, 2002).

Lefebvre (2011) also proposed an integrated social marketing model, specially adapted to health and social problems, at a macro level. This model was specially focused on consumers “desires and needs, aspirations, lifestyle and freedom of choice” (Lefebvre, 2011, p. 58), as well as prioritizing aggregate behavior change, that is, from markets or segments of the population, and not at the individual level. According to Lefebvre (2011), the key point is to understand the desired behaviors for a given segment, through a careful analysis of the context, the determinants and consequences that surround it, as well as a careful collection of insights that capture their essence (Lefebvre, 2011; 2012). Next, it is important to think about the 4 Ps of the marketing mix (product, price, place, promotion) for social marketing that can lead to behavior change. Doing so requires considering the products/services as the desired

behaviors, its brand strategy, brand personality (image and tone), and brand positioning, and to define the remaining elements of the marketing mix. The price, which moves away from the monetary value and includes all the “psychological, social, geographic, among others rewards and punishments caused by these everyday behaviors” (Lefebvre & Flora, 1988, cit. in Lefebvre, 2011, p. 62). The distribution of these same ideas, that is, to guarantee that the segment of the target audience has access to the information it needs so that it can make informed choices and change or adopt new behaviors. Regarding communication (promotion) it is essential that the promise of value of these same behaviors, products or services is transmitted to the target markets or segments. Thus, communication must be integrated with the other 3 Ps of the marketing mix and adapted to social marketing, at a macro, organizational and legal level (Lefebvre, 2011). French and Russell-Bennett (2015) also proposed some elements that all social marketing programs must consider, regardless of their intervention power: the value acquired through exchange; social behavior goals to be achieved; focus on society and citizens; social offer, be it an idea, product, policy, or experience; the construction of a relationship between the entity and the public.

In sum, social causes that involve the transformation of values or beliefs, as in the case study presented in this chapter, will be the most challenging and difficult to achieve. This includes campaigns that aim to minimize certain prejudices, including homophobia and transphobia, which generally show the lowest degree of success, as the disturbance of the values rooted in each individual generates tension and discomfort (Kotler & Robert, 1992). In fact, in social marketing research, this topic has received little attention. According to Pinto, Alcocer, Rivera e Veiga (2020) this is an area of knowledge that is still fragmented and with several gaps, with an overrepresentation of studies focusing on gay men instead of lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people. The lack of social marketing studies dedicated to discrimination of some minority groups, such as the LGBTI+ community, reduces visibility and knowledge of the problem, which ends up contributing to a distortion of social reality (Chae, Kim, & Johnson, 2016). Diversity is an important concept in the world of marketing. The presence of positive role models in the media and marketing campaigns and its power to challenge stereotypes, are utterly important to increase legitimization of minority groups and encourage more positive attitudes. Hence, more social marketing campaigns are needed to tackle this social problem. Hull et al. (2017) argue, however, that no single marketing campaign is sufficiently ubiquitous to combat these stereotypes. Nevertheless, the authors emphasize that stereotypes, created and perpetuated over time, can be altered with universal portraits that challenge them. Evans-Lacko et al. (2013), on the other hand, focus on the educational component of such campaigns and argue that the greater the level of information shared with the population, the easier it will be to provide a less stigmatizing environment. Thus, the influence of social marketing campaigns and interventions must incorporate a multi-faceted approach, with a view to reducing stigma and discrimination.

New Media and New Entertainment-Education Genres as Social Marketing Tools

According to Hart (2000), the representation of a certain social group in the mass media refers to the way in which the various members are portrayed, influencing consumers' perception of the groups represented. Furthermore, consumers understand media products as a faithful representation of reality and rely on these same representations to draw conclusions from the real world and individuals. In this sense, invisibility, or the weak or poor representation of a certain group in the mass media, makes it difficult to reduce prejudice. This is the case of the LGBTI+ community, which does not have enough

social representation. Exaggerated portrayals of LGBTI+ characters often emerge, perpetuating negative stereotypes (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008).

To understand the role of the media in minimizing established stereotypes, it is important to analyze the potential of new media formats. In the last decade, new and revolutionary ways of watching television have emerged, mainly due to the influence of the internet and social networks, as well as the massification of smartphones and tablets, which allow the viewing of content in video format (Grandío, 2012). The web thus became a legitimate space for the presentation of new narratives and genres, giving place to the emergence of web series and transmedia content (Glover, 2017). Web series are mostly independent and amateur television productions (Day, 2018), which can also take the form of corporate and advertising products. They are one of the means primarily used by independent filmmakers and producers to garner audiences unattainable by traditional means. Web series thus represent a new type of television, in a sector that faces uncertainties regarding its obsolete business models, allowing the creation of freer content, in which filmmakers can take more risks when experimenting with new narratives (Christian, 2011). Transmedia storytelling, in turn, is based on the expansion of the same fictional plot across several platforms, so that each of these elements can be consumed individually (Jenkins, 2003). Television narratives are, therefore, extended to other platforms, more directed towards the new generations, who do not consume fiction only through television. Currently, we are facing a form of content visualization in which viewers, increasingly connected to the web, consume television while discussing it on social networks. In this sense, television producers incorporate specific strategies to extend the narratives on Twitter or Facebook, for example, by integrating viewers into the plot (Grandío, 2012). Audience participation is thus constituted by feedback from the audience through technological innovations, allowing viewers to make their contribution. This participation can range from the simple availability of content through less conventional means, to the involvement of the audience with the content through the smartphone and social networks (García-Avilés, 2012). The synergies between television and the internet have thus revolutionized the role of the audience. In this sense, new television content is also produced as a function of its online distribution (Deery, 2003). Television channels are adapting to this multi-channel environment and changes in television consumption, as well as new audience expectations. These changes are part of a civic strategy and allow the democratization of citizen participation in television content, allowing for greater plurality of opinions (sometimes polarized) (García-Avilés, 2012). This is the case of the web series *Casa do Cais*, presented in this chapter.

In addition to these new media formats, distinctive media narratives and components are also utterly important in minimizing established stereotypes. The component of entertainment-education in the media is one such component which is gaining particular attention (Murrar & Brauer, 2017; Ortiz & Harwood, 2017). This is a technique that uses “television, radio, theatre, literature, among other means, to change consumer attitudes and behavior in a favorable way, including persuasive messages in its narrative” (Murrar & Brauer, 2017). Tufte (2005) presents a more specific definition, explaining that this is “the use of entertainment to communicate problematic issues strategically, with a purpose that can range from social marketing, more narrowly focused on individual behaviors, to articulating change agendas addressed to all citizens” (p. 162). At the strategic level, the author argues that the objectives vary, from increasing social mobilization to empowering minority or marginalized groups. In this sense, Tufte (2005) inserts television narratives in this practice, from soap operas to series, arguing that they can serve the agenda of social movements, as they give visibility to central problems, inform the public and put pressure on the political class. Tufte (2005) states that there are elements in the narrative construction and its relationship with the audience that make the genre so attractive for strategic communication. Drawing on his

research upon soap operas, Tufte (2005) discusses elements such as melodrama, mixtures of quotidian day life, relationship problems with family and friends, economic problems, personal dramas, dramatic love, social class conflicts, to name a few. At the heart of this issue are socio-emotional reactions aroused in the spectators, which allow their identification with the dramas experienced by the characters. This type of content also presents everyday problems — relational, personal, economic — experienced by the entire audience. Thus, although portraying a world different from reality, they show everyday experiences recognized by viewers, which lead to a feeling of identification and, later, to feelings of satisfaction and pleasure. This genre has proven to be more effective in reducing prejudice than other techniques that have been tried, mainly because it allows viewers to create empathy and familiarity with other social groups to which they do not belong (Tufte, 2005). In addition, there is also less resistance from the audience to persuasive messages, as they are involved in the narrative, not realizing that a message is being “sold” to them (Murrar & Brauer, 2017). However, despite its proven effectiveness in promoting positive attitudes towards gay people, this technique has not been extensively explored (Ortiz & Harwood, 2017).

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As stated above the aim of this chapter is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the usefulness of the discipline and tools of social marketing to the resolution of a complex social problem – that of prejudice and taboos regarding LGBTI+ people and homophobic and transphobic behavior. A qualitative and netnographic approach was adopted to design a case study aimed at understanding how a TV web series - *Casa do Cais* – portraying the daily life of five LGBTI+ friends, was received by the audience. This series is composed of two seasons with 11 episodes each, broadcasted by a public TV channel (RTP) through its website and YouTube channel. This case study was developed before the launch of the second season, and therefore is based on the first 11 episodes. The interactions of the public with the series broadcasted in the YouTube channel were analyzed, episode after episode, allowing scrutiny of comments, likes, emojis and all sorts of digital interaction. To implement a netnographic approach, 1482 reactions and user comments were retrieved using the YouTube Comment Scraper platform, which allows the collection of comments, username, date, comments ID and respective answers, automatically.

Netnography is based on the principle that the perspective of a human being, who is “temporally, historically and culturally situated”, is a much better analyst of people’s contemporary online experience than an algorithm or any other technology (Kozinets, Scaraboto, & Parmentier, 2018, p. 231), giving power to the investigator. Through netnography, users’ contents are analyzed to better understand their perceptions and feelings, through the expressions of their opinions and emotions (Kozinets, Scaraboto, & Parmentier, 2018). Through netnography applied to comments and reactions, it was possible to understand the feelings generated by the videos and episodes of the web series in the audience. This methodology is becoming increasingly relevant, as consumers use forums, personal pages on the World Wide Web, and many other online platforms to share their ideas, create communities, and contact other users. Netnography is especially relevant given that social networks increasingly affect the way people relate and engage, regardless of the situation or their age (Subramanian, 2017). Employing netnographic insights, users’ contents retrieved from the YouTube episodes were categorized and explored. The analysis of comments and reactions were, first, analyzed based on a categorization of “positive” and “negative” attitudes towards the series. The two categories were later divided into emerging thematic classes. The categorization of comments was also made based on the emojis used, as these often al-

lowed us to interpret the content of the comments and users' opinion. Emojis are “graphic symbols and ideograms that represent not only facial expressions, but also concepts and ideas, such as celebration, weather, vehicles and buildings, food and drink, animals and plants, or emotions, feelings and activities” (Novak, Smailović, Sluban & Mozetič, 2015, p. 1) and constitute users' communication tools, helping to understand the communicative intent of messages and bringing some insights about their ideas (Kaye, Malone & Wall, 2017). Furthermore, they have become extremely popular around the world, especially in social networks, chats, and email applications (Novak et al., 2015). In this sense, the emoji contributed to the analysis and understanding of users' position vis-à-vis the series.

A triangulation of the netnographic data was carried with secondary data retrieved from news and articles about the series. These two sources were also triangulated with primary data collected in three interviews with: i) the person responsible for the series transmission in the public TV channel (RTP Lab manager); and ii) two of the directors/producers/actresses of the series. These interviews allowed to gather information from both parties involved, namely their intentions and expectations with the creation of the series. The selection of participants was, therefore, made based on the criterion of involvement with the creation, production or planning of *Casa do Cais*, being subsequently selected for convenience and accessibility.

CASE STUDY: THE WEB SERIES CASA DO CAIS

Casa do Cais is a web series broadcasted by a Portuguese public TV channel (RTP), available on its website and official YouTube channel, #CasaDoCais (RTP Lab, 2018) and made to “be seen on a smart-phone” (Monteiro, 2018). The series intended to “find new forms of narrative in exclusively digital environments” in fiction and comedy genres (RTP, 2017). Released on January 15, 2018, it already has two seasons with a total of 21 short episodes, with an approximate duration of between 12 and 25 minutes. It stars three well-known Portuguese youtubers: Kiko is Hot, Peperan and Djubsu, presenting the daily life of five young people who live in Lisbon, in a narrative marked by “fun stories, without taboos, about being young in the new millennium (the sex, drugs, job search, self-discovery)” (RTP Lab, 2017). In the interview with RTP's Lab manager, conducted as part of this study, the manager confirms the need to explore “new languages and ways of telling stories that are born and live in a digital environment”, giving space to new creators who would not have this opportunity on traditional television. In this sense, it is a series made for an audience between 15-30 years old, with a different logic of television consumption, through a different means of distribution - the internet.

The creators of *Casa do Cais* claim that the web series intended to contribute to the normalization of the LGBTI+ community. In this sense, throughout the episodes, various themes are addressed as an alert call for particular issues, such as the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, LGBTI+ prejudice and racism, to create a greater social awareness of these issues in the audience and encourage the practice of more positive behaviors. Social criticisms are also part of the narrative, such as the increase in prices in Lisbon, the exponential growth of rents and the difficulty in finding a job.

Data regarding audiences was collected from the series' YouTube channel and from RTP Play between January 15th (the premiere date) and March 27th, 2018. Data on the audience, provided by the TV Channel, revealed that 36% of the views of *Casa do Cais* originated from search engines and 32% of these were direct traffic. 55% of the users were aged between 18-32 years, equally distributed by gender.

Regarding the official YouTube channel of *Casa do Cais*, it had more than 19 thousand subscribers and more than 1 million views.

With a different logic of television consumption, the web series was broadcasted on the RTP's YouTube channel, but other social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, were used, to expand the fictional plot across different platforms. Instagram and Facebook shared and (re)posted the episodes, several times in different periods of time. During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the platforms posted calls to (re)watch and enjoy lockdowns and the quarantine with *Casa do Cais*. As for Twitter, *Casa do Cais* frequently tweets to ask questions to their fans, share news on the series, and launch polls to engage with its audience. The last poll, for example, (June 2021) simply asked SEASON3? 97% of the viewers voted yes.

Regarding the creation of transmedia content, and as discussed in the literature review above, the synergies between television and the internet have created innovative ways of communicating with the audience, enabling them to interact, changing television consumption patterns (Deery, 2003; García-Avilés, 2012). Thus, the transmedia content broadcasted in *Casa do Cais* played a preponderant role in the entertainment-education genre, by allowing the show to address current issues of social nature, creating greater involvement with the audience, and possibly contributing to change in negative attitudes and behavior. *Casa do Cais* was developed in the web series format, corresponding to the description by Day (2018), which establishes that television creators are increasingly using YouTube as a platform for the dissemination of content that represent characters that lack representation in the generalized media (Christian, 2011). This is the case of *Casa do Cais*, which simultaneously represents the identity of its target audience and the identity of the creators themselves, encouraging difference and queer representation (Christian, 2011; Day, 2018). Thus, YouTube enabled the dissemination of new forms of content, enabling amateur creators to take an active role in the reformulation of entertainment content and opening doors to a greater diversity of genres and stories (Glover, 2017). Glover's argument is reflected in this case study since the public TV channel invested in the creation of a YouTube channel to broadcast non-conventional entertainment content. The analysis of secondary data allowed us to understand that one of RTP Lab's objectives was "to create a creative and experimental laboratory (...), as well as to explore new forms of narrative" especially for a young audience. In this sense, "a series for the digital generation was created, which can be seen on the mobile phone or tablet, with episodes of between ten and fifteen minutes that address topics, some of which are controversial, always with humor" (Monteiro, 2018). Thus, it can be considered that one of the 4 Ps of social marketing, according to Andreasen (2006) — distribution — is assured, as this implies the "creation of opportunities to act at specific times, in specific places and through of specific modalities" (p. 106), in this case YouTube and the RTP Play platform. Hence, it is pertinent to evaluate the role that these new narratives based on digital platforms can play, from a social marketing viewpoint. According to the director, "characters go through the inevitable job interviews (when they get them), parties with alcohol and sex in the mix, romantic relationships and social issues such as homophobia and racism. All with the appropriate excesses of age" (Calheiros, 2018).

Considered by many as the first openly LGBTI+ Portuguese series, and on top of that, broadcasted on a public channel, it raised a lot of controversy (Monteiro, 2018). There were many hateful comments and controversial reactions, necessitating assessment of the underlying motives for all this hatred and negativity.

DATA ANALYSIS

To understand which themes and words were most discussed in the 1482 comments, a word cloud was first created, with the 100 most used words, using NVivo 12. The most used words refer to the content of the videos (“episode”, “series”) and an appeal to the creation of a second season, through the expression “casadocais2”, which was used 276 times, generally associated with positive attitudes towards the series, when compared with the negative side. In fact, and against all odds, as expected by the series producers, the series was well accepted by the public (Cordeiro, 2018). This was also confirmed in the interview with RTP’s Lab manager conducted in this study. The following sections present the data analysis regarding positive and negative attitudes and beliefs and emerging themes.

Theme A: Positive Attitudes and Beliefs towards Casa do Cais

Despite the “avalanches of hateful comments”, mentioned by one of the interviewees, the series won the respect of a large part of the audience, who expressed their liking or support for the series through the comment boxes extracted from YouTube, episode after episode.

Authenticity of the Contents (A1)

According to both directors/actresses interviewed in this study, one of the factors that led them to create the web series was the need to represent their own reality in an authentic way, which they had not seen portrayed in Portuguese television and digital content until then. One interviewee claimed that “We believe that our series portrays our reality (...) something we didn’t see portrayed on television, on the internet. (...)” The second director/actress interviewed further added that “When we did this, we wanted it to be authentic (...), inspired by our life and we think a lot of people can relate to this and it happened.”

In this sense, it can be considered that a more genuine and less stereotyped representation of the LGBTI+ community, as the collected data indicate in relation to the *Casa do Cais* series, leads to greater visibility and better representation of this minority, generating positive attitudes in the public. Thus, greater authenticity of television content in the representation of minorities indirectly contributes to its normalization, gradually breaking away from taboos and negative stereotypes.

Engagement with the Series (A2)

Some positive comments reflect a strong audience engagement with the series through its YouTube channel. Data analysis revealed that a large portion of the audience constantly commented on the script and the direction of the story, as well as identified themselves with the content broadcasted. The news and opinion articles also denote a great engagement of the audience, referring to *Casa do Cais* as “the one that quickly conquered and addicted us” (Cordeiro, 2018). In the interview with the RTP Lab manager, she admitted not expecting such engagement:

We expected the public to be a little more closed, more prejudiced, but the truth is that the public liked it in general and whenever I go to present and talk about RTP Lab I show Casa do Cais and everyone recognizes it, especially the young people.

The involvement of the audience is due, in part, to the multiplatform content that allows interaction between viewers and the official distribution channels of the series, fostering the feeling of participation.

Generational Identification (A3)

Part of the comments reflects a positive attitude of generational identification with the characters. This indicator meets the intentions of the creators of *Casa do Cais*, who presented it as a series “about being young in the new millennium (sex, drugs, job search, self-discovery and maturation)” and which aims to portray “the adventure of being young today, in a current, raw and comic language”. In this sense, one of the objectives of the web series would be “to represent today’s youth, whether inherent to the LGBTI+ community or not since the problems faced by the characters are transversal to everyone”. This characteristic is reflected in the comments from users who have a positive attitude and feel represented:

I can say that it is without a doubt the best Portuguese series I have ever seen. From the cast to the plot itself, #CasaDoCais is an exceptional and simply revolutionary series in Portuguese fiction that addresses the experiences and some of the most present problems in the daily lives of the vast majority of young adults in Portugal, all in a very light and at the same time intense time but most of all REAL. All characters played their roles perfectly precisely by conveying some of the experiences they go through in their daily lives, not only as members of the LGBTI++ community but also as young people and all the feelings and issues that this stage of life encompasses. I felt an inexplicable representation, as I identified myself deeply with each of the characters from beginning to end (...) (Gomes, 2018).

This identification felt by the target audience of the series demonstrates that it can have educational power. *Casa do Cais* employed elements, in the construction of its narrative and in the relationship with the audience, that raised socio-emotional reactions and allowed the spectators to identify with the characters’ daily experiences and problems, leading to feelings of identification and, later, satisfaction and pleasure, as stated by Tufte (2000, 2005).

LGBTI+ Representation (A4)

For being recognized as the first “openly LGBTI+” series in Portugal (Monteiro, 2018; TV Mais, 2018), *Casa do Cais* served as a way of representing the LGBTI+ community in the Portuguese television, generating attitudes of identification and satisfaction on the part of many YouTube users: “LGBTI+ representation on Portuguese TV. Magic.” (Meow, 2018)); “It’s so nice to have a series on TV where the characters are LGBTI+, keep up the good work queensss!” (Garcia, 2018); “LGBTI+ pride forever” (Lee, 2018). The hope that the series would help fight homophobia was also mentioned: “I love it... I hope your idea has the advantage of getting rid of homophobic people.” (Monga, 2018).” Some of the positive comments were made in response to negative comments of a homophobic nature, by other users, and demonstrating positive attitudes towards the LGBTI+ community and its representation:

I’ve never felt so ashamed to have you as a Portuguese. Learn to respect others as you won’t have the slightest impact on their lives. You are an ant in the world. Homophobes should think at one time or another about accepting humanity but prefer to stay in their insignificant little world. Have you never been taught not to do to others what you do not want them to do to you? (P. Moreira, 2018).

Corroborating the existing literature (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008), findings also highlighted the normalizing role that the series can have for the LGBTI+ community, which contributes to reduce prejudiced perceptions and, consequently, increase society's acceptance:

I think that television and the internet play an important role in informing and educating society, so by having content that represents minorities, we are also changing the way society perceives these people. And consequently, in the way minorities are later involved by society (J. Moreira, 2018).

One of the actors also highlighted the educational power and pedagogical role that television entertainment content should incorporate in the acceptance of minorities:

I feel that any type of representation of a minority in entertainment sources is fundamental for their quality. Helping certain people to identify and educate ignorant people to other realities is essential, given that entertainment always has a pedagogical influence on society (J. Moreira, 2018).

As suggested by Evans-Lacko et al. (2013), the greater the level of information available to the population, the easier it will be to create a less stigmatizing environment, particularly for the LGBTI+ community. Thus, social marketing interventions, which may appear in the form of entertainment-education content (Tufté, 2005) must present a multifaceted approach, identifying which messages, contexts and specific media can help to reduce stigma (Evans-Lacko et al., 2013), especially in target audiences whose levels of awareness and knowledge are low in relation to a certain theme (Rundle-Thiele et al., 2013), namely in relation to the LGBTI+ community. One of the interviewees, director/actress and the series, also admitted that the series helped to demystify certain behaviors associated with elements of the LGBTI+ community:

People feel represented and this also opened up discussions with friends. And there are also people who saw and realized 'ah OK, so there's another side', they don't think we're just degenerates. They think 'ah, these are normal people who just like people of the same sex'. I think we managed, at least, to help deconstruct some kind of prejudice or preconceived ideas.

RTP's multimedia director believes that the launch of the series opened the discussion of sexual discrimination, giving greater importance to the theme, which was expected due to the script and the narrated story. However, this type of more inclusive and pro-LGBTI+ content is generally aimed at audiences whose socio-demographic characteristics pre-determine their receptiveness (Becker, 2006). In this context, YouTube is often used by television program creators to broadcast content with characters of less conventional identity, such as queer characters, representing themselves and their audience (Christian, 2011; Day, 2018). This is the case of *Casa do Cais*, which uses digital channels to address unconventional content in traditional media and communicate with its audience, not reaching the vast majority of the Portuguese population.

Theme B: Negative Attitudes and Beliefs towards *Casa do Cais*

According to both directors/actresses interviewed in this study, the public channel received avalanches of hateful comments, but the series producer highlighted that the controversy was positive, having gen-

erated debate and visibility around the LGBTI+ cause, meeting the opinion of the channel multimedia director, who emphasized that only quality content is the target of criticism and, consequently, opens the discussion of certain themes. The series' team had already expected the series to be the target of hatred. Interviewees highlighted, however, that some of the negative comments also emerged from the LGBTI+ community itself, given the possible representation of certain stereotypes of it, and it is, once again, pertinent to reflect on the role that the media can play, positively or negatively, in the representation and consequent normalization of the LGBTI+ community (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008; Nölke, 2018).

Anti-LGBTI+ Position (B1)

Negative attitudes and beliefs are mostly homophobic and/or transphobic, reflecting fear and hatred towards homosexuality (Andersen, 2000) or restlessness and revulsion towards non-normative expressions of gender identity and expression (Hill, 2002; Hill & Willoughby, 2005). In addition, several arguments are used to justify prejudice and discrimination towards the LGBTI+ community, such as religious, conservative (Whitley, 2009) and political ideology (Willoughby et al., 2010). Many of these comments mirror the view that homosexuality and transsexuality are anomalies or disorders, calling members of the LGBTI+ community “degenerate”, as in:

The only good thing about this is that these little folks are basically self-sterilizing. They chose to be degenerates. The generation itself won't be so bad” (Slunchlax, 2018); Gays constitute a sexual perversion taken so far that it is assumed as an identity in the person. One of the things that best explains being LGBTI+ is other associated psychological problems (e.g. autism, social phobia, anxiety, etc.). That is why we see so many LGBTI+ people saying that they ‘never felt like the others’ or that they ‘never fitted in or identified with others’ before coming out (Moyne, 2018).

Many of the negative beliefs about homosexuality are based on religious factors, mentioned by Whitley (2009): “You shall burn in hell sinners. Change course, repent and perhaps you will not have to face the DEVIL” (Sims, 2018); “This series seems to me to be the last nail on the anti-Christ cross” (Senpai, 2018). Political and conservative factors (Willoughby et al., 2010) are also mentioned in several comments, often merging with racist ideals: “I see what’s going on in the rest of Europe and the United States, the LGBTI+ madness is a (Jewish) weapon used to destroy what remains of the values we had” (Campos, 2018). Many of the users have negative attitudes and beliefs towards the series, showing concern towards the younger audience: “The problem is not a person being homosexual, but corrupting the minds of children with their s***, promoting degeneration, glorifying the eternal oppressed” (Campos, 2018).

These comments reflecting anti-LGBTI+ attitudes reveal the urgency, and potential, of exploring such entertainment-education formats through the lenses of social marketing frameworks. Developing segmented social change programs, based on these examples of discriminatory behavior towards LGBTI+, might lead to campaigns that are “effective, efficient, equitable and sustainable” (ISMA et al., 2013). However, this is a very little explored area about combating homophobia and transphobia, and little is known about its role (French & Russell-Bennett, 2015).

Conservative Beliefs (B2)

Another of the themes emerging from the data is the conservative beliefs of some users, which reflect their negative attitudes towards the series. Values and morality of the series' creators and the public channel were questioned, claiming the broadcast content to promote debauchery. This conservatism is often related to political ideology, as political conservatives tend to value traditions and customs, demonstrating intolerance towards gay and trans people (Willoughby et al., 2010). In this thematic category, nationalist and ideological comments were also present, such as "I never felt so ashamed of being Portuguese!" (P. Moreira, 2018)), "RIP Portugal. Really RTP? You were the first TV station in Portugal, the most historical and supposedly cultural and put this f**** s*** on?" (Veiga, 2018); "Down with this cancer... What society has arrived at... One day we will have these retarded behaviors in the public sector and it will be 100% legal without any legal or moral implication" (Cricket, 2018).

In the interview to Cordeiro (2017), the series producer justified this type of conservative and negative attitudes with the decontextualization of the content, which was viewed by a wider audience. The analyzed news, in turn, censored the conservatism and moralism present in the criticisms made to the series on YouTube:

The world is full of topics to discuss and never, as now, we had so much freedom and opportunity to do so. Maybe that's why we are in a phase of fascination that reveals itself in a kind of witch hunt in the social media and an exaggerated political correctness, of moralism and inconsequential indignation.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The case study *Casa do Cais* revealed the potential of alternative social marketing tools, such as entertainment-education television genre and new digital content, to promote behavior change towards the prejudice against the LGBTI+ community. As suggested by Murrar and Brauer (2017), when the content is simultaneously educational and entertaining, it allows the audience to engage deeply with the narrative (Murrar & Brauer, 2017). Moreover, the literature examining the use of humor in a variety of contexts, such as advertising, television, radio, shows that humor improves the effectiveness of communication and attracts the interest of the viewers (Cline et al., 2003). In this web series, the content was grounded on authenticity and humor, which generated great engagement between the audience and the narrative around the daily life of LGBTI+ people. Moreover, it also promoted a strong generational identification and a positive perception of LGBTI+ representation in the series, despite some contrary views from the audience and LGBTI+ people themselves. A small number of users also mentioned the innovative character of *Casa do Cais* compared to other entertainment content. On the other hand, based mainly on conservative standpoints, users manifested negative attitudes and prejudice, often translated into hateful comments towards the LGBTI+ community, especially due to the bohemian life portrayed and the stereotyping of young people in this regard.

Hence, based on this case study, one main recommendation to fight prejudice and taboos around LGBTI+ communities, is to invest in the entertainment-education television genre and new digital content. The potential of entertainment-education television content in communicating and debating complex social issues, with social marketing purposes focused on changing negative behaviors (Tufte, 2005), has long been recognized, especially through soap operas. The impact of such content is rein-

forced even more if broadcasted on digital platforms and disseminated through social media networks, such as YouTube. Since these platforms allow users to share comments, feedback, feelings and reactions, they also promote greater engagement with the audience. Hence, the use of transmedia content fits a new profile of TV series' viewers that, simultaneously, consumes television content and discusses it on social networks (Grandío, 2012). In this sense, in the long run, these new formats and narratives can contribute greatly to promote constructive entertainment-education contents representing LGBTI+ contexts, and hopefully encourage younger generations to debate and reflect their beliefs and attitudes towards LGBTI+ prejudice and discrimination.

Secondly, a recommendation is made on the value of adopting social marketing tools aimed at reducing stigma and discrimination against minorities and certain prejudices, including homophobia and transphobia. This is an important point to be made since the potential of social marketing and the effectiveness of its strategies are not widespread in the academic community and at the practitioners' level (Andreasen, 2002; Lefebvre, 2011). These strategies should be designed and implemented, continuously, in close coordination with the public media and targeted to the right audience, especially as a single isolated action is not enough to combat ingrained stereotypes (Hull et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

Using a case study of a web series portraying the daily life of five LGBTI+ friends, this chapter contributes to the ongoing debates on how LGBTI+ related taboos are perceived and discussed across younger generations. More importantly, it draws attention to the advantages of adopting social marketing principles, namely, on how to design innovate products and communication strategies to challenge, and ultimately change, discriminatory behaviors towards the LGBTI+ community, a theme that has been scarcely explored in this area.

Furthermore, a connection is made between the theme of entertainment-education content and the potential of digital platforms and the new narratives based on them. Thus, this investigation allowed us to understand that these can also constitute new tools at the service of social marketing, contributing to the perception of this discipline as a broad field, with a political and social intervention role (French & Russell-Bennett, 2015), as well as for filling this gap in the literature. Regarding practical contributions, the findings of this case study evidenced the role that might be played by public media in combating existing stigma against the LGBTI+ community. By investing in entertainment content grounded in the communication and discussion of social agendas, such as LGBTI+ related taboos, the strategy of the public TV channel RTP might inspire other mass media channels to engage in similar strategies. It is also necessary for the consumer of television and entertainment content to adopt a critical position regarding the representation of minorities in the media, questioning the repetitive and exaggerated stereotypes of homosexual and transsexual characters, seeking not to weave generalizations. In this way, it is equally important that the LGBTI+ consumer polices these same contents, looking for and denouncing weak and stigmatizing representations.

In terms of future research, we suggest more detailed investigation of the conditions and practical requirements that entertainment-education content must contain to be effective, contributing to the minimization of specific prejudice and discrimination against LGBTI+ people, or any other social problem. Another research approach is also suggested, relating to the study and analysis of emotions present in comments on social and LGBTI+ content that are online, to the detriment of their content, as well as

the in-depth exploration of the reasons underlying homophobia and transphobia, to increase knowledge regarding this theme.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Discrimination: Act of treating someone unequally based on negative preconceptions.

Entertainment-Education: Technique that uses entertainment through mass media to change individuals', social groups', or societies' attitudes and behaviors in a favorable way.

LGBTI+ Community: Acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons.

Netnography: Adaptation of ethnography based on observation in an online environment.

Prejudice: Attitude towards others based in negative preconceptions towards a specific social group, supported by beliefs and not facts.

Social Marketing: Adoption of marketing strategies and tools to create programs designed to change beliefs and influence changing behaviors of a given target audience.

Transmedia Storytelling: Expansion of the same fictional plot across several platforms, so that each of these elements can be consumed individually.

Web Series: Series of scripted or non-scripted online videos, generally in episodic form, released on the Internet across multiple delivery channels to create a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.

Chapter 9

Dismantling Taboos in Brazilian Popular Music Through the Works of Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque: Aesthetic–Social Provocations, Disruptions, and Obliterations

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this work is to propose a critical reflection on some of the main aesthetic-social ruptures developed by two internationally renowned Brazilian composers of popular music: Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque de Hollanda. Both are considered strong influences in dismantling taboos in Brazilian popular music and culture, surpassing prejudice and racism. Such composers brought a new aesthetic and critical dimension to Brazilian popular songbook, innovating in themes never discussed before, making bridges between popular music and other forms of expressions: theater, cinema, television, literature, poetry, plastic arts, sciences, philosophy, among others. Over the decades, these artists have become reference sources in the struggle for human and civil rights, gender, race and class equality, free expression, and against the power of authoritarian governments in Brazil and in the world.

INTRODUCTION

Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque de Hollanda are two Brazilian musicians and composers with great international renown. Their songs are seen as the ultimate expressions of Brazilian culture, as they differ from the common aspirations of traditional composing, singing, and interpreting popular songs with contents without social-political interests and contestations.

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Strongly influenced by composers from the Brazilian cultural tradition in line with social changes arising from the 1960s counterculture, these two composers signal a change in social and aesthetic posture in the field of popular song regarding political concerns, as result of a period of great intensification of critical and historical awareness that comes from their generation aspirations.

Making a critical reading of their time, as well as of their generation and their historical and social moment, they leverage modern popular song as a criterion for dismantling standardized and archaic cultural perspective models, which had reverberated for a long time in the cultural tradition of Brazilian popular music.

In this sense, they reveal other themes not addressed by adding another level of critical, social, cultural, and aesthetic elevation to popular music, making it potentially become the medium and the message at the same time.; that is, a strategic space for conscious creation of reality world sceneries, as well as of criticism in relation to the processes of continuous cultural alienation.

Following a desire nurtured by their educational and intellectual background of throughout their lives, and later by the possibility of enriching contacts with Brazilian and international artistic and cultural circles, both set out to deal with contemporary countercultural and postcolonial themes of great reflective malaise and discomfort.

In this way, they begin to treat difficult topics and social issues as their contents. Their music's themes ranged from the revolution of customs, the culture of protest, feminism, the struggle against racism and social class injustices, demands for greater intervention on behalf of the poor and the oppressed, and the empowerment of youth as a signal for future hope. In each case, they brought up taboo topics in effort to enact change. Regardless of topic, both men's artistic trajectory made them famous in Brazil and abroad. Caetano and Chico's inquisitive challenges to the status quo helped tear apart conservative elements of Brazilian culture that were perhaps assumed and taken for granted. They did so by wisely incorporating each topic into their music. Astutely, they put themselves in the symbolic position of confronting the hegemony of markedly intolerant and prejudiced characteristics in Brazil. They challenged the predominant political and cultural illiteracy among the country's elites that have typically been disseminated *en masse* through various methods of domination, persuasion, and constant alienation. Their music dismantled many unspoken and taboo topics by bringing them to the fore.

BACKGROUND OF CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL BRAZILIAN TABOOS IN THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Naturally, alongside Portuguese colonization in Brazil came paradigmatic cultural models, which were later enhanced by other cultural archetypes throughout Brazil. Brazil is a country with widespread miscegenation throughout its territory, which has allowed for idiosyncratic norms to be challenged, adapted, and replaced by other patterns of more acceptable behavior. In doing so, some Brazilians replaced former taboos with new norms. For others, great conservative forces hold on to the paradigmatic models, remodel themselves toward new interests and aspirations while maintain conservative values, and ultimately remain in cultural standpoints in which all territory, new and old, stand to be ruthlessly explored and conquered.

Many people appreciate Brazilian culture for its affective nature and democratic and liberal social values. However, those values have not always been the norm. Still laden within Brazilian culture are the values of traditionalism and blatant conservatism. Because of that, Brazil's cultural climate is one

containing endless taboos in relation to various social behaviors and cultural manifestations. As in any society, there is a prevailing pattern of behaviors and attitudes. Those beliefs and values come at great costs to artists, such as Caetano and Chico, who bear the brunt of attempting to challenge, modify, and radically dismantle the social conditions which have oppressed Brazilian people. Driven first by European Enlightenment ideals of the 19th century and later under the aegis of cultural industry and counterculture of the 20th century, a flourishing cultural revolution is underway. A new sense of conscience and free expression began to emanate between younger generations, who remain enthusiastic about questioning and destabilizing behaviors considered to be outdated with the societal transformations that have taken place around the world.

The desire to change their way of seeing the world began to take shape in different forms of cultural within Brazil, such as literature, poetry, sculpture, plastic arts, and popular music. Predominantly, in the 19th century, there was still the idea of searching for genuinely Brazilian culture, based on the roots of the original colonization. A romantic idea of idealization of Brazilian culture and civilization prevailed, brought by the Romantic movement, which was later replaced by naturalism and realism concepts, which analyzed society in its web of hegemonic colonial and post-colonial relations. Nevertheless, the model of national idealization of that time considered only aspects from Portuguese and white European cultural references, but mixed with indigenous values and traditions under a Christianized guise of the Catholic Church in order to provide a singular configuration.

On the other hand, Brazilian cultural values born from African origin, brought by the slave trade, was practically ignored as existing. Racist ideas prevailed with great force, emphasizing a principle of whitening Brazilian culture in several aspects, with deep repression regarding Black traditions, which were severely persecuted, and violently banished from the public sphere. The radical turning away from cultural taboos against repressed African and indigenous references only became possible after a cultural movement of Brazilian modernists, led by intellectual writers from the city of São Paulo, such as Mário de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade, and initiated in the so-called Week of Modern Art, 1922. In this revolutionary movement, Black culture of African origin, an indigenous culture in its essence and which existed sans idealized falsifications of Whiteness, united with cultural beliefs and attitudes brought by other European references, as well from Asian, Arab, and Jewish references, all of which were seen as representative elements present in the modern cultural formation of Brazil.

The ideas of the modernists sowed minds involved spirits in a great cultural investigation of the essences of a Brazil still in construction with several aspects hitherto disowned, ignored, and erased. Mário de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade formed a great generation of disciples and followers in the Brazilian intellectual field, in universities, in cultural studies research centers. Many writers, poets, visual artists, sculptors, and avant-garde musicians have mirrored their ideas to seek a sense of originality, miscegenation, as well as cultural diversity in the field of thought, aesthetics, and the expression of language. Their ideas and teachings echoed through generations of artistic creators, forming masters in a new vision of Brazilian culture, entirely critical of taboos of a conservative, prejudiced and racist nature.

In this sense, both Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque (Santos, 2011; Blitzer, 2021), who lived intensely with several disciples of the two intellectuals, also enthusiastically absorbed their ideas and references, to mobilize the necessary changes in the field of vision of the Brazilian popular music. In this way, they developed a meticulous role in deglutinating various possibilities of themes, cultural references, aesthetic and social contestations. Doing so sprung forth a framework of renewal in Brazilian popular music, which allowed it to expand to new purposes, provide an outlet for reflection and critical thinking, and to utilize creative media to challenge and question societal taboos.

DYNAMIC BREAKS OF CULTURAL TABOOS IN BRAZILIAN CONTEXT

If, for Marshall McLuhan (1994), the medium is the message, for Caetano and Chico, the medium of potentiating symbolic messages was popular music. Music is a powerful medium due to its dimension of coverage within the public sphere, the capability of arousing interests, its sensibilities and sociabilities, and the radical transformations that it facilitates. Since the beginning of their artistic careers, in the mid-1960s, Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque learned to deal with taboos and frequent hostilities, as Brazilian popular music was seen still to have an aura that would not allow it to be tarnished while allowing it to elucidate feelings that were at odds with traditional values of purity. In this sense, there was a great effort by the two artists to, at the same time, try to win the affective sympathy of the public and, at the same time, to make them understand the aesthetic and social dimension of the repertoire of their songs.

Undoubtedly, both artists faced resistance due to the taboo nature of their music. Despite the effervescence brought about by the counterculture of the 1960s, Brazil was still in a process of maturation and its cultural industry remained in its incipient stages. Therefore, it was a great challenge for the artists to be bold in their style. Their music aimed to be aiming to contextually accommodating to other unusual contents and aesthetics not experienced before in Brazil. In result, they revealed and produced sensations of estrangement in popular music addressing a cultural need that combined creativity and survival with the musical sphere. Still, in the 1960s, during the International Song Festivals in São Paulo, there began to be a search for a music that ruptured traditional cultural values, bringing together countless weird and dissonant aesthetic hybridisms. This was sophisticatedly translated by several audacious songwriters through immeasurable radical experimentalism in an attempt to dissolve any crystalized taboos regarding inappropriate themes, slang expressions, “curse” words, and the use of different language styles at the same time in one unique content.

Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque started to appear in Brazilian cultural scenery as emergent and significant promises for cultural paradigmatic shifts that could project Brazilian music and culture in an internationally prominent setting. What was later characterized as the composer-poets’ dimension, a new style of popular music emerged. As artists, they faced constant prejudice against their innovative introduction of electronic instruments—much in tune with the rise of rock and roll music in other parts of the world—as well as resistance against both theatrical and minimalistic performances and their use of weird vocalizations (e.g., screams, whispers, grunts, faucets, public provocations, profanity, erotization, among others “strange” elements). Undoubtedly, the new wave of Brazilian artists needed to be in tune with the waves permeating Brazilian society. Those waves were marked by increasing desires for innovation in artistic expression and new ways of thinking, being, and feeling in a world that questioned traditional, but undesirable, values and behaviors that were no longer accepted in contemporary times. And, therefore, their music quickly changed and modernized music to prepare for a new critical and social consciousness. It served as a dream, ready to transform the world into a better, fairer, and more equal world for everybody, within the spirit of the counterculture and the culture of protest, whose greatest reference for all was, without a doubt, Bob Dylan, Joan Baes, The Velvet Underground, The Beatles, and the Rolling Stones, among other musical popular artists. Indeed, Brazilian popular music began to be seen as a hybrid sign capable of embodying several metamorphosed styles and content, whose expressions were limited only by the artist’s inventiveness, originality, ingenuity, and their attentiveness to socio-cultural movements in Brazil and around the world.

Over time, many new age composers began to arouse frequent and unusual interest from the media, mainly from television, newspaper, and magazine journalists, from several enlightened intellectuals, and especially from the critics specialized in cultural studies and in the history of traditional Brazilian popular art. In the effervescent environment of great political and cultural agitation, Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque started to provoke several controversial discussions, always willing to aesthetically dispose of a mixture of gestures that encompassed a hue of sweetness and acidity, tenderness and rebellion, as well as that of exaltation and indignation. In this aspect, they attracted to themselves applause and rejection in various ultraconservative media, especially during the period of the military dictatorship in Brazil from 1964-1985. At that time censorship, ideological patrolling, and a lack of understanding of new, radical attitudes toward culture made Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque's music fall firmly in the realm of the forbidden.

CAETANO'S MUSICAL THEMES

Caetano Veloso is frequently associated with the cultural and aesthetic Brazilian movement of Tropicalism. Boosted in Brazilian popular song in the 1960s, Tropicalism was, at that time, considered a break from the traditional values and aesthetics of Brazilian popular music. As with any cultural taboo, there was great resistance on the part of conservative sectors of the Brazilian cultural tradition in accepting the insertion of new aesthetics, languages, and thematic contents in popular songs. For instance, the use of foreign words in popular songbooks, such as expressions using English and French language, caused great malaise among ultra-conservatives. In addition, the introduction of electronic instruments such as the electronic guitar and drums represented a moral and sinful distortion of the original precepts of the conservative purity of Brazilian culture. For conservatives, the idea was to restrict the universe of popular songs as something simple, without ideological content, without political, social, or economic challenges, and with much fewer aspirations for changes in individual and collective behavior and attitudes. For such purists of Brazilian culture, popular music, due to its traditionalist and folkloric nature, could not succumb to foreign influences from mass culture. Instead, it considered what was "foreign" to be minor, and without virtuosity.

However, Caetano, on the contrary, perceived the repressed potential in using creative artforms to critically access contemporary issues. And, in this way, he began to recognize opportunities for transformation via the agglutination of languages and other forms of popular media like cinema, television, comics, literature, poetry, plastic arts, and other cultural elements. Conceptually, Tropicalism appeared to reinterpret the work of cultural anthropophagy. Cultural anthropophagy was proliferated by Brazilian intellectual Oswald de Andrade, a great pioneer in the avant-garde modernist movement in Brazilian arts, and intellectual trainer of several generations of Brazilian artists. His work changed the course of Brazilian art and culture from the 20th century. Oswald de Andrade believed that Brazil, being a mixed country from several different ethnicities, was culturally formed by cultures that mutually influenced one another. The result of that mixed is a cultural spectrum of coexistence and assimilation, a hybrid of conservative and contemporary values that produced a hybridized Brazilian culture. Therefore, he defended the need for critical thought regarding the process of assimilation and cultural metamorphosis as a great differentiated universal cultural legacy, which was also a way of overcoming submissive colonial roots.

Caetano Veloso's Tropicalism, along with other influential and partner colleagues, such as Gilberto Gil, Tom Zé, and "Os Mutantes", proposed the cultural deglutition, ingestion, and digestion of various national and international elements of all kinds, without limiting prejudices.

The focal idea was to transform all of these diversified re-articulated components into an innovative musical reading as a result of the complete and unpredictable junction, interconnectivity, and interchangeability of many styles, languages, and aesthetical expressions at the same time. In this way, Caetano and his partners proposed frantic reinterpretations, mixing the new with the old and archaic, as well as the popular with the erudite and mass culture. And, in this embryo of innovative experiments, everything was permitted and liquefied, varying from ambiguous digressions and apparent disconnections, which unite what was supposed to not be linked anyway.

In his song "Tropicália", one of his greatest classics of innovative Brazilian popular music, electronic and twelve-tone music style was performed by conductor Rogério Duprat and Júlio Medaglia. Both were students and disciples of the German composer of contemporary musician Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-2007), who innovated in the fusion of electroacoustic music to create the dimension of a sonorous and melodious indeterminism. Stockhausen was a pioneer in the blending of different art forms, such as the visual arts, literature, and poetry, as well as defining paths for innovation in the creation of new instruments and chords. This also influenced the terrain of estrangement, proclaimed by the tropicalist movement of Caetano Veloso. The song "Tropicália", represented a cultural manifesto for defending the diversity of Brazil and the world, drawing attention to the dimension of the grandeur and the power of popular music to bring together such different themes and aesthetics, and the need to break with traditional and prejudiced taboos in terms of contemporary views of the world and culture. For him and his fellow activists, this had to be recognized as a force of grandiose conscience that could transform unfair realities, providing an open way to cultural conciliations and breakup to indigestible and retrograde taboos, considering the contemporary idea of art as even more and more libertarian and humanizing in the future.

Aware of all the news from the world around him, Caetano set out to assimilate as much as he could of all the influences that would enrich the originality of his conceptual proposal for popular songs. In this way, Caetano sought to make use of all that was innovation in the field of poetic and musical language, becoming interested in the original forms of strange and unusual textual, and phrasal constructions, fragmentary forms, as well as conceptual neologisms.

Caetano followed in the footsteps of great writers and poets who innovated in the language of avant-garde Brazilian literature and poetry such as Guimarães Rosa, João Cabral de Melo Neto, and the concrete poets from São Paulo city: Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos, and Décio Pignatari. Many of these names, among others, were constantly referenced and celebrated as inspirations for his creative pulse in the making of popular songs. Inspired by James Joyce and Thomas Mann, Guimarães Rosa created poetic prose, full of inventive neologisms, based on the originality of regionalist Brazilian speech and mixtures between Brazilian Portuguese and several other languages. Rosa was a fluent polyglot writer since he had worked as a Brazilian diplomat, living in several countries, and assimilating different habits and cultural manifestations. In an original way, Guimarães Rosa created new noun and verb phrases, suffixes and prefixes, mixing terms from several languages, as, for example, in *Sagarana*, a very famous book written by him. He mixes "saga" from the Nordic language, and "rana" from the Brazilian indigenous language called Tupi), meaning "false saga". Additionally, Rosa stood out for metaphysical and transcendent literature, inspired by the philosophical ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, regarding art, language, and transcendence. João Cabral de Melo Neto, on the other hand, created rational and anti-metaphysical poetry, based on totally innovative unusual semantic and grammatical structures.

As Caetano studied philosophy at university, and was a reader of Nietzsche and Heidegger, among others, he had a strong interest in understanding the relationships between art and philosophy, and the sense of transcendence in art. That sense served as inspiration for many of his so-called poetic-philosophical meta-songs. This naturally made the content of Caetano's lyrics even more sophisticated and inaccessible to the common audience, but at the same time, he invested in melodious chords and diversified sounds, drawn from various cultures, in order to create a sensitive atmosphere of more proximity to the general public. Perhaps, one of Caetano's most intelligent and audacious insights was to write a meta-song of philosophical aesthetics with the theme of the transcendence of art for a great popular Brazilian singer. The song "Força Estranha" (Strange Force) was composed especially for Roberto Carlos, the greatest popular singer in Brazilian music, widely loved by a large general public. As Roberto Carlos is religious and Christian, predominantly catholic, his interpretation of the song takes place as a message of religious transcendence, that is, of the spirit of faith, as well as incorporating the grandiosity of the strength of the Christian God in everything. However, symbolically, the song refers to the atheist philosopher Nietzsche's ideas about art as a sense of transcendence in terms of the continuity of the human spirit after death, that is, it has nothing to do with religiosity, but with the extension of human legacy provided by art. Roberto Carlos' eloquent interpretation made "Força Estranha" be sung emotionally and endorsed by a large humble audience, which could only capture and be identified with the message of religious faith, believing in the interpretative meaning of their eminent idol. In this way, Caetano operates a game of astute symbolism, managing to disseminate highly sophisticated ideas to the most diverse audiences, making use of polyphonic and polysemic disguises. He showed that the authentic feeling of the performer matters more than the composer's intentionality because the feeling of the performer modifies the context of the song so that it can reach another level of unpredictable artistic appreciation and fruition.

Cleverly, Caetano's sensitive intelligence toward aesthetics allowed him to astutely combat archaic cultural taboos that often antagonized secular values and which were still poorly understood in the context of Brazilian life under dictatorial military control in the 1970s. Caetano also made aesthetic experiments, by introducing several kinds of estrangements into the popular song, changing morphological and syntactic concepts of the Portuguese language, and providing another sensitive and poetic perception of the reality of the world. In this case, he was very influenced by several disciples of Oswald de Andrade, and diffusers of Umberto Eco's ideas, like the concretist poets of São Paulo city, Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, for example. These tuned intellectuals and sophisticated artists were pioneer semioticians, defending the radical autonomous expression of the word in art. Shrewdly, they experimented aesthetically, through several decades, all kinds of artistic media in profusion, without any respite: radio, television, video, cinema, computer languages, computer graphics, holography, comics, object books, plastic arts, design, etc., exploiting them as authentic expressive supports for creating art and poetry. Skillfully, Caetano immersed himself in the source of all these influences, always following, with enthusiasm, the aesthetic experiments of his intellectual colleagues and admirers, and anthropophagically absorbing them within the innovative Tropicalism spirit, trying to capture all the fundamentals in the service of his experimenting aesthetic gaze.

Nevertheless, Caetano was also very inspired by the ideas of Andy Warhol and Walter Benjamin on the commodification of culture and art in the capitalist society, understanding clearly the mechanisms of construction and deconstruction of the aesthetic aura of art through the mass media elements. Serving from them, he cleverly develops a perceptive strategy of contestation in relation to the habitual, prejudiced, and elitist separation between the stratified realms of high art, popular art, and media culture, revealing a dialectical game of ambiguity between them in the symbolic process of the art construction.

From a dialectical way of thinking, he sought to actively defend the idea of an incipient cultural industry in Brazil, even in the 1960s, many times criticizing it, and at the same time, adhering sympathetically to their culture principles, incorporating several themes from them in his songs.

For example, in the song “Superbacana” (Supercool) (1968) (Veloso, 2021h), Caetano references comic book heroes and the superlatives of their characters, with their superpowers, alluding to his desire to be part of this incredible and magical setting of American culture. In the song “Alegria Alegria” (Joy Joy) (1968) (Veloso, 2021f), he makes a collage of several terms of mass culture such as Coca-Cola, and the European cinema actresses of the sixties Brigitte Bardot, and Claudia Cardinale, who were famous sex symbols of the 1960s. However, while he accepted a strong wind of changes in Brazilian culture, on the other side, he believes it was essential to maintain a critical spirit, not alienating himself from what happened in the basements of the Brazilian dictatorship, with people being censored, persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered. The idea that “pop art is about liking things”, taken from Warhol, and frequently quoted by Caetano Veloso, became a very influential sign in the dilemmas of Tropicalism as a progressive and innovative cultural movement. Warhol’s slogan was quickly assimilated as a Tropicalism relevant mantra in the idea that there were no limits to aesthetic and cultural experimentation. Caetano believed in the free expression of art as the spirit of hybridizing and exploring themes from everything that he wanted, considering this as a symbol of the vital spirit of liberation and cultural emancipation from rigid and backward taboos.

Inspired by The Beatles album “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” (1967), produced by George Martin, and by “The Velvet Underground & Nico” album (1967), produced by Andy Warhol, “*Tropicália ou Panis et Circencis*” (1968), which contained “Tropicália”, brought together several exponents of Tropicalism movement in a conceptual album (Veloso, 1997). In different strategic ways, they together proposed to break cultural, aesthetic, social, and behavioral taboos in Brazilian society at that time. So, in this album, there were several voices focused on manifesting transgressions of different natures in the aesthetic field of new rising Brazilian popular music. The artists explored the stripped and loose hippie style in their clothing and abused the use of the electric guitar sound of counterculture rock, mixed with erudite chords and Brazilian popular and folk music. In addition, they used various references from mass culture in general, approaching different philosophical, aesthetic, and social themes. It was an album of radical ruptures in the Brazilian cultural scene at the time, disturbing everyone who was frightened by their new perceptions of the world, postures, attitudes of life, style of social behavior, political and cultural activism. Later, many of these artists began to be watched and persecuted by the regime of the Brazilian military dictatorship. In one of his concerts, Caetano preached the slogan of French students from May 1968 manifestations: “It is forbidden to prohibit”, which was in response to the dictatorial government institutional act that limited freedom of expression in Brazil. Caetano Veloso ended up being arrested, spending approximately three months in prison accompanied by his Tropicalism partner Gilberto Gil (Veloso, 1997; Blitzer, 2022).

After that, Caetano was forced into exile in England, from 1969 to 1971. Chico Buarque was also forced to go into exile to avoid arrest in Brazil. Both had been framed as communist agitators because the military dictatorship that controlled the government found all forms of dissidence to practice the spirit of communism and cultural terrorism in Brazil and, because of that, all dissidents faced violence from their government.

The new wave of Tropicalism was not accepted by all. Many people did not understand what was then happening in Brazilian popular music at that time, which caused extreme discomfort, rejection, intolerance, and prejudices of all kinds (Santos, 2011). More conservative citizens defended a traditionalist,

nationalist, and retrograde culture, which was not accepting of the winds of change coming from abroad, and which was openly influencing the new youth of the 1960s. Unfortunately, many of these people, due to their ultraconservative principles and ideas, ended up supporting the military regime, acting as sensors and watchers of misconducts that perhaps preached in subordination to the precepts of the dictatorship: traditional family, moral and civic values. A culture of surveillance of people's cultural behavior was then created, with sensors and whistleblowers scattered in different places: schools, churches, universities, companies, public places, squares, etc.

Names like Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque were then banned in the media. Many songs and cultural manifestations that evoked their names were censored. Only one song dedicated to Caetano Veloso was released by the censors, curiously a song made in honor of him by Roberto Carlos, portraying the image of his sadness in exile, when he visited him in England.

The simple song "Debaixo dos Cacaróis dos Seus Cabelos" (Under the Curls of Your Hair) (1971), clearly evoking Caetano's long and hippie-style hair, went completely unnoticed by the censors, because it was seemingly a romantic love song, and few people really knew the true story of its inspiration (Caetano, 1997). Consequently, in 1992, after 20 years, when Caetano turned 50 years old, he re-recorded the song made in his honor, and publicly revealed the true story of it, in a television performance alongside Roberto Carlos, thanking him for the gesture of generosity.

CHICO BUARQUES' MUSICAL THEMES

Initially, inspired by the style of traditional samba from Rio de Janeiro, Chico Buarque invented apparently simple songs, without great thematic pretensions at first, but which touched gradually on acidic social themes, such as current prejudice, social injustices, the oppression of women in the culture of patriarchy, and structural racism, among others. Distinctively, Chico already had in his family heritage notable Brazilian intellectuals. His father, Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda, is considered to be one of the greatest Brazilian sociologists, and his uncle, the great Brazilian philologist and dictionary writer Aurélio Buarque de Hollanda, was the creator of the most important Portuguese language dictionary. Undeniably, Chico showed himself as a shrewd connoisseur of the history of Brazilian popular music tradition, participating in several debates and disputes on Brazilian television talk shows from the 1960s. Chico ostensibly shone in all the sequences of such television programs, demonstrating a dense knowledge of the history of Brazilian popular music and culture, in relation to other famous participants.

However, one of the most electrifying programs was, without a doubt, the one that featured the participation of young Bahian Caetano Veloso, which served to demonstrate to everyone the rise of two new young idols, who brought promises of renewal in the aesthetics of popular music, with the intellectual domain of deep cultural knowledge. Due to his privileged educational background and access to influential contacts in Brazilian culture as a whole, as well as, his close friendship with great composers such as Tom Jobim and Vinícius de Moraes, precursors of Brazilian bossa nova, Chico developed a melodious and lyrical trait with dense social connotations, which become his personal signature and DNA as a uniquely thinking composer and artist.

After the military coup of 1964, a process of radicalization of censorship start to begin gradually in Brazil, with the creation of official agencies for monitoring freedom of expression. In 1967, with the implementation of the so-called AI-5 (Institutional Act number 5), which considered acts of free

expression as crimes against the state, Chico Buarque then became to be among one of the most clearly engaged Brazilian artists regarding political and social activism.

During the dictatorial period, Chico Buarque caused great rejection, with many songs censored or put under suspicion of transgressing the political and social order of the military government in power. Most of the time, he had to attend police inquiries, accused of disturbing public order, which cost him the acquisition of an extensive criminal record.

With his social themes about the oppressed: social workers, poor, Black, women, children, beggars, and others on the margins, he caused great discomfort among defenders of the dictatorship, and among very conservative people who accused him to be communist, as well as an agitator of masses and leftist university students. In addition, one of Chico's most peculiar characteristics has always been to be a spokesperson for women's feelings, putting himself in their shoes. Through his songs, he gave them an active voice through his poetic lyricism, which also caused prejudiced suspicions regarding his masculinity, in a sexist and patriarchal world, still insensitive to oppression, violence, and injustice against women in general. As feminist agendas claiming justice and equality between men and women had been suppressed in the right to free expression during the military dictatorship in Brazil, it was still very unusual for men to express favorable opinions on such issues, making Chico Buarque an artist well ahead of his time, for facing taboos that masked the oppressive reality of women in Brazilian society.

Inspired by the medieval troubadour songs of love and friendship from the Iberian Peninsula, Chico composed lyrics that expressed female feelings of pain, love, passion, desires, dreams, nightmares, and fears in the first person, which generated great estrangement at the time. He was not a man talking about female feelings, but a man turned into several women, revealing their innermost feelings as being entirely oppressed in a patriarchal society. In this way, Chico became a poor and miserable woman, an abandoned mother, a prostitute used to be abused, and a transvestite socially despised and repudiated. He becomes all of them at the same time, emitting their libertarian speeches and their tragic life narratives. He projects himself in the place of them, empowering them, and giving them an active voice to express themselves as human beings, worthy of respect, humanity, and equal rights.

Nonetheless, inspired by the ideas of his friend and playwright Augusto Boal (1931-2009), who also worked with Paulo Freire (1921-1997), Chico Buarque ingeniously created an aesthetic of the oppressed radiated singularly in Brazilian popular songs. Using the aesthetics of the oppressed, Chico developed over time themes that deal with the condition of women, ethnic minorities, the poor, children, and violence against nature. With Boal, he developed several partnerships, being the best known "Mulheres de Atenas" (Women of Athens) (Buarque, 2021b), which talks about the history of women's oppression since the time of Ancient Greece, when they were forced to play various roles of oppression and submission to the sexist interests and desires of the patriarchal universe. For Baudrillard (1990), the feminine has always occupied another place not clearly defined in the patriarchal world, because its existence is hidden, even in stories of oppression and suffering, historically being assigned the role of servitude and dramatic repression. However, women's cunning ability to play in the field of seduction is an unequal struggle for survival, which reveals his cunning and intentionality of power, so as not to cease to exist.

The song "Mulheres de Atenas" traces a sociocultural trajectory from women's history to contemporary times, demonstrating how oppressive roles have changed little and without major emancipations for most women in contemporary society. This song is a singular aesthetic way for the artist to express his radical alterity to the traditional forms of oppression in the political, social, intellectual, and affective role of women. In the same way that Baudrillard (1990) defines that the libertarian language of women has always been seduction as a game, Chico demonstrates that the superior power of symbolic control,

even in totally oppressive societies, has always belonged to women. Chico Buarque and Augusto Boal outlined the following roles played by women throughout human history: slaves, concubines, women who were obliged to be ideally beautiful to please men (e.g., Helen of Troy), women who become pregnant and were then brutally abandoned, women seen only as sexual objects to be savagely used and then discarded, pure women and virgins versus prostitutes and raped, powerless mothers who lose their children in wars, etc. In this regard, his songs radiated the soundtracks of major Brazilian theater, cinema, and television, whose focus was usually themes of social and political dimension or comprises the feminine universe. During the dictatorship, Chico often used metaphorical and allegorical symbols as a potent resource to confront the censorship of the military, talking about courageous women who faced the constituted power in search of justice, freedom, and real truth.

For Favareto (1995), allegory is a procedure that comes from a dynamic, nomadic thought, resulting from the transitory event of the sensitive, placed with a fragment in a world conditioned by juxtapositions of fragments of landscapes and momentary scenarios. This allegorical path was widely explored, in a different way, by Chico and Caetano.

In Caetano's songs, the allegory refers to the melodic and sonorous cannibalization of contradictory thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, whose objective is to assess contradiction as an interpretive model of Brazilian cultural reality, in a broad sense. On the other hand, in Chico's songs, the melody has always been more at the didactic service of the political and social content, with metaphors tending to be more effective than sonorous. Dialectical allegories, in his expressive form, embody a level of oppression and impoverishment of the critical spirit that becomes a source of continuous indignation. In this aspect, both artists seek, through different methods, to tune in to the needs of a necessary posture to problematize situations and reconcile differences in a transformative political-cultural path.

The song "Roda Viva", by Chico Buarque (1967), a finalist at the São Paulo International Song Festival, which later became the theme of a major play in 1968 against the oppressive movement of the dictatorship, is, without a doubt, one of the most powerful songs of confrontation to the destructive and alienating power of the culture of oppression during the military regime. Such a song suggests a magical tenebrous allegory (the living wheel), which uncontrolled and merciless sweeps away everything from the scene around it. "Roda Viva" is a metaphor for the censorship of all freedoms, desires, and dreams, gagged and torn apart by the power of oppression. The song talks about the terror of torture and death, always relentless with political dissidents of a dictatorial regime. Some of the verses clearly expose the gradual transformation from a peaceful environment to the scene of panic and terror (Buarque, 2021c):

world wheel, Ferris wheel

whirlpool, spinning top

time rolled in an instant

in the loops of my heart

The powerful cadence of the music defines a hopeless psychological state of mind, in which the sound points to frightening events that gradually unfold to a final destructive peak of freedom of expression, respect for the feelings of others, the idea of human dignity, etc. Step by step, the melody grows into tones of human events and tragedies placed in subsequent allegories and dark narratives of despair.

After *Roda Viva* (Live Wheel), Chico Buarque is seen as a dangerous figure alongside other artists and intellectuals, such as Caetano Veloso, whose contradictory elements juxtaposed in Tropicalism melodies have already traced signs of distrust of the military, censors, and ultra-conservative supporters. In this regard, both Boal (2008) and Freire (2005), who were inspiring sources in the formulation of the oppressed in the aesthetics of Chico Buarque's popular songs, clarify that the human gesture translated into aesthetic expression must be sensitive to the transformation of the world into a place that gets better and better through critical consciousness spirit. Boal defends an engaged and militant art, based on ethical and solidary values, while Freire, also a former colleague of Boal, states that freedom is not simply a gift, nor a self-achievement, but a collective symbolic process of awareness and transformation.

DISMANTLING SONGS OF HEGEMONIC TABOOS

Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque created some of the most notable disturbing popular songs, condensing poetic narratives of a counter-hegemonic nature. With post-colonial critiques, they point to the causes and effects of slavery in Brazil up to contemporary times, given the colonial exploitation in terms of deteriorated economic and social conditions.

Also, without boasting and pathetic nationalist exhortation, they value the sense of a mestizo and affectionate Brazilianness as the result of an experimental laboratory of variable ethnicities living together, comprising of Portuguese, Indians, and the African Black diaspora.

In his song "Sampa" (Veloso, 2021b), Caetano expresses his love anthem to the city of São Paulo, showing his initial rejection of the savage urbanization process, when he came to the city, in front of the outsider's gaze of a young man who came from a city in the interior of the state of Bahia (Santo Amaro of Purification). At a crucial point in the song, Caetano exposes (Veloso, 2021b):

When I faced you face to face, I didn't see my face

I called what I saw bad taste, bad taste, bad taste

It's that Narcissus finds ugly what is not a mirror

And the mind frightens what is not even old

Nothing like it wasn't before when we're not mutants.

In this song, Caetano exhorts the vision of a narcissist that he recognizes he has always had in relation to himself, and that he often takes up again in his songs. This narcissism of Caetano expresses his extreme vanity for his sagacity, high-level of clarification, as well as cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical knowledge, considering his artistic ingenuity, something that has always been the subject of harsh criticism directed at his person and his artistic work. The eloquence of Caetano's vanity, in addition to his progressive, anti-racist, anti-homophobic political and ideological positions, was always a reason to arouse antipathy and hatred. His music caused discomfort to traditionalists and ultra-conservatives of culture and politics.

At the end of the song, he concludes, with tortuous torments and renewed hopes (Veloso, 2021b):

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Of the oppressed people in the queues, in the villages, in the slums

From the strength of the money that raises and destroys beautiful things

From the ugly smoke that rises, erasing the stars

I see your poets emerging from fields, spaces

Your forest workshops, your rain gods

Pan-Americas of utopian Africas, tomb of samba

More possible new quilombo of Zumbi

And the new Bahians ride in your drizzle

And new Bahians can enjoy you in a good way

Thus, there is a clear lyrical expression of the theme of social and economic oppression in the big city, full of inequalities and social injustices in the distribution of wealth. But this same city represents for him a place of welcome, of plural coexistence, of mythical and ethnic empowerment, and a place that is open to diversity and the opportunity for equality and dreams. There is, therefore, a dialectical narrative between the existence of oppression and the exaltation of freedom and transformation of difficult realities.

As “Sampa” is a song composed in the 1970s, that is, still under the auspices of the military regime, it translates a symbolic message of the contradictions between the developmental policy defended by the military regime, and the contradictory reality to it in the Brazilian big cities.

In many other songs such as “*Vaca Profana*” (Profane Cow) (Veloso, 2021c), “*Tigresa*” (Tigress) (Veloso, 2021e), “*Abelha Rainha*” (Queen Bee) (Veloso, 2021a), Caetano exalts women’s freedom of choice, that is, their right to pleasure and her body, as well as their right to be free and independent, their right to have their clear positions of political activism, and their right to choose their sexuality and ambiguity. He even advocates for female power in the world over the dominant white male, giving her a vision of feminist empowerment. There are songs in which Caetano extols the beauty and grandeur of attractive men and women, without any shame, always defending the maximum expression of freedom in all aspects of intimate and social life.

In the song “*Língua*” (Language) (Veloso, 2021b), he speaks of the illusion of keeping a language like Portuguese entirely intact, without suffering from the permanent current influences of English.

In order to attest his provocative thought, he uses a controversial idealized conception, adapted from the ideas of the polemic German philosopher Martin Heidegger, for whom the German language was the language par excellence of thought:

I am thinking of the special inner kinship between the German language and the language of the Greeks and their thinking. This is something the French confirm to me over and over again today. When they start to think, they speak German. They assure me they can't do it with their own language.

(Heidegger, 1976, p. 113)

In this way, Caetano originally creates his own ironic and humorous vision of this illusory conception to oppose the presumptuous idea of the German philosopher, saying categorically:

“It is proved that it is only possible to philosophize in German.” In this way, affirming and at the same time disagreeing with such thinking, Caetano demonstrates the beauty and grandeur of the Portuguese language, and its dynamic openness to incorporate neologisms, foreign words, fashions, different accents, etc., proving that any language can be the home of a philosophical being.

The mere mention of Heidegger in the song caused amazement in some people because the philosopher had a pro-Nazi past, but Caetano takes advantage of the author’s authoritarian idea of a cultural imposition to express his disagreement and his love for the Portuguese language.

Caetano’s provocations regarding prejudices and taboos were always immensely variable. In the 1980s, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, he even claimed that the virus proved that perhaps the healthiest sexual relationship was a relationship between women. In the aesthetic field, Caetano has always been averse to prejudice, recording and re-recording songs considered tacky, and of dubious taste, by critics, and at the same time re-recording songs by great popular international composers such as Henri Salvador, Bob Dylan, Lou Reed, and even Kurt Cobain, whom he considered one of the greatest American composers of all times. In this case, he even recorded an album with a series of American romantic classics of all times and incorporated the song “Come as you are”, from Nirvana’s album “Never Mind”, alongside compositions such as Cole Porter, which also means a great provocation to the conventional idea of a great popular musical composition in terms from the point of view of specialized critics. Another of his discordant cultural provocations refers to the recording of the song “Prenda Minha” (Gift of Mine) (Veloso, 2021g), a song from the Brazilian popular songbook from the state of Rio Grande do Sul, done by an unknown author. For Caetano, composer Miles Davis had recorded the song in 1963, entitled “Song no. 2” (Davis & Evans, 1963), without giving credit to its Brazilian origin, and that is why he has recorded the song again, putting in it arrangements made by Miles Davis, in order to make it clear that he did not think it admissible from anyone (Mansque, 2018).

By performing popular themes with an aesthetic look and social criticism, Caetano Veloso incorporates Jokes, allegories, metaphors, the language of cinematographic montage, the collage of plastic arts, alliteration, cacophonies, multiple senses, the anglicisms of language, as well as the aesthetics of the fragment, in order to create vivid cultural paradoxes, all were engendered in the so-called “royal jelly” of Tropicalism, made by Caetano Veloso in the art of surpassing false cultural taboos. On the other hand, Chico Buarque, using his aesthetics of the oppressed, developed over time themes that deal with the human condition of women, Blacks, indigenous, the poor, abandoned and hungry children, and violence against nature. His idea of oppressor and oppressed in popular song serves as a method of effective approximation with the other in a broad aspect, of an intense process of construction of an individual and collective otherness.

In his song “Construção” (Construction) (Buarque, 2021a), Chico tells the story of a construction worker, with his daily routine, from when he leaves home on his way to work. The worker’s entire routine is presented in a mechanized manner, and at the same time gestures of love for his family and wife are treated as simply affective and humanized. His movements in the construction building can be compared to the worker’s movements in *Modern Times*, by Charles Chaplin (1936), in which there is a strong critique of Nazi-fascism, capitalism, and imperialism. In this regard, Chico criticizes the false developmental model of the Brazilian military dictators in contrast to the growing and invisible misery and injustices, due to the culture of censorship. The narrative, at the same time poetic, is treated as a journalistic chronicle of the Brazilian urban social daily life, in which many workers work in precarious

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and inhumane situations, without respected rights. The strongest and most tragic point of the song is the worker's death, accidentally falling from the building where he worked, in the middle of a lighthouse on a large busy avenue, congesting traffic, which generates great nervousness and cursing, demonstrating the level of alienation of people facing the violent events of everyday life. In the end, the life of an ordinary citizen is reduced to merely a single fatal accident statistic, without considering all the luster of a human life that fades away forever. However, despite the announced tragedy of the worker's death, Chico contradictorily praises his gestures and his joy of living every moment as if it were the only and last in his hard life, comparing him to a glorious prince empowered with human gestures that try to transform the mechanization to which it is imposed every day (Buarque, 2021a):

He sat to rest like he was a prince

He ate beans and rice like it was the best

He drank and sobbed like a machine

Danced and laughed like he was the next

And he stumbled across the sky as if he heard music

And it floated in the air like it was Saturday

What if he ended up on the floor like a shy package?

Agonized in the middle of the shipwrecked ride

Died against the grain, disturbing the public

In this way, Chico transforms indignation and the desire for social justice as taboos to be broken in the structure of Brazilian society and in the colonial way of thinking of traditionalist elites.

Illustratively, both Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque, through the art of their popular songs, tried to sow in the heart of Brazilian society an indispensable and conscious desire to definitively break with certain socio-cultural taboos that keep structural racism invisible, such as prejudice and historical incomprehensibility.

CAETANO AND CHICO BUARQUE AS CULTURAL THINKERS BEYOND POPULAR MUSIC

Due to the extreme relevance of the artistic quality of their work, the songs of Caetano and Chico have become, over time, the subject of studies on Brazilian culture and literature, in large Brazilian and foreign universities. Currently, the two artists are still in top form, recording songs, performing lives, and actively participating in protests against conservatism, intolerance, racism, hatred, fascism, still challenging retrograde and emergent taboos.

Caetano Veloso, for his sexual ambiguity in terms of aesthetics and free expression, as well as his personal love life, exalted his openness to controversial themes, in several songs, which made him an influential force in many fields of Brazilian culture. Besides that, he has maintained an acute eye as a general observer of Brazilian and international art and customs, writing extraordinary and controversial texts in magazines and newspapers.

On the other hand, when Chico criticizes society's apathy towards the socially oppressed poor, with their fatally unequal destinies, he makes the indignation and social justice desire as elements still seen as taboos in an extremely conservative society of outdated, retrograde, and toxic values, which does not accept recognizing inequality and misery as serious issues to be faced. Many furious ultra-conservatives do not understand the existence of inequality resulting from the socio-economic exploitation of the elites, as well as of the country's colonization model, and of its history of slavery. For them, the activism of excluded minorities often appeals to a discourse of pity, clemency, and victimization, and with this, they tend to belittle, despise, and diminish the relevance of social movements through defamatory and pejorative discourses. For Tatit (1995, 1997), the interpretive gestures in Brazilian popular songs turned timbre into a connotative status of great semiotic value, since the intonation melody transforms the oral gesture of everyday and ephemeral speech into a perennial and transcendent aesthetic work of art. Therefore, the interpretive gesture in Caetano and Chico's popular song is not just a banal social and provocative gesture put at random, but rather it is an irreverent clamor that calls on attentive listeners to critically think about the new (the emergent event) and the nebulous (the hidden history) as challenges for affective understandings.

For Bauman (2017), the lack of perceptive understanding of the contemporary world leads to anguish and the loss of clear references and, consequently, to insecurity and hopelessness. In this sense, for the philosopher, everything then becomes a sign full of ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings, and therefore, there is currently a search for a mystified past, which was previously ridiculed as an imaginary place full of misunderstandings and superstitions.

In this way, the two artists always knew how to be ingenious in both causing an aesthetic and symbolic destructuring of the musical language, as well as skillfully building a consistent historical narrative. Such innovative experiments have always been viewed with suspicion by ultraconservatives, as they were perceived as estrangement and malaise, triggering attitudes that were often reactionary and disturbing. In this aspect, the two artists sowed attitudes of symbolic deconstruction of taboos in relation to toxic sensations, emotions, and feelings, which were opposed to the idea of the openness to the new, and to the historical truth of the cultural past.

By way of illustration, the most well-known and anthological phrase by Caetano Veloso, evoked in the song "Vaca Profana" (Veloso, 2021c) is "Closely, nobody is normal". Caetano created this thought as a reference to the ideas of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. For Freud, the state in which the patient reveals his repressed and old memories, causing neurosis, brings to the surface the energy source of his hidden unconscious. Caetano expresses in the song the idea that normality is something relative and illusory, and that in the face of critical judgment and the process of self-analysis, no one can be normal. In the song "Vaca Profana", as Caetano talks about a defiant woman of patriarchal taboos, all the men become grimaces and incapable of understanding her provocative attitudes to the extreme. No one escapes such a judgment, not even Caetano himself, who narrates the grimace of critics and intellectuals from Paris and New York, in relation to the empowered woman he so exalts in his song. Caetano becomes yet another grimace among all the grimaces he points out, that is, another man incapable of understanding the maddening behavior of that exuberant woman. For Freud (1913), the taboo is more normalized

when members are part of the same social class, but it causes astonishment and violation of codes when practiced by individuals considered subordinate and inferior. The smaller the class difference, the lesser the fear regarding the practiced taboo, but when there are social disparities, the taboo becomes a social danger of breaking general norms, creating forms of resistance, confrontation, and disaggregation. Therefore, Caetano's profane cow image is the image of a transgressing woman, who violates pre-established norms of moral conduct, and is viewed with fear by men with a little open mind to her erratic behavior.

The song was a tribute to the Brazilian singer "Gal Costa", friend and interpreter partner of Caetano, participant of the Tropicalism movement, and one of his greatest interpreters of Brazilian popular music. The song has an ambiance of the Catalan scene in Spain, with many references and quotes from various artists, musicians, thinkers, which suggests different points of view and interpretations totally open. According to Caetano Veloso, the lyrics have "mutant choruses that are difficult to memorize", which creates an atmosphere of mystery and incompleteness of the defined woman, in a mixture of sacred and profane, which changes to the revealing gaze of the interpreter. In one of the passages, the lyrics place the position of the woman who defies taboos and sexist precepts well, when "the profane cow decides to put the horns (horns) out and above the herd, rebelling for having a different view from the others and choosing not to wish to conform to the same precept or uniformed pattern of passive behavior, as it sees its power to see and be beyond its permissible limits. Recorded in 1984 by Gal Costa, as the first song on the A-side from the album "Profana", the song was censored because, according to the Brazilian Public Entertainment Censorship Division, the lyrics were against the morals and good family customs and Brazilian society.

In Caetano's works, Freud emphasizes the ideas of estrangement and normality, otherwise, in Chico's, melancholy and bereavement give strength and shape to the dramatic narratives of his characters oppressed by society, intensifying the symbolic quality of alterity, identity and self-image in the interrelationship between author and character. Furthermore, in Chico Buarque, his characters go through a traumatic experience, culminating in the forced loss of their innocence. For the musician, misery and, injustice as oppressive forms of intensely traumatic experience force individuals to mature early, as well as the loss of illusion and hope. Therefore, for him to immerse himself in the pain of these people, to try to understand how they feel and how they actually think, is the social function of his investigative work.

BREAKING THE TABOOS OF HATRED AND INTOLERANCE

Recently, in Brazil, during the 2014 presidential elections, and after opening the process of impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, of the Workers' Party (PT), and after the effective impeachment of the elected president on corruption charges, Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque returned to being reasons for rivalry in Brazilian society, as they clearly define their political-ideological positions.

In this period, there began to be a strong political-ideological polarization, dividing society into two antagonistic extremes: leftists and rightists, PT and anti-PT, good people and evil people (Costa, 2019; Scott, 2019). Many Brazilians were forced to choose sides, which was not easy given the plethora of fake news and conspiratorial narratives. There were two divergent and radical positions, only one of which could be correct. The first argued that there was a gigantic corruption scheme involving the Workers' Party and the Presidency of the Republic, which implied impeachment and removal. The second argued that there was no crime committed by the current president, and that everything was just an orchestrated coup between the judiciary, the senate and the media, so it was defined as a parliamentary, judicial and

media coup d'état (Costa, 2019). Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque took their stand against the coup, defending the president of the republic, who often had her dignity as a woman disrespected, being insulted in various environments and public and private places. Both Caetano and Chico took a stand against attitudes of hatred and tolerance, suffering severe criticism on social networks and in public demonstrations, often by authoritarian and fascist speeches, which accused all supporters of Dilma and the Workers' Party of being corrupt, leftists, communists, and anti-patriots (Costa, 2019).

Both of them did not accept angry and threatening impositions from different authoritarian segments of society, which adhered to the conventional and elitist status quo, believing that all left parties were corrupt, and only the ultra-conservative right, with the support of the military and religious, could be the purifying safeguard of the true nation's values. For both Caetano and Chico, the impeachment was a coup d'état, and a great political staging for the resumption of power by the conservative and fascist right, which falsely defended traditional values: such as anti-corruption, mistaken idea of freedom, family, property and religion. For them, these were some well-known ingredients of the old Brazilian fascism, called Integralism, that emerged in the 1940s, during the dictatorial regime of President Getúlio Vargas, and that openly showed sympathies with Italian fascism and German Nazism. In the current scenario of great hatred and tolerance, dissonant voices such as those of Caetano and Chico have become obvious reasons for frequent public threats, with lynching, hostilities, and cancellations on social networks.

Interestingly, one of Caetano Veloso's most controversial statements, originating in the late 1970s, has recently become a popular meme. The content refers to a television interview by Caetano, responding to a journalist's biased criticism of Brazilian popular music. In this interview, Caetano lost his patience and called the live interviewer "dumb" for not understanding the aesthetic and cultural dimension of Brazilian popular music in its historical and innovative conceptual scope. Acting politely, but always symbolically smart, he tried to achieve his image as a popular artist and singer, as well as the relevance of his work and that of other artists of his generation. For Fershtman (2011), human behavior is governed only by rational decision making, and certain acceptable behaviors are part of a negotiated agreement based on rules and expectations. This ranges from maintaining respect for sacred and consecrated behavior, and even violating them, as long as this does not become dangerous and ongoing behavior. "Are you dumb, man?" (*Você é burro, cara?*) became a surprising viralization across social media (Veloso, 2021i). Such a meme has been widely used to make naive mockery while demoralizing and ridiculing totally unthinkable speeches.

Very critical of Brazil's current ultra-conservative government, elected in 2018, Chico Buarque was apprehensive about various authoritarian events that, for him, put democracy, sovereignty, human rights and civility at risk. For him, we are currently living in a period of civilizing crisis, with the loss of values such as respect for dissent, compassion and generosity, and intolerance and hatred normalizing as normal modes of behavior, based on name-calling, insults, swearing, and completely lacking in politeness and a sense of convenience (Nunes, 2020). Although he has already used profanity in his songs, such expressions served to characterize socially marginal and marginalized characters and behaviors in the service of an aesthetic function, and as a social gesture of engaged art, which differs for him from the fascist banality of mistreating others.

For Culpeper (2011, 2019), polite behaviors aim to maintain social balance and symbolically reduce the confrontation in the discourse, therefore, in certain cultures, breaking politeness norms is reflected in taboos as deviant modes of acceptable code of conduct. From the artist's point of view, the current changes seem troubling in Brazilian society, distorting the view of human rights and the ideals of advanced civilization, making them as real undesirable taboos to get rid of.

According to Baudrillard (1994), the simulation and simulacrum processes of the real in postmodern society make the signs of the representation of the real can easily be replaced by the real itself, creating levels of the artificiality of the real, and increasingly moving people away from nature of the real. In this regard, artists such as Caetano and Chico have shown great skill in not surrendering to the simulations of human values and historical and political facts, keeping themselves as sharp minds of indefensible critical thinking. Although they have helped to demystify false cultural realities and break behavioral taboos, we are currently experiencing a cultural paradox in an attempt to return to values from a falsely idealized past. To intelligently face the period of military repression, censorship, outdated moral values, Caetano and Chico had to be masters in the ingenuity of making their art a true perfect crime, through the use of allegorical and metaphorical images with the great symbolic power of multiplicity ambiguous.

For Baudrillard (2008), the perfect crime depends on the strength of appearances, and the erasure of marks, footprints, and compromising evidence. Playing with appearances, as well as revealing the hypocrisy that was hidden in their hypocritical values, was always a striking tone in the work of these two artists, for whom the prohibition could not have limits for expressiveness and artistic experimentation, in tune with the values of the contemporary world.

As artists from a generation that was educated with the necessary experience of critical thinking in the arts, currently, with the emergence of a highly conservative and backward mentality, the two have been accused of spreading various liberal ideologies, which defend equivocally gender equality, social inequality, and minority rights.

Such groups defend a growing de-ideologization in all public and media spaces, including schools and universities, where Caetano and Chico have become, over time, great references for historical, sociological, philosophical, artistic discussions, among others. To define ideology, Kofman (1999) uses the metaphor of the camera obscura, explaining how ideology is a way of seeing particular to each one, and such ways of seeing can suffer inversions when the focus of the object is changed. For the philosopher, ideology has a dynamic character, always mobilized by each person's field of vision and cultural imagination. On the other hand, for Žižek (1989), ideological criticism is sustained when it clarifies certain levels of social disturbances, with mechanisms of visibility and invisibility. In another complementary perspective, Fuchs (2020) distinguishes between the ideological structure of market fetishism and the fetishized structure of ideology, revealing that, in the first case, there is a loss of the experience of the totality of what is produced in the capitalist environment, while, in the second case, ideology naturalizes domination and exploitation, in order to legitimize exploitation.

Perhaps, a great question around what ideology (such as criticism and non-manipulation) is or de-ideologization (naive and illusory misrepresentation of non-ideology) concerns the field of the notion of radical alterity, which from authoritarian conceptions may come to become an ideology or taboo. For Baudrillard (2008), the other is paradoxical and does not reveal itself in its entirety. So, the exercise of infinitely opening up to the other is also a radical breaking of taboos, that is, surpassing codes and precepts that do not combine with the experienced reality, in which the other's face shows itself all the time in provocative gestures. In this context, Caetano and Chico were always extremely skillful in building their relationship between the music and culture market and critics, managing to build a dialectical game between conditions of cultural production and freedom of expression, without concessions, that is, without submitting to the pasteurizing abuses of high sales and easy consumption. Therefore, the ideology in their case takes on a critical, conscious, and engaged character as artists serving a greater purpose in society.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned, these two artists were pioneers in the reinvention of themes and agendas to launch a new look at the relevance of Brazilian popular music and culture in the critical, aesthetic, and philosophical debate in Brazil and in the contemporary world.

Over time, they were idolized, persecuted, threatened, and even expelled from Brazil for remaining firm in their critical positions in relation to the ultra-conservative and toxic behavior of Brazilian society. Their social and cultural concerns have always shown a differentiated interest in the potential of popular culture and popular customs, in line with mass culture and high culture. They also became exponents in breaking cultural, sexual and hegemonic political taboos, demonstrating that there are other ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in the context of affective, loving, and solidary human relationships.

They demonstrated throughout their artistic trajectories how taboos that stand prejudice, intolerance, racism, ignorance, violence, censorship and repression of all kinds in terms of destructive and self-destructive qualities, take away the purpose of the well-being of all living people in everyday social life. For them, these elements just become psychic shackles and prisons that impede the fullness of the emancipation of human destinies, being permanent obstacles to collective happiness and the achievement of social and economic equality rights.

Finally, based on the various cited reflective references, the aim of this work was to build a refined theoretical and analytical dimension in relation to the issue of breaking consolidated and ghostly taboos, which has always been a permanent concern of Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque, in their permanent confrontation as engaged artists, as well as affectionate and supportive human beings.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

AI-5: Institutional Act no. 5, an act instituted by the Brazilian government of the military dictatorship in 1967, with the objective of delimiting and controlling freedom of expression in the country. During this period, many journalists, artists, and intellectuals had their works heavily censored.

Brazilian Military Dictatorship: Period of military repression in Brazil, from 1964 to 1985. In 1964, the Brazilian armed forces decree a military coup, claiming that the country was in danger of becoming communist. It was a period of terror, with arrests, torture, and deaths, in addition to the restriction of freedom of expression in a broad sense.

Brazilian Modernism: It was a revolutionary intellectual movement, whose symbol was the so-called Week of Modern Art in São Paulo, in 1922. This movement aimed to break with traditionalist and archaic visions of Brazilian culture and art, defending a broad international dialogue with the artistic manifestations from Europe and the United States. From this movement, two fundamental intellectual exponents emerged: Mário de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade, who will influence generations of Brazilian artists and intellectuals, who will have international prominence.

Concrete Poetry: Concrete Poetry: It was a movement of Brazilian artists from the city of São Paulo, having as main exponents: Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos, and Décio Pignatari. The three dedicated themselves to new artistic experiments with the use of words in various technological supports, since the 1950s, becoming a great contemporary reference in Brazilian art, poetry, and music.

Cultural Anthropophagy: Cultural Movement that preached the absorption of elements from various cultures as an innovative and original character of art and culture.

Meta-Song: A style of poetic composition that discusses the very meaning of the popular song as art, its aesthetics, its intentionality, its political and social function, as well as its character of transcendence.

Tropicalism: Brazilian artistic and cultural movement, created in the late 1960s, whose two great exponents were Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, and whose objective was to propose a new interpretation of Brazilian art, culture, and music, more contemporary and international.

Section 3

Family Communication

Chapter 10

Cyberbullying and Family Communication Theory and Research

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ABSTRACT

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are potent with promise and peril. On the one hand, ICTs provide an unprecedented amount of information, an ability to network across the globe, and interactive entertainment and socializing. On the other hand, the same properties are at risk of misuse to bully, to spread misinformation, and to commit other acts of harm. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the theoretical and conceptual significance of studying cyberbullying from a family communication perspective. The aim is to explain essential features of cyberbullying, to situate cyberbullying as a communication phenomenon, and to propose important conceptual and theoretical frameworks in family communication (including trait verbal aggression, developmental assets, family rituals, family communication patterns theory, and inoculation theory) for future research. The hope is that this chapter will inspire more family communication researchers to better understand, study, and provide solutions for the destructive and harmful effects of cyberbullying.

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INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) hold promise, offering an unprecedented amount of information, an ability to network across the globe, and interactive entertainment and socializing. It is no surprise, then, that the use of ICTs is steadily growing among teenagers (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2012), young adults, and the elderly (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2017). Seventy-four percent of adults are on some social networking platform (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram) (Pew Research Center, 2014) and 92% of teens access social media daily (Pew Research Center, 2015). At the same time, ICTs risk peril. The same anonymity that can empower one to seek help about sensitive issues can imperil children, adolescents, and adults when it emboldens bullies. Devastating cases in the news remind us that cyberbullying threatens our families, friends, and communities (NoBullying, 2015). Online forums suggest seemingly inescapable circumstances for adolescents, with one 14 year old girl noting, “. . . I have been bullied many times before, it makes me not want to live in this world anymore,” (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2021).

The effects of cyberbullying are widespread and long lasting (Alvarez, 2012). For children and adolescents, this poses serious psychosocial challenges including substance abuse, depressive symptomatology, low school commitment (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004) and emotional, psychological, and behavioral problems (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). Adolescent targets of cyberbullying feel sad, angry, frustrated, embarrassed, and scared (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007); they have lower self-esteem and score higher on suicide ideation scales (Sinclair et al., 2012). For example, online forums house stories where individuals and families recount unbelievable hardship in dealing with cyberbullying. One 17-year-old girl notes, “Honestly when I was being cyberbullied I felt like I wanted to never get out of the house or talk to anyone ever again. I ended up staying quiet and even today I do get bullied online,” (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2021). Youths having to guard against problematic interpersonal encounters online and offline are hindered in their ability to focus on academics, family responsibilities, and making pro-social choices (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). Adults are not immune either, with many experiencing workplace bullying themselves (Cowan, 2013), or as parents, trying to manage the negative effects of cyberbullying on their children. One mother writes, “My sixteen year old son was cyberbullied on Facebook over a period of 8 hours. . . it caused my son to have an acute psychotic break and to be hospitalized in an adolescent psychiatric ward for almost a month,” (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2021).

Given the problematic mental health concerns that arise from the shame, sadness, and anger experienced by those being cyberbullied, as well as the gradual decline in parental monitoring of ICT use among children as they age, it is no wonder that communication surrounding cyberbullying would be challenging, possibly taboo, for families. Taboo topics are “an interaction topic that is perceived as ‘off limits’” (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 254), and when engaging in topic avoidance, individuals may decide not to disclose information about a particular topic and limit discussion with particular people in their lives (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). Among adolescents and their parents, taboo topics often include things like sexual /dating experiences, negative life events, communicating with parents about issues with friends, and dangerous/risky activities (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a; 1995b).

Although much of the literature on cyberbullying is in psychology and education, the communication discipline is particularly well suited to study, assess, and combat the negative effects of cyberbullying throughout one’s lifespan. For example, an anti-bullying resource bank was created as part of Christina Beck’s NCA Presidential Initiative in 2016 (National Communication Association, 2016) with an edited volume on bullying. In communication, this volume is the first of its kind (West & Beck, 2018); however,

more data-driven studies are needed. More specifically, the purpose of this chapter is to consider the theoretical and conceptual significance of studying cyberbullying from a family perspective to encourage more communicative, theory-driven work which might combat the taboo nature of cyberbullying and its effects. We focus on extant scholarship, including work from psychology, social work, educational psychology, and communication. We selected this work from database searches with two key qualifiers in mind. First, we focused our search on research published since 2010, given the extensive reviews of recent cyberbullying research (e.g., Ramirez et al., 2008; Roberto & Eden, 2010; Schrock & boyd, 2010). Second, we looked for research highlighting implications of cyberbullying on personal relationships, and this qualifier insured that our focus remained within interpersonal and family literature. With this foundation, our aim is to explain essential features of cyberbullying, connect cyberbullying to communication research, and propose conceptual and theoretical frameworks (e.g., trait verbal aggression, developmental assets, family rituals, family communication patterns theory, and inoculation theory). The hope is that this chapter will inspire more work from a field well situated to better understand, study, and provide solutions for, the destructive, harmful effects of cyberbullying.

CONTEXTUALIZING CYBERBULLYING RESEARCH

Aggressive Communication

One way to think about cyberbullying is to consider it as a form of communicative aggression. Initially, research on aggression focused on physical attributes as demonstrated in primarily male samples (see Bjorkqvist & Niemela, 1992). In contrast, early research into indirect aggression identified characteristics such as rejection and seclusion of newcomers to established groups in young children (Feshbach, 1969). Conceptual extensions include telling untruths behind someone's back, spreading rumors, or trying to hurt a child's reputation or social standing (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992), damaging a child's friendship or exclusion from peer groups (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Simmons, 2002), and acquiring power and status within adolescent cliques by threatening other members with exclusion for not complying with group norms (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Communication scholars have also explored the more social and communicative aspects of bullying, noting the negative, yet skilled communication that can be employed to isolate girls through the use of social aggression (Willer & Cupach, 2011).

From a communication perspective, verbal aggression, or the "tendency to attack the self-concepts of individuals instead of, or in addition to, their positions on topics of communication" (Infante & Wigley, 1986, p. 61), manifests as competence attacks, character attacks, teasing and ridicule, maledictions, threats, and nonverbal expressions. Rancer and Avtgis (2006) argued that verbal aggression is caused by a variety of factors including: a) psychopathology, or, expressing repressed hostility, b) disdain for another, c) modeling verbal aggression, d) genetics (inherited trait), and e) argumentative skill deficiency. If verbal aggression has elements of social learning (e.g., children mimicking aggressive behaviors they have seen caregivers perform, or poor conflict management skills among parents or caregivers) and inherited family traits, family communication scholars might explore cyberbullying, a form of aggression, in such ways as well. It stands that traditional bullying includes physical, verbal, and relational aggression (Li et al., 2012); however, below we outline the landscape of cyberbullying research with special attention to features of cyberbullying that are typically not included in definitions of traditional, face-to-face bullying in an effort to discuss the importance of family scholarship in this area.

The Landscape of Cyberbullying Research

Cyberbullying research comes from a number of disciplinary perspectives, exploring individual characteristics, specific behaviors and technologies, comparisons to traditional bullying, prevention, psychosocial effects, and legal consequences (Kowalski et al., 2012; Li et al., 2012; Ramirez et al., 2008; Roberto & Eden, 2010; Schrock & boyd, 2010). Conceptualizing terms has been complicated. Some difficulty lies in gaining consensus on how to define a concept or experience as technologies are developed, used, abandoned, and reconstituted. The following are useful definitions for understanding the communicative form, content, and behaviors of cyberbullying. Kowalski et al. (2012) stated, "Cyberbullying, also known as electronic bullying or online social cruelty, is defined as bullying through email, instant messaging (IM), in a chat room, on a Web site, on an online gaming site, or through digital messages or images sent to a cellular phone" (para. 278). Cyberbullying is also defined by its ability to be anonymous, have an unlimited audience, contain sexual and homophobic harassment, maintain expressions permanently, and utilize online social communication tools (Wong-Lo & Bullock, 2011). Roberto and Eden (2010) added: "Cyberbullying is the deliberate and repeated misuse of communication technology by an individual or group to threaten or harm others" (p. 198). This last definition is of meaningful use to communication scholars studying cyberbullying, as it allows for the examination of a) an exhaustive list of communication technologies and platforms, b) threats of deliberate harm by others (including verbal and nonverbal threats that might be carried out online or offline), and c) repeated communication by individuals or groups (e.g., an individual might send repeated harassing messages, while a group of individuals might view an embarrassing video repeatedly on YouTube). In some ways, then, cyberbullying shares similarities with other forms of aggression. In other ways, there is some consensus in the literature on key features of cyberbullying, namely, a focus on the ubiquitous nature of cyberbullying, individual differences in cyberbullies and cybervictims, anonymity, technological skill of the perpetrator, and propensity to engage in online risky behaviors.

Consider, for example, specific types of cyberbullying, including flaming (e.g., posting insults or offensive language online), harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing (e.g., sharing personal and private information or pictures/videos) exclusion/ostracism, cyberstalking, and happy slapping (i.e., video recording an assault and uploading it to the Internet) (Kowalski et al., 2012). Consider, too, the common use of communication technologies (e.g., mobile devices and computers) and tools (e.g., email, Instagram, instant messaging, Snapchat, etc.) (Ackers, 2012). These activities, technologies, and tools offer varying experiences of anonymity, communication messages and behaviors, and popularity among different age groups. In other words, these behaviors, technologies, and tools are part of our everyday lives with online and in-person consequences. With the ubiquitous nature of cyberbullying, it too often is considered a socionormative behavior, just something that we all have to manage in our everyday lives, and not enough research has focused on these complicated intersections.

One complicated discovery is that much of the research has focused on individual differences in children and adolescents with mixed findings. In one study, male students demonstrated higher levels of cybervictimization and cyberbullying (Erdur-Baker, 2010). Other studies suggest girls were generally more likely to be cybervictims than boys (Ackers, 2012; Walrave & Heirman, 2011). However, even with these unclear findings, there is a strong relationship between cyberbullying and cybervictims (Erdur-Baker, 2010). For one thing, the hostility of the cyberbully can be motivated by the bully's own victimization (Walrave & Heirman, 2011), whereby cybervictims become cyberbullies as retaliation (Barlett & Gentile, 2012), potentially extending cycles of bullying. Whereas traditional studies of bully-

ing identified sex differences among participants, a kind of two-way model of communication where one child bullies a victim, cyberbullying studies indicate networks of behaviors where children, regardless of their sex, occupy multiple roles (i.e., cyberbully, bystander, cybervictim).

Variations in anonymity also prove to be complicated. Within traditional, face-to-face bullying, power typically lies with those who are physically stronger. Some research suggests that the power in cyberbully, at times, lies instead with those who manage their anonymity (Barlett & Gentile, 2012). It is possible, then, for a cyberbully to maintain complete anonymity, where the identity of the cyberbully might be hidden from a victim (Aoyama et al., 2012). This could induce disinhibition; that is, if one is not able to see the emotional reactions of others when engaging in cyberbullying, there is no immediate accountability for that behavior (Kowalski et al., 2012). However, the attacker is not always unknown. Cyberbullying still typically includes someone within a friendship network, such as those found in one's social network. Consequently, cybervictims might be somewhat aware or even completely aware of who it is harassing them. Interestingly, in a sample of 15 to 17 year-olds, Ševčíková and colleagues (2012) found that cybervictims experienced distress when there was a collective perpetration, and when onlookers were personally identifiable. Adolescents might be afraid to go to school, become wary of friendships, and avoid familiar social networks in physical locations when they know the identity of the cyberbully. Ultimately, knowing or not knowing the attacker is an important contextual feature, but, both cause distress when victims are left wondering if the perpetrator is one or several individuals, friends or enemies, strangers or acquaintances (Kowalski et al., 2012).

Advantages lie with those who are skilled ICT users. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) observed that online aggressor/targets, as compared to victim-only youth, were two and a half times more likely to report having almost expert or expert knowledge of the Internet. Those who have greater technological skills are able to disseminate, archive, repost, or alter information; influencing the ways a victim can be harmed (Langos, 2012). Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2009) noted that boys who were skilled with the Internet were more likely to participate in POP (potentially offensive internet and mobile phone practices). Walrave and Heirman (2011) found that both cybervictims and cyberbullies were heavy Internet users, and reported higher online skills than other peers; thus, perpetuating the image of the tech savvy cyberbully.

Finally, some research indicates that those engaging in online risk behaviors and online identity experimentation are more likely to be victimized (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). In a sample of 2,052 primary and secondary school children, those who were bullied via the Internet or mobile phone were more dependent upon the Internet, and took more Internet-related risks (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). These risks are usually considered in the realm of talking with an unknown person, asking someone you met online to meet face-to-face or agreeing to meet face-to-face when someone asks, giving out personal passwords or usernames, and placing personal information on the Internet.

We know, then, some important features about cyberbullying, but predominantly among child and adolescent samples. Much of this work has favored individual psychology or is technology-centric (e.g., hardware and software). While this research certainly has its value as part of a significant body of literature, it would be a mistake to limit the contributions of communication research to technologies and young people. Managing anonymity to expose or hide oneself from victims, gaining technological skills to advance one's ability to disperse harming messages, and opening oneself to avoidable risks rely on communicative components so far under-explored by researchers. There is a more nuanced, vivid portrait to be understood about families and social networks.

EXTENDING THE VIEW: SPACES AND PLACES WHERE FAMILIES LIVE, WORK, AND PLAY

Cyberbullying includes social networks, spaces where family members work, live, and play (Festl & Quandt, 2013). Although there is a growing body of literature on bullying in the workplace (Fox & Cowan, 2015), arguably an experience that might affect family life; not much communication scholarship has focused on child and adolescent cyberbullying or family processes associated with cyberbullying prevention. Wegge and colleagues (2014) found that bullying is experienced in real and virtual spaces, wherein individuals, interacting with complex ICTs, can be perpetrators, victims, and bystanders, *concurrently*. This suggests that cyberbullying becomes less about an individual and more about a network that supports social and cultural norms around cyberbullying. Therefore, common networks where both parents and children live, work, and play can be opportunities to inform, educate, and share narratives around family communication and cyberbullying.

The Workplace

Bullying and cyberbullying affect adults in the workplace, challenging the societal belief that bullying behaviors are “something that kids do” (see National Communication Association, 2016 for more on workplace bullying in communication research). The idea that adults should somehow be more mentally prepared or tougher than younger victims of cyberbullying mistakenly suggests that adult victims of cyberbullying are complicit (e.g., they have done something to draw ire) and that adults should endure cyberbullying without complaint. Cowan (2013) identified aggressive management styles, deficient communication skills, generally negative organizational culture, personality clashes, and contemporary issues, such as economic downturn, as driving factors for workplace bullying. Further, she suggested top-down approaches to anti-bullying policy and improved positive communication skills as effective tools for combating traditional bullying in the workplace. Others have also explored the use of narratives and sense-making processes among workers in an effort to empower co-workers experiencing workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Tye-Williams, & Krone, 2014). Within higher education, Vogl-Bauer (2014) analyzed the effect of student cyberbullying of instructors on multiple institutional levels noting that instructor-victims were concerned about returning to the classroom, lost confidence, and experienced lower job satisfaction. These concerns are compounded by issues such as student evaluations impacting tenure decisions for junior faculty, decisions that could affect emotional and physical resources. Consequently, workplace bullying could have significant effects on a parent or caregiver’s employment status, benefits related to childcare, and ability to contribute to parenting. Finally, with more and more parents and children attending work and school online, parents and educators must find ways to mitigate the interruptions from those that would “zoom bomb,” or disrupt online meetings with hateful or inappropriate comments (Stomp Out Bullying, 2021).

The Dark Side of Close Relationships

Another area of research related to cyberbullying is on the dark side of relationship pursuit (Goodboy & Martin; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014). Studies examining obsessive relational pursuit (Spitzberg & Hobbler, 2002), or, “a pattern of unwanted pursuit of intimacy” (Phillips & Spitzberg, 2011, p. 357) includes a focus on repeated, deliberate, continual implicit and explicit threats of harm. These sometimes in-person

and online threats are real and distressing for those who experience them. Additionally, with relatively easy access to members' personal profile pages and varying degrees of privacy settings available on Social Networking Sites (i.e., SNSs), friends and strangers alike have the ability to monitor others without their knowledge. Walker and colleagues (2011) reported 33% of young adult respondents had received unsolicited tokens of affection, 34% had been contacted by someone pretending to be somebody else, and 30% experienced undesirable and excessive communication. While most cyber-based pursuit is relatively uncomfortable but benign, prolonged exposure to ICTs is correlated with increased risk of a person experiencing unwanted pursuit via those same media (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002).

Media and Digital Technologies

There is a long history of studies examining the controversies of children's use of media on both their social and cognitive development (Lauricella et al., 2021). Common sense media indicates that young children, age zero to eight years, use screen media almost every day, including television, DVDs, computers, video games, and mobile devices (Rideout, 2013). Studies on video game play have explored the ever-increasing social panic over violent media effects on aggressive online and offline behaviors. Online video games such as Multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs) and massively-multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are notorious in popular media for vitriolic play (e.g., Carlson, 2013). Recent work has examined gender biases and racial stereotypes (Ratan et al., 2015) and discrimination based on national origin (Fragoso, 2015). With limited parental monitoring and often hostile expectations for game play, these online environments are well-insulated spaces where cyberbullying can occur. For example, with technological skill, anonymity, and expectations for aggressive communication offered by some games, children and adolescents are vulnerable to becoming both cybervictims and cyberbullies. However, video games are also being used to engage in family time, providing the opportunity for skill improvement, education, and mental and physical health (Strasburger et al., 2014). Leveraging video games to combat cyberbullying could prove beneficial for parents committed to protecting their children against becoming a perpetrator and/or victim of cyberbully attacks.

In summary, the approaches described here highlight some important communicative contexts with opportunities to explore communicative processes beyond the individual. Here, we see a conceptualization of cyberbullying that includes both skill *and* process, individuals *and* relationships, children *and* adults—something well suited for family communication scholarship in particular.

FAMILY COMMUNICATION AND CYBERBULLYING: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Cyberbullying is a pervasive problem with a few defining elements that can frame how researchers conceptualize and operationalize people, systems, technologies, and enacted behaviors. Additionally, topic avoidance behaviors within families (Guererro & Afifi, 1995a) complicates conversations where children and parents can openly discuss the technological and psychosocial components of cyberbullying. Below, we argue that family communication research, child-focused and family focused research, is particularly well suited to address the study of cyberbullying. We outline some theoretical and conceptual frameworks that might complement the cyberbullying prevention work already being undertaken in other disciplines as a way to encourage talk on cyberbullying and its effects of children, adolescents, and caregivers.

Trait Verbal Aggression

Communication scholars have provided theoretical advancement to the study of cyberbullying. As examples, Ramirez et al. (2008) and Roberto and colleagues (Roberto & Eden, 2010; Roberto et al., 2014a; Roberto et al., 2014b) suggested a few communication-based approaches to cyberbullying rooted in aggressive communication (Infante & Wigley, 1986) and the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Among a sample of 1,606 young adults, they found that verbal aggression, risky behaviors (i.e., drinking, smoking, or school detention/suspension), and prior cybervictimization were the only significant predictors of cyberbullying (Roberto et al., 2014a). They also found that cyberbullying was directed toward a friend, another student at school, or an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend. Utilizing these frameworks has provided some initial insight into how trait and relationship focused prevention could be useful. There is more that could be done, however, to link trait verbal aggression as a family process and cyberbullying.

Family Communication Patterns Theory

One theoretical framework that might have significant utility in the study of cyberbullying among children, adolescents, and adults is Family Communication Patterns Theory (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002b). In a meta-analysis Schrodts and colleagues (2008) outlined a number of outcome variables associated with patterns of communication established by families in predicting behavioral (e.g., parents' discussion of and control of TV viewing, family conflict, and physical and symbolic aggression), psychosocial (e.g., physical and mental health outcomes, anxiety and depression, and self-esteem), and information processing outcomes (e.g., attitudes toward TV violence, message persuasiveness, and cognitive flexibility and complexity). Specifically, Schrodts and Carr (2012) determined that family communication patterns predicted trait verbal aggression in a sample of young adults. They found that pluralistic families (high conversation, low conformity) reported lower levels of trait verbal aggression than consensual, protective, and laissez-faire families. These authors suggest that families fostering open communication, perspective-taking, and healthy disagreement might help diminish the development of antisocial communication traits such as verbal aggression. Other studies show that high conversation-oriented families positively influence adult children's feelings about their communication competence (Young, 2009), emotional intelligence (Keaten & Kelly, 2008), and ability to process complex messages without anxiety (Ledbetter & Schrodts, 2008). Utilizing a FCPT framework, one might examine associations between cyberbullying and family communication processes such as self and family schema integration (Ledbetter & Beck, 2014), secret keeping among children and parents (Hays et al., 2017), trait-like orientations to privacy (Bridge & Schrodts, 2013), conflict management strategies (Sillars et al., 2014) and conversations about health-related topics (Baiocchi-Wagner & Talley, 2013).

Inoculation Theory

Another approach—or simultaneous approach—would be to explore ways of enhancing resistance to the pressures of cyberbullying. One candidate for this work is inoculation theory. Inoculation (McGuire, 1964; Compton, 2013) is a theory of resistance to influence. Inoculation theory explains how attitudes (or beliefs, values, or other constructs) can be made resistant to change (e.g., how a negative attitude in childhood toward smoking can be protected against peer pressure later in adolescence, or how a positive

attitude about self-worth can be protected against self-doubt). Just as a medical inoculation can confer resistance to future stronger viral attacks through pre-exposure to weakened versions of the virus, an attitudinal inoculation can confer resistance to future stronger persuasive attacks through pre-exposure to weakened versions of the persuasive influence.

Consider, for example, how a child's positive self-esteem could be protected against cyberbullying taunts by talking with children about what they might experience when using ICTs and, importantly, some ways they might respond when challenged. Such conversations could reflect the requisites of inoculation—a mildly threatening motivator (e.g., warnings about some cyberbullying possibilities) and weakened attacks (e.g., examples of cyberbullying and how to respond, before the attacks occur). This framework has established efficacy in helping children maintain positive attitudes—especially children with lower self-esteem (Pfau et al., 1992). Inoculation theory could help give youth the resources to actively resist negative pressures of cyberbullying, including those who need help the most.

Additionally, inoculation theory might be a particularly productive area for giving youth the resources they need to combat cyberbullying by considering ways to harness the power of family communication. For example, Compton and Craig (2019) proposed various inoculation messages to assist parents from differing family types (i.e., pluralistic, consensual, *lasses-faire*, and protective) on how to discuss substance use and abuse with children, including ideas on how to engage parents in families that typically avoid discussing difficult topics. Inoculation theory seems well suited to motivate these difficult discussions and to provide content for such discussions.

Interventions using inoculation theory could also take the form of video games, harnessing the popularity of games and the engagement that games offer. The components of inoculation theory, such as threat and refutational preemption, could be characterized in video game storylines and dialogue or by the players themselves. Such approaches could model the gamified inoculation game “Bad News”—a game about combatting misinformation that incorporates inoculation components (see Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019).

Developmental Assets in Youth

Drawing from work in positive psychology (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and positive communication perspectives (e.g., Socha & Pitts, 2012), researchers could examine how families and communities build assets in youth, protecting them from cyberbullying and cybervictimization. Wilson and Gettings (2012) note, “Asset-based approaches encourage holistic thinking by moving away from a fragmented focus on ‘one social problem at a time’ and instead exploring connections between social problems as well as thriving indicators” (p. 283). Luurs (2018) notes that while rules and policies frequently admonish problematic behaviors associated with cyberbullying, they tend to fail in establishing competent models for pro-social behaviors. Within an social-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), family communication scholarship would have much to say about the development of these internal assets (e.g., youth committed to doing well in school, parents communicating positive values, youth developing conflict management skills, and youth developing positive identity) and external assets (e.g., families providing support, youth perceiving they are accepted by adults in the community, families having consistent rules, and youth being involved in creative, after-school programs) (Leffert et al., 1998; Wilson & Gettings, 2012).

Although there is evidence that in the context of bullying, children and adolescents experience real emotional distress, some children might demonstrate fortitude when targeted by bullies. For example,

in a sample of 3,141 girls under the age of 18, 55% reported no negative effect after being bullied (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2010). Qualitative data suggests that some girls are quite dismissive of attacks. The authors note that girls view cyberbullies as stupid, pathetic, bored, and attempting to humor themselves (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2010). It is unclear the mechanisms that allow for this deflection of negative messages. They might have developed scripts or stories that assist the dismissal of attacks. For example, Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM) is how individuals make sense of identities, relationships, and challenges through attributions, accounts, narratives, memorable messages and communicated perspective-taking (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). This framework highlights the importance of how joint storytelling enables the development of narrative coherence, the organization of events, and development of meaning of challenging experiences (Koenig Kellas et al., 2010). Additionally, communicative resiliency has been shown to be an emerging theory with which to examine individual and family resilience (Buzzanell & Houston, 2018). Future research might examine how family narratives around difficult experiences (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006), like cyberbullying, can help individuals and the family as a collective cultivate resilience when cyberbullying occurs (Buzzanell & Houston, 2018).

Family Rituals

Creating family rituals that consider age of the child, mastery of ICTs, and parental involvement will be of continued interest among family and media scholars. Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2009) found that when parents were less involved in Internet use, the chances of the child becoming a cyberbully increased. Additionally, independent teens demanding privacy were more likely to be involved in Internet harassment (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Moments when adolescents acquire new technologies like smartphones (e.g., as gifts), or become interested in mastering the use of SNSs for social connection might also be times when they begin demanding privacy from parents, providing opportunities for more unmonitored time. Such situations become particularly important when we consider increased use of SNSs among adolescents and the potential for significant psychological harm and mental distress from cyberbullying, sexting, and online solicitation (Strasburger et al., 2014). If adolescents have received ambiguous messages regarding the rules and norms surround ICT use and good interpersonal communication practices, increased privacy and mastery of ICTs might be the perfect condition for cyberbullying and cybervictimization to occur.

Strasburger and colleagues (2014) suggest extending the focus beyond parental monitoring, creating rules for mobile phones, or limiting Internet use among children and teens. Specifically, Roberto et al. (2014a) did not find that parental monitoring or parents setting limits on Internet use were significant predictors of cyberbullying among a sample of young adults. If this is the case, instead of focusing on monitoring children's Internet use, one might suggest establishing environments of positive communication within families early; environments that promote healthy interpersonal communication in online and offline spaces (Webb et al., 2015). For example, students were bullied less often if they had a close parental relationship (Accordino & Accordino, 2011). Establishing family rituals that include new technologies might be a pro-social way to develop rules and expectations for both relationships and appropriate technology use. Kowalski et al. (2012) argued that weekly family meetings encouraged communication about technology use, cyberbullying, and other important issues facing children. Strasburger and colleagues (2014) highlight co-viewing as a mechanism for fostering conversations of appropriate expectations and rules for media use. Parents might discuss sexting, challenges of communicating online, the importance of protecting passwords, and allowing children to teach parents about technologies

that are confusing to parents (Kowalski et al., 2012). Parents might also model positive ways to utilize ICTs, so children can then identify the ways ICTs enhance personal relationships in positive ways. For example, it might be important to have children engage in connective practices with technologies and others. If children can see the immediate effects their messages have on the people who receive them, we might see a diminishing in disinhibited behaviors. Finally, researchers might examine reverse socialization processes where children guide, teach, and model positive ICTs practices for parents. Promoting empathy, perspective-taking, and relational consequences to communicative behaviors are paramount to the well-being for both children and adults, especially if parents themselves are experiencing cyberbullying. In creating environments where both can be empowered to learn, create, teach, and express ideas, parents and children co-create communication scripts, models, and expectations for all types of good relational practices that can follow them throughout their life.

In summary, the theories and conceptual frameworks suggested here are certainly not an inclusive list. We think, though, that exploring these areas could generate new and important knowledge on conceptualization and operationalization processes, as well as how practitioners might create and implement effective interventions.

CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying can have devastating physical and psychological effects not only for the individuals directly involved, but also indirectly for those part of the individuals' social network, including friends and family. By acknowledging discussions of cyberbullying within families as taboo topics, investigating the ways individuals harm each other is not only important, it is imperative. This is especially important in the context of cyberbullying and family communication where communication rules, expectations, patterns, and rituals can all have significant influence in a child's and parent's life. Considering the prevalent and integrated use of ICTs and the relational/social implications of cyberbullying, particularly among young teens, a sound theoretical framework would help scholars explicate the nuances of cyberbullying, providing a solid footing for open conversations, future coping or preventative strategies. Challenges that face researchers include conceptualizing and operationalizing cyberbullying; utilizing theoretical frameworks that capture cognitive, social, structural, developmental, cultural, and communicative components; staying up-to-date on emerging ICTs; examining individual characteristics and larger networks associated with cyberbullying; and understanding the role of cyberbullying in personal relationships. Applications of this work might include the education of children, young adults, and adults about cyberbullying in personal relationships and discussions on how family communication processes socialize parents and children on sound ICT practices. The challenges are many, but the potential solutions—especially from those in a communication discipline embracing the importance of process and recognizing the power of relationships—are even greater.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Cyberbullying: Deliberate and repeated harm to others through the use of communication technology.

Cybervictim: Target of deliberate and repeated harm through the use of communication technology.

Developmental Assets: Cultivation of internal assets (e.g., positive values) and external assets (community support systems) that promote healthy child development.

Family Communication: Messages, symbols, and discourses that organize and create rules, rituals, and routines of a family system.

Information and Communication Technologies: The inclusion of past, present, and future technological hardware and software that aids in human communication.

Inoculation: Resistance to influence.

Rituals: Specialized gatherings, events, or routines where families engage in socialization of children, support of healthy technology use, cognitive development, and reverse socialization processes.

Sense-Making: Use of stories and narratives to engage in perspective-taking and organize coherent frameworks around adverse experiences.

Chapter 11

For Love or for Business: Taboos of Family Business Communication

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ABSTRACT

This case study of Dr. Esther Perel’s How’s Work? podcast focuses on couples who work together. Two primary types of relationships shape the study: those in business together who are blood related and those who are married or partnered. In this work, taboo is constituted as uncomfortable topics that remain undiscussed. Prior to therapy, Perel’s dyads did not openly speak about their issues with one another. What they did do, however, was mentally roll over the issues on their own. Even though both parties deeply considered the taboo issue(s), they did not directly address taboo topic(s) with their partner until they had the opportunity to do so with Perel. To that end, this work is an extension of Roloff and Johnson’s research on taboo topics that are left undiscussed until they are carefully addressed in a planned interaction. This chapter contributes to knowledge around taboo topics relevant to family business and how different types of families have differing taboos.

INTRODUCTION

Renowned couple’s therapist, Dr. Esther Perel, brings therapy to podcast listeners in her series *How’s Work?* Every episode begins with the voice over, “*How’s Work?* is a onetime unscripted counseling session focused on work” (Gimlet Media, 2021). This one-line primes listeners to hear and learn about work-related problems as discussed in a therapeutic setting. The current study focuses on episodes of Perel’s podcast that feature couples or family members who are in business together. In listening, the audience is

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reminded that work-related problems are relational problems—especially in a family business. Scholarly interest in family businesses is relatively underdeveloped despite its dominant international presence (Siebels & zu Knyphausen-Aufseß, 2012). As family businesses employ 63% of American workers and the majority of businesses around the world are family owned, these struggles may be similar to ones experienced by Perel's listeners (Astrachan & Shanker, 2003; Family Business Alliance, 2017; Siebels & zu Knyphausen-Aufseß, 2012).

While many approach a work construct in a capitalist, neoliberal sense—namely, work is just work—nothing is *only* work when it involves family. It is much more complicated to walk away from a toxic work environment when it is the family business. Disagreements at work, financial problems in the firm, issues with upper management, and power struggles all become major problems influencing the 9-5 and workers' home lives. In those scenarios, work impacts family, and family impacts work (Yu et al., 2012). Talking openly and bluntly about those problems reveals a unique space for taboo topics and conversations to surface, especially in cultures more focused on monetary gain than relational outcomes.

In this study, two types of relationships shape the family business: those who are blood related (e.g., mother/son, twin brothers) and those who are married or partnered. Working with a family member in either scenario opens the door to travail. When the boss reprimands an employee at work, employees may interpret that action from a familial standpoint and not as professionals in a workplace setting. To these ends, the therapy community has recognized a need to provide services specifically to blood-related families who work together (e.g., Cole & Johnson, 2012; Lee & Danes, 2012; Michael-Tsabari & Lavee, 2012; Strike et al., 2018). There is similar role confusion for married/partnered couples. Weaving together lover and co-owner/business partner identities is potentially fraught especially if one relationship undermines the other (i.e., they focus on the business rather than their personal relationship) (e.g., Barnett & Barnett, 1988; Jaffe, 1990; Kaslow, 1993). In those instances when both the business and interpersonal relationship cannot be maintained, most research focuses on preserving the marriage/partnership over the business (e.g., Cole, 1997, 2000; Danes & Morgan, 2004; Jaffe, 1990; Kadis & McClendon, 1991). A few authors have written about couples who work together in their business after divorce (e.g., Brown, 1990; Cole & Johnson, 2007). In Perel's work with her clients, *How's Work?* listeners hear not just her direct interactions with couples, but also her commentary as podcast host speaking to a podcast audience. In most cases, Perel finds space for the couples to remain together in both capacities as business partners and close family members.

BACKGROUND

Addressing Taboo

For the purpose of this study, taboos constitute uncomfortable topics that remain undiscussed. Even though both parties deeply consider the taboo issue(s), they do not directly address taboo topic(s) with their partner. Based on the conversational and narrative nature of this study, the definition of taboo centers on *ideas* rather than acts. Acts, though, may be at the center of the unspoken ideas. Roloff and Ifert (1998) focused on reasons why couples deem particular topics as taboo and came to two conclusions. First, the topic itself was unimportant. Second, consistent argument about the topic was harmful to the relationship. The second rationale is consistent with Dunleavy and Dougherty (2013), who found

marital partners considered some topics (or events) so hurtful, the choice was made to avoid the topic, cease the hurting, and move forward in their relationship.

In this study, the taboo topics were left undiscussed, but the couples had never explicitly agreed to leave the topics unspoken. In later research, Roloff and Johnson (2001) specifically interrogated a couple's ability to reintroduce taboo topics into current relational conversations after avoiding the topic in prior conversations. Their findings suggest couples can productively discuss those topics if the relationship had strengthened since the initial topic banishment. However, if the reason for topic reintroduction was a worsening problem, relational outcomes also became worse. In this study, rather than explicitly labeling a topic "unimportant"—and thus, not worth the conflict that would come from rehashing it—the dyads chose to open the taboo topic in the planned interaction of a therapy session. While Roloff and Johnson (2001) were unable to determine clear reasons why planned interactions around the taboo elicited positive relational reactions, this research continues their work examining taboo topics in intentional conversation.

In a relational setting, myriad topics seem unbroachable based on the awkwardness or discomfort that arises in open discussion. A short review revealed many interpersonal contexts where researchers examined the taboo of discussing or revealing stigmatized topics. Several scholars interrogated the limits of taboo and what is deemed un/acceptable in broaching the difficult topic of death and dying (Wildfeuer et al., 2015), grief (Christensen et al., 2017), and addiction (e.g., Lawson et al., 2021; O'Shay-Wallace, 2020). Beyond those life and death situations, other health communication researchers explore taboo conversations around sex and sexuality (e.g., Hayden, 2010; Javaid, 2020), diabetes (Basinger et al., 2020), and communicating about HIV, HPV, and STIs (e.g., Amusa, 2021; Arendt et al., 2019; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011; Mutonyi & Kendrick, 2011; Muturi & An, 2010; Reinius et al., 2021; Ren & Lei, 2020; Yang & Pittman, 2017). Additionally, there is increasing interest in what might be otherwise considered "taboo women's topics," including pregnancy (Ndlovu & Ngwenya, 2010), menstruation (e.g., Mathew, 2018; Thomas, 2007), breastfeeding (e.g., Bock et al., 2019; Zhuang et al., 2018), and unplanned pregnancy (Lippert, 2019). Common in each of these taboo topics is the socially hidden nature of their undertaking; sex, menstruation, and grief are often viewed as private, undiscussable taboos.

Therapy, seeking therapy, and the thought of "needing" therapy remain largely taboo for many Americans who find the premise of talk therapy frightening, unneeded, or overrated (Kaufman, 2018). There is also the fear of stigma associated with not only seeking therapy but possibly receiving a mental health diagnosis and subsequent treatment (e.g., Byrne, 2000; Simmons et al., 2015; Tharaldsen et al., 2017). Beyond the fear of receiving a mental health diagnosis, research indicates both a public and self-stigma related to seeking care (e.g., Corrigan, 2004; Corrigan et al., 2006). Individuals may perceive a public stigma of those seeking mental health care. Specifically, the public perception is that individuals with mental health diagnoses are prone to erratic behavior, even violence. That public stigma begets subsequent self-stigma, wherein individuals internalize the public equation of mental health diagnoses with violence, and those perceptions then guide therapy seeking (in)actions (Corrigan, 2004). Recent work indicated Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has the potential to help alleviate the self-stigma therapy seekers may suffer (e.g., Lorona et al., 2018; Tong et al., 2020; Young, 2018; Young et al., 2020). Additionally, not all marriage and family therapists are prepared to deal with the complexities of family businesses (Distelberg & Castanos, 2012). Public and self-stigma remain as barriers to seeking therapy even though the dyads in this case study were not seeking counsel as a means of treating mental illness.

Beyond breaking the taboos of therapy, Perel's podcast addresses many obstacles and taboos working families face regarding identity. As Meuret et al. (2016) found in their study of the social identification of patients in group therapy, therapy helps form an empathetic bond between participants and those with

whom they identify. In listening to the podcasts then, audience members hear relationships grow stronger as the dyads speak their truths and find greater closeness with their partner. This dynamic of integrating the two identities—of the firm and of the family—can create both benefits and harmful conflicts for both the organization and the individuals who are part of it (Wielsma & Brunninge, 2019). In what follows, there is an examination of how entrepreneurial families balance (or fail to balance) their family and work lives. This study takes on the hesitance to address taboo topics and the subsequent desire to unpack work/life issues with a counselor. Additionally, discussed in full later, the interdependent nature of related or partnered dyads who also work together comes to the fore. These couples tackle many issues ranging from acknowledging partner strengths, deciding whether to put their time and energy in issues at home or with the business, learning how to run a business from the ground up, and managing conflict both at home and at work. While there are many topics to examine, each taboo came up repeatedly in the same context: couples counseling related to family business. There is no single, simple stamp to place on all these interactions to indicate “this is *the* taboo.” Rather, in conversation, these couples unearth many taboos—things left unsaid or unrecognized—simultaneously.

Complications in Family Business

A review of literature about family businesses demonstrates there is so much contention in family businesses, scholars cannot even agree about how to define the concept of a “family business” (e.g., [Powell & Eddleston, 2017](#); [Siebels & zu Knyphausen-Aufseß, 2012](#)). For the purposes of this research, “family business” indicates family involvement in ownership and employment in the business ([Powell & Eddleston, 2017](#)). Meaning simply, members of the same family own and work at the business. While these businesses may have non-family employees, family members must also work at the business to be included in the sample. Those family members may be blood-related, married, or partnered.

Successful business practice often comes down to sharing values and organizational culture, a process eased when incorporating family members who share communication systems, possess common values, and understand organizational roles ([Barker et al., 2004](#)). There are documented benefits in involving business with family. For example, family businesses are reported to have higher levels of emotional support, support at work, and support at home from their family members contributing to entrepreneurial success ([Powell & Eddleston, 2017, p. 627](#)). Those multiple levels of support, however, are not always present. Research also indicates enterprising together is a strong predictor of divorce, especially in businesses that maximize debt to develop higher sales revenue ([Sanchez-Ruiz et al., 2018](#)). At the same time, family businesses are more likely to take financial risks and hold risky assets compared to non-family businesses, which may exacerbate issues of divorce and relational discontent ([Xiao et al., 2001](#)). Further, not all family members are welcomed or incorporated equally. This is especially true along gender lines, as women and daughters are given essentialized tasks or scorned for time devoted to children/family ([Day, 2013](#)). Finally, some family businesses falter in handling decisions related to succession. To do so means to grapple with the loss of a stalwart family leader and choosing their replacement. These oversights are largely confined to family businesses resulting from attachment to management structures and individuals ([Barker et al., 2004](#)). Continuing family involvement in management and having a succession plan positively impacts business performance in the long run ([Kim & Gao, 2013](#)).

Working with partners and relatives is often made more difficult, as family communication practices bleed over into the family business. Research shows identity development is a dynamic process where family influences business identity and vice versa (Wielsma & Brunninge, 2019). That boundary crossing

also influences communication satisfaction and conflict style and resolution (Paskewitz & Beck, 2017). In the messy interstices between family, business, and conflict, there is an often-overlooked emotional realm. Processing all family and work-related issues inside the family business creates an unavoidable emotional expense (e.g., Judge et al., 2006; Livingston & Judge, 2008; Speights et al., 2020). There is even reason to believe these continuing conflicts in family business not only impact a couple's decision-making about whether to stay together or divorce, but also whether to expand their family through adoption or procreation. Family/work conflict, then, impacts not only the people most intimately involved in it, but the entire structure and composition of the family unit (Burch, 2020).

Podcasts as Case Study Texts

Over the course of its two seasons (November 2019 – June 2021), the *How's Work?* podcast series focuses on several different types of work relationships. Ranging from college friends, to mentor/mentee, to fashion models who crafted their careers together, a subset of the work relationships are people in family business. Regardless of the subjects' backgrounds, Perel, a trained and board-certified couple's therapist, always interviews dyads for her podcast. In this study, the focus is limited to podcast episodes exploring the relationships between people who 1) are related by blood, marriage, or love and 2) work together. That choice was made intentionally to explore taboo topics in family business.

Of the 19 total episodes across the two currently available seasons of the podcast, five (just over 25% of the total episodes) were related to family business and specifically fit the sampling frame. Of those five, two dyads were blood relatives. One pairing is a mother/son combo, wherein the son works for and will inherit his mother's business. The second blood-related family business centers on twin brothers who, while still in their twenties, have started a series of successful business ventures. The remaining three episodes present couples who have started their own businesses together.

It is also worth noting that Perel is a multi-national, multi-lingual therapist. Her clients were also multi-national, as some of the episodes were recorded remotely during the COVID-19 lockdown. This sample features a set of native French speakers, two multi-national couples (wherein one partner crossed national borders to be in the relationship), a multi-lingual/national male relationship, twins who are of mixed sexual orientation, and a couple in an open marriage. These businesses and their owning/running families hail from all around the world. The sample includes couples from the United States, Canada, France, and Italy. While exploring business practices may seem somewhat boring or blasé, the complexities of family members operating and communicating in a business setting dresses the table for drama and taboo. The sample size itself may be limited, but there is a broad range of participants, backgrounds, business problems, and relational issues at hand. As such, the *How's Work?* podcast proves a fruitful venue for case study research.

As a mediated communication platform, podcasts are also incredibly popular. According to a March 2020 report by Edison Research, podcast awareness and listenership in the U.S. continues to rise with one-third of people ages 12 and up listening regularly. Seventy-five percent of Americans are familiar with podcasts, and 104 million report listening monthly (Edison Research, 2020). Podcast listenership continues to grow as does the academic area of podcast studies (e.g., Cwynar, 2019; Euritt, 2019; Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2021; Lundström & Lundström, 2021; McClung & Johnson, 2010; Murray, 2019; Perks & Turner, 2019; Sharon & John, 2019; Sienkiewicz & Jaramillo, 2019; Tran, 2019; Vrikki & Malik, 2019). The burgeoning area of podcast studies continues to pave the way for further research, especially the specific study of podcast listener motivations. In their uses and gratifications study, Perks and Turner

(2019) found listeners turn to podcasts for entertainment with limited neural processing demands. As less demanding auditory sources, podcasts allow for multitasking, entertainment during rote tasks, or enrichment while performing otherwise mindless duties. Research also indicates podcast listeners find community, solace, and sameness in podcasts; audience members can find help when listening to problems that reflect their own (Pavelko & Myrick, 2020; Perks & Turner, 2019; Zehelein, 2019).

Specific to health-related podcasts, Kirkpatrick and Lee (2021) found both expert and experienced sources potentially motivate listeners to make health changes. In seeking out podcasts, listeners self-select the types of content they wish to hear, and many participate on message boards and fan forums. There has been a turn toward the podcast medium for more intimate self-disclosure and identification, as Meserko (2014) found in their study of the show *Mental Illness Happy Hour*. Hosted by comedian Paul Gilmartin, the topics are often culturally taboo: depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, to name a few. Bringing a comedic take to these dark topics helps interpellate an audience that can use podcast content as a means of passive learning (Meserko, 2014). Similarly, listeners of the *My Favorite Murder* podcast found the hosts created a community and safe space for discussing mental health and sobriety (Pavelko & Myrick, 2020). Therefore, it is plausible individuals listen to *How's Work?* to learn how to constructively address similar situations in their own work lives. Even if the topic is not entirely relevant to the listener, there is potential for passive learning, as listeners create their own playlists, integrate into the community, and congregate around taboo with others.

THEORY

Interdependence Theory

Interdependence theory is undergirded by a social exchange orientation (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and is a useful framework for interpreting the taboo conversations that happen between family members in business together. Interactions between partners is the indispensable quality of all close relationships (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). The focus of interdependence theory, then, concerns the nature of possible rewards. If individuals find their current relationship more rewarding than a theoretical alternative relationship, the theory indicates the individual will continue to engage in the status quo (Dindia & Canary, 1993; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Partners can give rewards to and seek them from one another. The structures of interpersonal arrangements impact the choices partners make—whether to spend a large sum of money without discussing it with their partner, seeking sexual gratification outside of the relationship, or opting to stop birth control without partner consent. Some relational dyads accept one or more of these behaviors; others find them all taboo. As individuals, each must consider the possible relational outcomes (positive, negative, catastrophic, or otherwise) and choose whether to engage in those particular behaviors (Sidelinger et al., 2009). Thus, partners are interdependent insofar as they can influence one another's rewards—one partner's inputs are the other's outcomes.

In terms of family business, this might mean helping to lighten the load for a partner, finding a way to maintain “family time” outside of work, and utilizing intentional acts meant to keep the personal relationship lively. In any case, if the rewards of staying in the relationship—work, personal, or both—outweigh the perceived inputs, the theory indicates a relationship will stand. Also salient to this study is the concept of self-perceived power to both dependence and commitment in the relationship (Carpenter, 2017). Drigotas et.al, (1999) suggest commitment asks for vulnerability in the relationship

process. While highly committed couples often experience rewards through a commitment/gratification cycle, vulnerability leaves individuals open to power plays and power loss. Family members in business together share much of their life, livelihood, and time. Acknowledging interdependence, risks, rewards, power, dependence, and commitment is imperative as these couples navigate personal and business relationships simultaneously.

Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT)

At its basis, Relational-Cultural theory (RCT) posits people possess an inherent desire to connect with others through relationships, and culture impacts the way those relationships develop (Jordan, 2010; Jordan & Hartling, 2010; Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Pompeo-Fargnoli, 2017). Coming out of second wave feminism, RCT developed as a therapeutic practice working to depathologize the valid complaints that women (in particular) had at the time. Since its development in the 1970s, RCT has grown into a theory that assumes productivity in relationships. For this study, actual couple's therapy sessions can serve as a functional text to gauge productivity in a relationship. Using RCT to examine Perel's therapy sessions with dyads who work together creates potential to understand communication rifts and relational insecurities in family/business relationships. Perel works to talk her clients through the interdependence they share as relatives or relational partners as well as coworkers (typically co-owners) in business together.

RCT illuminates interpersonal and relational communication narratives (Swiatkowski et al., 2020), especially as these relationships face the unique obstacles of navigating both personal and business relations. Five central tenets serve as indicators of growth-fostering relationships in RCT: 1) a sense of zest or energy in the relationship; 2) an increased sense of worth, including self-worth, self-esteem, and worth in relationships; 3) a sense of clarity about the relationship; 4) the ability to take action inside and outside one's significant relationship; and 5) a desire for more connection in the relationship, often brought about by current satisfaction in the relational experience. These tenets are paired with their negative alternatives. For example, a lack of zest or clarity serves to indicate a relationship missing its growth-fostering ability. Those negative flip sides are also known as the central relational paradox within RCT.

Together, interdependence theory and RCT can explore the balance in a relationship between partners while also assessing the overall condition of the pairing. This approach provides insight into relationship motivators (e.g., risk and reward) and the efficacy of those motivators (e.g., taking that risk increased my/our sense of worth). Through this unified theoretical approach, this study examines intricacies of family/business relationships to understand what is/not taboo in those contexts. To accomplish this task, the following research questions emerge: 1) How do the dyads communicate about the choice to confront taboo topics via therapy? 2) How do the dyads address their management of home and work tensions in their sessions?

METHOD

Methodologically, this study was borne out by undertaking a content analysis through open coding podcast episodes (or cases). In this section, there is discussion of the data itself, a rationale for content analysis in this situation, and theme development as a result of open coding.

The data for this study consists of the audio and transcripts for each of the five selected podcast episodes. These transcripts consisted of 94 pages (40,554 words) transcribed from 5 hours 48 minutes of original podcast time. Transcripts were made available on the *How's Work?* website by podcast sponsor Gimlet Media (Gimlet Media, 2021).

Content Analysis

Content analysis was chosen as a research approach to best explore the issues at stake in the bounded systems of these podcast episodes. This study is a collective or multiple case study defined by Creswell (2007) as one which has a single focus—taboo—and several cases closely surrounding that topic for consideration. This examination then led to an analysis of themes to further understand the family/business dyads and their complexities (Creswell, 2007; von Rosenstiel, 2004).

Coding and Finding Themes

The first two authors began a process of open coding the transcripts together in real time. It was an inductive process focused on finding the types of taboo topics that came up in couples therapy when family business is at the center of the conversation (Keyton, 2019). Data was pulled from each episode dealing with the choice to seek therapy as a dyad in family/business together. That data is used to address the first research question. Full open coding initially resulted in eleven codes. The average number of codes recorded per podcast was 56.8. The minimum was 32, the maximum was 75, and the median was 57. In total, 298 codes were recorded across the five episodes. The two most salient codes for this research revolved around relationship management at home and at work. The themes of family at home and family at work together made up 122 of the total 298 codes, or just over 40% of the entire dataset. Figure 1 includes an operationalization of the two most salient themes along with their frequencies. Content from this largest part of the data set came together as the primary way to answer the second research question.

Figure 1. Description of themes with frequencies

Theme	Frequency	Episodes	Description
Family at home	67	5/5	Refers to how the couple/family comport themselves at home. Includes their communication practices, issues, and problems.
Family at work	55	5/5	Refers to how the couple/family comport themselves at work. Includes their communication practices, issues, and problems.

RESULTS

Research question one tackles the decision to seek therapy as an avenue to explore taboo conversations or topics. To begin, there is a section on seeking therapy, where Perel's clients find ways to put words to the previously unsaid—a central tenet of the working definition of taboo in this study. In choosing to

voice their otherwise unspoken issues, the couples bring light to the usefulness of therapy as a tool for others in their same family/business position. The second, and largest portion, of this section is dedicated to an examination of the dyad's management of their home and business lives in response to research question two. Those larger codes are broken down for a more granular understanding of the issues the couples face.

Seeking Therapy

This initial taboo is primary to the entire study, as many of the dyads waded into therapy for the first time. Seeking therapy remains a taboo topic for many in contemporary culture (Kaufman, 2018). The choice to pursue therapy came up in nearly every episode. For example, with the mother/son realtor dyad, Perel notes: "In this case, I realized that they've been talking to each other in their heads for a while, and this is the opportunity for them to actually say some of these things out loud" (Perel, 2019). The therapeutic setting gave them the opportunity to voice the hardships rolling around in their heads for months or years. Similarly, Perel asked twin brothers to turn to one another and voice their issues, "because I'm not sure that that's even something you guys have ever really talked about" (Perel, 2021b). Even though the twins were incredibly close siblings and had worked together as serial business owners since their late teens, they had never put their worries into words before their session with Perel. As a final example of seeking counseling as a way to say the as-yet-unsaid, the primary macaron baker in business with his partner divulged, "there's so much stuff that we haven't been talking about" (Perel, 2021c). In that space of not talking, Perel intuited the baker had been "talking to [the partner] in your head" (Perel, 2021c). Just as with the previous two couples, this duo had each been harboring thoughts they felt were too taboo to voice to their partner.

These passages provide hints about how some dyads previously felt either about seeking therapy or about whether to engage their home/work partner concerning these pressing issues. While no client addressed aversion to therapy specifically, nearly all cases noted a lack of communication about the issue(s) with their partner. This finding is consistent with Roloff and Johnson (2001) insofar as the dyads sought a space of carefully planned interaction to begin their discussion of taboo topics kept unspoken for so long.

While three dyads in the study needed a chance to speak their truth for the first time, a couple who ran a successful restaurant and winery together was close to therapy fatigue. The husband voiced his frustration with continuing to seek therapy and noted "my biggest hang up at this point is that we're just going to continue to like go to counseling and like talk about the idea of all that stuff, but never actually put anything into play" (Perel, 2020). His frustrations with previous, unproductive counseling sessions prompted him to file for divorce, as he cannot be monogamous and prefers an open marriage—an arrangement his current wife and business partner does not prefer. In this case, "putting into play" the advice of a counselor may be insurmountably difficult for him, as he cannot perceive himself as compliant. Here, unlike Roloff and Ifert (1998), the couple did not remove the taboo topic from the conversation. The couple never discussed (or even mentioned) the topic due to potential damage or lack of productivity. Instead, the taboo topic was seemingly too hot to ever put on the table. They skirted around it, rolled it around in their heads, and imagined alternative outcomes—all without bringing it up in conversation. These examples illustrate therapy can provide a way to address some topics, no matter how taboo.

Family at Home/Work

For the purposes of discussing taboo topics between couples in their conversations at home and work, these two themes have been condensed. Both themes were most prevalent and occurred across all five podcasts, with 67 occurrences of “home” and 55 of “work.” Please refer to Figure 1 for full descriptions of the codes. In what follows, the major themes of family at home and work have been aggregated and subdivided (or re-coded) into four subthemes: acknowledging partner’s strengths, deciding where to focus time and energy in the personal or work relationship, handling work issues as first-generation business owners including mistakes and overreaches, and managing conflict as a couple. These subthemes capture the victories and struggles of working with family.

Acknowledging Partner’s Strengths

In the first subtheme of the home/work codes, couples speak frankly to one another about their perceptions of each other’s strengths, what they bring to the business, and the pride they find in working together. In speaking with one another about myriad business problems, each dyad acknowledges the reasons they are in business together. Directly pointing out the strengths their partner brings to the business and the complementary way their strengths interact is a rather loving, intimate conversation. While not itself taboo, this acknowledgement lays the common ground for therapeutic space for growth. These hat tips toward the other partner begin with the esoteric claim the wife of the gym-owning couple made of her husband— “he’s the intellect in our relationship. He’s extremely intelligent”—and of herself— “I think I bring love. I bring, care” (Perel, 2021a). Understanding a gym as a business requiring both a scientific approach to physical strength and an interpersonal relationship with clients, this couple initially set themselves up for success knowing they could achieve more together than separately.

In the same sort of model, the male couple who own the macaron shop have clearly delineated roles to fulfill inside the business. One partner begins: “He is the, the pastry chef. He’s the creative guy. He is busy with the products.” While the other partner says: “He is anything to do with customer contact, customer care, the, the logistics. Basically, everything to do with what happens to the macarons from the door out” (Perel, 2021c). In this case, the duties are distinctly divided between production and customer service with very little overlap. Similarly, the less business inclined twin says of his brother, “I think you are so naturally gifted with business and you have the education to back it up” (Perel, 2021b). In recognizing that one twin has a business degree and the other does not, there is a bit of tension when it comes to work. The degreed twin, however, supports his brother’s (non-business related) educational pursuits.

Others are less obvious in acknowledging their partner’s skills. The husband who runs the restaurant and winery notes, “we both know each other’s strengths and weaknesses, so like, I know I’m not good at the things that she’s good at” (Perel, 2020). While the roles were not specifically expressed, he recognizes his wife for her talents. Finally, the mother/son duo negotiated some tense times when the son returned from school, as the son says, “I was very arrogant, at the time” (Perel, 2019). The son’s arrogance led him to believe he knew more about the business than his mother, who spent decades in real estate. The mother, however, finds usefulness in their differing approaches. “He reached a point that he’s able to do it himself,” she said. She then follows with “I did it my way...and he’s doing it his [way]” (Perel, 2019). In acknowledging their partner’s strengths publicly, the rewards of interdependence are put on display. Additionally, this type of uplifting communication aids the dyads through their relationship so they can gain a sense of self-worth, increased clarity, a greater sense of zest, and a desire for more connection

in the relationship. According to RCT, this is growth-fostering communication. Voicing their partner's strengths establishes a foundation where dyads can address taboo topics and grow their personal and business relationships.

Deciding Where to Focus

In this second subtheme of the home/work category, Perel's clients find their attention split between work and home lives, making it difficult to decide where to focus their time and efforts. The balance needed to establish successful, happy, and harmonious home/work lives is precarious. For example, one of the twins expressed that "at times I've felt erased by the business" (Perel, 2021b). Their interdependence as a co-working twin set subsumed the identity of the less business inclined brother leaving him to question his value to the team. This perceived loss of self illustrates the central relational paradox in RCT. This brother questions his self-worth, lacks zest for their business pursuits, and does not connect to others in the process. It took therapy to break the silence related to the taboo of his identity loss, as this is the first time this twin voiced his erasure to his brother.

Coming out of their session, one of the male partners expressed about their macaron business, "we have to get back to the beginning where we felt in love with each other but also ambitious and the happiness we had started a company. And I think deep inside of me I know it's still there" (Perel, 2021c). Rather than falling victim to the business, this man acknowledges a balance between the love he has for his partner and the zest he feels for their work. While they currently experience the central relational paradox within RCT, they acknowledge they can find their way back to a growth-fostering relationship. The zeal for their romance must match their business interest for this couple to succeed. To find that success, they need to uncover the true harmony of work/home interdependence. Even though more absorbed in the business, this couple can pull themselves back to a place where they also enjoy their romantic relationship.

The married couple running the gym has a similar problem. But in their case, the husband puts all his energy into work, runs out of steam, and comes home in need of a recharge. That leaves the wife to do household tasks without his help. She says, "Because I do things that, that I really love, I cook and, and take care of our household and plan things. And, but then I start to resent doing those things because I'm doing them alone" (Perel, 2021a). There is a tension between the enjoyment she finds in these tasks and a desire to feel supported at home. This solitary feeling at home leaves her self-worth unclear and demonstrates the central relational paradox.

The final offering from this subtheme comes from the owners of the restaurant and winery. The husband had a couple of extramarital affairs and moved out of their shared home. While they continue to work together, they have been living apart for two years. Considering these issues, he is frustrated with all the time and energy they spent focusing on counseling. Perel reorients his frustrations, commenting:

they've spent two years talking about the relationship, auditing it versus being in it or investing in it, and they know the difference because it's exactly the opposite of what they have done in their business, which of course is a successful business by virtue of the fact that they invested a lot in there, all kinds of resources that they don't know how to bring into their own private sphere. (Perel, 2020)

This tension in distributing their resources—time, energy, ingenuity, and even love—is a struggle for interdependence between their successful business and their marriage. The husband expressed an inability to see the productivity of therapy, which leads to a shared central relational paradox.

There is a certain level of stuck-ness in each of these discussions, either through inaction or inability to act. A desire for more “home” connection with their partners exists, but that is difficult to find when “work” investments supersede. Ultimately, this indicates taboo topics invite/create the central relational paradox, which can threaten/disrupt home, work, or even both relationships.

First-Generation Business Matters

The third subtheme of the home/work codes highlights problems first-time business owners experience when seeking work/life balance. While much of the literature and narrative around family business concerns succession and long-term viability, each of the businesses in this sample are first-generation businesses. The real estate-owning mother is by far the most experienced of the group and the only one actively looking to hand her business on to another generation. All the other businesses are still in the perilous early years. According to the Small Business Administration, as of 2018, 80% of small businesses survive the first year, about half make it to the five-year mark, and one-in-three survive the decade (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2018). These couples experience high stress levels in the early years of their businesses, as they seek to make their hard work and financial investment pay off. It would be nearly impossible to open a business knowing from day one it would fail, create no return on investment, and crush the couples’ dreams. Discussing the idea of business failure, then, falls within the taboo realm.

While each of the couples desire a successful business, not all possess the same knowledge or instinct to preserve a life for themselves outside of work. The gym-owning couple faced the facts early: “I mean, at the end of the day we are, we’re first-time business owners. First time employers, we’re learning it kind of as we go. Um, and could we be doing a better job? Yes, 100%” (Perel, 2021a). This learn-as-you-go mentality is certainly better than refusing to learn at all. This couple sought out resources, like online classes and how-to books. At the same time, they know their business could be more successful today if they made good business decisions from day one. Another misstep centered on passing over small victories. When they initially got their business loan, their first instinct was to get right to work. But they took a moment to realize they had reached a huge milestone, so they celebrated by going out for a beer together. Several years into the business, they forgot to recognize victory along the way. Even in terms of gym memberships, she says, “Oh, we hit 100 members. Great, move on to 150” (Perel, 2021a). Continually striving without celebrating achievement is a direct route to burnout.

That same burnout can happen when home and work bleed into one another, and work never really stops. The couple with the macaron bakery began to realize, “The relationship at work comes home with us” (Perel, 2021c). They fail to remove their metaphorical chef’s hat at the end of the day and, instead, relive the same relationship at home: one in the kitchen organizing everything, the other in charge of the rest. “[W]e almost forgot that we can be ourselves and not the business partners here in the house” (Perel, 2021c). Even though their romantic relationship pre-dated their business, they forgot how to come home as a loving couple who can separate themselves from work. The family business took over all elements of family life. In these cases, the couples make the mistake as first-time business owners to rely too heavily on the rewards that come from business interdependence—growing clientele, revenue, and year-over-year success—while forgetting the rewards of interdependence as couples.

One way or another, each of these duos had to find ways to remember themselves outside of work. Business can easily take over all the hours in a day, especially when the businesses are run by first-time owners who are just getting their passion projects off the ground, and the struggle to push back on constant work came through in this subtheme. In capitalistic cultures where work and money seemingly mean everything, choosing to “turn off” and revert to a self *outside* of work is effectively taboo. These folks invested their hard-earned time and money into a family business. Choosing to find time to place work on the backburner becomes verboten and potentially detrimental, thus they find themselves in therapy openly discussing this taboo for the first time.

Managing Conflict as a Couple

In the final subtheme of the larger, home/work aggregated theme, conflict comes to the fore as a harbinger of problems. Sometimes the issue is differing conflict styles; other times, the issue is continuous conflict, or defining the difference between business issues and home issues. For example, the gym-owning couple understands their typical conflict resolution style is to shout it out. The husband says, “I wanna stop that fiery interaction between the two of us. It doesn’t serve either one of us and it doesn’t serve our business anymore” (Perel, 2021a). That is a difficult cycle to stop, as he also says, “I think that’s hard for us ‘cause we both get defensive and both of us want the last word” (Perel, 2021a). This couple recognizes their detrimental conflict style, as it directly impacts their employees, the business, and the workplace atmosphere. They cannot continue to fight at work, because those interactions are not appropriate for employees or clientele to witness. If they want to see long-term business success, this couple realizes the importance and necessity of work interdependence. Additionally, they need to focus more on fully understanding themselves and their partner, as increased understanding will help quell loud conflict and move them back out of the central relational paradox.

While the gym-owning couple had a mode of conflict that “worked” for them in their personal life (with adjustments for the business setting), the macaron bakers did not have a productive conflict style at home or work. The first says, “I take his way of communication way too personal. Uh, I’m getting angry, I’m getting frustrated, and I don’t recognize myself in this kind of behavior” (Perel, 2021c). This partner knows he is not his best when he allows himself to get too worked up while in conflict. Acknowledging he does not recognize the person he becomes when he acts out toward his partner signals a lack of understanding of himself in accordance with the central relational paradox. At the same time, the other partner says, “I contemplated recently, I was like, ‘Shit, I’m leaving. I have to leave.’ And it’s so hard. I, I really love the guy. In a lot of ways, he brings that best in me” (Perel, 2021c). Feeling a need to leave a relationship exhibits yet another element of the central relational paradox: a lack of desire for more connection or closeness. Having the quiet desire to exit the relationship is a hallmark of the negative side of RCT. This exchange showcases how both partners felt so unappreciated it was time to call it quits. Here, conflict forces the couple to weigh the benefits of staying in the relationship versus leaving, which serves as the fulcrum for interdependence theory. When there are no longer rewards for staying, the social exchange is unbalanced and entire relationships (work and home) dissolve.

The twin brothers hit a major bump in their relationship when one came out of the closet. Coming out at age 25, this twin found his brother:

...wasn’t accepting at first when I first came out to him, which is so interesting because, like, if I think, like, [my] biggest ally now, it’s you. But it wasn’t the case at the beginning. I think you were, like, shocked, or

to me it felt like you were shocked and disappointed, and I remember at that time, you told me, like, “We should never work together again, because you’ve been lying to me for however many years, and I’m just finding out.” I didn’t actually tell him. He found out by coming across some messages with somebody. I think- I think he felt, I mean... To me, it seemed like you felt so... It was like I’d lied to you. (Perel, 2021b)

Things did get worse for the two of them in managing the conflict over the “secret” of sexual orientation. Feeling as though he was misled, the straight brother’s immediate reaction was to cut all business ties with his gay brother. Conversely, the straight brother violated the gay brother’s privacy by reading his messages without consent. For the first time in their lives, these brothers found a rift large enough to separate them. After the straight brother reacted to the coming out, the gay twin kept his distance for about 18 months. In their session, however, the straight brother recognizes his overreaction and acknowledges his brother kept his distance “for good reason,” and he accepts that his brother “cut him out completely” for that year and a half (Perel, 2021b). The conflict strategy during that time became one of avoidance on both the personal and business fronts. While the straight twin gained a greater sense of clarity about his now-out brother, he used that understanding in a hurtful manner in reacting poorly toward his twin. The gay brother found, maybe for the first time, a chance to truly take action in the relationship by distancing himself in those toxic early days. Eventually, the brothers resolved the conflict and reunited. Inevitable conflict arises from taboo topics in any relationship. Conflict *management* surrounding those taboo topics, however, determines if life/business partners succeed or fail in any part of the relationship.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Interdependence theory asserts relationships are based on an input/output system of perceived costs and rewards. Each of these dyads faced dueling forces that enabled or disabled them from giving or receiving rewards. Primary among those problems was lack of open communication with one another about their relational problems. Prior to their Perel sessions, it was unclear that opening the can of proverbial worms and addressing their taboo would be met as a reward. Indeed, many feared engaging with those topics would cost them their interpersonal relationship, their business relationship, or both.

Consider, for example, the couple who owned the successful restaurant and winery. She loves the business and finds incredible personal gratification in her accomplishments at work. At the same time, they no longer live together based on his infidelity and request for an open marriage. Her reward is staying in a business she loves—but he is willing to leave. His reward is leaving the marriage and finding sexual gratification elsewhere—but they may lose the business. In either alternative, the reward for one partner comes with a high cost to the other. The outcome hinges upon a frank and open conversation about what each partner is willing to give in order to reward the other. When faced with two seemingly untenable outcomes, a third approach acknowledges the reward structure inherent in relationships to create a path forward.

As Drigotas et.al, (1999) suggest, commitment in seeking and gaining rewards necessitates vulnerability in the relationship process. That vulnerability can be a barrier to seeking therapy, as it may leave individuals open to power plays and power loss. It then becomes crucial to find the right counselor—one with experience in the realm of family business therapy—to assist in navigating those vulnerable waters. As Distelberg and Castanos (2012) note, it can be incredibly difficult to find that perfect provider, as family business-related issues are not represented in all practices. There is growing evidence, however,

that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is a useful tool in helping couples find paths forward, out of self-stigma and shame, and into a more tenable future (e.g., Corrigan et al., 2006; Tong et al., 2020; Young et al., 2020).

There are similar applications with Relational-Cultural theory. All the couples come to voice their deep dissatisfaction with the status quo and (finally) put into words long-held taboo discussions. Relational-Cultural theory provides a framework to analyze the relative strength of each relationship and mark its growth-fostering potential. As expected, as the couples receive professional counseling for their problems, growth-fostering communication is largely absent. Surprisingly, there was one area where positive communication and growth-fostering discussions were consistent. As each of the couples energetically acknowledged the strengths their partners brought to the business, individuals within the dyads demonstrated a clear sense of their own self-worth as well as that of their partner. In those moments, they indicated a sense of understanding themselves and their relational other, provided a sense of productivity in the relationship, and communicated closeness and pride in their partner's contributions. In making that series of acknowledgements, they fulfilled all five tenets of RCT. Notably, in those conversations, the positive affirmations of the partner's worth were relegated to the area of work. It became clear why the dyads *worked* together, but there was no clear consistent understanding of their value at home or in their outside-of-work relationship.

Aside from the single instance of affirming the potential for a growth-fostering relationship, the other findings were consistent with RCT's central relational paradox. In that paradox, the negative potential of the five tenets emerged. The couples found themselves confused about what they wanted or what their partners could provide; they were unable to find excitement in either work or home relationships. Simultaneously, they began to question their own self-worth (both at work and at home) and struggled to retain the closeness and connection they expected from their relational other. Through their planned interactions, as Roloff and Johnson (2001) suggest, they were able to voice their unspoken thoughts and release the taboo feelings about the unease in their work and home environments.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The clearest implication of this research is more family business members would benefit from carefully planned interactions to unearth the taboos they harbor. Perel's clients demonstrated growth and gained clarity in their sessions while finally speaking directly to their relational other about problems at home and work. It also became clear many taboos occurred simultaneously. While all taboos were unvoiced prior to the sessions, the sheer number of possible taboos held in family business is worth considering. This indicates the need for greater research into family business taboo broadly, more paired partner research into the topic, and more qualitative approaches to the taboos that exist in family businesses.

Additionally, more research is needed to closely examine the relationship between podcast listeners and their subsequent actions. As passive learning tools, podcasts have the potential to shape the actions and re-actions of listeners who find themselves in similar life situations. As podcast playlists are self-selected and curated, more work is needed to determine not just *why* audience members listen to these podcasts but also *how* they apply information from the episodes into their daily lives.

CONCLUSION

This case study of Perel's *How's Work?* podcast focused on couples who work together. Two primary types of relationships shaped the study: those in business together who are blood-related and those who are married or partnered. In this work, taboo was constituted as uncomfortable topics that remain undiscussed. It became clear Perel's dyads had largely not spoken about their issues with one another. What they did do was mentally digest the issues on their own. Even though both parties deeply considered the taboo issue(s), they did not directly address taboo topic(s) with their partner until they had the opportunity to do so with Perel. To that end, this study is an extension of Roloff and Johnson's (2001) work on taboo topics left undiscussed and carefully reintroduced in a planned interaction. That planned interaction enabled the dyads to bring their hidden taboo topics to light. As such, one of the major contributions of this study is an illumination of taboo topics relevant to family business.

Podcasts formed the basis of this case study and furthered the literature related to potential audience learning. Given the preponderance of family businesses around the world, listeners can curate their own playlists and possibly find information useful to their lives and problems. Finally, in relationship to theory, this study demonstrated the clear usefulness of interdependence theory when read alongside Relational-Cultural theory. Interdependence became key in understanding the reward structures as perceived by the participants. RCT was also useful in this study, as it helped demonstrate the growth-fostering activities (or lack thereof) in which the dyads participated.

A key limitation in this study was the availability and diversity of texts. While the five podcast episodes under analysis vary widely in demographics and business types, there were far fewer multi-generational, succession-related family businesses than anticipated, with only the mother/son realtors being in the position to consider succession. The types of relationships were also pre-determined by the available episodes, as the sampling frame included all episodes that addressed "family" business whether by blood or by partnership. Additionally, as podcast episodes that each ran about one hour, there is so much more to the stories to which the listener is not party. The structure of the texts meant interpretations were based only on what was explicitly said in the moment with as much context as was provided—even though a much richer story surely exists.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Content Analysis: A research method focused on the study of documents and other texts as communication artifacts. This method is often used to determine the presence of particular words, themes, or concepts as may fit the study.

Family Business: Business ventures owned and operated by families. Family may be defined as nuclear, married, or chosen.

Interdependence Theory: An approach to understanding the interactions in a relationship based on how each person's outcomes are dependent upon the actions of the other.

Podcasts: Episodic programs made available as digital audio files. Listeners can curate episodes on personal listening devices for convenient consumption.

Relational-Cultural Theory: A continuously updated second-wave feminist theory that interrogates women's (or minoritized peoples) positions in relationships. Also, a form of therapeutic practice.

Taboo: Implied prohibitions of actions or ways of speaking that are socio-culturally bound.

Therapy: The practice of meeting with a licensed therapist, counselor, or social worker to resolve conflict, problematic behaviors, and/or tensions.

Chapter 12

Family Communication at the End of Life: Breaking the Taboo Through Entertainment Media

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ABSTRACT

Communication at end-of-life remains a stigmatized and taboo topic among families. Despite evidence indicating open communication and engagement among family members in the end-of-life process, people still struggle to communicate in this taboo topic. This chapter will review the literature of end-of-life communication among families, including theoretical approaches, challenges and barriers to open end-of-life communication and advance care planning, and depictions of end-of-life in entertainment media. Opportunities to overcome the taboo nature of communicating about death and dying by using media entertainment, specifically film and television, as a conversational platform to launch discussion aimed at overcoming the stigma surrounding death and dying are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Death is an inevitable human experience that each one of us will experience, either through the death of a loved one or our own eventual end-of-life. Research supports that end-of-life is a process (Murray, et al., 2005) and quality communication among patients, family members, and health care providers is essential to positive outcomes (Keeley, 2007; Jackson et al., 2012; Tenzek & Depner, 2017). Throughout the death and dying process there are many opportunities for presence through quality communication,

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including at the moment of diagnosis, conversations about place of care, and moment of death (Jackson et al., 2012; Tenzek & Depner, 2017). The more engaged and present individuals and their family members are throughout the death and dying process, the closer the relationships between the dying and their surviving family members can be (Keeley & Yingling, 2007). This strengthened relationship continues after death and can assist the surviving family members through their bereavement process. Beginning the end-of-life conversations early also provides opportunities for gained knowledge regarding one's preferences and advance care planning (ACP), which outlines one's final wishes for end-of-life care and decision-making. Encouraging conversations about end-of-life preferences before a health crisis occurs and decisions must be made has a number of positive outcomes, including enhancing families' confidence in end-of-life choices, reduction in suffering, and leading to a greater agreement between families' and patients' preferences for dying and post-death arrangements (Gardner & Kramer, 2009; Meeker & Jezewski, 2005).

Ultimately alleviating stress and creating greater meaning for all involved when a loved one is dying. In contrast, when end-of-life issues are avoided and not addressed prior to one's death, the quality of end-of-life care and well-being of the surviving family members is compromised (Tilden et al., 2001). With the opportunities to engage in ACP one may expect people would take the opportunity to fill out forms and have these important conversations. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Over the past 30 years the number of Americans filling out an advance care plans has remained under 40% (see Moody, 2020; Morrison 2020; National Academies of Science Engineering and Medicine, 2021), despite encouragement from formal caregivers. Even if an advanced care plan is complete, explicit conversations regarding ones' end-of-life preferences may not be shared with family members. The reason many avoid end-of-life conversations is because death remains a taboo topic in which people may feel anxious or hesitate to start the conversation with a loved one (Keeley, 2007, 2017; Prince-Paul & DiFranco, 2017; Quill, 2000).

This does not have to be the case. Normalizing communication about death and dying before a loved one's end-of-life can remove the stigma and better prepare family members for this process. To this end, this chapter will address the taboo nature of end-of-life communication among families by delving into the current issues with end-of-life processes and present opportunities for engaging in difficult, yet meaningful end-of-life discussions by using mediated communication, specifically television and film, as conversation starters. Utilizing entertainment media as opportunities for end-of-life conversation starters provides a less threatening approach to the taboo topic of end-of-life enabling family members to initiate meaningful conversations and continued engagement through the end-of-life process and into bereavement.

BACKGROUND

In order to understand the significance of communication at the end-of-life and the processes involved, it is first important to consider the familial context in which end-of-life occurs. Health-related issues are central to family life (Pecchioni & Keeley, 2011) and the death of a loved one is recognized as one of the most stressful life events families face (Murray et al., 2005). When thinking about the end-of-life process, one often thinks of death as an individualized process for the person that is dying, yet that individual is relationally connected to a multitude of interpersonal others, including family and health care providers (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Tenzek & Depner, 2017). After the death of a loved one, the survivors' sense of self and how they view the world and their place in it is profoundly impacted as they experience

bereavement and life after loss (Toller, 2015). Research has examined the role of family in end-of-life care in a variety of ways. Communicating about death and during an end-of-life event of a loved one is an emotionally-charged experience for all involved. Despite evidence indicating open communication about end-of-life provides opportunities for closure, connection, and can set up a meaningful end-of-life experience for family members and their dying loved one (Keeley, 2007; Generous & Keeley, 2014, 2020; McQuellon & Cowan, 2000), many families avoid talking about death and end-of-life.

McQuellon and Cowan (2000) emphasize that authentic conversations at the end-of-life can enhance and deepen the meaning of life for those dying and their loved ones. However, talking about death and dying in the U.S. and many Western cultures has been recognized as a taboo since Kubler-Ross's (1969) classic work. Even in formal caregiving settings, the topic of death is often avoided in most doctor-patient conversations (Quill, 2000). This discomfort surrounding end-of-life communication limits how frequently and thoroughly the topic is addressed and increases the mystery and dread within the general population. Talking about end-of-life is also fraught with uncertainty and tension as family members can have competing perspectives, fears, and goals.

Family systems theory (Bowen, 1978) provides a useful lens for describing the dynamic relationships among family members. Families are dynamic systems that are interdependent upon each member and continuous, during life and after death. The death of a family member can create emotional shock waves felt throughout the extended family system, creating emotional reactions that threaten the functional stability of the family as a whole (Bowen, 1978). Although family members grieve as individuals, the death of a member disrupts the family system's equilibrium, modifying the structure, and requires the system to reorganize the roles and functions of the surviving members. The role the dying individual fulfilled within the family (and the degree to which other family members depended on that individual) influences the family systems ability to adapt during end-of-life and after death (Shapiro, 2001). Further, which family members are involved in decision making during one's end-of-life reflect long-standing patterns of interaction within the family system and are dependent on the pre-existing rules and roles (King & Quill, 2006). Established patterns of family communication and privacy rules may either encourage or discourage family members from openly communicating intimate feelings and wishes at end-of-life (Bute et al., 2015). Previous research on family communication patterns has found that families who create relational environments that encourage open and unrestrained communication are more supportive of open conversations regarding health (Campbell-Salome et al., 2019; Holt, 2006; Kenen et al., 2004; Rauscher et al., 2015). Whereas families high in conformity that stress hierarchy and homogeneity of beliefs may be less likely to openly communicate about family health concerns (Campbell-Salome et al., 2019). More specifically, a family history of avoiding personal, difficult, or emotional topics has been identified as a barrier to engaging in conversations related to death and end-of-life care preferences (Roscoe & Barrison, 2019).

End-of-life conversations are also intergenerational in nature, often commonly occurring between older adults and their adult children (Murray et al., 2005; Egbert et al., 2017). Over 20 years of research on communication at the end-of-life has documented the role, impact, and importance of communication between terminally ill individuals, their family members, and health care professionals from a variety of contexts (Keeley, 2007, 2017; Wallace 2015). Although end-of-life communication from the healthcare perspective has received a great deal of attention, of particular focus recently has been on the content and function of end-of-life communication between terminally ill individuals and their close relational others. Specifically, Keeley and colleagues (see Generous & Keeley, 2014, 2020; Keeley, 2007; Keeley & Yingling, 2007) have identified personal conversations individuals have with dying loved ones, referred

to as *final conversations*. This line of work has provided an essential focus on the verbal and nonverbal messages shared between close loved ones at a time in which people generally don't know what to say or do. Their findings have identified, from the survivors' perspective, specific conversational themes ranging from the ordinary everyday talk to meaningful and memorable messages of love and identity (Generous & Keeley, 2014, 2020; Keeley & Yingling, 2007). Final conversations occur in the time between one's terminal diagnosis until death; a personal and private time period in which individuals share messages of love, clarify religious and spiritual beliefs, are afforded opportunities to reflect about one's self, share everyday messages, begin healing relational wounds, and engage in instrumental talk in which they make known their final wishes about end-of-life care and funeral arrangements known (Generous & Keeley, 2014, 2020; Keeley, 2007).

It is important to note that family dynamics and perceptions of relational closeness between the dying individual and loved one influences how final conversations occur; more specifically loved ones that are already relationally close are more likely to engage in final conversations (Generous & Keeley, 2014). Moreover, final conversation topics such as expressions of love that verbally or nonverbally communicate affection for each other can function to bring the dying individual and their loved one even closer (Generous & Keeley, 2014). Communicating with dying loved ones has positive post-death outcomes for the surviving individual, as Generous and Keeley (2020) found surviving individuals experience personal growth, in that they make sense of the experience and have new found meaning after engaging in final conversations with their dying loved one. Personal growth was found to be particularly strong after conversations centering on self-identity, which include messages describing their personal and relational characteristics (i.e., personality strengths, what their relationship meant to each other; see Keely, 2007). Sharing what you love about one another, what aspects of that person will be missed most, highlighting one's gifts or talents, and what the relationship has meant in his or her life contributes most strongly to personal growth as these messages prepare the individual for the difficult emotional journey post-death.

Taken as a whole, the research using different theoretical perspectives to understand family communication at end-of-life presents valuable insight to death and dying, further highlighting the role of family and close relational others in the private and personal communication that occurs in the final days of one's life. However, because the end-of-life process and death of an individual is unseen prior to a beloved family member's death, the communication about end-of-life remains a stigmatizing and taboo topic, leaving family members unprepared for final conversations and the critical decisions that must be made. Therefore, topics of end-of-life are often avoided or perceived as unnecessary until a healthcare issue becomes a crisis, which may blindside loved ones, forcing family members to make decisions under emotional distress.

CHALLENGES OF END-OF-LIFE COMMUNICATION

At the end of life, family members are often at the forefront of end-of-life interactions and serve as primary caregivers for their terminally ill loved ones. Family members are also the primary communicators with healthcare and palliative care professionals in the event a loved one is unable to make decisions for themselves. Yet too often family members feel unprepared for the end-of-life processes, which often involve health care decision-making, the responsibility of fulfilling their loved one's final wishes and end-of-life preferences, and post-death arrangements for their loved one. This places a serious emotional burden on families at an already emotionally challenging time.

There is evidence that the acceptance of an impending death and advanced planning decreases the use of life-at-all-cost medical involvement, which too often only prolongs the inevitable and can lead to more pain for the terminally ill and anguish for the family members (Bernacki & Block, 2014). Family end-of-life communication that clarifies one's treatment preferences and identifies a family member as a healthcare surrogate is associated with more timely "do-not-resuscitate" orders, higher rates of life support withdrawal, and shorter intensive care unit stays (Lambda et al., 2012). Involving family members through communication and sharing advanced care plans, while also preparing legal forms known as advanced directives, can facilitate healthcare decision-making by outlining one's preferred choices for medical care and interventions and choosing a specific family member as a proxy decision maker. These conversations can also highlight the dying individual's values concerning quality of life, the type of setting they desire for end-of-life comfort care, and post-death preferences for cremation or burial. However, the challenge lies within the conversations about death, dying, and even the word "death" itself as the topics are often avoided by both family and healthcare practitioners (Berry, 2008). The way we use language surrounding death and dying is often referred to as the "elephant" in the room (Berry, 2008; Fearnley, 2010; Quill, 2000). There are a variety of reasons for this, including the discomfort or fear felt when talking about death, denial of death occurring (Roscoe & Barrison, 2019), uncertainty about what one's end-of-life preferences actually are, and a desire to protect loved ones (Schickedanz et al., 2009).

Death is a complicated topic to discuss because it involves biological, socio-cultural, spiritual, and emotional elements. Despite the universality of death, the way individuals and families negotiate the meaning of end-of-life is greatly influenced by one's familial upbringing, culture, religion, and overall societal beliefs. Death avoidance is common within U.S. culture, where Americans have attached fearful meanings to death and dying, and the process of dying is often private and unseen outside of the immediate family and health practitioners. This cultural attitude towards death, including fear and avoidance, is passed down by adults to their children, continuing the cultural cycle of death avoidance. Researchers have identified fear of death, denial of death, and a belief that modern medicine can fix all problems as a barrier to discussing end-of-life issues (Roscoe & Barrison, 2019). Medical technology that extends life has also resulted in care dominated by efforts to delay death by all means available and forcing families to make decisions about whether to prolong the process of dying or "pull the plug" to end medical care. Being able to extend life through medicine has shifted attitudes towards seeing death as a failure, rather than an expected stage within the normative life cycle.

Moving dying loved ones out of the home and into hospital, hospice, or palliative care centers has distanced families from the intimacies of death and provides fewer opportunities for younger family members to participate in death-related experiences (O'Gorman, 1998; Rando, 1993). This distance has shifted attitudes away from perceiving death as a normal event that occurs within life, resulting in families experiencing increased stress when confronted with death that hinders open communication about end-of-life. Because of this family members, patients, and even health care providers often struggle to communicate comfortably and effectively about end-of-life and end-of-life health care decisions, leaving next of kin or surrogate decision makers with uncertainty when forced to make medical decisions for dying loved ones. There is increasing evidence that avoiding end-of-life conversations may result in longer hospital stays (Ahrens et al., 2003), greater risk of continuing life-sustaining treatment against a patient's wishes (Parks et al., 2011), and diminished quality of life for the patients and their family members (Siminoff et al., 2006).

The manner in which death occurs also influences whether the family has had a chance to engage in end-of-life conversations and advanced care planning. Dying of old age is considered a normative

event over the life course. Death of a parent is the most common form of family loss middle aged adults experience (Murray et al., 2005); as expected as these deaths are, they are still painful and can be difficult to mourn. Older individuals are more likely to engage in advance care planning and/or complete an advance directive compared to younger individuals (Bauer-Wu et al., 2009; Freer et al., 2006). Whereas non-normative or sudden life events such as an accident, heart attack, injury, or suicide can leave the family with little time to plan, ultimately overwhelming the family with pain and grief. Chronic illness may provide families with time to prepare for end-of-life, however in such cases family members often experience a series of stressors and anticipatory grief before end-of-life occurs. Further, family members can still perceive the death of a terminally ill loved one as sudden or unexpected when they feel they are not yet “ready” (Murray et al., 2005). Even those diagnosed with a terminal illness still may not engage in end-of-life conversations. In a study of women with advanced stage breast cancer, 40.7% reported not sharing their end-of-life wishes with loved ones as well as not having a written advanced directive (Bauer-Wu et al., 2009). The same sample of women reported a higher likelihood of discussing end-of-life decisions with their lawyers (20.7%) rather than with their physicians (6.9%). For family members that are ready to discuss end-of-life preferences, approaching the conversation of one’s death in a way that makes the individual still feel wanted and valuable can be a barrier (Roscoe & Barrison, 2019). This is where family communication patterns come into play; if an individual has a pattern of avoiding personal, challenging, or emotional topics, they may become agitated or refuse to discuss end-of-life issues (Roscoe & Barrison, 2019), contributing to death avoidant behavior within families.

Resources to assist with advance care planning and filling out advanced directives are available to help mitigate these challenges. Yet fewer than one-third of American adults have completed advanced directives (Moody, 2020; Morrison 2020; National Academies of Science Engineering and Medicine, 2021; Rao et al., 2014) and it can be a challenge to motivate individuals to complete advanced directives before they are needed (Durbin et al., 2010). As the time of death approaches, dying individuals may experience pain, confusion, delirium, labored breathing, or loss of consciousness (Kehl & Kowalkowski, 2013). At this stage, pain medication may be required to provide comfort to the dying individual. An immediate family member (or members) will then step in and act as primary decision-makers, referred to as surrogates, to communicate with health care professionals on behalf of the dying loved one. It is at this critical stage that the dying individual should already have an advance directive in place so family members know how to proceed with their dying loved one’s final end-of-life preferences.

To start that process, online websites and groups are available to provide individuals with resources for talking about death and an open forum to discuss end-of-life with others. Websites such as Death Cafe and Death over Dinner (DoD or “Let’s Get Together and Talk About Death”) enable anyone to gather virtually to initiate end-of-life conversations. Research on Death over Dinner forums found that the format provides a space for individuals to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with end-of-life, yet within the conversations contradictions and mistrust regarding whether families would follow through with end-of-life preferences were present (Lambert South & Elton, 2017). Further, one limitation of the web-based forums is that those who are most likely to log in and participate in end-of-life discussions are already motivated to initiate the conversations, leaving out those who may not have considered discussing death and end-of-life preferences prior to death occurring.

Giving credibility to the mistrust regarding whether families will follow through with end-of-life preferences, family members acting as surrogates often report emotional distress, uncertainty, lack of knowledge when making a decision on behalf of another (Lopez & Guarino, 2011), or multiple family member conflict around end-of-life decisions even with an advanced care directive in place (Roscoe &

Barrison, 2019). Individuals' emotional reactions to situations that involve loved ones can become more intense in stressful situations. Although family members may have good intentions, individuals react to crises differently or have different visions regarding care for their loved one, ultimately affecting their judgment and decision-making. Survival and life-at-all-cost mentality for medical treatment options often overshadow death with maintaining hope and optimism. Denial of an imminent death of a loved one may impact decision making, with a tendency to focus on quantity of life over quality of life (King & Quill, 2006), with family members resisting the withdrawal of life-sustaining measures or insisting on aggressive treatments (Goldsmith et al., 2011). These decisions from family members may counter the preferred end-of-life care the dying would have opted for. This further highlights the dialectic tensions and competing goals individuals experience during end-of-life.

At this point, the opportunity for a quality end-of-life experience has been missed, raising the risk of long-lasting negative emotional impact on the surviving family members. Feelings of guilt, resentment, and/or doubt can linger long after a decision has been made, complicating the bereavement process (Wendler & Rid, 2011). When assessing the variety of grass roots web-based efforts and research on strategies for communicating about end-of-life, combined with the call for different approaches to advance care planning, there is still a great need to help people overcome their hesitations about end-of-life communication. The question remains - how do we encourage family members to engage in end-of-life conversations and planning prior to a medical crisis? The initiation of these conversations continues to be a challenge because the fear of death remains. The challenges for overcoming the taboo nature of end-of-life communication are steep, but the next section addresses opportunities for integrating end-of-life conversations with family and loved ones within a less threatening context.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conversations with loved ones regarding end-of-life preferences are easier when enacted before a medical crisis arises and scholars across disciplines and healthcare organizations have called for individuals and families to take advantage of opportunities that serve as an opening for end-of-life conversations (see Nickels et al., 2021; Niemiec & Schulenberg, 2011; Pecchioni & White, 2015; Tenzek & Nickels, 2019). Pecchioni and White (2015) have aptly stated "in a culture that avoids conversations about death and dying, providing examples of *how* to initiate those discussions seems vital" (p. 134). Therefore, in order to address end-of-life as a taboo topic and a stigmatized conversation, this section will highlight past and current research on death in entertainment media with the goal of highlighting how it can be used as a mechanism to open the door to conversations about death and dying. Instead of trying to reverse or recreate deeply embedded socio-cultural beliefs about death and dying, although incredibly important in the long-run, a tangible solution for overcoming death avoidance within families is to examine death and dying in a context that is readily available and less threatening to the general population.

The pass-time of watching television and movies has been a consistent activity of American society due to their massive popularity and ease of accessibility. Although many families within the Western culture are distanced from death, depictions and narrative storylines of end-of-life and death are ubiquitous throughout news and entertainment media they watch, thereby bringing death into the home on a regular basis. In fact, death in various forms has been an integral part of film and television narratives from the beginning of the medium (Niemiec & Schulenberg, 2011). Therefore, television and films containing

storylines of end-of-life can help address fears about death and provide a way to become informed about the often unseen human experience of death.

The significance of television and films extends far beyond their entertainment value due to the passive nature of an entertaining narrative, which can serve as a source of persuasion and education. Research on themes within entertainment media suggests mediated narratives play a role in shaping viewers' conceptions of reality. Media theories such as *cultivation theory* (Gerbner et al., 1980) argues that when people are exposed to a consistent set of messages, they incorporate information from their viewing into their understanding of the world around them. While viewers may not consciously watch television and films to learn about health information, cultivation theory suggests that health information presented in entertainment form could affect their ideas about health-related issues. For health issues that viewers' have limited experiences with, television's influence on one's conceptions of reality and values can be particularly strong (Pfau et al., 1995; Quick, 2009). The capability of films to educate lies in the fact that viewing is a visual process, linked to leisure and entertainment (Alarcon & Aguirre, 2007). Further, the visual element allows individuals to immerse themselves into the entertainment narrative, connect emotionally with the fictional characters, and explore their own feelings regarding a situation.

Cinemeducation refers to the use of movie clips or whole movies as a pedagogical tool to educate viewers about the bio-psycho-social-spiritual aspects of healthcare (Alexander, Pavlov, & Lenahan, 2007). Cinemeducation has consistently been used in medical curriculum to provide a humanistic perspective to help students understand patients and develop empathy (Blasco et al., 2006; Shapiro & Rucker, 2004). An example of this is the film *Wit*, which follows a middle-aged woman's journey from a metastatic stage IV ovarian cancer diagnosis through chemotherapy and eventual death. Assessing the effectiveness of using *Wit* as a pedagogical tool, Ozcakil and Bilgel (2014) found an overwhelming majority of medical students (80.5%) reported a greater degree of consideration to the emotional and spiritual suffering dying patients experience as a result of viewing *Wit*. Due to the pervasiveness of entertainment media, it is therefore argued that the media can serve as a useful tool in creating meanings and influencing attitudes about life and death for general audiences as well.

Television dramas and popular films provide individuals with information regarding health care decisions and opportunities for learning about health care options. Embedded with prosocial messages that impact awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, medical dramas in particular are considered a type of *entertainment-education* (E-E), meaning entertainment that serve as educational opportunities (Moyer-Guse, 2008; Thompson et al., 2000; Ye & Ward, 2010). The narrative depictions within medical dramas often depict life and death decisions that must be made quickly. For example, *ER* (Chulack et al., 1994-2009) and *Grey's Anatomy* (Rhimes, 2005-present) storylines contain emotionally engaging and informative depictions of various patient-provider relationships, medical decision-making situations concerning informed consent, family release for organ donation, and the terminations of treatment with and without advanced directives (Gauthier, 1999). Organizations such as Hollywood, Health, and Society work directly with television script writers and producers to implement timely and accurate health information into popular television shows (i.e., *Grey's Anatomy*). However, it is important to consider that television and films are often criticized for unrealistic portrayals of either heroics to save a life or sensational extraordinary causes of death. For example, of the 857 death-related scenes Schultz and Huet (2000) identified across 65 films, most were dominated by sensational and violent deaths. This finding enforces the notion that television and films often perpetuate misconceptions about death and feed unnecessary fears (Niemic & Schulenberg, 2011). This is often the case due to a romanticizing of

illness within narrative scripts for entertainment value, that are not always adhere to scientific, medical, or historical truth (Alarcon & Aguirre, 2007).

Even so, the death portrayals in television and films can still serve an important function by both showing death and exploring the influence that death has on the human experience (Sullivan & Greenberg, 2013). Entertainment media can cultivate an awareness of death and encourage a discussion among viewers by disseminating information about the end-of-life experience. For example, watching *ER* (Chulack et al., 1994-2009) or *Grey's Anatomy* ((Rhimes, 2005-present) may encourage viewers to engage in advance care planning conversations with loved ones after witnessing fictional families and health care providers engage in frenzied decision-making within the show (Gauthier, 1999). Television dramas that focus on family dynamics also provide opportunities for observing challenging end-of-life conversations. Research analyzing the NBC primetime show *This is Us* (Fogelman et al., 2016-present) has found the depiction of familial characters engaging in end-of-life communication and decision-making regarding a character's cancer diagnosis and another character's stillborn infant loss (Nickels et al., 2021). Nickels and colleagues (2021) identified viewers are exposed to difficult end-of-life conversations and decisions families experience when a loved one is diagnosed with a terminal illness, as well as the impact a sudden and unexpected death has on the surviving family members. By focusing on the family dynamics, television shows like *This is Us* (Fogelman et al., 2016-present), depict the interplay of life and death, the effect the end-of-life event of a family member has on the surviving members. Viewers observing death and end-of-life conversations occurring among the fictional characters within mediated entertainment provide opportunities for conversation starters for viewers of all ages who may not know how to approach the challenging end-of-life topics (Tenzek & Nickels, 2019).

Another television drama, *Six Feet Under* (Ball et al., 2001-2005), centers around a family that owns and operates a funeral home and portrays the impact the death of a loved one has on surviving family members. By focusing on the funeral home perspective *Six Feet Under* (Ball et al., 2001-2005) also introduces viewers to the logistics of post-death experience, including the cost of caskets, the option of cremation, overall funeral costs, and expose viewers to the sanitized language of the funeral business (Schiappa et al., 2004). Viewers are also exposed to what happens to the body after death, including the process of identifying a body in the morgue, preparing the body for open casket viewing, and details of what happens to the human body when it decomposes (Schiappa et al., 2004). Although watching death scenes has the potential to increase one's personal fear of death as they face their own mortality, observing the respect paid to the deceased and care for bodies within the funeral home has been found to prompt less fear about what happens to one's body after death (Schiappa et al., 2004). Studies such as these (Nickels et al., 2021; Schiappa et al., 2004) highlight the potential portraying end-of-life and death within entertainment media as a socializing agent with respect to death attitudes. For example, as a result of watching *Six Feet Under* (Ball et al., 2001-2005), a viewer may decide they prefer to be cremated as a result of learning the high financial strain of funeral expenses and casket costs, therefore verbalizing their decision to their loved ones and/or including this decision in an advanced care directive.

The dramatic element of the entertaining narratives draws viewers in and can produce emotional grief reactions in response to fictional character death, comparable to grief responses felt towards losing close others in real life. The parasocial connection and emotional response viewers have with fictional characters can create empathetic emotions for others and end-of-life (Mutz & Nir, 2010). The death scenes within the mediated entertainment have been found to assist viewers in developing sensitivity and empathy for the deceased and for the survivors, ultimately having profound short-term effects of eliciting grief responses within the audience (Shapiro & Rucker, 2004; Foss, 2020). As viewers become

immersed in the narrative, their connection to the characters grows, producing a stronger parasocial connection. Viewers are able to explore their feelings of sorrow, anger, or grief when a beloved character dies without the real-life direct involvement of losing a loved one (Shapiro & Rucker, 2004). Storylines that explicitly explore end-of-life are also addressing grief head on. For example, *This is Us* (Fogelman et al., 2016-present), focuses on the familial and individual effect of losing significant members of the family (i.e., newborn baby, and a father) in a way that demonstrates the complicated and prolonged nature of grief, rather than a single one-time event. Another example is Netflix's drama-comedy *Dead to Me* (Feldman et al., 2019-present), which depicts a widow's wide-spectrum of grief responses ranging from intense sadness to rage. By showing how death and grief continually affect individuals throughout life and how grief responses are retriggered long after a loved one has passed, the mediated narratives help normalize the life-long process of grief after losing a close loved one.

Death scenes are not only limited to adult demographics in film and television. Research on Disney and Pixar films found more than 80 percent of films have some implied or explicit depiction of death (Tenzek & Nickels, 2019, see also Bridgewater et al., 2021; Cox et al., 2005). From Simba losing his father in *The Lion King* (Allers & Minkoff, 1994), to Carl losing his wife in *Up* (Doctor, 2009), to Anna and Elsa's parents dying in *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), death is a common theme in most popular Disney and Pixar films, exposing young children and viewers to end-of-life and grief depictions in the fictional characters, but also stirring up parasocial grief reactions within the young viewers. For children the death of a loved one can be a confusing and scary time. Watching animated films can provide opportunities to help open up conversations about end-of-life, explain and prepare them for death, and understand their grief. Disney and Pixar films such as *Coco* (Unkrich, 2017) also expose viewers to different cultural perspectives on end-of-life by celebrating the Mexican tradition El Dia De Los Muertos (Day of the Dead). More recent Disney and Pixar films, such as *Soul* (Doctor, 2020) and *Onward* (Scanlon, 2020), base the entire narrative around death, whether it is death of the main character himself in *Soul* (Doctor, 2020) or death of a parent in *Onward* (Scanlon, 2020).

However, despite the influence and prevalence of death in children's media, parents are still believed to be a child's primary source of information. Using kid-friendly movies as a starting point to discuss end-of-life can give them the tools to start to understand death and grief. Analyzing conversations about death between parents and children, Bridgewater and colleagues (2021) identified a third of polled parents reported their children asked questions about the death of characters in animated films. Findings overall suggest children ask questions about death while co-viewing animated films with their parents that elicit information about death in general. Yet, some parents are still reluctant to talk about death with their children, even after witnessing death scenes in films, suggesting that parents are not always taking advantage of the opportunity to engage in end-of-life communication (Bridgewater et al., 2021). Not discussing death with children can implicitly communicate to the child that it is not okay to share feelings of grief and loss within the family system (Porterfield et al., 2003). Although many parents want to shield their children from death, children inevitably experience death and grief from losing a grandparent, parent, extended family, or even the death of other young kids in their community. As Bridgewater et al., (2021) aptly stated, "one problem is to figure out how best to convey to parents that these films can be used to educate children about death" (p. 15). Therefore, it seems fitting that what is still missing is clear communication guidance on how to talk about death when given opportunities within films and television.

Identifying specific films and television shows that explicitly model open end-of-life communication is another approach. A classic example is the 1983 *Sesame Street* episode entitled "Farewell Mr. Hooper"

in which the characters openly addressed the death of actor Will Lee, who played Mr. Hooper (Simon et al., 1983). In the episode the adult characters discuss Mr. Hooper's death with Big Bird, providing clear communication statements that can be applied in real-life contexts. For example, the adult characters empathetically tell Big Bird that when people die they don't come back, highlighting the permanence of death. The episode also addresses emotional responses such as anger and grief, as well as Big Bird's fears of being provided for. Although the episode does not offer further guidance into how to address follow-up questions related to cause of death or religious and spiritual beliefs, it does provide a genuine opportunity to start the conversation about end-of-life based on the real-life death of a beloved actor and character. More recent television shows, such as *This is Us* (Fogelman et al., 2016-present), also explicitly depict end-of-life conversations occurring between adults and children. Specifically, viewers are exposed to explicit portrayals of family members engaging in conversations regarding end-of-life decision-making (e.g., the decision to end chemotherapy and plans for funeral arrangements) and final conversations that occur between a dying family member and their loved one. *This is Us* (Fogelman et al., 2016-present) also explicitly portrays conversations with children, explaining life and death and sharing ways to memorialize deceased loved ones in preparation for the eventual death of their grandfather. Identifying specific mediated examples as these may bolster confidence in a parents' ability to engage in end-of-life conversations with their children by modeling their own words and behavior after the characters.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Although there is no single panacea for overcoming the taboo and challenging discussion of end-of-life and death, communication remains at the center of loss and grieving in order to find meaning (Neimeyer, 1999). Keeley and Yingling (2007) state that the dying often want to talk about death, about preparations they need to accomplish, or about how much they will miss their loved ones and life. But in order for this to happen, to provide your dying loved one your presence at end-of-life, one must first overcome their own fears and avoidance of death communication. Engaging in conversations before someone is dying, and doing so in a context that is less threatening and emotional, opens the door for greater presence and more meaningful talk when the inevitable end-of-life occurs. Further, the relational elements of trust, nonverbal communication, and empathy are important to build in order to delve into the discussion and provide presence for the dying.

Films and television bring people together through entertainment but can also bring people together in conversation. Identifying end-of-life and death themes in the entertainment media forces viewers to embrace the reality of mortality; which in turn provides an opportunity to start the conversation and break the taboo nature of end-of-life talk. An easy way to start this process is by asking loved ones about their responses to the character deaths while viewing television and films. By asking loved one's questions, such as "what would you decide, if you were in that character's position?" individuals are able to learn new information and identify issues that are important. Individuals can also opt to provide their own preferences to their loved ones while viewing the entertainment narratives play out. For example, after watching *Grey's Anatomy* and vicariously experiencing the anguish of watching a person die while waiting for an organ donor, an individual may open up to their loved one about their desires to donate their own organs in the event they are declared brain dead. Another example is after watching *Six Feet Under* (Ball et al., 2001-2005) and learning about the high cost of funeral expenses, one might open up

to their loved one about their preferences to be cremated, and not want their surviving family members to be financially overwhelmed at an already distressing time.

Further because many films and television shows attract viewers of all ages, this appeals to the concept that end-of-life conversations are intergenerational occurring between family members across the range of ages. For instance, although Disney's *Coco* (Unkrich, 2017) is predominately a children's film, because it deals with death, remembering our lost loved ones, and the dying process from the perspective of both young and older family members, this serves as an intergenerational bridge. The reoccurring song "Remember Me," which is sung by different characters throughout the film, highlights the significance of saying good-bye and honoring family members who have passed away. Watching this film can initiate conversations between family members, including young children and adults, about how our elderly loved ones (e.g., parents and grandparents) pass away, cultural perspectives on death and the afterlife, and identify ways to memorialize our deceased loved ones. Bosticco and Thompson (2005) argued that by creating meaningful rituals and telling stories about loved ones and their death, families can make sense of a loved one's death together (Toller, 2015).

End-of-life issues also do not stop when the dying individual passes. The surviving family members continue to experience emotional grief responses that can last months, years, or decades (see Carnelley et al., 2006). Using mediated examples that portray realistic grief can help individuals understand their own grief or a grief response within a loved one. One example is the character Kate in *This is Us* (Fogelman et al., 2016-present), viewers witness Kate's struggle with grief decades after the passing of her father, and how it has manifested over time into anger and depression. Parental loss depicted in *Onward* (Scanlon, 2020) may provide a connection with children regarding how one's sense of identity can feel fractured. For example, in *Onward* (Scanlon, 2020), the protagonist, Ian, experiences a sense of missing identity due to not knowing his deceased father, yet through personal growth realizes his older brother has fulfilled many of the social roles of a father figure. Watching these scenes collectively can open an opportunity to ask questions, relating the events occurring within the film or television episode, to the person.

Ultimately, overcoming a stigmatized topic is incredibly challenging and will take time and practice. If we can focus on the opportunity for re-framing death, dying, and end-of-life as a normalized experience, individuals may be more willing to engage in the conversation more openly. Another consideration is the language we use to talk about dying. The use of metaphors can be useful for those uncomfortable with the words "death" or "dying" (Moss et al., 2003). Communication scholars Omilion-Hodges and Swords (2017) proposed specific communication recommendations of metaphors and mindful communication for initiating end-of-life conversations. One advantage to this approach is that by learning one's metaphor for end-of-life, family members also learn how someone refers to death and gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions of death. The second proposed recommendation of mindful communication is the employment of reflective, authentic, and adaptive communication behaviors (Omilion-Hodges & Swords, 2017). There are many points for intervention within entertainment media and our communicative choices that could help improve the connection between family members and present opportunities to prepare for comfort and presence during end-of-life. Thus, it is essential to continue to integrate conversations about end-of-life in a more normalizing fashion into our day-to-day lives.

CONCLUSION

Whether death comes suddenly or is anticipated due to age or illness, no one is ever ready to lose someone they deeply love. Overall, the collective research illustrates the challenges of end-of-life communication within the family system and the way in which media can serve as a valuable tool for starting conversations with loved ones. Film and television narratives can provide glimpses into human life, depicting the ups and downs of the human experience, including pain, disease, and death (Alacron & Aguirre, 2007). Films and television also serve as a bridge between the Western culture of death avoidance and the popular culture of watching death for entertainment value. The entertaining narratives enable viewers to learn about experiences of others, cultivating perceptions of what it means to die or have a loved one die, and develop empathy for the human experience of end-of-life. Communicating about end-of-life issues requires patience and time to develop the relational trust to delve into such an intimate topic. Because end-of-life is a process, one conversation is not going to prepare everyone to make decisions for a quality end-of-life experience and waiting for the dying process to start may be too late to develop comfort and understanding of how to engage in and discuss one's thoughts and preferences about end-of-life.

In the chapter the authors focused on death and dying and the end-of-life process as stigmatized and taboo in nature. By utilizing film and television as resources for social modeling and conversation starters within families, end-of-life communication can be normalized and the taboo nature of talking about death and dying can be reduced. Subsequent research is needed in order to continue to analyze end-of-life communication within mediated entertainment and the effects it has on families beginning the process of discussing end-of-life and decision-making. End-of-life research should extend into positive elements of communication and relationships so that there becomes less anxiety, stigma, and fear, but hope, opportunity, and meaning for those who are experiencing the death and dying process. In doing so, presence and relationships across the lifespan can be strengthened and made meaningful, leading to a quality end-of-life experience for the dying, family members, and health care providers. This review serves as a foundation for future scholarship to move forward in the 5+ direction.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Advanced Care Directive: A legal document recording an individual's preferences for future care in the event that person becomes unable to verbalize their own decisions.

Cinemameducation: The use of movies or scenes within movies as a learning tool to educate viewers about aspects of health and healthcare.

Cultivation Theory: A media theory that predicts media viewing influences how people perceive the world around them and their behavior.

Entertainment-Education: Educating through entertainment with a strategic focus of implementing pro-social messages into the narrative storylines.

Family Systems Theory: Families are a complex social system in which each member is interconnected and dependent upon each other.

Final Conversations: Verbal and nonverbal messages that occur between terminally ill individuals and their close relational loved ones.

Health Surrogate: A person authorized to make health care decisions on your behalf in the event you are unable.

Healthcare Proxy: An appointed person who has the legal authority to make health care decisions on your behalf in the event you are unable.

Hospice: Medical care centered around comfort and quality of life for someone with a terminal illness.

Palliative Care: Medical care specializing in pain, symptom management, and comfort care for someone with a terminal illness.

Chapter 13

Negotiated Morality, Families, and Communicating About Menstruation: Sites for Moral Understandings

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ABSTRACT

In the Western world, menstruation has been branded a taboo topic. The purpose of this chapter is to build an argument for the use of morality as a fruitful lens for understanding menstruation communication within families. This chapter frames familial communication about menstruation as sites for the process of moral communication that have implications for the experiences, communication, and (dis) embodiment of menstruators through analysis of original, qualitative data using the concealment imperative framework and negotiated morality theory. In-depth interviews were conducted with mothers ($n = 30$) who identified as either current or former menstruators. Results indicated family functioned as a site for moral communication when discussing menstrual products and in dialogues attempting to normalize menstruation. Framing family conversations as sites for the co-creation of moral understandings of menstruation offer an avenue from which menstruation can be re-storied, not as a shameful or embarrassing taboo, but as an embodied and powerful experience.

INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is a natural and healthy bodily experience seen as both signaling one's transition into puberty (Winkler & Roaf, 2014) and "an integral part of female identity" (Winkler & Roaf, 2014, p. 3). Yet it is stigmatized (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011) and identified as a "taboo topic" (Costos et al., 2002; Kissling, 1996) that can be shame-inducing (Fingerson, 2006; Schooler, et al., 2005). By definition, menstruation is a biological process that begins during puberty and signals a body's ability to reproduce (Quint, 2021). According to Dahlqvist (2018), "it is an experience shared by more than

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two billion people in the world. Every day 800 million people menstruate” (p. viii). The purpose of this chapter is to advance an argument for the use of morality as a fruitful lens for understanding the communication of menstruation, a taboo topic, within families. Familial communication about menstruation is framed as sites for the process of moral communication that have implications for the experiences, communication, and (dis)embodiment of menstruators through analysis of original, qualitative data using the concealment imperative framework (Roberts, 2004) and negotiated morality theory (NMT) (Waldron & Kelley, 2018).

BACKGROUND

Menstrual Taboo

Baxter and Wilmot (1985) define a taboo topic “as an interaction topic that is perceived as ‘off limits’” (p. 254). Menstruation, across a variety of disciplines, has been well-documented as a taboo topic (see Aragón & Cooke-Jackson, 2021; Gottlieb, 2020, among others). Taboos in general, and more specifically menstrual taboos, have been seen as neutral by certain cultural groups (Gottlieb, 2020). Nevertheless, in the Western world and many parts of the Non-Western world, menstruation, as a taboo topic, has undoubtedly been branded with a “negative moral evaluation” (Gottlieb, 2020, p. 151). Consequently, Houppert (1999) has described menstruation as existing within a “culture of concealment” that shames menstruators into keeping menstruation a secret (p. 13).

Concealment, secrecy, and shame reinforce menstruation as a topic that is off limits for all menstruators regardless of age and gender identity (Dahlqvist, 2018). According to Dahlqvist (2018), “the shame is universal and the silence is the golden rule. This affects those of us who are menstruating in significant ways” (p. viii). Persdotter (2020) uses the term “menstrunormativity” to refer to the cultural norms that dictate who should menstruate and the appropriate ways for them to menstruate (p. 358). Concealment, secrecy, and shame are reinforced through these norms and positioned as a type of “menstrual etiquette” (Laws, 1990, p. 43). Examples of concealment norms are keeping period products hidden from view and refraining from any mention of periods especially in the presence of males.

These norms of concealment, secrecy, and shame reinforce menstruation as an off-limit topic even in the context of close relationships. Evidence of this can be found in the research on menstrual euphemisms. Kissling’s (1996) study of adolescent girls’ communication regarding menstruation, found same-sex peer groups developed a variety of tactics for talking about menstruation without actually talking about “it.” One strategy adolescent girls used was what Kissling (1996) referred to as the “objectless start,” meaning they would refer to “the start” of something, but they wouldn’t identify what was starting (menstruation) (p. 300). Similarly, they also avoided explicit mention of menstruation products, like “pad” and “tampon,” because even saying those words caused embarrassment. In lieu of using those terms, they referred to having or not having “some” (Kissling, 1996, p. 302). Another strategy included the use of euphemisms, such as “ragging” or “on the rag,” to manage the dialectical tension between openness about menstruation and concealment of menstruation, in individual efforts to avoid violating taboos and experiencing shame (Kissling, 1996, p. 299).

While menstruators develop creative strategies for communicating about menstruation in their same-sex peer groups; unfortunately, in doctor/patient interaction, research suggests menstruators refrain from speaking about menstruation altogether, even when experiencing pain and other concerning symptoms

related to their cycles (Kadir et al., 2010; Seear, 2009). Seear (2009) noted menstrual stigma creates a hesitancy to disclose menstrual abnormalities, even in health care settings, which can result in the delayed diagnosis of endometriosis and other conditions. According to Kadir et al. (2010), only 40% of women in their sample who suffered from excessive menstrual blood loss reported this to their doctors. Branding menstruation as taboo not only creates emotional and psychological discomfort for menstruators when navigating close relationships and concealment norms, they also place them in situations that can be physically harmful and even dangerous; such as in health care settings when menstruators are not comfortable disclosing physical symptoms related to their cycles. This evidence suggests women feel a *concealment imperative* (Roberts, 2004; Wood, 2020) in a range of interactions, thus highlighting the degree to which menstruators are socialized to self-police their concealment practices.

The Concealment Imperative

The concealment imperative is a conceptual framework used to problematize menstruators internalization of menstrual stigma and taboos, which negatively impact their views of their bodies and selves (Roberts, 2004). Furthermore, this concealment imperative results in self-objectification, self-policing, and self-monitoring of one's concealment efforts in an attempt to avoid shame (Wood, 2020). Wood (2020) argues "the internalization of the culture of concealment is a form of social control... that keeps women disembodied and oppressed" (p. 320). The concealment imperative has long-standing consequences for menstruators' social relationships, health, and relationships with their own bodies. Their socialization into this imperative starts early in life, often within the context of family communication regarding menstruation.

Costos et al. (2002) examined the types of messages mothers communicated to their daughters about menstruation from the perspective of adult daughters reflecting on their mother's messages. Participants perceived their mothers communicated more negative messages regarding menstruation focusing on things such as secrecy, sexuality, and what the researchers referred to as "grin-and-bear-it" discourses (Costos et al., 2002). When it came to secrecy, these maternal messages reinforced the taboo nature of menstruation by emphasizing that periods and period products should be concealed and not discussed. Participants also reported mothers used "code words" such as "the curse" to refer to menstruation (Costos et al., 2002, p. 54). These familial messages about menstruation, have been identified as a type of memorable message.

Memorable Messages

Memorable messages are "remembered for a long time and have a profound influence on a person's life" (Knapp, et al., 1981, p. 27). Waldron et al. (2015), note that memorable messages are "often conceptualized as tools for socialization" (p. 38), as they have been shown to be easily recallable for people in a variety of situations. Family, a well-documented site for socialization (Vangelisti, 2013) where members learn how and what to communicate (Bruner, 1990), is an important context for the communication of memorable messages (Holman & Koenig Kellas, 2018; Koenig Kellas, 2010; Waldron et al., 2014).

Aragón and Cooke-Jackson (2021) used memorable messages to frame the study of sexual health, with particular attention paid to menstruation, within Latina and Latinx women and gender minorities. Results indicated women received both positive and negative memorable messages regarding menstruation. Negative messages of menstruations included comments about tampons being for loose women and

the possibility for taking one's own virginity by inserting a tampon (Aragón & Cooke-Jackson, 2021). Participants also identified inaccurate descriptions of periods, such as bleeding from the abdomen, bright pink blood, and statements that it is just something that happens monthly without any discussion of ovulation or other biological aspects of the menstrual cycle, as negative messages because they lead to fear and confusion (Aragón & Cooke-Jackson, 2021). Positive messages included the normalization of periods as part of growing up and becoming a woman, as well as mothers supplying pads and showing proper usage (Aragón & Cooke-Jackson, 2021). Participants also voiced a desire for more holistic, supportive messages about sexual health in general, and menstruation in particular, in order to better support their overall well-being. One of the supportive messages they wished they received was that there is no need to be embarrassed or ashamed about talking about periods, even in front of males (Aragón & Cooke-Jackson, 2021).

The present chapter extends this research by focusing specifically on parent/child memorable messages and framing these in a morality context. Familial messages about menstruation communicate and serve as sites for ongoing negotiations about family values and morals.

Negotiated Morality Theory (NMT)

Negotiated morality theory (NMT) (Waldron & Kelley, 2018) provides a theoretical understanding of how family values are socially constructed and maintained through family communication. NMT centers family as “an important site for moral learning” (p. 233). According to Waldron and Kelley (2015), “NMT views personal relationships as sites where people negotiate their moral values” (p. 7). Parental messages communicate values, their importance, and the ways those values are expected to be maintained within the family system. Through this process, children come to know what is expected of them and their communication, as it pertains to familial values.

NMT posits that morality is co-constructed through communication between family members (Waldron & Kelley, 2015). As conceptualized, values are not pre-given and disseminated from parent to child only in a top-down fashion. Values emerge in and through communication between any number of family members. According to Waldron & Kelley (2015), “morality [is seen] as emerging from an ongoing cultural conversation about right and wrong, rather than a particular set of virtues, standards, and moral authorities” (p. 7). This dialogic process happens within the family's social interactions. Family communication then becomes more than a site for information exchange but instead a site for mutual co-constructing of “moral understandings” that can then inform one's ongoing “moral commitments” (Waldron & Kelley, 2015, p. 7).

Waldron et al. (2015) further elaborate that “moral commitments are enduring obligations, the important principles that guide a person's behavior and define the core of their moral identity” (p. 36). These moral commitments create a moral order within a family system, and through that order, these commitments are preserved (Waldron & Kelley, 2018; Wood, 1982). NMT proposes eight moral functions of family communication, which include “defining moral standards,” “establishing accountability,” and “engaging moral tensions” (Waldron & Kelley, 2008, p. 82).

This chapter locates parent/child communication about menstruation as a site for moral messaging and argues for the use of NMT as a productive theoretical lens from which to understand communication about taboo topics. As parents communicate their own moral commitments and understandings of menstruation to their children, these conversations could either result in top-down value socialization or they could promote parent/child dialogue, in which moral understandings of menstruation could be

discursively negotiated between parent and child. This pathway will depend on the specific family system and their orientation to communication. As noted above, taboo topics are those defined as off limits. To suggest a topic is off limits, is to make a moral evaluation of said topic. Once labeled “off limits,” due to a negative moral evaluation, that topic has been branded as “bad,” “wrong,” or “undesirable” in some way. Furthermore, communication regarding the taboo topic, and any potential behavior surrounding it, can also be morally evaluated based on the moral order one prescribes to the topic. While NMT can be used to understand how communication surrounding a variety of taboo topics are negotiated in families, this chapter argues for the use of NMT to better understand how family functions a site for the process of *moral* communication regarding menstruation. Bridging memorable messages with NMT is a way to do this. According to Waldron and Kelley (2018), NMT “encourages researchers to listen for the talk that family members use to negotiate, define, and enact their moral commitments” (p. 235). One avenue for listening to family talk is through the exploration of their memorable “moral messages” (Waldron & Kelley, 2015, p. 8).

Memorable Moral Messages

Memorable messages may communicate about an infinite number of topics; however, Waldron et al. (2015) argued for the exploration of memorable messages within a moral framework; NMT. NMT provides scholars with a way to consider how moral commitments are embedded within messages individuals identify as memorable. Moral messages communicate what one perceives to be right or wrong, just and unjust, desirable or undesirable; therefore, memorable moral messages are enduring messages that communicate moral commitments that are remembered for a long time and have a profound influence on a person’s views of right and wrong.

Waldron et al. (2014) explored parents’ memorable moral messages by examining the types of memorable moral messages recalled by young adults and how those messages were communicated by parents. Results revealed seven overarching morality categories embodied in the parental messages participants recalled. The most common category, “relational ethics” (p. 384), addressed a variety of moral concerns and responsibilities within the context of relationships. These include “obligations” one has in their relationships with others (i.e., how to be a “good daughter”), concerns about safe and appropriate sexual practices, “proper treatment of others,” and norms for “social appropriateness” in relationships (p. 384). The second category was “self-honoring behavior,” which focused on either the “bettering of self” or “self-respect” (p. 384). Third, were messages about honesty and included things like, “lying/truth telling” and “acting with integrity” (p. 385). Fourth, “harmful/careless acts,” were described as “those activities that put others or the self at risk” (p. 385). In the fifth category, “[p]arents referenced enduring qualities of virtuous persons” such as “accountability” and “moral fortitude” (p. 385). In the fifth and sixth categories, parents emphasized qualities of people they find to be “virtuous” and “respect[ful of] authority” (p. 385). Finally, in the last category, parents described how one “should” respond when they have done something wrong.

Waldron et al. (2014) also present 11 categories of message types used by parents. These categories included “identity-shaping messages,” which “construct an expected moral identity” and “authority invoking messages,” which invoke authorities, like law and religion, to establish where to look for moral guidance (p. 386). Waldron et al. (2014) used these results to argue for the heuristic value of NMT that allows it to evaluate a variety of contexts, like menstruation.

By considering memorable messages surrounding menstruation as “moral,” the present study allows for the exploration of menstrual messages as sites for the process of moral communication that shape the ways menstruators understand their menstrual experiences, communicate about those experiences, and experience (dis)embodiment. The following research questions guided this analysis: 1) How do memorable parent/child conversations about menstruation function as sites for the process of moral communication? 2) How do these sites shape the ways menstruators understand their menstrual experiences, communicate about those experiences, and experience (dis)embodiment?

FAMILY AS SITES FOR MORAL COMMUNICATION ABOUT MENSTRUATION

Participants, Data Collection, And Data Analysis

This chapter includes data collected through open-ended, qualitative interviews with adult women who identify as mothers ($n = 30$). Mothers were recruited via posts on social media and through snowball sampling (Tracy, 2013). These mothers identified as either current ($n = 24$) or former menstruators ($n = 6$) and ranged in age from 30 to 56 years old, with an average age of 41.23 years. Mothers were married ($n = 24$), single-parents ($n = 5$), or cohabitating with a romantic partner ($n = 1$). A variety of racial and ethnic identities were represented and were self-identified as follows: white ($n = 23$), Hispanic/Chicana ($n = 3$), Asian ($n = 1$), Middle Eastern ($n = 1$), and mixed race ($n = 2$). All mothers attended college for at least some period of time (some college, $n = 4$; Associate's degree, $n = 1$; Bachelor's degree, $n = 10$; Master's degree, $n = 8$); Doctorate degree, $n = 7$).

To be eligible for this study, mothers had to have at least one child aged 19 years or younger. In five instances, mothers had children older than 19 and some younger. These mothers were still included in the sample because they had at least one child who was under 19 and the quality and detail of their recollections of parent/child conversations regarding menstruation were no different from the other mothers in this sample. Participants' children ranged in age from one to 23 years old ($M = 11.52$). Mothers reported having at least one menstruating child ($n = 15$) and not having any menstruating children ($n = 15$).

Rubinsky et al. (2018) call for the use of the in-depth interview in the study of menstruation communication as it allows for a deeper exploration of participants' lived experiences. These interviews allowed for a rich exploration of conversations regarding menstruation as a familial process of negotiating values and moral understandings. In these interviews, mothers were asked to describe memorable conversations they had with family members about menstruation, including any specific messages within those conversations they found particularly memorable. Mothers also described the conversational process(es) used in these interactions along with their current views on menstruation. In these interviews, mothers also shared stories of the memorable menstruation conversations they have had with their romantic partners and children. Finally, mothers were asked to reflect on their personal views of their menstruating bodies and describe how these views may, or may not, have evolved throughout their lifetime.

Because this research explores how family, as sites for moral communication, shape the ways in which menstruators understand their menstrual experience, communicate about these experiences, and experience (dis)embodiment, potential participants must have, or have had, menstrual periods at some point in their lives. While nonmenstruator perspectives are also important for understanding moral messages surrounding menstruation, data presented here only reflect menstruator experiences. These data

are part of a larger study on parent/child communication regarding menstruation, which does include the perspectives of fathers (nonmenstruators).

Interview length ranged from 37 minutes to one hour and 41 minutes, with an average length of one hour and 11 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, which resulted in 1204 double-spaced pages for analysis. This study was reviewed and approved by the institutional review board at the author's university.

Data were preliminarily analyzed using Gilligan's (2015) feminist listening guide approach, which frames the understanding of qualitative data as a series of "listenings" (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 77). The listening guide is a particularly suitable framework for an analysis exploring the usefulness of moral communication to better understand menstruation communication, because it highlights the ways in which memorable moral messages are co-constructed through the interplay of voices and how these operate at the individual level to inform the participant's own subject position and (dis)embodied experiences in regard to their menstrual experiences.

The listening guide outlines three different "listenings" followed by the composition of the written analysis that structure how the researcher listens to the data: "listening for the plot;" "listening for the 'I;'" "listening for contrapuntal voices" (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 78-79). For this study, only the first and third listening were utilized (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). When "listening for the plot," the author engaged in the descriptive process of examining narrative, characters, and plot points in the mothers' stories. Then, when "listening for contrapuntal voices," the author focused on the interplay between the multiplicity of voices with emphasis on points and counterpoints made by each voice in the story.

Results

Process of Moral Communication

Results add further support for treating family as a site for the process of moral communication about menstruation. For the purposes of this chapter, family is not viewed as monolithic. Rather, it is defined using Koerner and Fitzpatrick's (2013) transactional approach which claims family emerges from "emotional ties and shared experience of a history and a future" (p. 129). Examples of this emerged when listening to both mothers' recollections of memorable messages regarding menstruation from their families-of-origin during their adolescence *and* recollections of conversations they have had as adults with their own partners and children. Mothers described how family functioned as a site for moral communication when discussing menstrual products and in dialogues attempting to normalize menstruation. All mothers have been given pseudonyms.

Menstrual Products as Taboo: Engaging in Family-of-Origin Dialogues as Daughter

One of the primary ways menstrual taboos were communicated in memorable moral parental messages was in messaging around tampon use. Mothers' parents, most typically their own mothers, used tampons as a specific site for communicating moral commitments in a variety of ways. One way this happened was through moral evaluations of tampons and tampon usage. For some mothers, the morality of tampon use was associated with maturity. In these instances, tampons were prohibited until they were "old enough" to use them. For example, Maria said, "I got 'you're too young for that,' for quite a few years."

When asked when her mother deemed her old enough to use tampons, Maria said she did not actually know. Her mother never communicated a specific age that represented “old enough.” Sometime in high school, Maria secretly started using tampons. When her mother finally “busted” her for this, Maria described her mother’s reaction:

...She was just, I guess, taken back because she didn’t expect that. I think she just believed that I kind of did what she said; didn’t question it. Rude awakening... I really wasn’t doing anything wrong outside of just not following what she had told me to do. I mean, I wasn’t going out and smoking a cigarette. I wasn’t, you know, doing something that was wrong. I was just trying to make my life better... it got to the point where she wasn’t budging on it. So, of course, I had to figure something out.

Tampon use made Maria’s life easier by allowing her to swim while menstruating. She also found them to be more comfortable than pads for everyday wear. While her mother explicitly stated her moral evaluation of tampon use (“too young”), Maria rejected this evaluation (“I wasn’t doing anything wrong”) and made her own decision about tampons based on her own moral understanding. Perhaps “old enough” is a conflation between menstruation and sexualization, a phenomenon that is well-documented in previous research (Bobier, 2020; Fingerson, 2006; Lee, 2009); when one is “old enough” to start having sex, they are “old enough” to use a tampon.

When asked if her mother punished her for breaking the rules, Maria said, “No...At that point, she really didn’t have an argument. I wasn’t hurt. I wasn’t doing it like, it wasn’t causing me any kind of problems, so she kind of just let it go at that point.” While her mother tried pushing upon Maria her own moral code, Maria only accepted this enforcement for a limited time. Eventually, Maria decided to break from her mother’s moral code. Once her mother discovered she was breaking the rule, instead of punishing her to restore the moral order, her mother “let it go,” suggesting a modified moral order around tampons. While her mother may still not like it, Maria was “allowed” to wear tampons after that.

Another way menstrual taboos were communicated in memorable moral parental messages was in judgments of tampon users. Grace also shared a memorable moral message related to tampon use. While Grace’s mother never prohibited the use of tampons, she made her moral judgments regarding their use clear:

At the age of 17, is when I had sex for the first time. I remember all of a sudden, I started to use tampons and my mom said, she made a comment to me, that still sticks with me to this day: “I know that you’ve had sex, because you wouldn’t be able to use a tampon if you didn’t.” And it just really made me feel, like, kind of dirty.

Her mother’s moral evaluation was not about the tampon itself, but about the *kind* of menstruator that would wear tampons – a sexually active one. Grace felt shame from being personally judged by her mother’s moral message; feeling “kind of dirty.” This message impacted, and continues to impact Grace’s understanding of herself and her own menstruating body:

I think, just the connotation of it, like, you could only ever feel comfortable with a tampon after you had had intercourse. And I don’t know, it was just something that like, my personality; I’m a super people pleaser. I didn’t get in trouble when I was younger. I just still, to this day, as an adult, unfortunately, in

some ways, I just don't like people to be upset with me or like angry with me and the whole, the whole experience when my parents found out that I had been sexually active was very traumatic for me.

Grace believes her use of tampons is the reason her mother discovered she was sexually active and labels this experience “traumatic.” According to Waldron and Kelley (2018), NMT “assumes that moral emotions such as guilt, remorse, hurt, indignation, anger, and shame are provoked by moral misdeeds” (p. 236). This provides a lens from which to understand Grace’s use of the words “dirty” and “traumatic” to describe this experience. Because Grace accepted her mother’s moral evaluation, she sees herself as somehow committing a “moral misdeed,” which induced shame. While menstruation is related to reproduction, thus can be associated with sex, menstruation does not need to be inherently associated with sex. Grace’s mother introduced this association, by linking use of certain menstruation-related paraphernalia (tampons) to sexual intercourse, which Grace internalized. This moral commitment now impacts the way Grace views tampons, sex, and her own sexually active, menstruating body. This site for moral communication impacted Grace’s menstruation experience, at least insofar as that experience involves tampons, and it led to her own disembodiment. Grace feels disconnected from both her menstruating body and her own sexual expression.

Previous research on the sexualization of menstruation (Bobier, 2020) can be used to contextualize Grace’s experience with her mother’s memorable moral messages surrounding tampons and sexual activity. Bobier (2020), in a study of adolescent girls’ experiences and perspectives surrounding menstruation, found girls (ages 11-13) “consistently employed sexual language when narrating their thoughts of and experiences with tampons” (p. 309). These results were discussed using the literature on the sexualization of the menstruating body, which establishes the pervasiveness of marking menstruating bodies as sexual (Fingerson, 2006). Because menstruation marks the body’s ability to reproduce, the menstruating body becomes a site for sexualization. Tampons expound this sexualization due to the nature of having to insert them into the vagina as focus shifts to the process of “insertion,” without consideration of what is being inserted.

This research has also documented the impact of this sexualization on young girls. Lee (2009) notes the tendency for young menstruators to view their sexualization negatively. According to Bobier (2020), “interviewees revealed that this experience was partly distressing because they were forced to confront (and consequently, reject) their sexuality” (p. 309). In light of the previous research, Grace’s story serves as another example of the sexualization of the menstruating body and shame and disembodiment that can accompany it. The present study extends these conclusions by placing them in a framework of moral communication, which brings to light the ways in which sexualization is present in memorable messages that inform moral judgments and how those are communicated and negotiated within the family.

Unlike Maria, who asserted her own moral evaluation of tampons in her relationship with her mother, Grace internalized her mother’s moral evaluation of tampons:

But that's something that I've always just kind of like, I've always like kept in my mind. Like teenagers can't use tampons unless they've, they're sexually active, which is so stupid, but it's just something I think that has like lingered since I was 17.

Grace not only translated her mother’s moral evaluation as a judgment of herself, her body, and her own sexual activity, she also internalized the belief that teenagers who wear tampons are sexually active. Note that while Grace identifies this moral evaluation as “stupid,” it has “lingered” for her. This

suggests that a person may accept a moral evaluation even if they doubt their legitimacy and may also signal the degree to which a *mother's* judgment may impact her daughter even if her daughter doesn't share said evaluation.

When asked about the most memorable message she received from a family member about menstruation, Ella immediately and firmly stated: "Tampons are for whores." When asked to further elaborate, Ella explained, "I think I was in middle school when I wanted to start using tampons, because I wanted to be able to swim." She told the following story of asking her mother to buy tampons:

I was told that only whores use tampons and then that was compounded by the fact that my stepmother used to use tampons and was willing to you know, let me use them, which just made my mom really, really mad, because my stepmother was the whore. So, of course, she uses tampons. [laughs] So then we didn't talk about periods anymore after that, I don't think.

Her mother's moral evaluation of tampons appears, at least to Ella, is conflated with a moral evaluation of her stepmother. The origins of this moral judgment are not as important as the judgment itself, because it is the judgment Ella identified as the memorable moral message. Similar to Maria, Ella did not accept her mother's moral evaluation of tampons. She kept asking her mother for tampons and "eventually" her mother did buy them, but she continued to make her moral judgments known:

She just couldn't help me figure that [tampon insertion] out because, 'that's disgusting.' And 'why would you ever do that? That's so gross. Why would you want to do that?'... I ended up trying different things and applicator tampons didn't work, so I switched to OBs and that made life, a whole lot better. But it pissed my mom off, because that was even more disgusting that I was using something without an applicator. Actually, like, sticking my finger in my body was just horrific and embarrassing to her.

Her mother's moral understanding of tampons became more nuanced when she differentiated between those with and without applicators. The lack of applicator necessitates, according to Ella's story, "sticking [a] finger in [one's own] body," a behavior Ella's mother appears to find morally reprehensible. Ella's mother's moral judgment moved from being about the stepmother to now focusing on the act of insertion.

When asked if Ella sought any assistance with learning how to insert tampons, Ella talked about going to her stepmother for help:

My stepmom tried through a door; you know. I mean, like the whole, it's so hard to like talk someone through that. But yeah, I do remember at least one episode of my stepmom trying to help me talk through it and my stepmom doing like the, this is what it looks like before it's filled and then putting it in water, so that I could see how it changed and understood what was going to happen inside of me and how to get it out. She did talk me through it.

While Ella largely rejected her mother's moral evaluation of tampons, she did find support from her stepmother. Ella's decision to seek support from her stepmother is a function of her rejection of both her mother's evaluation of her stepmother *and* of tampons themselves. Two contrapuntal voices exist within Ella's story: her biological mother's and her stepmother's. The dialogue between them, through the story Ella tells in her interview, expresses a moral contradiction that characterizes Ella's experience negotiating moral meanings around tampons and her own use of tampons to manage her body's menstrual flow.

Negotiated Morality, Families, and Communicating About Menstruation

Katie also described rigid moral evaluations of tampons within her family and ascribed them to her family's religious orientation:

Catholics have a lot of weird ideas, a lot of things, you know, and they've gotten better over the years. But yeah, not wanting to use this [tampons], because that would break your hymen and then oooo then that would mean...

Katie recognizes Catholicism as an influence on her parents' moral evaluation of tampons, and she also recognizes the gendered values behind this evaluation – virginity should be protected and if tampons threaten virginity, then they should not be used, at least not by an unwed (thus presumably virginal) menstruator. Samantha described a similar experience with her Southern Baptist mother:

My mom believed that, in using a tampon, you could lose your virginity. That is a big thing to my parents and my religion. We were Southern Baptist and that was like, you know, that's the thing. Now, as an adult, and an educated adult, I understand how gross, that is.

For both Katie and Samantha, the familial value is to protect virginity as sacred. These findings compliment previous research on tampon taboo and virginity. In their study of Latina and Latinx women and gender minorities, Aragón and Cooke-Jackson (2021) found, at the intersection of cultural and religious messaging, participants' mothers associated tampon use with a loss of, or threat to, virginity.

While NMT foregrounds family as sites for moral learning and negotiation, the theory recognizes macro-level systems, such as culture and religion, influence the negotiation of moral order within the family system (Waldron & Kelley, 2018). In their study of memorable moral messages, Waldron et al. (2014) found some memorable moral parental messages reinforced moral positions espoused within larger cultural norms and within religious institutions (“authority-invoking messages”) (p. 387). NMT makes space for these macro-level moral commitments by recognizing their potential impact on familial dialogue. According to Waldron and Kelley (2018), “actions that call into question moral commitments that are sanctioned at multiple levels of social organization (e.g., cultural, religious, familial) are associated with more emotional and complicated family dialogues” (p. 236).

These theoretical claims, in partnership with the listening guide, provide a fruitful way to listen to these mothers' stories that emerged from the data. Acknowledging this intersection increases awareness of the complexity of these dialogues and the potential for emotional complications. This is an important avenue for exploring taboo topics, as rules for what topics are “off limits,” are often rooted in both micro and macro-level systems, making it more challenging and more emotional to negotiate moral commitments. While cultural and religious tampon taboos are well-documented, NMT provides a new way to view these taboos as sites for moral decision making and clearly situate the decision-making in the dialogue. The moral commitment does not come from reading a religious text alone; it is talked into being in and through familial communication surrounding tampons.

Menstrual Products as Opportunity: Engaging in Family Dialogues as Mother

Up to this point, the discussion of menstrual products has focused on messages these mothers received from their families-of-origin. The voices engaged in these dialogues are those of participants' mothers and participants as daughters. While this is an important area of inquiry that has implications for the

way these mothers experience their own menstruating bodies, it is also important to consider how these mothers choose to talk about menstrual products, including but not limited to tampons, with their own children. When listening to the data, another voice that emerged within these stories was participants' own voices as mothers themselves. When listening for participants' voices as mothers, a more nuanced story about menstrual products emerged.

Mothers very clearly described taking a different moral perspective with their children when it came to tampons. When asked about conversations she has had with her two menstruating children, Ella said: "Clearly, I did *not* tell them that tampons were for whores. We talked about pads. We talked about tampons. We talked about cups." Ella's sentiment was common among mothers interviewed for this study; they provide information about the variety of products available to manage menstrual flow and then allow their menstruating children to self-select their own products.

Sunny also gave her daughter agency in selecting her own menstrual products:

She doesn't want to use tampons. I said, okay. When it comes time, I'll show her how. And she can use whatever she wants to use, but we've talked about what's out there and what would probably be easiest right when she has her first couple [periods]. It's just whatever is easiest, but I said, I told her that she can use whatever she wants to use. Same thing as like when she asked me about shaving your legs. I'm like, "well when do you want to start shaving your legs? They're your legs. If you think they need to be shaved, then shave them. If you don't think they need to be shaved, then wait."

For Sunny, decisions around menstrual products are another mechanism to teach her daughter agency in making her own decisions about her body; an additional moral commitment that emerged through this dialogue.

These mothers encouraged their menstruating children to try whatever products they desired and, after experimenting with them, choose which products they wish to use on a regular basis based on what they deem most comfortable and desirable for themselves. From the perspective of NMT, this invites adolescents into the dialogue and makes them equal participants in the process of negotiating morality around menstrual products. What the interplay of these voices illuminates is a value these mothers hold that has nothing to do with menstrual products per se. The value is not about this product or that product, the value is in the kind of relationship they wish to foster with their children and the sense of agency they hope to foster in their children. These mothers are using negotiations of morality as a platform to build what Kelley (2017) has labeled "just relationships" with their children (p. 11).

Considering relationships as "moral entities," Kelley (2017) advocates for relational justice in close relationships (p. 3). Furthermore, he encourages a particular kind of relational justice, one he refers to as processual justice; justice based on how relational partners choose to "do" their relationships together (Kelley, 2017). When defined in this way, a just process typically includes mutual respect, fair rules for the relationship, and both partners' active engagement in developing a "fair" relationship ethic – both partners "are of equal value in the relationship" (Kelley, 2017, p. 15). These mothers use negotiated morality around menstrual products to engage in just parenting practices.

Another example of negotiated morality around menstrual products emerged when listening to Celeste's story about reusable pads:

The hardest conversation, I think, that I had to have is around reminders. I think I have patience, to an extent, but you know, being a home schooler and having everyone here all the time, I definitely get

impatient. There's a learning curve. So, my daughter uses reusable pads, which means you have to, she washes them and rinses them but it's, that's a process, right, like trying to change your pad over a toilet and trying to clean it and trying to remember to put it down the laundry chute. So there have been times when I have found a pad on the counter and I've just said 'Okay, I can do this.' I've tried to model being calm... Those conversations have always been the hardest, because I feel like sometimes, I'm being a touch edgy and I have to sort of remind myself, this is all new. I would have never in my wildest dreams as a 13-year-old girl used a re-usable pad and be okay with that or wanted to do that. I would have probably been horrified. And I think it's great that she wants to, and so I try to be patient.

Celeste's 13-year-old-daughter while not comfortable inserting a menstrual cup, as her mother does, shares a familial moral ethic around sustainability and waste, prompting her to approach her mother with the idea of using reusable pads. She was unequivocal in her support for her daughter's choice even in light of the fact this was not a product she experienced using, and does require an additional level of maintenance. While Celeste expressed some impatience as her daughter continues learning how to care properly for her reusable pads, she expressed a commitment to support. Patience and care inform how she talks to her daughter about the reusable pads and how she responds when her daughter has not properly cleaned them.

The process of negotiated morality around Celeste's daughter's reusable pads has also included the other members of their family system. Her younger daughter and husband have also been involved in the process of developing a moral ethic around the reusable pads. Celeste said, "there has already come a point where my youngest daughter has also found that [used reusable pads on the bathroom counter] and she's a lot more prone to being reactive than I, but she has, she's done okay." Celeste was clear that part of her own reaction management is to be a model for her younger daughter, who is 11-years-old and not yet menstruating herself. This modeling invites her youngest daughter to participate in a just relationship with her sister. While not cleaning up after herself is an undesirable behavior that Celeste says they are "working on," it is also not something to be shamed for and she wants to make sure her youngest daughter also holds this value. Celeste said she struggles with this sometimes, which is where her husband's participation becomes helpful:

He [husband/father] has taken over having the conversations in the bathroom of, like,

'Hey you know, this is what you want to keep in mind. Here's where you want to be careful when you're throwing it down [the laundry chute], here's what you want to do with laundry.' I was worried about those conversations, to be honest, because I thought she would kind of cringe and freak out and she didn't. She was just like, 'okay that's fine.'

Celeste's husband has taken the lead on teaching their daughter how to clean and properly care for her reusable pads. NMT emphasizes the use of dialogue to "create and maintain relational moral ethics" (Kelley, 2017, p. 21). Celeste's family utilizes moral dialogue to establish, negotiate, and craft their moral commitment around reusable pads and, in so doing, they are also in the process of co-constructing their familial relational ethic – this is how we treat each other and this is how we communicate about difficult topics in ways that respect and affirm one another.

As illustrated above, conversations about menstrual products have been a site for negotiated morality and the co-creation of just parent/child relationships; however, upon listening to the data, what also

emerged was a tension around providing their menstruating children choices that is perhaps rooted in cultural messages about tampons. One of the functions of NMT is “engaging moral tensions” (Waldron & Kelley, 2018, p. 237). This emerged in mothers’ descriptions of their conversations with their menstruating (or soon to be menstruating) children as they discussed giving their children choices, while also communicating a somewhat negative evaluation of tampons. Ella, who navigated a difficult space between her mother and stepmother in order to wear tampons as a young teen, verbalized this tension:

I told them [her two menstruating children] that I wouldn’t start them on tampons, because that’s very tricky. [laughs] But that whenever they were ready for tampons, we would certainly talk through that and that it is a very normal and natural and better, in my opinion, better way to live your life when you have your period. So, when they were ready for that, we went through that too.

Ella is communicating an openness around tampons, but also labels them as “tricky” and won’t “start them on tampons.” Here we see a struggle between allowing her daughters to choose the products that are right for them, but also a directive around what is not “appropriate” when it comes to products for new menstruators. At the same time, while tampons are “tricky,” they are also a “better way to live your life.”

Stacey communicated a similar sentiment: “I kind of explained, you know, about tampons and why pads might be more appropriate for now, but later, you know...” Both mothers’ examples illuminate a tension experienced by some mothers who want to be open, and still associate tampons with some level of maturity and, therefore, may not be “appropriate” or “best” for new menstruators. These mothers are communicating a moral sentiment to their daughters regarding tampon use, while at the same time trying to communicate a value around giving daughters agency. As noted above, narratives about being “too young” for tampons may be grounded in the sexualization of menstruating bodies. These mothers may be unknowingly engaging in this sexualization even as they are attempting to create open, just relationships with their children. This indicates a potential moral contradiction for these mothers.

Normalizing Menstruation Through Family Dialogue

Another way family communication about menstruation functioned as a site for the process of moral communication for these mothers is through the discursive construction of the following value: menstruation is normal. Mothers described both conversations with their parents from their adolescence as well as conversations and perspectives they take with their own children as being sites for the normalization of menstruation. One way this story emerged was through discussion of menstruation as a normal, biological process.

Ashley discussed her own moral commitment to the belief that menstruation is a normal biological process:

They know it exists and that it’s normal... I think that the more we can openly talk about that stuff with our children, the more normalized it becomes. To where there’s not an overall stigma and fear, because even as an adult, before I had my ablation, I would go to the grocery store, the Target or whatever, and I would be buying tampons. I put them in the bottom of my cart and put something on top of it, you know, because someone might not know I’m a woman [said in sarcastic tone]. I mean, hide that right. [laughs]... I think the more conversations we have with our own children... that just makes it a better situation for women all over.

As a mother of four children, Ashley advocated the importance of communicating a moral ethic of normalcy to her children. When asked about communicating this normalcy with her three sons, Ashley said: "I just want them [sons] to know that it's a normal, natural thing and that when they have girlfriends or, you know, whatever, that it's normal." Ashley, in attempting to teach a particular moral value in her children, illustrates a fundamental claim of NTM: "family communication is an important site for moral learning" (Waldron & Kelley, 2018, p. 233). Ashley communicates a value around having period discussions with her nonmenstruating children. While this is certainly helpful for her family, it also goes beyond the family and informs how her nonmenstruating children may communicate with others such as menstruating peers at school.

In listening to Ashley's story, what emerged was a conscious choice to engage in this type of moral talk with her children because this was not the message she received from her mother regarding menstruation writ large or her own menstruating body in particular:

I was raised with a woman [her mother], who everything was not normal, like, you know, "Oh, I never did that" or "I never thought." "I didn't go through that." "I don't deal with that." It's very like, okay, so I'm a weirdo... so I chose to be the parent I needed.

As a result of her mother's sentiments, Ashley felt abnormal and grew up believing her menstruating body was abnormal. She decided she wanted to send a very different message to her own children, which represents the opportunity to shift moral commitments within families when morality is re-negotiated throughout the generations. Riley also described communicating a value around periods as normal to both her son and daughter:

From them being really young, I've just tried to talk about it like it was a normal thing without like a value judgment on it... in like normal language... just treating it like it is a normal human bodily function. We had all of [these] books, Everyone Poops and, Everyone Farts... I've strived, or I guess, aimed to do the same thing with topics surrounding periods and puberty and all of that stuff.

While Riley claims there is no value judgment attached to this, the presentation of menstruation, bodies, and bodily functions as "normal" *does* in and of itself communicate a value. If these are normal processes, there is nothing shameful about them, thus no reason to treat them as taboo (AKA "off limits"). From the lens of NMT, Riley is, in fact, engaging in moral talk with her children when she communicates menstruation, and anything else related to the biological function of the body, is "normal." Angela shares Riley's value around treating menstruation as normal, but she also directly identified this as one her values:

It would just be part of everyday life that, you know, menstruation was acknowledged as the child was growing up. You know, from the mother having her period and then just evolves into normal behavior around having a period and a normal understanding of what it means to get your period... My value around it is just that this is a normal, biological process and it's good to just understand our normal biology. So, it should just be involved in everyday life, similar to sleeping.

These mothers' stories emphasize the communication of a moral ethic around menstruation as a natural element of human biology. They also indicate a moral commitment to educating all children, including sons, about this process and including all of their children in moral dialogue regarding menstruation.

In reflecting on how her family-of-origin handled the topic of menstruation, Katie described a confusing contradiction in the messaging: "It was a very mixed message. So, you know, this is natural, *but* you need to hide." Here is another example of a family commitment to menstruation as normal, or natural; however, she also received messages emphasizing the importance of hiding her own menstrual cycle from others. Her father never talked about menstruation and the culture of her peer groups were such that any mention of periods in front of males was to be avoided at all costs. These memorable moral messages from Katie's childhood illustrate another contradiction within familial moral commitments surrounding menstruation. If something is natural, then one would assume it does not need to be hidden from view, yet when it came to menstruation, Katie was taught that it *did* need to be hidden from view. This illustrates the presence of the concealment imperative in her family-of-origin's moral understanding of menstruation (Roberts, 2004). Katie believes this necessity of secrecy came from their religious orientation and the slippery slope of associating menstruation and menstruating bodies with sex.

Katie's personal moral commitment around menstruation as natural *and* viewable developed, in part, from the co-construction of a new moral ethic around menstruation with her husband. When asked how her view of menstruation evolved as an adult Katie shared:

He [husband] doesn't really have a lot of the hang ups around a lot of these things, because I remember like, we were first together, I was like 'oh my God, you know, like I need to hide, you know when this has happened,' and he'd be like, "I don't care... it makes no difference to me."

As their romantic relationship evolved, they engaged in their own series of moral dialogues about menstruation, and created their own moral order around the topic. This was also happening in tandem with Katie's experiences in college, where she started identifying as a feminist. While the negotiated morality between her and her partner did not happen in a vacuum, those conversations were instrumental in the evolution of her views of menstruation and her own menstruating body. While she overcame the contradiction present in her early familial socialization, this story illustrates another example of how a mother made sense of the multiplicity of voices through the use of dialogue to develop a new moral order around menstruation in her adult familial partnership. Overall, results demonstrated family communication is a site for the negotiation of morality around menstruation.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Taken together, these results demonstrate the utility of using a moral framework, specifically NMT, to understand familial communication regarding menstruation. Mothers were easily able to recall memorable messages about menstruation within their families-of-origin and the families they created in adulthood. These messages are more than memorable messages. Since they communicated a moral ethic around menstruation, they should be considered memorable "moral" messages. These memorable moral messages frame how these mothers understand their menstrual experiences, communicate about these experiences, and experience (dis)embodiment. They also inform their parenting perspective and how they choose to communicate a sense of moral order around menstruation with their children. This presents

an opportunity to better understand how family communication can be used as a site for dismantling the taboos associated with menstruation.

These results illustrate moral messages about menstruation are powerful enough to become memorable. Memorable moral messages surrounding menstruation may fit particularly well within Waldron et al.'s (2014) categories of "identity-shaping" and "authority invoking" messages (p. 386-387). Taken together, this suggests the utility of using memorable moral messages as a frame for exploring menstruation communication. This may include how menstruators understand and experience their menstrual cycle, their experience with (dis)embodiment, and how they negotiate these understandings in light of cultural and religious messages about menstruation.

These findings also demonstrate, even if the communicated moral order is not accepted as one's own or the moral commitment shifts over time, these memories are one avenue where menstrual taboos are institutionalized across time. While none of these mothers ascribed to traditional Western notions of menstruation as taboo, they all articulated various versions of this cultural idea and described the various ways in which they grappled, and continue to grapple, with what these cultural taboos mean for both their menstruating bodies and their parenting practices. These mothers were much more open to various menstrual products, especially tampons, than their families-of-origin, yet evidence of tampon taboo, and the sexualization that intersects with that taboo, still emerged, though to a lesser degree, when listening to their stories.

Listening to these data revealed family dialogues that normalize menstruation, which is a significant moral stance. If menstruation is seen as "on the table" for conversation, instead of "off limits," there is opportunity to foster comfort and openness around the topic as natural, rendering concealment of, and shame about, menstruation unnecessary. Dismantling cultural taboos around menstruation as something "monstrous" (Ussher & Perz, 2020) will take time; however, when family functions as a site for moral understanding, family communication can begin to break down these taboos.

The current findings highlight potential strategies to assist in these normalization efforts. First, parents can place the topic "on the table" by inviting their children, whether they are or will be menstruators or not, into conversations about menstruation. Second, parents can invite menstruating children or pre-menstruating children into conversations about period products allowing them to explore options and make empowered choices for themselves. Third, parents may consider the ways in which their discourse may inadvertently sexualize tampons and tampon use. To avoid these problematic messages about tampons, parents can refrain from communicating any moral evaluation of tampons. By treating them as just another option without attaching any person experiences, preferences, or comments about maturity-level, parents may present a neutral understanding of tampons. Next, parents can consider how to invite the larger family system to participate in supportive practices. For example, for heterosexual, two-parent families, fathers can be active participants in these conversations, buy products, and communicate verbally and nonverbally there is no need to conceal menstruation from males. Overall, these findings suggest the interaction qualities associated with processual justice (Kelley, 2017) can be utilized to improve the lives of individual menstruators who find understanding, support, and encouragement in their family relationships and create space for larger social change.

A significant finding that emerged from these listenings is the presence of just relationships in these mothers' relationships with their children. This suggests the utility of a relational justice framework to understanding parent/child communication about taboo topics and a preliminary argument for the use of processual justice (Kelley, 2017), in parent/child relationships in order to foster healthy moral dialogue around taboo topics. In the case of menstruation, processual justice creates a space for the negotiation of

moral evaluations that take into consideration the experiences and voices of multiple family members. This also provides an opportunity for family to use communication about a taboo topic as a site for: 1) the development and maintenance of relational closeness and trust, and 2) the development of a just relationship frame that can be applied to other relationship contexts throughout one's life (Kelley, 2017).

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This chapter is meant to be a starting point in the use of moral communication as a framework for exploring taboo topics, in general, and menstrual communication more specifically. Present findings suggest the usefulness of using moral communication as a framework for research on taboo topics. Future research should consider the ways in which moral communication can be used as a theoretical framework for understanding communication regarding other taboo and stigmatized topics, including but not limited to, menstruation communication.

Future research should also explore the perspectives of fathers and other nonmenstruators in the process of negotiated morality within families. Previous research has established boys and men tend to be left out of conversations regarding menstruation (Allen et al., 2011). Males must be involved in the normalization of menstruation in order to eliminate the taboos associated with it. Actively involving males in familial moral dialogues regarding menstruation, and in research that seeks to break down taboos and destigmatize the topic, should be used to invite nonmenstruators to participate in these moral reconstructions.

Future research should also explore the ways in which romantic partners, particularly those in long-term relationships, negotiate morality around menstruation. Using moral communication as a frame, the process of negotiated morality in this relationship context should be viewed as part of a couple's co-construction of their relationship ethic (Kelley, 2017), that has implications for how they establish just relationship dynamics, incorporate moral evaluations of menstruation into their sexual relationship, and establish the definition of fairness when it comes to the division of labor within their relationship.

Additional research regarding how family functions as a site for negotiated morality regarding menstruation and impacts the lived and (dis)embodied experiences of menstruators is warranted. The present results, as well as previous research, have established a relationship between messages about menstruation and menstruators' views of their bodies. This intersects with the sexualization, from others and self, of young girls' menstruating bodies. The sexualization of girls and women, through menstruation, must be eliminated and replaced with a healthier perspective. Rather than assuming a body that has a menstrual process *is therefore* a sexual being, the body should be seen as one that *may* have both a menstrual process *and* a sexual identity.

Finally, research regarding menstruation communication should work to identify and actively engage opportunities for diversification. The study of menstruation is not inherently the study of women. Rather, menstruation is the study of a biological experience that occurs in some bodies. Anyone who communicates about menstruation, whether it be in one's family system or in an academic chapter about menstrual taboos, is engaging in a communicative act that conveys their moral commitments. There is a responsibility to engage in inclusive menstrual communication and research. Scholarship should look for ways to develop inclusive, translational research that creates opportunities to benefit the lives of menstruators.

CONCLUSION

This chapter utilized the menstrual concealment imperative and NMT to explore familial conversations regarding menstruation as a site for the development of moral understandings. This research is useful in bringing together research on menstrual taboos, which have occurred largely outside of the field of Communication, family communication, memorable messages, morality, and NMT. The synthesis of these lenses was used here to explore how memorable parent/child conversations about menstrual taboos function as sites for the process of moral communication and how these sites shape the ways menstruators understand their menstrual experiences, communicate about those experiences, and experience (dis) embodiment. Findings suggest moral communication and NMT are useful frameworks for understanding menstruation communication within families. Mothers in the present study described how family functioned as a site for moral communication when discussing menstrual products and in dialogues attempting to normalize menstruation.

This research should be used by parents, scholars, educators, and activists to expose familial moral messaging patterns around menstruation to help break down menstrual taboos that lead to silence, self-policing, and shame. Menstrual taboos, and the shaming that accompanies them, are rooted in patriarchal notions of the menstruating body (which is typically conceptualized as a woman's body, although not all menstruators are women and not all women menstruate) as inferior (McHugh, 2020). Framing family conversations as sites for the co-creation of moral understandings of menstruation offer an avenue from which menstruation can be re-storied, not as shameful or embarrassing, but as an embodied and powerful experience, or anything in between. This means family communication research, in its ability bring to bear how family can shape "moral commitments" (Waldron & Kelley, 2015, p. 7), could be used as a means of shifting "negative moral evaluation[s]" (Gottlieb, 2020, p. 151) of menstruation into something neutral, positive, or even empowering.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Concealment Imperative: A socially constructed norm that requires menstruators to hide all evidence of their menstrual cycle under the threat of shame and embarrassment.

Family: A self-defined group of intimate connections, typically related through biology or marriage, who maintain their relationships through interaction, and are connected both voluntarily and involuntarily.

Family-of-Origin: The family an individual was raised within.

Just Relationship: A close relationship characterized by a sense of relational justice and fairness.

Memorable Message: A message that sticks in someone’s memory long after it is communicated.

Memorable Moral Message: Enduring messages that communicate moral commitments that are remembered for a long time and influence a person’s views of right and wrong.

Menstruation: A biological cycle that lasts about 28 days. At the end of the cycle, if the individual is not pregnant, the lining of their uterus will shed causing a bloody discharge to be expelled through the vaginal opening.

Moral Commitment: A value or belief, held by an individual, that reflects their evaluation of rightness or wrongness about a given topic, or circumstance.

Morality: A set of values, ideals, and evaluations that outline an individual’s view of what is right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable.

Negotiated Morality Theory: Theoretical assumptions that outline the process of co-constructing moral ethics through communication.

Processual Justice: A type of relational justice that conceptualizes fairness between partners based on how they communicate with, and treat, one another. Usually characterized by respect, listening, perspective-taking, and a recognition of each other’s humanity.

Relational Justice: A form of social justice that occurs in relationships that outlines how fairness is established and maintained between partners.

Section 4

Sexual Communication

Chapter 14

Online Safe (Enough) Spaces: Internet Support Groups for Survivors of Sexual Assault

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ABSTRACT

In the age of the internet, online support groups have been developed to connect those with shared experiences—especially those with experiences that can be considered “taboo.” Because of the high levels of victim-blaming and stigmatization present in the U.S., due in large part to the perpetuation of rape myth narratives, the survivors of sexual assault are often reluctant to share their experiences with others. The fear of further victimization has led some sexual assault survivors to turn to online social media-based support groups for emotional support and understanding from like-minded individuals to fight against the isolation that so many survivors often face. This chapter looks at how online social groups, like those that thrive on Facebook, can provide safe (enough) spaces where survivors can access communal support despite the lurking harassment by online trolls.

INTRODUCTION

More and more of our daily social interactions are being facilitated by digital tools. With social media and direct messaging systems, immediate or semi-immediate communications are freed from restrictions of time and space; thus, inspiring individuals to create and participate in online networks that enable community-building across the globe. There are a wide range of interest groups operating in the digital sphere, and they are not just for cat lovers and avid gardeners. There are, for example, online groups that focus on providing support for heavier, more sensitive subjects, like couples experiencing infertility (Malik & Coulson, 2010) or individuals living with the human immunodeficiency virus (H.I.V.) (Bar-Lev, 2008). The benefits of participating in these online support groups have become well-established within the last decade (Seale et al., 2006; Mo & Coulson, 2014), but there is still much to learn about how online spaces can provide support for topics that seem to remain socially “taboo”. One such topic is that of sexual assault, a term that refers to an act or repeated acts of non-consensual physical contact of

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a sexual nature with another individual that is often, but not always, “achieved by force, through threats or the exploitation of authority (e.g., rape or attempted rape, indecent assault, and forcible sodomy)” (Band-Winterstein et al., 2021; Felson & Cundiff, 2014; Smith & Skinner, 2012). According to Band-Winterstein et al. (2021), sexual assault is an under-studied phenomenon because of the intertwining social “taboos, stigmas, and prejudices that shape and frequently accompany the phenomenon, both at the social as well as the interpersonal level” (p. 113). Victims and survivors of sexual assault often are victim-blamed and shamed for being assaulted, resulting in the blame being placed on the traumatized victim rather than on the perpetrator. Negative feedback due to the social perpetuation of rape myths and other stereotypes because of the tabooed nature of the subject can lead to further traumatization for the victims or survivor (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012), which is why online support groups can offer an alternative space for survivors to seek help.

This chapter will analyze the role of online support groups for survivors of sexual assault in the context of the U.S. to exemplify how online communication modalities can offer safe (enough) spaces for individuals who have lived through traumatic experiences to find empathy and solidarity. To begin, a review of sexual assault as a stigmatized topic will be used to analyze how survivors can be further victimized by their communities because of ingrained biases. Next, a discussion of how peer support can help the recovery process for survivors will specifically highlight how online modes of support groups can both help and hinder. Finally, a case study analysis of the sexual assault support groups on the social media platform Facebook will look at how survivors are currently gathering together online.

BACKGROUND: SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS A TABOO SUBJECT

To best position sexual assault as a societally tabooed topic, this section begins with Goffman’s (1963) definition of stigma “as an ‘attribute that is deeply discrediting’ that reduces the bearer ‘from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one’” (as cited in Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 364). Stigma is attached to an individual or a group as a way of discrediting or even dehumanizing their position within a society. This is significant because one of the most primal human motivations is a sense of belonging. If an individual or group thinks that their actions might result in stigmatization, they are then more likely to hide or deny that they had been tainted by a social taboo(s). One such group are victims/survivors of sexual assault. Due to widespread discreditation of survivors through victim-blaming narratives, survivors have a low reporting rate: only 310 out of every 1,000 sexual assaults are reported to the police, which means about two out of every three survivors chose to not officially levy charges against their attacker (Morgan & Truman, 2020). The reinforcement of social norms typically places the blame on the individual victim/survivor rather than on the social factors that perpetuate sexual violence in the U.S. When victim/survivors are met with blame by their family, friends, significant others, and/or communities they experience further traumatization that can significantly disrupt their healing process.

The Survivors of Sexual Violence in the U.S.

“Victim” or “survivor”? There has been debate over which term is most appropriate for describing an individual who has been sexually traumatized. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), “victim” is best used “when referring to someone who has recently been affected by sexual violence; when discussing a particular crime; or when referring to aspects of the criminal

justice system”. “Survivor” “refer[s] to someone who has gone through the recovery process, or when discussing the short- or long-term effects of sexual violence” (*Key terms...*, n.d., para. 3). Ultimately, it is the decision of the traumatized individual as to which term they feel more comfortable with. For the purposes of this work, the term “survivors” will henceforth be used with the thought that if an individual is seeking online support, then they have begun their recovery process.

Described as the “hidden epidemic” by Koss (1985), sexual assault has been historically underreported and underrepresented in the U.S. despite statistics that highlight how common an experience sexual assault is for American women and, to a lesser extent, men. It is estimated that “At some time in their lives, 1 in 6 women have experienced an attempted or completed rape; more than half occurred before the woman was 18, and 22% before age 12” (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000, para. 3). These statistics are based on data collected in 1998; but it stands to reason that as the U.S. population has grown, so most likely has the rate of sexual assault. Updated information does show that the rates of victimization of women from 1994 to 2010 have increased, especially if the survivor belongs to a racially minoritized group or is a member of the LGBTQ+ community (Planty et al., 2013, p. 3). While 90% of adult rape victims are identified as female, not all survivors identify as women: “about 3% of American men—or 1 in 33—have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime” (p. 13). Overall, sexual assault is a significant issue in the U.S., yet talking about the prevalence of sex-based crimes is commonly viewed as socially taboo (Campbell et al., 2001). And when survivors do talk about their trauma, they are oftentimes faced with negative feedback that can result in further victimization known as “the second rape” when the survivor is met with disdain rather than compassion by loved ones or the police after disclosing their trauma (Ahrens et al., 2007; Campbell et al., 1999).

Fear of Further Victimization

As Campbell et al. (2001) state, “rape does not occur in cultural isolation: Society’s response to this crime can also affect [the survivor’s] well-being” (p. 1240). It matters significantly how and to whom a survivor chooses to disclose their trauma to (disclosure refers to the act or process an individual goes through when sharing the experience of their trauma with another party). There are two common types of disclosure. Formal disclosure refers to the official documentation of the crime with the police, medical professionals, or a counseling service. Informal disclosure is when a survivor turns to family, friends, or a significant other for support. While informal means of disclosure are the most common, these interactions can yield both positive social reactions (like listening, comforting, emotional support, tangible aid) and negative social reactions (like blame, doubt, control, withdrawal) (Campbell et al., 2001; Ullman & Filipas, 2001). If a survivor experiences any level of negative feedback, they run the risk of being further harmed (Campbell et al., 2001). Without proper support, survivors can experience debilitating mental health issues that could affect the rest of their lives (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012; Orchowski et al., 2013). More specifically, survivors have an increased risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (P.T.S.D.), depression, and thoughts of suicide than those who have not experienced sexual violence during their lifetime (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2010). But what causes loved ones to react negatively? Stigmatization of sexual assault is perpetuated through inaccurate beliefs about sexual assault, commonly known as “rape myths” (Taylor, 2020, p. 39).

Rape myths are “prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (Burt, 1980, p. 217) that feed into the idea that “women are the source of male violence”, insinuating that it was what the victim did or said that were the core reasons for the crime (Taylor, 2020, p. 38). The concept of

rape myths is defined by feminist scholar Brownmiller (1975) in her book *Against our will: Men, women, and rape* as “a set of largely false cultural beliefs...[that] underlie sexual aggression perpetrated against women” (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 761). As posited by Payne et al. (1999), there are seven categorizations of rape myths that each include at least one of three central elements: blaming of the victim for the sexual assault’s occurrence, the minimization or rationalization of the assault, and absolution of fault for the perpetrator. Payne’s categories of rape myths include themes, such as: (1) The victim was asking for it; (2) The victim said they did not want it but they really did want it; (3) The victim is lying about it; (4) The act that occurred was not really sexual assault; (5) The perpetrator did not mean to sexually assault the victim or the sexual assault was an accident; (6) Trivializing the sexual assault or saying what happened was not a big deal; and (7) Denoting that sexual assault is a deviant event (see Taylor, 2020, p. 39-42 for more details).

Rape myths are often perpetuated by the legal system (Gyls & McNamara, 1996), religious institutions (Franiuk & Shain, 2011), and media (Merken & James, 2020) in the United States. For example, the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN) organization attributes the low conviction rates of sexual assault perpetrators with the prejudices of the police officers who are “less likely to believe victims whose characteristics were not consistent with a stereotypical rape victim (e.g., are not virgins, had a prior relationship with the suspect)” (Edwards et al., 2011). There is evidence to suggest that education on sexual assault can decrease these types of prejudices against survivors (Edward & MacLeod, 1999); but overall, the stigmatization of sexual assault survivors inhibits survivors from dealing with their trauma in a productive way. Which, in turn, may encourage survivors to seek out alternative modes of social support, such as peer support groups.

SUPPORT GROUPS FOR SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Peer support occurs when individuals seek and exchange resources with one another including the sharing of information, similar experiences, and emotional, social, or practical help. The modern conception of peer support groups is more recently traced back to the mental health consumer movement in the U.S. that took place in the 1970s when peer-to-peer mental health services were being used to provide support for topics such as chronic illness management, maternal care, and childcare (Tang, 2013). Typically, peer support has been conducted in counseling settings (like local rape counseling centers) where peers are introduced to each other for mentoring or support. According to Mead and MacNeil (2004), peer support is beneficial because “people who have like experiences can better relate and can consequently offer more authentic empathy and validation” (p. 4). Dealing with traumatic experiences can feel isolating, which is why mental health professionals and rape centers alike have recognized peer support as a vital resource for survivors.

Because effective resources are of paramount importance, Holter et al. (2004) describes ten core principles as the “critical ingredients” of peer support (p. 49). *Empowerment* describes a survivor’s ability to take responsibility in their own recovery. In developing agency, survivors become better prepared to take control over their recovery process and determine their course of action. *Advocacy* represents the survivor’s ability to communicate with others about what they need in any given moment. *Decision-making opportunities* occur when a survivor is exposed to situations in which they can actively participate in the process of or control the decisions being made about their recovery. Those who are more empowered may also have more decision-making opportunities. *Skill development* is key to help survivors establish positive

coping skills and other necessary abilities that will help them recover from their experience. Alongside skill development is *positive risk-taking*, representing the survivor's ability to leave their comfort zone as part of their recovery. Good peer support will maintain values of reciprocity and support. *Reciprocity* occurs when the survivor can work with others and contribute to the process and *support* illustrates the survivor's feelings of have others to turn to when they need it. Holding those values facilitates a *sense of community* or a sense of belonging among peers. Finally, the best peer support groups will establish a foundation of *self-help*—where survivors develop the ability to know what is best for them in any given moment—and developing awareness where survivors may increase their level of knowledge concerning topics relevant to their recovery. Together these multiple psychological facets of peer support reinforce the claim that peer support can help survivors work through their trauma by creating a sense of community for survivors despite the stigmatization of their experiences in the wider society.

Ultimately, peer support groups can offer a safe space for survivors to interact with others that have similar experiences. Rape myths and victim-blaming responses tend to isolate survivors, making them feel like they brought the trauma upon themselves because of something they did, said, or wore (Taylor, 2020). However, peer support services help exemplify how widespread the issue of sexual assault is by connecting victims with survivors that are farther into the recovery process. As previously mentioned in this chapter, the widespread stigmatization attached to sexual assault can result in survivors receiving negative feedback from those they are close to, therefore heightening their feeling of seclusion or self-blame (Campbell et al., 2001). These are the moments when access to peer support services become significant to the future wellbeing of the survivor. While a variety of both voluntary and state-mandated resources are available (like talk therapy and pharmaceutical interventions), Smith et al. (2015) found that survivors tend to prefer voluntary services led by therapists or facilitators who are survivors themselves (Konya et al., 2020). The positive psychological impacts provided by these peer groups aid in “participants’ ability to experience feelings that had been denied and numbed...which may be a reflection of how they became more able to connect with their feelings and with the impacts associated with the abuse” (Konya et al., 2020, p. 6). However, in-person support groups are no longer the only, or even the best, option for survivors. With the introduction of online social networking sites, support groups of all topics have developed online: including those for survivors of sexual assault.

Benefits of Online Support Groups

Examining the number of rapes that occur alongside the available resources provides some troubling data. The United States Census Bureau (2021) reports an estimated population of 331,893,745 citizens, just over half of which are identified as female. Additionally, RAINN provides information about the number of organizations within the United States (including the 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia) that serve the needs of sexual assault and rape victims: just 1,110 organizations (*Centers*, n.d.). As reported by Tjaden and Thoennes (2000), one in six females will experience sexual assault or rape, many even at a very young age. Put together, these numbers paint a horrifying picture. We can estimate that more 27 million young girls and women have been targeted for sexual violence at some point in their life with only a paltry number of organizations available to help: one for every twenty-four thousand survivors. It then becomes clear that access to physical, brick-and-mortar resource institutions is not equitable to all the citizens of the U.S. However, with 90% of adults in the U.S. using the internet as of the writing of this chapter, online resources are a viable alternative option for accessing support resources (Johnson, 2021).

Since the introduction of the internet in the late 1990s, online versions of support groups have been created to take advantage of the digital communication tools that can connect like-minded individuals from all over the world (Seale et al., 2006; Mo & Coulson, 2014). Now emotional support can be shared on a global scale, resulting in the ability to develop intimate relationships with individuals that may never be met in person. The pandemic era of COVID-19, which has extended from early 2019 through 2021 and beyond, makes robust digital tools crucial. Social distancing measures and online methods of communication have become even more relied upon for social interaction (Zaagsma et al., 2020). Over the last decade, studies have analyzed the benefits of online support groups as new spaces for those with shared experiences to meet and connect and have found that the sharing of “experiential knowledge, mutual support and problem-solving, friendship, hope and encouragement and a sense of universality... can have a therapeutic and empowering effect on participants” (Malik & Coulson, 2010, p. 315). It is important to note that not all aspects of support groups are positive, however. There are drawbacks to any group that is based upon human interactions, especially anonymous ones.

Limitations of Online Support Groups

It would be incomplete to describe the benefits of online peer support groups without also mentioning the potential disadvantages of participating in these online communities. This section will discuss how hate speech is used online to target vulnerable, socially stigmatized populations in spaces that are supposed to be designated “safe” (Pohjonen, 2019). The concept of gatekeeping is introduced to highlight how online support groups are engaging in protective measures by limiting access for participation (Yeshua-Katz & Hård af Segerstad, 2020). Then, the focus will turn to how survivors are specifically being influenced by online hate using the concept of “third-victimization” (Clevenger & Navarro, 2021).

The concept of “safe spaces” originated in the late 20th century in the U.S. when feminist, anti-racist, and queer communities were coming together to prioritize cultural concerns (like harassment) over economic inequalities (Melucci, 1989). Polletta (1999) uses the alternative term “free spaces” to describe the “small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization” (p. 1). With the introduction of the internet, and more specifically of social media platforms, safe spaces are no longer just physical gatherings but have gone digital. The label of “safe spaces” in the context of the internet was once a utopian ideal when theorists in the late 1990s and early 2000s had high hopes for the internet as an “emancipatory [space] that would foster free expression by allowing users to leave their bodies and identities behind” (Clark-Parsons, 2018, p. 2127). However, this naive view soon was punctured by the inherent biases of the humans participating in them. For example, the algorithms that support the Google search engine have been exposed as having elements of sexism and racism written into their search capabilities (Noble, 2018). This is because the programmers who developed the code had certain biases that were then transferred into the technology itself. Google is not the only one. Due to the internet’s shield of anonymity (Stoeffel, 2014) and lack of accountability (Salter & Bryden, 2009), there has been an overall rise of “online harassment, alternatively referred to as ‘trolling,’ ‘flaming,’ ‘cyberbullying,’ or ‘e-bile’” (Clark-Parsons, 2018, p. 2126). Online hate specifically targets vulnerable populations, such as women, minorities, and other marginalized groups (including sexual assault survivors) and is indicative of ingrained social biases and prejudices (Daniels, 2009; Nakamura, 2013; Noble & Tynes, 2016; Shaw, 2014). Because so many sexual assault survivors identify as women, misogyny often follows them online. Clark-Parsons (2018) argues that “networked

misogyny” is meant to silence women (and members of other stigmatized groups) from speaking out to retain the sexist status quo (p. 2127). Described by Cole (2015) as “disciplinary rhetoric”, online hate is levied against vulnerable individuals or groups to make them reluctant “to speak out against online misogyny for fear of appearing humorless, weak, and censorious or opening themselves up to more attacks” (Clark-Parsons, 2018, p. 2127). Online communities have had to develop ways of protecting themselves, while still being able to take advantage of the internet’s capabilities of building online communities. The most common way is the restriction of access and the stripping away of anonymity. Based on the findings by Duggan (2014), these are known as “separatist” safe spaces that actively exclude certain populations in an effort “to provide marginalized users with safe spaces in which to speak freely, seek support, and organize action against injustices faced outside the group’s boundaries” (Clark-Parsons, 2018, p. 2127). For example, some of the online survivor support groups are just for women or just for men. Gatekeeping measures are often employed to protect the participants of these online communities, usually manifesting in the form of increased privacy settings. Due to the potential risks of participating in online safe spaces, these groups will never be completely safe from online negativity. For those willing to overlook these threats, online communities can be just safe enough.

There is little current research on how survivors are participating in online support groups. However, there is discussion around the likelihood of survivors experiencing further victimization, or “third-victimization” (Clevenger & Navarro, 2021). While “second rape” refers to the possible negative response survivors might experience after their initial disclosure to loved ones or law enforcement, “third-victimization” refers to online harassment a survivor might experience either at the hands of the perpetrator or online trolls. The survivor could be the victim of various malicious cybercrimes, such as cyberfraud, cybersexual abuse, and cyberstalking, to scare or shame them into keeping silent (Clevenger & Navarro, 2021, p. 357). Retaliation studies exemplify how easy it is for perpetrators to find and harass their victims online (Holtzman & Menning, 2015), specifically for many survivors of interpersonal violence where they intimately know their perpetrator (Citron, 2009). For example, the practice known as “revenge porn” often involves an ex-partner uploading naked or semi-naked photos or videos to the internet without the consent of the individual, oftentimes attaching personal information to the content so that the survivor is bombarded with unsolicited online attention (Bates, 2017). There are even cases where instances of sexual assault are digitally videotaped and then the footage is uploaded to the internet. For example, in 2017 a story broke in Tennessee that a video depicting the sexual assault of an unconscious woman from three years before had been posted to an internet website (Jones, 2017). The lede of the article reads: “A Mid-South woman said she was the victim of rape three years ago—now she is being victimized again after a video of the attack surfaced on the internet”; thus, solidifying how the internet has become a tool yielded by some to further harm survivors (para. 1). While the internet does have the potential for providing unparalleled opportunities for community building, there will always be the other examples of the internet being used against survivors in sinister capacities.

FACEBOOK AS A SAFE (ENOUGH) HAVEN

While there are many sites that offer paid access to support groups like Sesh Online Therapy and Emotions Anonymous, the community building capabilities of social media platforms offer a cheap and easy mode of creating and sustaining online groups. By conducting a case study analysis of Facebook, the most popularly used social media platform of 2021 with 190 million active users, this author developed a

snapshot of the current state of sexual assault support groups on the popular platform. Each of the major social media platforms offer something of value to users, like Twitter's hashtags and Instagram's reels, but it is Facebook's "groups" capability that makes it a prime resource for solidarity groups.

Studying Facebook groups can be difficult for reasons of both access and ethics. Due to privacy issues, some groups may not feel comfortable allowing researchers to access their groups in effort to protect their members. Furthermore, many members post with an expectation that the boundaries of their messages remain within the confines of the group. Researchers who break that barrier may in turn break the trust of group members, or even inadvertently cause third-victimization. Therefore, the following data was collected to exemplify how sexual assault support groups are indeed present on social media, but due to those access and ethical concerns, only utilized publicly available information. The benefits of any particular group can only be speculated upon because protecting survivor's rights was of higher priority. Though more information could have been gained by access more private details, these limitations to data collection prove the value of the rules, regulations, and restrictions these peer support groups place on on researchers. Furthermore, the mere presence and popularity of these groups exemplifies how online peer support groups offer some form of support for survivors.

The following snapshot of Facebook sexual assault support groups were analyzed for: (1) the basic characteristics of the visible groups (including how many there are, if they were set to public or private, and the number of members), (2) the range of topics being discussed and how the secondary topics fit into the larger conversation of sexual assault, and (3) any exclusionary or gatekeeping measures that the groups exhibited. Overall, this is an overview of what can currently be known about the online support groups that have been created sustained by and for survivors on Facebook.

What is Currently Out There

With over 200 million active groups around the globe, the Facebook platform has become an ideal space where individual users can join and connect with those interested in similar topics. Using a personal Facebook account, the researcher searched the term "sexual assault" in their page's "groups" feature. A total of 48 unique groups were listed on July 29, 2021. This list is not comprehensive, however, because the Facebook algorithm limits what a user can see based on their language and geographic settings (this account is registered in the U.S.). The subsequent findings are not meant to be generalizable but should function more as a representation of what kinds of groups are out there (Cooper, 2021). Of the 48 total (n=48) groups that were listed, 12 were disregarded because they did not focus specifically upon sexual assault (n=36) (for example, some video game interest groups also used the word "assault" in their titles). Then, the groups were segregated based on whether they were private (meaning that a user would have to be approved by an administrator to join) and public (meaning that any Facebook user could see the content of the group). Most of the groups (~83.33%; n=30) were private, with only six (~16.67%) set to public. The most popular group had approximately 15K (~15,000) members, while the least popular group had only 4 members. Overall, sexual assault support groups are present, popular, and thriving on the Facebook platform.

What is Being Talked About

But what are the groups talking about? This is when the gatekeeping restrictions become significantly relevant. The groups with the most members and, therefore, the most engagement are all set to private.

So, unless researchers can be granted access through the page administrators, there is no ethical way of analyzing the interactions going on in these online peer support groups. However, there is some information that is publicly viewable. First, the titles of the respective groups are accessible. From these titles, some re-occurring terminology and sub-topics emerged. For example, the term “sexual assault” was used the most (n=24), but “rape” (n=5), “abuse” (n=14), and “trauma” (n=3) were also present. Also, the identifier of “survivor(s)” (n=19) was preferred over “victim(s)” (n=3). Finally, 14, or about 38.89%, of the groups specifically labeled themselves as a “support group”. These linguistic signifiers are important because they epitomize how most of these groups were created with the intention of being support groups for sexual assault survivors, thus supporting the argument that survivors have something to gain from participating in peer support groups.

Beyond the main theme of sexual assault, there were three secondary sub-topics: (1) discussion of sexual assault during childhood, (2) the inclusion of secondary victims in the support group, and (3) highlighting sexual assault that occurred while the victim was enlisted in the military. These three sub-themes are significant because they each reveal another layer of the overall issue of sexual assault. Mentioned 10 times, child-related abuse or trauma was the most popular secondary theme—thus highlighting how prevalent sexual assault is for children in the U.S.: one in nine girls and one in 53 boys under the age of 18 experience sexual abuse or assault (Finkelhor et al., 2014). The presence of this topic also illustrates how (1) “the effects of child sexual abuse can be long-lasting and [can] affect the victim’s mental health” (*Children and teens...*, n.d., para. 5) and (2) how these online Facebook support groups can be a recovery resource for adult survivors of childhood sexual assault. Another reoccurring theme was the inclusion of a population known as “secondary survivors”, which include the family members, friends, or significant others of the victims that have also undergone a form of victimization after the assault of their loved one (n=2). As Remer and Ferguson (1995) state, “victimization has a ripple effect, spreading the damage in waves out from victims to those with whom they have intimate contact” (p. 408). Therefore, it makes sense that family members and loved ones would also seek out resources for processing trauma. Finally, there were multiple references to survivors who experienced their sexual assault while enlisted in the military (n=2). According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center’s (2013) report on sexual violence in the military, in just one year alone (2012) there were 26,000 estimated victims of sexual violence. Of those, about 14,000 victims were male while 12,000 victims were female. These sub-groupings show just how complex the issue of sexual assault is and, therefore, how a diverse selection of groups is needed to serve each type of survivor.

Gatekeeping Measures

As mentioned before, the societal stigmatization of sexual assault has led to the perpetuation of online harassment of survivors. The support groups that have chosen to be facilitated online have had to protect themselves from these malevolent attacks. With only about 16% of the groups publicly accessible, it is evident that the page administrators of the respective support groups see the benefit of restricting access to the page’s content. The most popular pages with membership in the thousands are all set to private, thus insinuating that participants feel safer with these restrictions in place. The gatekeeping measures for the private pages are all set up in the same way: an interested survivor must answer a set of questions to the page administrator’s liking to be granted access to the group. Below is an example of a set of questions asked by one of the most popular private support groups, Warriors & Survivors of Abuse, Trauma, Sexual Assault & Mental Illness (accessed 2021, August 2):

1. Why do you want to join this group? Are you at least 18 years of age?
2. You understand that if you do not follow the group rules you will be removed and banned?
3. You agree to keep everything in this group confidential to respect others, not to cause unnecessary drama and that you're not coming here for research or study purposes?

Along with these questions, potential members are asked to adhere to a set of rules or guidelines that the page administrator has constructed to control what is said within the groups. Below is an example of some rules of participation also from the Warriors & Survivors of Abuse, Trauma, Sexual Assault & Mental Illness (accessed 2021, August 2) private group—these are publicly visible material:

1. **Be kind and courteous.** You agree to keep everything in this group confidential to respect others, not to cause unnecessary drama, and that you're not coming here for research or study purposes.
2. **Safe space.** This is a safe space for LGBTQ+ and trans men and women. We do not allow hate speech or discrimination. Discussions/comments RE: politics and religion will be removed at discretion of the admin team.
3. **Use TW for posts.** Please add trigger warnings for graphic content, or if requested. If this is not done, your post will be deleted, and you will need to repost in the correct format.
4. **No public accusations/ name and sharing.** Do not name / share photos of anyone accused of abuse or links to information about them. Do not give out personal information about abusers or encourage sharing this information.
5. **No direct messages without consent.** Please ask before you direct message another member of the group. Do not DM without express permission to do so.
6. **No Go Fund Me posts.** We cannot allow everyone to do this, or the group will be full of requests. Posts will be deleted.
7. **No spamming.** Do not spam the group. Messages about MLM groups, cold sales messaging, or repeat posts will be deleted.
8. **No promotion of other groups.** We don't generally allow members to promote other groups. Sharing links to resources is fine.

These questions reveal how the page administrators aim to protect the group's members by instituting a form of a code of ethics. By making the group private they are also able to remove any participant that breaks the rules. Overall, these privacy restrictions are a way of regulating online groups from inappropriate behavior that might further harm the vulnerable participants. Page administrators are trying to make their space as safe a space as they can. Although monitoring these groups for inappropriate content must take a lot of labor, both physical and emotional, the page administrators must feel like the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.

Another type of restriction that is placed upon five of the groups is based on gender: four groups explicitly state that they are for women only, with only one specifically for male survivors. While discriminatory, this restriction of access based on gender leads back to how much of sexual assault is rooted in male violence: "Male and patriarchal violence against women and girls is overwhelming... Acts of male violence against women occur in every country, every community, every religion, every time period, and every language" (Taylor, 2020, p. 17-18). However, gender is also a social construct that glosses over the spectrum of gender expression (Alexander, 2005), so the usage of the gender binary could potentially exclude nonbinary and transgender individuals who might feel like they were not welcome. But for those

survivors that seek a space dedicated to one end of the gender spectrum over another, these limitations could be beneficial. With most of the interactions between survivors occurring in private spaces, at present, this is the best picture of how support groups for survivors are operating on Facebook.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

More research is needed to gather the lived experiences of survivors who participate in online support groups. Right now, current research theorizes how peer support can be helpful and how online methods of communication give survivors more resource options, but what is lacking are in-depth accounts from survivors themselves detailing why they choose to participate in online support groups and what they gain from participation. Collecting this data is complicated by gatekeeping measures, as well as the lack of comfort that survivors might have when discussing their trauma with researchers. To get a more holistic view of how survivors are benefiting from these online groups, in-depth interviews and wide-spread survey data need to be collected in an ethical and trauma-informed manner. Researchers working in collaboration with victims-rights advocacy organizations and group administrators may be able to overcome the limitations online support group research faces by allowing administrators to post on behalf of the researchers and allowing participants to volunteer for the study by reaching out to the research team as was done in another chapter in this volume (see Ch. 24 on non-religious grief communication).

Overall, there is a lot yet to be learned about how online support groups benefit individuals struggling with socially tabooed experiences and/or identities. However, with the advent of social networking sites like Facebook there are more opportunities than ever before for individuals to find and establish communities online. By studying online communication networks, such as sexual assault support groups, a better understanding for how new digital modes of social connection both positively and negatively affect people's lives can shed light on how social connection can be fostered in a variety of ways. Online communication strategies are a burgeoning area of research where continued analysis is needed to keep up with the evolving ways people are interacting with one another online.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this chapter introduces the concept of how beneficial online support groups can be for survivors of sexual assault. Due to the onerous stigma attached to sexual violence in the U.S. (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985), survivors often experience further secondary (Campbell et al., 2001) or even tertiary traumatization (Clevenger & Navarro, 2021). Therefore, peer support groups are such a necessary resource for recovery for many survivors. After their trauma, survivors often feel isolated or even blame themselves for the crime of the perpetrator (Taylor, 2020). Connecting survivors in a network of support is important, especially when considering the high rates of mental illness that survivors are at risk for after their trauma (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012; Orchowski et al., 2013). However, in the day and age of Web 2.0, there are even more options available for survivors when it comes to accessing the benefits of support groups. As exemplified by the case study analysis of the current active support groups on Facebook, the internet can facilitate online versions of the traditionally in-person peer support groups. Despite the limitations of meeting via the internet (i.e., online harassment) (Holtzman & Menning, 2015; Citron, 2009), survivors have developed gatekeeping measures that allow these groups to function in

safe (enough) spaces. The access restrictions enacted by page administrators are most likely not perfect—anyone could lie their way in—but, for the most part, these online groups offer another resource for survivors to interact and access resources they often desperately need. Despite the taboo nature of sexual assault in U.S. society, survivors are still being able to utilize the internet as a viable tool and resource for fostering community online.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Peer Support: Occurs when individuals seek and exchange resources with one another including the sharing of information, similar experiences, and emotional, social, or practical help. Can take place in a variety of settings, including physical counseling centers or online.

Second Rape: Occurs when survivors of sexual violence are faced with negative feedback by loved ones or the police after disclosure of their trauma.

Sexual Assault: Refers to an act or repeated acts of non-consensual physical contact of a sexual nature with another individual that is often, but not always, achieved by force.

Social Media: Refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create, share, and/or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks.

Social Norms: Shared standards of acceptable behavior by groups.

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Stigma: A mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.

Support Group: A gathering of people facing common issues to share what is troubling them.

Third Victimization: Refers to online harassment a survivor of sexual violence might experience either at the hands of the perpetrator online or by online trolls.

Chapter 15

Challenging the Taboo Against Personal Abortion Accounts: Towards a Discourse of Strong Objectivity

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ABSTRACT

The present chapter is an analysis of how 10 women described their positions on abortion prior to and after deciding to terminate an unplanned pregnancy. The discursive features of their pre- and post-decision accounts are contrasted, noting the ways their pre-abortion accounts resembled the generalized, impartial, simplistic accounts that characterize political abortion rhetoric, and how they reframed and reconstructed more experiential, complex, integrated, and objective accounts, which then informed their changed position on the issue of abortion.

“Feminist thinkers must self-consciously and critically confront various traditions of political discourse, feminist and nonfeminist. There are among us, for example, those who seek solutions to our public and private dilemmas by depriving us of a grammar of moral discourse and forcing all of life under a set of terms denuded of a critical edge. In so doing, they would deprive the human object, female and male, of the capacity to think, to judge, to question, and to act, for all these activities are importantly constituted by an everyday, ordinary language infused with moral terms. We must be alert to such destructive options as we break the silence of traditional political thought on questions of women’s historic oppression and the absence of women from the realm of public speech” (Elshtain, 1982, p. 605).

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INTRODUCTION

The present chapter focuses on a contrast between 10 people's pre-pregnancy anti-abortion accounts, and their changed, more objective positions post-pregnancy that accompanied a decision to have an abortion. These accounts, collected 21 years after the passage of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States, are analyzed against the backdrop of a discussion of three factors related to abortion in the United States since 1973: 1) Historically ambivalent public opinion on the moral and legal status of abortion; 2) The stubborn taboo against personally situated abortion accounts; And 3) A longstanding, unwarranted privileging of the indicatively "male" (Gilligan, 1982) discourse that characterizes public, political rhetoric over a situated discourse that draws from personal experience. The current chapter describes how 10 individuals communicated with the author, a sympathetic listener under conditions of confidentiality, about their pro-life beliefs prior to deciding to have an abortion, their decisions to terminate their unplanned pregnancies, and their subsequent changed perspectives on abortion. Their pre-abortion accounts are shown to resemble the universal, impartial, and simplistic structure of publicly facing political scientific discourse while their post-pregnancy accounts constitute more complex and personally situated formulations of the decision-making process, constructing what the author claims is a discourse of "strong objectivity" (Harding, 1991, 1993) resembling the more ambivalent discourse of American public opinion that has persisted for nearly 50 years.

Grounded in their communication with a sympathetic Other, encouraged to detail their experiences with neither an imposition of taboo nor an expectation of stigma, the interviewees talked about the particularities of their private lives, the complexity of their developing understanding of what it means to be a pregnant person, a parent, a partner, an employee, a student, a daughter, among other intersectional identities that situate their experiences and considerations about an unwanted pregnancy. While the individuals whose stories are told in this chapter are not politicians or scientists, their explorations into their personal circumstances are powerful models of how to reimagine a more *objective knowledge* about the realities and complexities of an abortion decision in ways that publicly facing political rhetoric about abortion leaves out in its attempt to generalize, distill, distance, convince¹.

BACKGROUND

Strong Objectivity

While a discourse of impartiality or what critics have called "the view from nowhere" (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991, 2015a, 2015b; Wylie, 2003) is the privileged discourse on abortion in the US, it is hardly a neutral or impartial one. As will be outlined below, political discourse about abortion, as opposed to personal abortion stories, index very specific and deeply perspectival moral stances. By the very empiricist criteria that would render an argument "objective," such discourse fails to be impartial and ultimately obscures and trivializes the very real lived circumstances that lead people to consider different reproductive decisions. A better candidate for an account that meets criteria of "strong objectivity" (Harding, 1991, 1993) is one that embodies what Feyerabend (1962) called "epistemic pluralism." A more objective discourse about abortion achieves a more inclusive and relevantly situated set of considerations, explicitly accounts for the complexity, the diversity, and in the case of the abortion question, the ambivalence of the situated knowledge of individuals who, far from being impartial, are self-proclaimed

stakeholders, albeit stakeholders who are stigmatized by a taboo against talking about their experiences. As standpoint feminists have argued:

The inclusion of members of marginalized groups has the potential to lead to more rigorous critical reflection because their experiences will often be precisely those that are most needed in identifying problematic background assumptions (Intemann, 2010, p. 787).

Inclusion of individuals who have particular experiences and interests may confer an “epistemic advantage” (Intemann, 2010) to the otherwise partial perspective of a less inclusive group because:

Members of oppressed groups must understand the assumptions that constitute the worldviews of dominant groups in order to successfully navigate the world. At the same time, they often have experiences that conflict with dominant views and generate alternative views about how the world works (Wylie, 2003, pp. 34–35).

In the discussion and analysis that follows, the voices of a stigmatized group are centered for the purpose of contributing to a more complete, a more “objective” discourse about abortion than exists in the ubiquitous and historically polarized public debate. Such an analysis begins not only from the perspectives of people’s reproductive experiences but insists on the applicability of such standpoints to people’s reproductive lives, aligning with Smith’s (1992) conceptualization of standpoint as practical politics:

*The standpoint of women proposes a different **point d’appui**: It begins one step back before the Cartesian shift that forgets the body. The body isn’t forgotten; hence the actual site of the body isn’t forgotten. Inquiry starts with the knower who is actually located; she is active; she is at work; she is connected with particular other people in various ways; she thinks, laughs, desires, sorrows, sings, curses, loves just here; she reads here; she watches television. Activities, feelings, experiences, hook her into extended social relations linking her activities to those of other people and in ways beyond her knowing. Whereas a standpoint beginning in text-mediated discourse begins with the concepts or schema of that discourse and turns towards the actual to find its object, the standpoint of women never leaves the actual (p. 91).*

Historical Ambivalence of Public Opinion on the Abortion Question

According to the American Enterprise Institute’s (AEI, a nonpartisan, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) educational organization) recent report on November 2, 2021, American public opinion has only moved within a narrow range on moral and legal questions about abortion in the nearly 50 years since the Supreme Court handed down its 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*. Gallup poll results show that 54% of respondents in 1975 and 48% in 2021 said abortion should be legal only under certain circumstances (Bowman & Goldstein, 2021). Comparing two Quinnipiac University polls, one in 2004 and the same poll in September 2021 (taken shortly after the Supreme Court denied an emergency request to block the Texas fetal heartbeat law), 20% of respondents in 2004 and 31% in 2021 said abortion should be legal in all cases, 35% in 2004 and 31% in 2021 said it should be legal in most cases, 26% in 2004 and 21% in 2021 said it should be illegal in most cases, and 14% in 2004 and 11% in 2021 said it should be illegal in all cases. Four other organizations that ask an identical four-part question found that support for legal abortion in all cases

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has risen slightly, while the view that it should be illegal in all cases has dropped slightly (Bowman & Goldstein, 2021). Based on these results, Bowman & Goldstein (2021) conclude that:

Americans appear to be simultaneously pro-life and pro-choice. Significant numbers of people say abortion is an act of murder. They also say that the decision to have an abortion should be a personal choice. These are contradictory sentiments, yet many people hold them at the same time. Many see no reason to resolve the tensions in these positions. They believe in the sanctity of life and the importance of individual choice (p. 2).

These “tensions” that Bowman and Goldstein (2021) identify, “tensions” that have consistently existed in the wake of the 1973 supreme court decision, suggest that Americans may be less divided among ourselves than we are within ourselves regarding the question of abortion, and that perhaps this kind of complexity lives more comfortably in narratives of personal experiences than on the political stage.

Personal Abortion Stories as Taboo

While the voices of individuals² who have elected to terminate an unwanted pregnancy are too often stigmatized and consequently silenced by the taboo against speaking about one’s own abortion experience, political discourse around abortion is unmuted by such norm-threatening social practices. While we might initially be tempted to think that it is the topic of abortion itself that bears the weight of such a heavy taboo, it is rather the kind of discourse, a personal discourse about one’s own abortion, that is taboo and that consequently functions to stigmatize those who speak about their abortion experiences. This is not to say that there have not been attempts to break this taboo against speaking freely and without stigma or retribution about one’s own abortion experience, even on the political front. Lawmakers who have spoken openly about their personal abortion experiences in an attempt to inform political decision-making with experiential, reality-based perspectives, rarely elicit a critical mass of support from fellow lawmakers on matters of abortion availability, safety, or funding, but are instead often met with hate mail and death threats. Many politicians have made the calculated decision to speak out about their own abortion experiences, bringing the particularities of such an experience to the US legislative discussion to challenge the discourse on abortion as detached from people’s lives. Sadly, the public testimonies of those such as Teresa Fedor, Erica Crawley, and Lisa Obecki of Ohio, Wendy Davis of Texas, Lucy Flores of Nevada, Tricia Cotham of North Carolina, Jackie Speier of California, and Molly White of Texas (who identifies as pro-life), to name a few, did not ignite changes in their fellow lawmakers’ votes, changes that would better reflect and support the realities of their constituents’ reproductive healthcare needs.

Recognizing the harm that stigmatization and silencing does to people who have abortions, many outside of the political arena have also made bold attempts to make personal stories about having had an abortion more visible. The Abortion Diary, a traveling museum exhibit and podcast that began in 2013, “offers audiences a more real and nuanced picture of abortion and provides material for meaningful and relevant conversations” (The Abortion Diary, 2020). In 1972, in 2006, and then again in 2019, *Ms. Magazine* launched a “we had abortions” campaign for “honesty and freedom.” In 2004, Jennifer Baumgardner created an “I had an abortion” t-shirt campaign to coincide with the March for Women’s Lives in Washington D.C. and created a film and a book with the same title. In 2010, Steph Herold introduced the hashtag #ihadanabortion in a move to raise consciousness about abortion and to encourage women to

“come out” about their own abortion experiences, and in 2012, *Advocates for Youth* launched the “1 in 3” campaign and then “*Abortion out Loud*” in 2019 to “break through the status quo of silence and shame.”

These are only a few of the many important projects devoted to challenging the taboo against personal abortion stories, of “normalizing” (Goffman, 2009) or “untroubling” (Beynon-Jones, 2017) them. The importance of this work is evident in the pervasive finding that the stigma attached to having an abortion and the consequent self-imposed silence (taboo) regarding one’s abortion (Biggs et al., 2020; Major & Gramzow, 1999; Hanschmidt, et al., 2016), not the abortion experience itself, does psychological harm (Biggs et al., 2015). However, while these impressive campaigns that push against the silencing of abortion experiences have created a much-needed space for personal abortion stories, self-disclosure of one’s own abortion history remains a taboo subject. Individuals who have abortions remain generally silent and too often suffer a ‘compound stigma’ built on multiple forms of discrimination and structural injustices (Kumar et al., 2009).

In addition to the stigma and the danger associated with disclosing one’s own abortion experience, another consequence of the taboo against speaking publicly about personal abortion experiences is that politically as opposed to experientially informed discourse is then relatively unavailable to those who face a decision about an unplanned/unwanted pregnancy. According to a survey released in 2018 by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI, a nonpartisan, independent research organization interested in issues at the intersection of religion, culture, and public policy), 47% of those polled said that they did not “know someone who has had an abortion” (27% replied that they knew a close friend who had had an abortion, 18% that they knew a family member, 11% that they knew someone else, and 5% reported that they themselves had had an abortion). Yet, 98% of those polled identified as either “pro-choice” or “pro-life,” with only 2% identifying as “neither/mixed.” These numbers suggest that even though less than half of those polled were likely to have talked with someone about a personal abortion experience, the vast majority identified as supporting one of the two highly visible “pro-choice” or “pro-life” political platforms, their identifications therefore likely based on political rhetoric. This historically well-entrenched taboo around personal abortion stories means that a person who may be experiencing an unwanted pregnancy generally has greater access to abortion discourse designed to polarize and to malign the perceived opponent rather than to accurately inform pregnant individuals of factual information to support them in their reproductive health decisions. Such political language obscures and trivializes the circumstances that lead people to consider terminating a pregnancy, even though it is the more grounded, more complete, more *objective* accounts of actual people reflecting and deliberating about their identities, positionalities, and outcomes associated with whether to terminate a pregnancy that better inform such a critical reproductive decision.

Features of the Privileged Discourse of the Political Abortion Debate

Impartial, Abstract

Much as the women of Plato’s era who were barred from public speech of all kinds, whose private speech of the household fell into the domain of opinion (subjectivity) rather than truth (objectivity) simply by virtue of being spoken by women (Bloom, 1991/1968), it is what Carol Gilligan (1982) called the “male” discourse of abstract, impartial “rights” that is the privileged voice on abortion. This is not to say that such discourse is spoken exclusively by individuals who identify as “male” or that individuals who identify as “female” do not use such discourse. The characterization of these “voices” lies in the speech act’s

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discursive features. For example, “‘Women’s talk,’ in both *style* (hesitant, qualified, question-posing) and *content* (concern for the everyday, the practical, and the interpersonal) is typically devalued by men and women alike” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997, p. 17). The indicatively “female” discourse of personal abortion experiences is correspondingly devalued, stigmatizing, and ultimately taboo.

By contrast, the political abortion debate as practiced on the public stage is a discourse of abstract, impartial “rights,” framed as either evil or as necessary. Such political claims, with their rhetorical attempts to negate the “legitimacy of the opposing perspective and, in the case of activists, to vilify their opponents” (Dillon, 1993; Vanderford 1989), are limited by no such taboo when putting forth arguments on either side of the abortion polemic. The apparent “conceptual incommensurability” (MacIntyre, 1981) of rival “pro-choice” and “pro-life” arguments lies in part, with the discursive structure of these arguments. The insistence on the part of activists who communicate their positions as universal claims, that the things about which they are passionate “are either clearly good or clearly bad” (Luker, 1984) precludes the possibility of weighing or evaluating different, complex, and especially competing claims. Public discourse around abortion bears many of the characteristics of language designed to shore up domination “by debasing the meanings of words, displacing our attention from the important to the trivial, or covering up with a smokescreen of obscurantisms that aim to deny and to distance” (Elshtain, 1982, p. 605). Such discourse is often presented as though the truth value of its claims exists independently of the person arguing, or of the relationship the person has to their interlocutor (MacIntyre, 1981), deleting from such accounts the particularities of people’s actual personal circumstances.

Developmental analyses have similarly revealed such features. Perhaps one of the most famous of these is Carol Gilligan’s (1982) work on moral development and moral decision-making. She noted that in the case that moral dilemmas are constructed as conflicts between the *rights* of individuals, general abstract rules are applied equally across all situations. This was what she called the predominantly “male voice” that develops in relation to a telos of independence and autonomy. It is this voice that characterizes public discourse on abortion. Whether under the moniker of pro-choice or pro-life, the abortion debate is framed in terms of either the abstract “rights” of the pregnant person to their own body, to their own reproductive choices, their own self-determination (as with pro-choice arguments) or the “rights” of the embryo/fetus (as with pro-life arguments) to life, to be free from harm. In both cases, the rights of pregnant individuals or of embryos/fetuses serve as the centerpiece of each argument in a way that decontextualizes them from the complexities and particularities of lived realities.

Simplistic, Narrow

The nature of the public debate about abortion is also unexpectedly simplistic in form (Collins, 1987; Dillon, 1993) given the number of ways that abortion touches on matters of great importance to most. By the late 1980s, “antiabortion activists had successfully redefined the meaning of abortion... The new narratives significantly narrowed the interpretive framework in which to understand the role of abortion providers and patients” (Schoen, 2015, p. 264). In the case of public debates on abortion, “It may also be a question of simplicity begetting simplicity – reflecting a spiral of argument wherein each player tactically responds to the simplicity of others” (Dillon, 1993, p. 312). This simplicity, in its rhetorical efficiency, strips such discourse of the inherently complex medical, ethical, legal, social, cultural, family, religious, and gender categories (to name a few) into which abortion finds its way (Sanger, 2016). It limits the possibility of public communication surrounding abortion to function as a constructive dialogue between interlocutors in which each side is attentive to the others’ claims and concerns in the diversity

of contexts in which they arise. Using Gilligan's paradigm of moral voices to explore the possibility of transforming this discourse, Collins (1987) writes:

Advocates of each position use symbols that reflect the philosophical and moral underpinning of their position's voice. The antichoice woman displays pictures of the helpless, vulnerable fetus, evoking and reflecting the responsibility to care for others. The prochoice woman speaks of "individual rights," "bodily sovereignty," and autonomy. Each fails to hear the concerns of the other voice and the absence of the other voice in its own speech. Thus, what the antiabortion, antifeminist woman hears in the feminist, prochoice argument is the absence of care and responsibility for others. Yet from the feminists' perspective, one of the most disturbing aspects of prolife rhetoric is the lack of concern for the pregnant woman (p. 13).

Both sides of the abortion debate, particularly when the discourse of single-issue groups (e.g., the National Abortion Rights Action League, the American Life League) is examined, lack conceptual differentiation and integrative complexity (Dillon, 1993). Such groups strategically shape their communication "in ways that primarily legitimate their own point of view" (Dillon, 1993, p. 305); they are "simple, straightforward arguments that appear to be directed at consolidating support for their own position and not risking its attenuation by using more differentiated arguments" (Dillon, 1993, p. 312).

As arguments become articulated into increasingly generalized and simplified accounts, they are positioned further and further apart, reifying, and solidifying "opposing" sides to the point that single words can come to index these general moral positionings. Although there are many ways to talk about prenatal life, for example, different linguistic choices can come to index (Ochs, 1990, 1992; Silverstein, 2003; Peirce, C.S., 1897) very different perspectives on critical social topics such as pregnancy or motherhood: "Termination of pregnancy or abortion? Pro-life or anti-choice? Fetus or unborn child? Pregnant woman or mother?" (Sanger, 2016). While these different linguistic choices index different moral stances on abortion, they simultaneously do this in a way that essentializes political positions on the question of abortion. If the politicized debate centers on the general question of "rights" of the "child" vs. the "rights" of "women," for example, as long as the discussion fails to address substantive issues grounded in the full reproductive lives of individuals, it remains a linguistic "mask" (Rosenthal, 1973)

...In which language may be used to perpetrate illusions, and pieces of palpable nonsense may be 'demonstrated' as valid because the propositions in which this half-baked knowledge is borne bear no relation at all to the world of real objects, whether natural or socially constructed (p. 605).

Centering Personal Abortion Stories: Objectivity by Way of Subjectivity

Another of these "substantive issues" that is obscured in public abortion rhetoric, is the pregnant person's subjectivity. The abstract and impartial arguments leave out the voice of the pregnant individual and their particular concerns as though they are not relevant to a full accounting of reproductive health choices. This is not unlike carefully crafted scientific discourse, another historically masculinized and privileged form of communication, which deliberately and precisely attempts to eliminate the role of the scientist in producing and communicating knowledge as an objective matter of impersonal, impartial facts. Feminist scholars have roundly criticized such communicative practices in science. They have challenged the very claim as to the possibility and value of so-called "unbiased objectivity" defined

in part as against the discourse of value-laden subjectivity. Far from being “universal” and “impartial” feminist scientists show that scientific discourse often reinforces prevailing social and cultural stereotypes (Blaffer Hrdy, 1986; Lloyd, 1993; Tuana, 2004, 2006; Weasel, 2001), revealing the distortions created by a masculine bias that purports to be “objective” while proliferating “rampant sexist and androcentric bias – ‘politics’! – in the dominant scientific (and popular) descriptions and explanations of nature and social life” (Harding, 1993, p. 49).

This attempt at “self-extrication,” part of what Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1997) call a “separate” epistemological orientation, is one in which the “self” is suppressed, in which knowledge is strictly impersonal. This way of knowing is described as developmentally prior to an epistemology of care in which “connected knowledge” is built on experience, through empathy (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997), and is therefore fundamentally connected to the self as experiencer and as knower. The very idea of the detachment of scientists from their object of study (or even the claim that such a relationship is possible) is itself “culturally constructed and historically situated” (Ochs, Gonzales, & Jacoby, 1996, p. 329). As Davis (2013) explains, such claims to objectivity function “to regulate behavior” and “to manage issues of difference and deviance” (Davis, 2013, p. 554) but without any appearance of moral authority or value commitments.

The emphasis on detachment as a form of objectivity also stands in sharp contrast to what Ochs, Gonzales, & Jacoby (1996) find in the actual discursive practices of physicists actively engaged in scientific inquiry with one another. These scientists’ communication was characterized by very different ways of positioning themselves vis-à-vis their object of study than the purported ideal of scientific detachment would predict. Contrary to language that constructed and maintained a distinct separation between scientist as objective observer and nature as observed, Ochs, Gonzales, & Jacoby (1996) instead describe the discourse of scientists as one in which the scientists are subjectively involved with the objects they study. Their communication with one another went so far as to blur the distinction between the scientist-speaker and the object (or state, e.g., temperature) being studied to “constitute an empathy with entities they are struggling to understand” (p. 348). In attempting to understand and describe phenomena under study, the scientists speak of the phenomena they study as though they themselves *are* those phenomena and describe changes they undergo as though they themselves are undergoing such changes (“When I go down into the domain state...” with “I” being both the speaker and the temperature). Far from being “objective” qua “impartial” the actual discursive practices used in the midst of solving scientific problems are fundamentally subjective, even unexpectedly agnostic on the boundary between the scientist and the phenomena they observe. These were the actual communicative practices observed among scientists as they were creating scientific knowledge, practices that arguably function as crucial discursive tools for knowledge production. Their final published and public reports, however, bear few if any traces of such subjectively created scientific knowledge since the culture of public scientific discourse persists in its demand for detachment³.

TEN PERSONAL ABORTION ACCOUNTS

Alongside those who have chosen to speak out about their personal abortion experiences on the senate floor, as part of a traveling exhibition, or on online campaigns and podcasts, the following is a reanalysis⁴ of ten personal abortion accounts collected roughly halfway between the time that *Roe v. Wade* was passed and the present, a time during which American opinion has changed little, political discourse

remains divided and acrimonious, many laws challenging the availability of abortion have been passed, and the status of *Roe v. Wade* as law of the land is being seriously challenged in the supreme court. The interviews represent a precise sampling of socially taboo, normally unheard communication of individuals who have chosen to undergo an abortion. They take place in a conversational space in which the strong social taboo against talking about one's abortion experience, a taboo that has persisted for over 50 years in the US, is lifted, giving the individuals in this study the opportunity to speak candidly about their experiences with an unwanted pregnancy and their decision-making processes that ultimately led to the decision to terminate their pregnancy. The analysis that follows challenges the marginalization of such accounts in an attempt to center these voices as crucial to the understanding of such a reproductive healthcare decision.

METHODS

Recruiting and Interviewing

The 10 individuals who agreed to be interviewed were between the ages of 18 and 28 (mean age 22.5). Their socio-economic status ranged from very low to upper-middle income levels. All of them identified as White; none identified as a member of a racial or ethnic minority. All had recently (within about 2 weeks) undergone an abortion for the first time at a clinic in central Massachusetts. They were recruited for the study on the day they visited the clinic for the abortion procedure by a counselor during the usual counselling session that takes place before all abortion procedures. The author was a counselor at the clinic at the time, though other counselors at the clinic also helped recruit participants.

To participate in the study, the interviewee had to be at least 18 years of age, the abortion they were seeking that day was their first, and they would have reported, as a routine part of the counseling session, that they had changed how they felt about abortion in light of the pregnancy they sought to terminate that day. The first two criteria were assessed using their routine medical history form. The third was assessed in the counseling session by asking them directly. This was not an unusual topic during the routine counseling sessions and so it did not alter the usual flow of conversation between patient and counselor. Once it was determined that a patient was eligible, they were asked if they would be interested in participating in a research project involving audio-recorded interviews. They were not offered compensation for participation. If they agreed, they were asked permission for a follow-up phone call from the researcher to set up the interview. All who were eligible agreed to a follow-up phone call and were contacted about a week after the abortion to set up the time and place and to discuss any questions they had.

Most of the interviews were conducted in a private room at the clinic where the interviewees had had the abortion upon returning for the two-week post-abortion check-up. For a few, it was more convenient to meet at their or the researcher's home where they could speak free from distractions. Participants were informed that the interview would probably last about 30 - 60 minutes, that it would be audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher, and that all names would be changed on the transcripts to ensure their privacy. They were invited to ask any questions they had, and informed consent was obtained in writing. They filled out a brief demographic form requesting their name, age, ethnic and racial identity. All procedures were approved by the author's institutional IRB. Once the interviews were transcribed, all data were deidentified and entered into a database. Once the data were compiled in this way, all materials that included personal information were destroyed.

Challenging the Taboo Against Personal Abortion Accounts

During these semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked general questions about how they used to feel about abortion and how they felt at the time of the interview but were encouraged to elaborate as they saw fit. Because the primary aim of the interviews was to understand the interviewees' views on abortion from their personal point of view, it was determined that such a format was the most adequate way to promote discussion in which interviewees were invited to take part in structuring the conversation, as well as a more appropriate way of avoiding a purely exploitative attitude towards them as data sources. Responses to the following questions, used as a guide for the interview, were used for the present study:

1. I understand that your views on abortion have changed. Starting with the way you used to feel about abortion, can you describe in as much detail as you can, how you came to feel the way you do now?
2. Do you think that there could ever be a time or a situation in which you would feel the way you used to feel about abortion?
3. Was there any particular event, situation, or person you feel had a major influence on this change?
4. Can you imagine a time or situation in which you would not have made this same decision?

Transcription and Coding

Each interview was assigned a number (P1 – P10) and transcribed word-for-word, with no attempt to alter false starts, backchanneling, repetitions, or other kinds of “disfluencies” that appear normally in oral discourse, but not generally in written discourse. Question marks were used to signify rising intonation, periods were used to signify falling intonation, and a dash (“--”) was used to signify an abrupt stop in mid-word or mid-statement. All names used during the interviews were changed to maintain confidentiality. Once transcription was complete, the data preparation began with identifying utterances in which the interviewees made explicit reference to their attitudes or feelings about abortion, generally in response to the first question, but in some cases, during other parts of the interview. Statements that addressed their feelings or beliefs about abortion, reasons for taking a particular position, how they defined or characterized abortion, were included in this step. These passages were then parsed into utterances using Gee's (1990) notion of “basic speech units” (BSUs) since many utterances which occur in oral discourse do not necessarily consist of the standard subject-predicate structure that characterizes much written discourse. Instead, as Gee argues, speakers mark short stretches of speech in oral discourse using intonational contours: “Each BSU contains on its last content word a salient change of pitch (and stress) and the words in each BSU are said with an integrated intonational contour” (p. 339).

Although the original data collection was not focused on the issue of abortion as taboo, as part of the reanalysis undertaken here, each transcript was examined for comments in which the interviewees talked about how they or others they knew had chosen not to speak about their personal abortion or unplanned pregnancy experiences. These utterances were coded as “taboo.” Next, as part of the analysis of “activist” (polarized, essentialized) discourse, the pre-abortion accounts were coded using an inductive “in-vivo coding” technique to best hear and preserve the voices of the participants. All the descriptions/ explanations given for their pre-abortion stances towards abortion were initially “lean” coded (Creswell, 2016) then narrowed to the following 5 codes, codes that were generally named using the interviewees' own word choices: 1) sin, 2) wrong/not right, 3) mean, 4) killing/murder, 5) irresponsible/selfish. The pre-pregnancy accounts were additionally coded for passages that discursively framed the issue around

1) the “killing/murder” of a “baby/child,” 2) the “irresponsibility/selfishness” of the “mother” and 3) the “unequivocal” nature of their pre-pregnancy beliefs.

The post-pregnancy accounts were similarly coded into categories that describe the kinds of reasons or justifications given for their changed positions. A similar inductive process of “in-vivo” coding led to a final set of 12 “reasons” codes: 1) own life goals, 2) own physical/emotional health, 3) unstable/unpredictable relationship with sexual partner, 4) continue or return to school/ begin career, 5) existing children need support, 6) too young/immature, 7) hurt/disappoint/burden own parents, 8) no social support, 9) importance of an experiential perspective, 10) unfair to the baby, 11) single/alone, 12) financial struggles. Using the same “in-vivo” approach, post-pregnancy utterances were further coded along two dimensions designed to capture two epistemological themes that emerged: 1) explicit formulations about the role of “experience” in “knowing” and 2) complexity or “ambivalence” in their changed accounts.

Felt Stigma of Abortion

Although they were not explicitly asked about this, 9 out of the 10 interviewees commented on their worries with being potentially judged or shamed if they shared information about their pregnancies or thoughts about having an abortion. Their worries, or what Cockrill & Nack (2013) call “felt stigma” manifested in their talk about not being able to tell their family members (often their parents) (n=6), coworkers (n=1), classmates in college (n=1), or certain friends (n=1) what they were going through. While most described not telling people they were close to because of the deep disappointment or judgment they feared from them, one woman mentioned two situations in which she feared judgement even from relative strangers. This suggests that felt stigma does not only happen in the context of close interpersonal relationships but is even experienced in less intimate social contexts. She described “hoping” the priest, who she did not know personally, and who was picketing outside the clinic where she had the abortion, did not know why she was there and that she “couldn’t even look at him.” She also described the deep sense of shame she felt during an ER visit when she realized she had to disclose why her pregnancy test was positive a few days after the abortion procedure, even though she was not at the time pregnant. Two interviewees also mentioned secret pregnancies of their older sisters. One offered that her older sister had been pregnant without the family’s knowledge, then gave birth to a baby, an event she characterized as “traumatic” for the whole family. Another also mentioned that her sister had had an abortion but not told anyone except her partner, who in turn told her (the interviewee).

This taboo against speaking about abortion or unplanned pregnancies (their own and others’) was part of the broader communicative context in which the 10 interviewees grappled with what to do in light of their own unplanned pregnancies. As the following analysis of their pre-pregnancy accounts will show, the participants’ ways of talking about abortion prior to experiencing an unwanted pregnancy sounded a lot like the impartial, abstract, simplistic ways that political discourse is shaped. Because of the social taboo against speaking about one’s own abortion, the participants in this study describe their own and others’ silencing and felt stigma by the social taboo against personal abortion decisions. Perhaps because of the general silence surrounding such experiences, they also relied on a narrow discourse of impartiality and unequivocalness in reporting their pre-pregnancy positions on abortion as will be described below.

Pre-Abortion Accounts: Impartial, Narrow, Unequivocal

Many of the interviewees used words like “mean” (n=1), “wrong/not right” (n=5), or “sin” (n=2) to describe how they felt about abortion in their pre-pregnancy accounts. All 10 of the people interviewed talked about their prior stance on abortion making reference to “killing/murder” deploying some of the harshest imagery used by anti-abortion activists, imagery of abortion as horrific in terms of the pain, suffering, and eventual “killing” or “murder” of a “baby” (with one exception in which the word “fetus” was used by one interviewee). Their use of prototypical political (anti-abortion) rhetoric in which the image of a “baby” or “child” as victim was invoked alongside images of those who choose abortion as “killers” or “murderers.”

Why should you murder a baby because of it? You know what I mean? Why should the baby suffer? (P7).

Killing a baby wasn't like, you know didn't seem right to me at all... Um, killing, is basically how I thought of it, was killing a child (P8).

Another theme found in the interviewees' pre-abortion accounts constructs the person who decides to terminate a pregnancy as irresponsible, as not facing the consequences of their mistake, as selfish, and abortion as too convenient (n=7). The following excerpt is typical of how their pre-pregnancy accounts positioned people who choose abortion as fundamentally irresponsible not only for becoming pregnant, but for choosing abortion:

You know if I make that mistake then I'm gonna have to have a baby raise it and that'll be the end of it....And I thought and then I-- well, you're just being selfish, (P5).

All of the interviewees' pre-abortion accounts were not only thematically, but also structurally like political discourse. Their pre-abortion accounts were communicated as *universal*, *impartial*, and relatively *simplicistic* accounts of the moral status of abortion. They were constructed as though they needed no elaboration, as unequivocal through the use of a range of intensifiers (e.g., “never,” “completely”) that communicated a sense of finality to the positions they took:

I would never get an abortion. That's just always how I felt (P1).

What the pre-pregnancy accounts have in common is a thematic focus on a vulnerable “baby” and an irresponsible, selfish, murderous, mother. The use of the term “baby” as in pro-life political rhetoric, essentializes the immorality of abortion, implicitly indexing the role of the pregnant person as “mother” carrying with it a specific relationship that implies responsibility, care, nurturing, and other traditional qualities assigned to mothers and not to killers. These accounts were also structurally similar to pro-life rhetoric, presented as unequivocal, with no mention of ambivalence, openness to alternative considerations, or examination of other possible perspectives as the following “post-pregnancy” accounts do. The absence of such considerations contributes to the sense of universal, impartial, and simplicistic accounts that the 10 interviewees came to reconsider, to reframe once they were faced with an unplanned pregnancy.

Post-Abortion Accounts: Reframing Pre-Abortion Accounts

The post-abortion accounts differed from the pre-abortion accounts in the emphasis placed on the relevance, indeed the centrality of their personal life circumstances, as opposed to the relatively detached moral imperatives they had claimed as guides to action in their earlier positions. The post-abortion accounts were also much more detailed as each of the interviewees spoke of a range of circumstances that they considered in eventually making the decision to have an abortion. Three of these circumstances, coded as “own life goals” (n=5), “own physical/emotional health” (n=2), and “continue or return to school/begin career” (n=2) focused more on how continuing the pregnancy and having a baby would affect them personally and primarily. The other 9 reasons given were more clearly related to how continuing the pregnancy would affect others, especially the “baby/child.” Of these, the three most mentioned were “not fair to baby” (n=7), “unstable relationship with father” (n=5), and “financial struggles” that would affect their ability to provide for the baby (n=5). Four of the people interviewed offered that they were too young/immature to properly raise a child, three said they had no social support network within which to raise a (or another) child, three offered that it was important to them that they not raise a child outside of a traditional nuclear family structure and that this was not possible given their current circumstances, two said they could not raise a child alone (they were single), two said they had existing children they were barely able to support, and one mentioned ongoing but improving struggles with drug addiction that would make caring for a second child risky for both herself and the child.

Another theme explicitly repeated by 9 of the 10 the interviewees was the importance of *experiencing* an unplanned pregnancy and being faced with having to make a decision. These comments served a largely reflexive function in their accounts, a reflection on the general insight that making a reproductive decision in light of an unplanned pregnancy must involve, as one woman says,

The feelings and the pain and all the choices involved, everything, not just, um, what you think of it as, like an outside look (P8).

Far from the impersonal truths of their pre-pregnancy accounts, their post-pregnancy accounts were largely characterized by language about the centrality of personal experience and in several cases, involved strong critiques of the protesters outside the clinic who had presumably not had such experiences, and were therefore unable to “know what they were talking about:”

It's, when you're put in a situation, you totally think differently, you know? You know, I, I couldn't believe my opinion about it changed so m- so much until I was put in that situation, and it's, it's a very hard decision. A VERY hard decision... T- to ever be put in a situation like that. To have to make that type of a decision. You can talk and talk, you can talk but until you're put in that situation it's totally different... They don't until they're put in that situation they do not, anyone do not know what they're talking about. They have to be put in that situation and then they can talk about it (P2).

If the individuals interviewed for this study had simply replaced one political position (pro-life) for another (pro-choice), one might expect them to simply recast their earlier language about being against abortion with a new repertoire of pro-choice indexicals (“baby” to “fetus” or “murder” to “termination,” for example). This is not what the 10 interviewees did. They instead seemed to rework much of their earlier discourse in ways that recontextualized, rather than replaced, many of the words they had used

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previously to index their opposition. Their post-pregnancy accounts, fully attentive to the “realities” of their lives, provided more objectively grounded considerations and freed their voices from the restrictions of their earlier, dogmatic constructions of abortion. Words like “baby,” for example, that carried so much rhetorical force in indexing strong opposition to abortion, were still used in their accounts of their changed perspectives. And while still indexing the kind of care and responsibility generally attached to “motherhood” this care and responsibility was broadened to include care for a future, hypothetical child. In this way, care for a “baby” was differentiated to include not only a “baby” in-utero, but a “baby” that has been born, and grown into a person who the interviewees worried would suffer in the long run. Rather than unilaterally avoiding or replacing the word “baby” or “child” with a term that might linguistically distance the interviewee from the issue of motherhood as some pro-choice rhetoric does (Dillon, 1993; Luker, 1984) the interviewees generally retained the use of such words, constructing a similarly empathic perspective on the “baby” or “child” whose developmental trajectory they imagined going forward. For example:

But, then I looked at it the other way that, you know, I could, it wouldn't be fair to do that, to have the baby. I really started thinking about if it was fair for the baby if, you know, for that person's life, and I, that's, you know, when I really kinda changed too... what life would the baby have and, which I think I and then I thought, you know, the baby could have a good life. I could be a good mother and raise it good, but I don't know if I could do it well enough. And I'm certainly not ready and, there was just t- it just w- th- this just weighed more you know? For everyone's sake (P1).

The 10 interviewees' changed perspectives were all communicated in more nuanced ways, in ways that allowed for more complex formulations, ambivalence, for ambiguity on some of the very issues they had presented in such stark, all-or-nothing terms before. Their post-pregnancy positions allowed for many questions to arise, questions about themselves as “good” mothers, the limits of being able to provide “well enough” for a baby, and in some cases, questions about their “rights” to choose abortion:

Um and then I said well I could have it and I I thought about that but I couldn't support it. I couldn't give it the right kind of life if I had it now... I didn't want to do it but I knew what I had to do, so. It needs constant care and love and affection and I could've given it the love and affection that I-- it's so hard to explain um, I I can I could've loved it, but just not the way I would've wanted to you know. And um I gue- it's not a terrible thing it's terrible to bring a baby into the world and have it go into a shelter or a foster home or just not have food or be hungry or y- y- that's terrible. You know I guess you have to look at both sides of the coin because it's it's not terrible to take a life away before it-- it is terrible (laughs). See I still, um I guess it's it is bad to take away a life before it even has a chance but it's also terrible to bring it into this world where it doesn't have a chance anyways. So... And I don't feel it's a sin anymore um, I don't feel it's right completely right, but I I I still think of the choice: did I have a right to make this choice? Then I say well yes I did have a right. But was it the right choice? and I say yes it was. But I'll never know (P5).

Objectivity by Way of Subjectivity

The 10 interviewees' pre-abortion accounts were, as many of them pointed out, relatively unexamined. They resembled the kinds of “condensational symbols...that define an issue in abstract, ambiguous,

and emotionally charged terms” that “reduce the seeming complexity of an issue, while heightening the affective response and thus intensifying the conflict” (Collins, 1987, p. 9). The interviewees themselves reflected on how those pre-pregnancy positions were far from objective insofar as they did not properly account for the actual circumstances they later describe in their post-pregnancy accounts. While the highly visible political discourse for or against the legality or morality of abortion, by virtue of its abstractness or its claims to universality is often taken to be somehow “objective,” these highly biased, one-sided, impersonal articulations are characterized by relatively little reference to what the interviewees considered “knowing” by “being in the situation.” From a feminist perspective, such positions are simply uninformed and constitute at best, a “weak” form of objectivity (Harding, 1993) insofar as they purport, but fail to speak for a wide range of circumstances.

The interviewees themselves indeed characterize their pre-decision positions as lacking in “knowledge” about the realities of grappling with such a difficult decision. Two of them described when they learned what the actual size of the fetus was at the time of their visit to the clinic. Perhaps because of the powerful imagery carried by pro-life rhetoric that references the “baby” when speaking of a fetus, one interviewee reported that they had pictured a full-term birth when they thought about an abortion:

Like I think I thought of it as the th- a baby you know?... I just think I thought of it as, being pregnant as the baby already being there like a full-grown developed baby... I just thought of the birth process itself... Like I think I thought of it as the th- a baby you know?... I just think I thought of it as, being pregnant as the baby already being there like a full-grown developed baby... I just thought of the birth process itself... I don't think I, I don't think I understood really what it, you know, what the whole process was... Um, when you showed me the that tube, that size, the different sizes, yeah, that just shocked me that it was so small, you know. I thought it was gonna be huge (P1).

Just cause, I know, I'm more knowledgeable about it now. I mean, I really didn't know that much about it. How b—how big it was like them main thing and uh, I don't know. I guess I really didn't know anything at all before. You know, how it was done and, you know, stuff like that. I guess I'm not an expert on it, I can't say that, but I mean I I didn't know a-- I really didn't know anything about it at all before. So maybe I was just ignorant to it (P2).

Relatedly, several of the interviewees reflect on their prior positions and explicitly compare them to the discourse of the anti-abortion protesters they encountered, or to positions taken by others whose arguments are not informed by experience. They note that the particular political positions these pro-life individuals take are fundamentally uninformed about the material and emotional realities of abortion, pregnancy, and parenthood:

I was wrong of thinking, you know, of saying it's wrong when I really didn't know about it. You know, you see a couple of pictures and you say 'that shouldn't happen, that's wrong' it's, it's kind of like the wrong way to go about it, in my opinion (P8).

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Feminist standpoint theorists and philosophers (e.g., Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993; Longino, 1990) have argued that the experiences and lives of marginalized individuals have not been taken into account as important contributions to *objective knowledge-making*. As the interviewees in this chapter explain, the very considerations that were central to their evaluations of their circumstances are the very issues they could not communicate with others because of the strong taboo against such conversations. Although the 10 individuals interviewed for this chapter identified as “against abortion” before they discovered they were pregnant, they described their earlier positions on abortion as essentially uninformed by what they came to see as a more balanced and realistic set of considerations. The interviewees did not simply replace one political discourse (pro-life) with another (pro-choice), but rather constructed a third voice, a more complex, nuanced, ambivalent one that was ultimately a better guide to action. They described their earlier position (in retrospect) using much of the same public, political discourse they had no doubt encountered, a discourse that ultimately did little to inform them how to make a decision about whether or not to terminate an unplanned pregnancy. In contrast, their post-abortion reflections, as communicated to the author, incorporated very different sorts of considerations in reconstructing their identities as someone who chose to terminate a pregnancy. These post-abortion accounts constitute a position of “strong objectivity” (Harding, 1993) arrived at by way of considering a host of personally experienced realities, grounded in their social and interpersonal experiences, none of which informed their earlier positions on abortion. In this way, their changed accounts, in keeping with Haraway’s (1988) statement that “Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*” (p. 581), points to a third “voice,” one that is neither pro-choice, nor pro-life, but that replaces a narrow, simplistic discourse of purported impartiality and unequivocality, with a more authentic set of considerations derived from a close examination of one’s intersectional positionalities embedded in relationships with significant Others, less significant Others and a full range of consequences for oneself and Others of making different decisions. It is this third voice that we must attend to, that we must not allow the taboo against personal abortion accounts to silence.

CONCLUSION

As noted above, the personal opinions of Americans (as reflected in national polls) regarding the morality and legality of abortion have shifted very little in the wake of the *Roe v. Wade* decision with perhaps a small change in the direction of more people responding that they believe abortion should be legal, at least under certain circumstances. The political landscape of the last nearly 5 decades, however, reflects increasing political acrimony, a move towards more restrictions, with well over a thousand laws that limit access to safe abortion being passed since 2010 (Guttmacher Institute) and for the first time since passage of *Roe v. Wade*, the possibility of it being overturned by the supreme court in the near future. Paradoxically, this political landscape may not represent what most Americans value. When we center and attend to the voices of individuals who have been silenced by the taboo against speaking of one’s own abortion experiences, we make visible a more complete, less distorted understanding not only of their lives, but of all people’s lives and of the various social institutions (economic, family, educational) that shape the realities and conditions of an unplanned and/or unwanted pregnancy.

For Harding (1993) “The problem with the conventional conception of objectivity is not that it is too rigorous or too “objectifying,” as some have argued, but that it is not rigorous or objectifying enough; it is too weak to accomplish even the goals for which it has been designed, let alone the more difficult projects called for by feminisms and other new social movements” (p. 50-51). Communication about abortion, including the taboo against personal but not political accounts, is one of these social projects that remains a discourse of weak objectivity. As long as individual people’s accounts of their personal abortion experiences continue to be silenced, as long as individuals who challenge this taboo continue to be socially penalized, we cannot correct what remains a form of linguistic “masking” (Rosenthal, 1973). How individuals talk about whether to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, as seen in the 10 accounts presented here, illuminates socially silenced knowledge, knowledge that must inform a more thoroughly objective understanding of abortion, and of broader reproductive realities. But because of the longstanding and powerful taboo against speaking about personal abortion decisions, the more objective experiential knowledge that comes from individuals’ accounts of grappling with the decision of terminating a pregnancy remains out of the socio-political discourse. Without this kind of objective consideration of how individuals experience parenthood or potential parenthood as but one of their intersecting identities, an understanding of reproductive decision-making that includes the possibility of safe, accessible abortion is incomplete and therefore biased in favor of reductionist political rhetoric that fails to account for the full context of lived circumstances that must accompany such decisions. It remains a form of “unknowledge” (Schick, 1999), a culturally produced form of ignorance.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Abortion: Termination of a pregnancy through the deliberate removal or involuntary expulsion (as in “miscarriage”) of an embryo or fetus.

Discourse: A system of thought, knowledge, or communication that frames one’s experience and interpretation of the world.

Epistemology: Theory of knowledge.

Feminist Standpoint Theory: A form of epistemology that claims that knowledge is grounded in one’s social position.

Indexicality: The condition in which a sign (word, symbol) points to (or indexes) some object in the context in which it occurs.

Masculinized Communication: Ways of communicating that conform to and reflect societal expectations about masculinity.

Political Rhetoric: Communicative strategies used to construct persuasive arguments in political debate.

Strong Objectivity: Coined by feminist philosopher Sandra Harding who suggests that starting research from the lives of women “strengthens standards of objectivity.”

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Although the interviewees in this study all elected to undergo an abortion, it is not the author’s position that all such deliberations of the sort described in this chapter would necessarily lead to the decision to undergo an abortion. The author recognizes that such careful consideration of lived realities could similarly lead a person to elect to continue an unplanned pregnancy.
- ² Because not only cisgender (women and girls assigned “female” at birth) women and girls, but people with other gender identities (e.g., transgender men and boys, intersex individuals) may become pregnant and/or seek access to abortion services, the less inclusive category of “women” will not be used to reference individuals who have the reproductive possibility of pregnancy. Instead, a more general reference to “people” or “individuals” will be used to be more inclusive of those of all genders who could become pregnant.
- ³ The practice of disallowing the use of first person (*I, me, my, we, us, our*) to refer to oneself in one’s professional publications, including such chapters as the current one, is commonplace. Authors are instructed to write “in objective third person point of view throughout (Use “the authors” or “the researchers” NOT “I” or “we”))” despite the awkwardness of distancing oneself from oneself in speaking of oneself in the third person, the necessity of certain passive grammatical constructions needed to obscure the author’s agency, or despite any theoretical incommensurability with scientific inquiry whose object of study is the very process of communication/interaction between the researcher and the study participants.
- ⁴ Data are taken from an unpublished M.A. Thesis (1994) written by the author of this chapter.

Chapter 16

Communicating Human– Object Orientation: Rhetorical Strategies for Countering Multiple Taboos

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ABSTRACT

The Objectum-Sexuality Internationale (OSI) website is the largest source of information representing a community who experiences emotional and romantic desire towards objects. This chapter presents a queer rhetorical analysis of OSI to understand how queer communities that must negotiate multiple taboos (en)counter the public. The author argues that OSI reveals two things about taboo communication: 1) the discursive and material boundaries that constitute the taboo and 2) the rhetorical work required to disrupt these boundaries. The author's analysis reveals how OSI engages in complex rhetorical practices to lay the groundwork for a queer-posthuman counterpublic—a rhetorical space that disrupts the heteronormative moral divisions and anthropocentric paradigmatic distinctions that constitute certain lived experiences as taboo. Such a move exposes the possibilities and ethical implications at stake in communicating the taboo while outlining an analytic framework for understanding the rhetorical processes that facilitate (en)countering the taboo in public communication.

INTRODUCTION

The objectum-sexuality (OS) community includes over 300 individuals who experience “a pronounced emotional and often romantic desire towards developing significant relationships with particular inanimate objects.”¹ People who identify as OS express romantic interests toward varied objects, such as bridges, buildings, cars, musical instruments, sporting equipment, and amusement rides, with some even expressing desire for less material objects such as words, syntax, languages, and accents (separate from people who speak with accents). The largest source of information about OS, authored by those who identify as OS, is the Objectum-Sexuality Internationale (OSI) website (<http://www.objectum-sexuality>).

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org/). The OSI website was founded by self-identified objectum-sexual Eija-Riitta Eklöf Berliner-Mauer, from North Sweden, and further developed with the help of OSI members Erika Eiffel, from the U.S., and Oliver Arndt, from Germany. The site features information about how OSI members define and describe OS, how the OSI website was started, testimonials about living as OS, and links to external information about OS that have been deemed as acceptable by the community (some self-authored and some authored by mainstream or alternative media sources).

For those who identify as OS, their experiences of love and intimacy are little understood and often delegitimized by anthropocentric heteronormativity. Anthropocentrism positions human beings at the center of everything, which manifests in assumptions that human ways of being are the norm and fosters beliefs that humans are exceptional in comparison to all other entities (Tyler, 2021). Heteronormativity is a worldview that upholds dominant understandings of gender as binary and prescribes heterosexual coupling as a normal and preferred sexual orientation. Anthropocentric heteronormativity, then, reaffirms human-to-human sexuality as a normal and preferred dimension of hetero/sexuality. Consequently, many outside media outlets and medical practitioners categorize objectum-sexuality as taboo—a violation of boundaries of propriety and normalcy—thus representing OS folks in unfavorable ways. For example, OS is described as a psychological disorder (Thadeusz, 2007), a capitalist fetish (Clemens & Pettman, 2004), a manifestation of Asperger’s syndrome (Lynn, 2009; Marsh, 2010), a fantasy refuge for victims of sexual and emotional abuse (LeMouse, 2018), or a perverse form of masturbation (Dennison, 2011). OS has even been featured on National Geographic’s now defunct television docuseries, *Taboo*. In documentary television and film, editorial news articles, Internet blogs, and even academic research, OS is framed as pathological, unnatural, and a practice symptomatic of late capitalism’s alienation.

Much of this criticism stems from that fact that the term *objectum-sexual* denotes identification with emotional-sexual ties and longings toward objects that are deemed by outsiders as inanimate; however, to objectum-sexuals they are soul-bearing companions. This perspective is founded in animism, the belief that “natural phenomena” possess a “spiritual essence”² and are capable of communicating and reciprocating love. Although authors of the OSI website explain its primary function is to help those who identify as OS find, connect with, and support one another,³ much of the site functions simultaneously to challenge external perceptions of their lived experiences as taboo, thus correcting negative misconceptions about OS and cultivating respect from outsiders. OSI’s communication about OS to curious audiences—whether it be because of personal identification, genuine information seeking, or sensationalistic consumption—elicits the following questions: 1) How does OSI, a marginalized community deemed taboo, construct (public) identity and disrupt a taboo (public) landscape? and 2) What do these rhetorical processes reveal about how people “come together around nonnormative sexualities in a framework for collective world making and political action” (Warner, 2002, p. 18)? In other words, what do we learn from OSI about taboo communication, specifically, public rhetorical practices that navigate the weight of being characterized as taboo?

Through queer rhetorical criticism (Otis, 2020; Slagle, 2003; West, 2013), I analyze the OSI website to understand how communities that must negotiate multiple layers of taboo, such as the OS community, (en)counter the public; meaning, how they disrupt “binaries and traditional categories” that fuel taboo constructions and, in doing so, how they build “alternative queer worlds” (Otis, 2020, p. 158). I explore how OSI exists, resists, and persists within dominant public contexts (Warner, 2002) by (re)imagining who and what is included in the public sphere. I argue that OSI teaches us two things about taboo communication: 1) the discursive boundaries (i.e., sociocultural frameworks that we speak to and through) and material boundaries (i.e., objects, spaces, and structures) that constitute the taboo, and 2) the rhe-

torical work required to disrupt these boundaries. I reveal how OSI engages in this complex rhetorical work to construct and navigate (public) identity. By entering the public sphere, they are burdened with communicating themselves and their relationships into existence while simultaneously (de)constructing taken-for-granted norms surrounding sexuality and deeply embedded philosophical assumptions about reality. In doing so, OSI necessarily lays the groundwork for a queer-posthuman counterpublic—a rhetorical space that disrupts heteronormative moral divisions and anthropocentric paradigmatic distinctions, which constitute certain lived experiences such as OS as taboo, in order to remake the world as less anthropocentrically heteronormative. Such a move exposes the possibilities and the ethical implications at stake in communicating the taboo.

BACKGROUND: WHAT MAKES OS TABOO?

What is taboo is constituted through discursive and material configurations. Taboo identities and topics do not merely exist in the world, rather, through communication we “articulate boundaries and their violations” (Brenner, 2010, p. 231). These articulations are not only verbal declarations but can also emerge in silence and taken for granted assumptions about reality—the patterns of thought and material configurations that organize what exists and how we exist. Taboo thrives on the status quo. We avoid talking and thinking about the taboo and what we avoid talking and thinking about becomes taboo. Thus, anyone who breaks the silence or questions the status quo risks being ostracized; however, remaining silent and being complicit fuel fear and shame, particularly regarding sexuality. The discursive and material boundaries that constitute what is normal and what is taboo are not merely proscriptions of propriety but can produce dangerous consequences for livability (Brenner, 2010).

Malta & Wallach (2020) explain that a context in which there is a lack of communication about a topic (e.g., sexuality and death), coupled with discriminatory attitudes about a group of people related to that topic (e.g., ageism and assumptions about the asexuality of older adults), yields multiple taboos when juxtaposed to one another (e.g., intimacy among older adults receiving palliative care = a triple taboo). OS is a double taboo in that it violates the boundaries of both anthropocentrism and heteronormativity, thus evoking discriminatory attitudes about preferred and moralistic human coupling, which results in a lack of communication about the topic. Queer theory and posthuman studies reveal the binaries, norms, and assumptions that enable silence and a discriminatory status quo, which positions communities such as OSI as multiply taboo. In particular, these bodies of scholarship survey the ways language, discourse, and material configurations regulate (human) sexuality and how they render particular forms of love and desire as normal or taboo, pathological or healthy, livable or unlivable.

What Queer Theory Teaches Us about Taboo Communication

What queer theory teaches us about taboo is that anything that falls outside of (hetero)normative arrangements, binaries, norms, or assumptions evokes regulation and revulsion. One of the key projects of queer theory has been to reveal and challenge “naturalized assumptions about genders, bodies, sexualities, and desires” (West, 2018, p. 2), including assumptions about the “continuities between anatomical sex, social gender, gender identity, sexual identity, sexual object choice, and sexual practice” (Martin, 1994, p. 105). These configurations are what Butler (1993) refers to as the *heterosexual matrix*, which assumes that a person’s sex will determine their gender which will lead to opposite sex attraction (desire).

Assumptions about (hetero)normative arrangements emerge through “the communicative force of norms,” constituted through discourses about sexuality, genders, bodies, etc. (West, 2018, p. 2). For example, Foucault (1978) challenges the idea that sex is natural/biological by stating that discourses of sexuality are what produce our notions of sex. This discourse does not determine sexuality but rather constitutes and regulates it. Foucault attributes the construction of the term *homosexual* to the subsequent invention of homosexual identity. He argues that although there were same-sex acts prior to the construction and use of the term, there was no discursive category with which to identify, thus it was the creation of this label that turned same-sex acts into a taboo identity. Foucault’s theory of the discursive formation of sexuality points to how heterosexuality is constantly reaffirmed and rearticulated by discursive moments throughout history.

Looking at these historical configurations of sexuality, Rubin (1999) offers an overview of laws, morals, and values from across time that have differentiated “‘good,’ ‘normal,’ and ‘natural’” sexuality from taboo, perverse, and pathological sexuality (p. 159). She visually maps a sexual hierarchy, referred to as the *charmed circle*, which shows how contemporary sexual norms construct “good” sexuality as “heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial,” as well as “coupled, relational, within the same generation,” occurring at home, and “should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female” (p. 159). Anything that violates these norms is not only considered “‘bad,’ ‘abnormal,’ or ‘unnatural’” but is vilified and policed. These practices of marginalization reinforce the exclusion of queerness (as sexuality, identity, discourse, etc.)

Deconstructing binaries that uphold the heterosexual matrix, such as outdated binaries like heterosexual/homosexual and male/female, “makes it possible to identify them as sites that are *peculiarly* densely charged with lasting potentials for powerful manipulation” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 10). The policing of these binaries denies a host of sexual possibilities (Yep, 2003). By revealing the unstable incommensurability of these binaries, there is possibility to manipulate and make possible other identifications of sexuality, intimacy, and desire outside of dominant conceptions, perhaps even beyond human-to-human desire.

What Posthuman Studies Teach Us about Taboo Communication

What posthuman studies teach us about taboo is that heteronormativity is simultaneously regulated and policed through anthroponormativity—the taken-for-granted assumption that being human is the norm by which all other entities are judged (e.g., the binary division of human/nonhuman). The human is performed through heterosexual desire, and heteronormative discourses—such as those about preserving the two-parent family and saving the children (Reid, 1995)—imply that the success of humanity is dependent on the future of heterosexuality (Edelman, 2004; Runions, 2008). Thus, the policing of heterosexuality is dependent upon demarcating the boundaries of the human and vice versa, which is what positions human-object intimacy as doubly taboo, a violation of heteronormativity and anthroponormativity. Scholarship interested in queer non/in/trans/post-human (collectively referred to here as *posthuman*) studies seeks to interrogate the “fragile division between animate and inanimate” that is “relentlessly produced and policed” (Chen, 2012) and to “decenter the human” (Luciano & Chen, 2019, p. 115) by disrupting the stability of the category *human*, including binaries and assumptions that position humans as hierarchically superior to all other entities.

In communication studies, the human is consistently positioned as exceptional to and dominant over non-humans. Burke (1963) suggests that the ability to be reflexive about symbol use is what makes humans distinct and capable in many ways that animals and objects are not. Posthuman studies challenge

this perspective. Some suggest that the category of human and the connotations of superiority that this category carries are discursively regulated constructs with material implications, similar to gender and sexuality. For example, Giffney (2008) states, “The Human is both a discursive and ideological construct which materially impacts on all those who are interpellated through that sign” (p. 55). Being human is performative, a product and production of the repetition of particular discourses and material practices that are defined as human by being “defined against those who are deemed unrecognizable and thus excluded from its remit” (Giffney, 2008, p. 56). Labeling and categorizing what is human engenders discursive patterns and material configurations that constitute certain entities as hierarchically superior over others, thus continuously reinforcing who or what is excluded from the category of human.

Like queer theory, posthuman theory offers possibilities for countering the taboos demarcated by anthroponormativity. These possibilities include acknowledging that everything, not just humans, might be speaking (Seegert, 2016), understanding communication in relation to “mind-independent [e.g., non-human] realities and the limits of our abilities to know that reality” (Barnett, 2017, p. 13), and to challenge human exceptionalism by embracing the agency of the material world (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). This means listening to and considering communication that is “not expressed in word” (Seegert, 2016, p. 78) and accepting that “nature is agentic—it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 1). There is an inseparable relationality between the discursive and the material, meaning there are both symbolic and tangible implications that emerge from interaction between the human and nonhuman. To account for these relational practices and implications “we need ways of understanding the agency, significance, and ongoing transformative power of the world” particularly “between phenomena that are material, discursive, human, more-than-human, corporeal, and technological” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 1). Such accounts hold the potential to expand our “range of ethical concern” (Barnett, 2017, p. 15) to include others so often silenced and ostracized by the normative boundaries that constitute and regulate the taboo. As a case study in navigating multiple layers of taboo, OSI not only reveals how discursive and material boundaries produce taboo but also the rhetorical work required to make the taboo comprehensible and utterable to a dominant public.

WHEN TABOOS GO PUBLIC

Taboos proliferate in silence and through the status quo but they emerge from the differentiation between what is deemed private versus public, which is unquestionably tied to who has access to contributing to and, thus, defining the public sphere (e.g., public space, public policy, public discourse, etc.). With regards to sexuality in particular, Berlant and Warner (1998) explain how heterosexual culture is defined by the privatization of sex—the removal of sex acts, their literal and discursive manifestations, from the public sphere—which “bestows on [heterosexual culture’s] sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy” (p. 554). The legal and moral righteousness of heterosexuality is the ideological undercurrent of heteronormativity—political and social arrangements that privilege heterosexual formulations of intimacy, family, romance, community, coupling, kinship, etc. Such boundaries of normalcy are a consequence of historical conceptions of a single public sphere (articulated by Habermas, 1989), which is implicitly dominated by the voices and lived experiences of people in power who have the agency to shape political, legal, and social proscriptions that prevent “the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures” (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 547). These proscriptions discursively and materially

reaffirm that in order to contribute to and exist in the dominant public sphere, one must be complicit in heteronormativity and participate in practices that police sex.

In contrast, scholars such as Fraser (1990) explain the emergence of coexisting public spheres that develop in reaction to dominant, exclusionary political and discursive practices. She (1990) explains, “members of subordinate social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternatives publics” (p. 67). Fraser proposes calling these collectives “*subaltern counterpublics*,” which are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 67). Whereas the dominant public sphere shapes what is acceptable and permissible—thus constituting what is taboo—counterpublics emerge in response and resistance to these discourses.

Within formulations of counterpublic theory, scholars question: “what makes a public ‘counter?’” (Squires, 2002, p. 446). As Fraser’s (1990) work suggests, collective voices that convene around shared marginalized identity is one possibility of the origin of a *counterpublic*. Palczewski (2001) elaborates this perspective, claiming counterpublics do not “strive toward a universal understanding of the human condition,” rather, they serve to affirm specificity, which allows people excluded from dominant public spheres to “develop and explore” their identity, as well as “counter repressive characterizations of it” (p. 165). The purposes of these counterpublics, then, are to “create the space for safe discussion of ideas,” to develop “alternative validity claims,” and to develop “vocabulary with which the subordinate can articulate their needs” (Palczewski, 2001, p. 178). From these perspectives the *counter* in counterpublics refers to collective resistance to identity-based exclusion and the development of discursive practices that are inclusive of marginalized identity.

However, some scholars argue that the development of a counterpublic is not just a matter of shared identity and struggle for inclusion but *how* dominant discourses are (en)countered. Asen (2000) suggests that counterpublics are in and of themselves “discursive entities,” which cannot be “reduced to the identities of their participants” (p. 431). What distinguishes a community or collective from a counterpublic is the latter’s recognition of exclusionary practices and attempts to resist or transcend these practices. The term *counterpublic* “signifies the collectives that emerge in the recognition of various exclusions from wider publics of potential participants, discourse topics, and speaking styles and the resolve that builds to overcome these exclusions” (Asen, 2000, p. 438). Identifying counterpublics requires understanding how they emerge from discourses that “acknowledge dilemmas of difference,” whether implicitly or explicitly (p. 427). In later work, Asen (2002), highlights how the crux of counterpublics is their refutation of “discursive norms and practices” (p. 359). In other words, the *counter* in counterpublics refers to alternative discourses that uncover, resist, and transcend the ideological and practical differences that lead to dominance and exclusion.

Expanding on this notion, Squires (2002) proposes considering how marginalized public spheres emerge differently depending upon “political, economic, social, and cultural conditions” (p. 448). This includes how they “respond to dominant social pressures, legal restrictions, and other challenges from dominant publics” depending on potential repercussions and access to means of circulation (p. 457). Squires differentiates counterpublics from enclaves, in which the latter produce “hidden transcripts”—which are guarded group communications that contradict dominant ideologies and risk unfavorable response if shared widely (p. 458). Enclaves become counterpublics when hidden transcripts are used to intentionally reject “public transcripts” that reinforce inequities—such as those facilitated by taboos—in order to “change the minds of dominant publics, or seeking solidarity with other marginal groups” (p.

460). The potential for circulating hidden transcripts is made possible by greater access to “independent media resources and distributions channels” that increase the possibility of wider participation and discussion (p. 461). In other words, the *counter* in counterpublics refers here to the ways groups, who are heterogenous in their marginality, strategically deploy (previously hidden) discourses in arguments against dominant conceptions and interests.

Squires (2002) and Asen (2002) both acknowledge the potential for counterpublics to be coopted and undermined by dominant publics. Squires (2002) points out explicit processes, such as censorship and direct attacks on counter discourses, which monopolize time and resources and harm counterpublic movement. Asen (2002) describes the ways counterpublic agents are imagined and represented by dominant public forums in negative ways, which creates a “symbolic hurdle” that other public sphere participants do not have to manage (p. 360). As such counterpublic agents must skillfully occupy multiple roles, including articulating their own perspectives while simultaneously countering negative images and dominant ideologies.

With regards to queer inclusion, Dean (2003) reminds us that “one does not resist the forces of normalization by inventing new kinds of social or sexual identity” (p. 239). What is taboo is constructed in tandem with what is considered normal, and, for that reason, queer counter discourses must not just deconstruct to reconstruct but also stand “in opposition to the forces of normalization that regulate social conformity” (p. 239). One of the ways this can be accomplished is by disrupting heteronormative imaginings, or what Dean calls *fantasies*. He suggests that violent reactions to queer sexuality emerge from a “preoccupation with how the Other organizes [their] enjoyment,” which manifests as a fantasy of queer sexuality as a form of “sexual excess” that is incompatible with “decency and normalcy” (p. 246). For this reason, articulating and raising awareness about sexual identities that disrupt normative binaries and assumptions is not a political endeavor in and of itself, it is also important to develop discourses about sex that counter and construct queer imaginings (or fantasies) beyond focusing on the reproduction of social norms that constitute and reaffirm taboos.

Based on these various definitions and theories of counterpublics, it is easy to see many hallmarks of a counterpublic when looking at the backstory of OSI. The OSI Web site provides a detailed description of how Eija-Ritta Eklöf Berliner-Mauer “took a chance and braved hoards of criticism from faceless critics on the Internet in an effort to find others like her.” The site goes on to describe how she developed hundreds of pen-pal relationships all over the world, which allowed her to “open up about her sexuality with little to no reprisal.” She educated her pen-pals about her sexuality by creating typed flyers to include in her letters. In 1996, Eija turned these flyers into the first OS Web site, written in four different languages. She states that “it was from these early hand-coded pages that objectum-sexuality became known in the trenches of the Internet.” In 2002, co-founding member Oliver Arndt developed the largest network for Objektophilie, the German word and online network for objectum-sexuality. Co-founding OSI member Erika Eiffel travelled to meet Eija-Riitta and Oliver Arndt in the early 2000s to gather data and learn more about OS. From these meetings, in 2004 Erika and Oliver were able to work together to adapt the German OS group for English speaking objectum-sexuals in order “to help to share the hope started so long ago...to know we are not alone.” From this initial description we can see that OSI emerges through a sense of marginalized identity and a search for shared struggle, a desire to correct misconceptions about OS through education, and access to an evolving public platform that facilitated wider discussion and the possibility of countering negative images of OS.

However, this backstory only scratches the surface of OSI’s counterpublic project. Arguing that OSI functions as a queer-posthuman counterpublic is not just to say that OSI is a queer identified collective

that coalesces around a shared desire for post-human relationships with objects—though they are and they do. It is also not just that they counter dominant discourses and negative images through strategic employment of hidden transcripts through an independent media channel—though they also do this. Most significant to OSI's counterpublic project is that they advocate against ideologies and practices of normativity while discursively producing a post-human public—one that represents and engages the material world.

Specifically, OSI engages in what Asen (2002) calls *collective imagining*. He developed the concept of *imagining* to elucidate the nuances of inclusion and exclusion in the public sphere, wherein dominant groups cultivate collective assumptions and arguments about marginalized groups—even in their absence from the public sphere—by constructing discursive images and employing them through representations—expressions of collective imagining. Asen states “our attitude toward and treatment of others depends crucially on how we imagine others” (p. 354) and representations reflect “choices regarding how people should be portrayed” (p. 353). In Asen's configuration, people who have access to and legitimacy within the dominant public sphere have the power to imagine and represent those excluded, thus determining how they are portrayed (e.g., as taboo) and treated (e.g., silenced and ostracized). However, the analysis of OSI presented in this chapter reveals how representation can also be employed in service of (re)imagining marginalized worlds, thus changing assumptions and arguments about who/what is taboo. Explicating this process of counter representations and imaginings is facilitated by a method of queer rhetorical criticism.

Analyzing Taboo Communication through Queer Rhetorical Criticism

One of the concerns central to queer theory is livability—determining possibilities; ways in which all lives are livable. The overarching task being “about distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breath, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself” (Butler, 2004, p. 8). One approach that can reveal and complicate normative conventions is exploring the rhetorical function of language and discourse in constructing and disciplining the taboo, for which queer rhetorical criticism is well suited.

First and foremost, queer rhetorical criticism endeavors to bring “issues of sexuality—issues generally considered private and personal—to the fore through critical inquiry” (Slagle, 2003, p. 130). There are two “critical impulses” of queer rhetorical criticism, identified by Otis (2020), which are “(1) the disruption of binaries and traditional categories and (2) the building of alternative queer worlds” (p. 158). Though Slagle's (2013) original framework of queer rhetorical criticism emphasized dominant and resistant readings of texts by rhetorical critics, West (2013) suggests that we expand this method to “understand how rhetors are themselves theorizing genders, corporealities, sexualities, desires, and other embodiments in ways that exceed our extant explanatory frames” (p. 540). This present analysis employs West's proposed approach in conjunction with Slagle's method for identifying assumptions and practices regarding essentialism, heteronormativity, privacy, and assimilation. Meaning, it attends to the ways that OSI, as a rhetor, (1) “challenges the notion of a static, essential, or natural identity” (essentialism) (p. 133), (2) “illuminates heterosexual privilege in discourse” (heteronormativity) (p. 135), (3) “challenges the notion that sexuality is a private matter” and argues against reducing sexuality to sexual activity (privacy) (p. 134), and (4) attempts to “construct a world in which sexual difference is not only acknowledged, but celebrated” (resisting assimilation) (p. 137). Though queer rhetorical criticism was originally developed to account for “language and discursive rhetoric” or “any symbolic activity

that focuses attention on sexual difference,” the following analysis engages simultaneously with counterpublic theory in order to expand and account for the symbolic and material possibilities for imagining queer post-human (counter)publics.

Queer rhetorical criticism supports an endeavor of counterpublic investigation through its critical attention to processes of normalization, its excavation of rhetorical strategies that seek to disrupt norms, and its embracement of communicative practices that work to create queer worlds (i.e., counterpublics). Public sphere scholars “ought to seek the counter of counterpublics in participants’ recognition of exclusion from wider public spheres and its articulation through alternative discourse practices and norms” (Asen, 2000, p. 427). Even when an individual or collective does not explicitly articulate exclusion, rhetorical critics are tasked with identifying and inferring this recognition through alternative rhetorics that counter dominant discourse, images, and representations. In doing so, identifying how publics are countered can yield a discussion of potential change. Ott (2011) reminds us that “rhetoric is defined in part by its *consequentiality*, by its capacity to effect change in the attitudes, values, and beliefs of individuals and the rules, rituals, and norms of collectives” (p. 344). Although the influence or effects of counterpublics cannot be determined through rhetorical criticism, Ott suggests that one way the critic can engage in this step is to explicate the modalities, or modes, through which change is carried out. Doing so allows the critic to portend its significance and elaborate on why it matters to the advancement of knowledge and scholarship.

The analysis presented here reflects a multi-level investigation, which began with broadly identifying OSI’s key assumptions and practices that contest essentialism, illuminate heteronormativity, challenge privacy, and resist assimilation. This first level of analysis provides context and insight into the second layer of analysis, which are the modalities through which OSI’s project of change is developed. As a project that (en)counters the taboo at two levels—sexuality and nonhuman agency—OSI employs a paradigmatic modality, through which to imagine a queer posthuman public requires altering patterns of thought underlying representations not only at a symbolic (terminological) level but also at ontological (i.e., relating to the nature of being) and axiological levels (i.e., relating to the nature of value). By representing objects as agents in the public sphere, OSI cultivates an image of a queer sociomaterial world—constituted by entanglements of queer social practices and posthuman configurations of matter—that disrupts the moral divisions of public vs. private and the philosophical distinctions between the human vs. non-human, thus countering normative discourses and assumptions that render certain lived experiences taboo.

Key Rhetorical Practices for Communicating Taboo

The first layer of analysis revealed 7 themes, which organize the key assumptions and practices employed by OSI to contest essentialism, illuminate heteronormativity, challenge privacy, and resist assimilation. These themes include: Orientation, Sensuality/Intimacy, Gender, Love, Animism, Nonverbal Communication, and Marriage. Each of these themes are explored in-depth to reveal how they 1) contest identity as natural and monolithic, 2) call attention to anthropocentric heteronormativity, 3) publicly counter these dominant discourses (i.e., reveal hidden transcripts), and 4) work to build a queer posthuman world that (en)counters the taboo.

Orientation

OSI defines OS orientation as separate and different from sexual orientation. They state that OS is “an *orientation* to love objects [emphasis added],” which is different from a *sexual* orientation. By countering traditional understandings of orientation, this discourse aims to disrupt and expand perceptions and possibilities of sexuality beyond human identity and anatomy—beyond sexual activities. In a section of the website titled “What is OS?” a definition of sexual orientation is opposed to a definition of orientation (sans sexual) to demonstrate to visitors of the site the ways the term *sexual orientation* does not account for object desire and separating *sexual* from *orientation* provides a more accurate account of OS. Sexual orientation is described as: “*the direction of someone’s sexual desire toward people of the opposite gender, people of the same gender, or people of both*. This does not include objects [emphasis original].” Immediately following is a definition of orientation, described as “*a complex mental state involving beliefs and feelings and values and dispositions to act in certain ways* [emphasis original]. This does include objects as we see it.” Later, in the same web link, OSI suggests that if you replace *objectum* with *hetero* or *homo* before *sexuality*, it merely implies an inclination toward such, suggesting that sexuality is more fluid than determinable by different types of sex acts.

As demonstrated in the queer and posthuman literature, anthropocentric heteronormativity depends upon a linear and static formula of sexual orientation that assumes human sex will determine gender identity which will lead to opposite (human) attraction that results in private sex acts involving only genitals between humans of the opposite sex. OSI calls attention to the rigidity of this definition, and its exclusion of a wide range of possible relationships, including those with objects. They counter and broaden this discourse with a hidden transcript that reveals an alternate view of orientation as cerebral, diverse, and involving more than just genitals.

This definition dovetails with the queer posthuman work of Ahmed (2006), who suggests that objects have always been present in orientations but mostly in service of orienting us toward the normative and away from the taboo. Ahmed says “orientations involve directions toward objects that affect what we do, and how we inhabit space. We move toward and away from objects depending on how we are moved by them” (pp. 27-28). Repeated practices of facing and directing attention toward certain objects over others solidifies an orientation overtime. In an anthropocentric heteronormative sphere, our bodies are directed toward symbols and objects that reaffirm heterosexual human coupling so that we are appropriately oriented in that direction but the possibility for orienting another direction is always there. OSI’s definition of orientation disrupts the taboo of object-directional orienting by creating rhetorical space for turning our minds and bodies toward ways of being that are not just about the desire of a singular human entity. Instead, it is possible for various orientations, including sexual orientation, to manifest as inclinations toward ways of living and loving that exist outside of the heteronormative/anthropocentric boundaries that perpetuate and police taboos. OSI goes on to suggest that the OS community prefers the terms *sensuality* and *intimacy* over *sex* because physical acts of desire are not generalizable across many relationships, including human-object relationships.

Sensuality/Intimacy

Many curiosities related to OS arise from interests about how someone has sex with an object and how sex with an object differs from masturbation or fetishism. When discussed in the context of what it means to be OS, OSI offers sensuality and intimacy as opposed to dominant presumptions about sex as

penetration. Sensuality and intimacy are characterized, instead, as psychic or spiritual presence. One OS member, identified as A. L., recalls a counseling session with a psychiatrist who claimed that “it is not possible to have sex with a building” and that A. L. “must love a building because it’s a large phallus!” The psychiatrist assumed that object sex is not possible because, from their perspective, sex requires a penis, or, at the very least, some form of penetration. In response, A. L. says “OK, that may be the case if you are going off the prolific definition between humans.” Instead, A. L. suggests that OS cannot be understood within (hetero/anthropo)normative frames of reference that presume the role of sexual activity is penetration.

The OSI website goes on to state, “we use sensuality or intimacy to describe physically related expressions of love as this offers a broader definition considering our partners are not human and cannot be generalized.” They explain further, “intimacy is very broad and what may be sensual for some may not be so for others.” This representation of sensuality and intimacy counters dominant assumptions about sex as penetration with more broad, flexible, and non-monolithic terms. In doing so, it also calls attention to the ways anthropocentric heteronormativity facilitates taboos around intimacy that are not only limiting and exclusionary but also minimize our understanding of a wide range of possible relational configurations, among humans and nonhumans. By publicly sharing their expanded definitions of sensuality and intimacy, OSI charts rhetorical terrain that invites open-ended notions of sexual activity, which may include physicality but could also include a variety of expressions beyond physical touch, penetration, and gratification. These concepts of intimacy/sensuality point to the more complex role that gender holds in defining and developing human-object relationships.

Gender

One of the most common questions that Erika Eiffel says she receives is how OS people determine the gender of an object and how this impacts the way OS people label their sexual preference (i.e., does a female loving a female object mean they identify as a lesbian?). Erika responds by saying “I can’t lift a leg and check, but there is a general persona that I sense about my objects...some OS people see their objects as only male if they are female and vice [sic] versa and some do not sense gender.” In other words, object-gender complicates dominant perceptions of human-gender as biologically, socially, or even performativity perceived and constructed. Gender, instead, is sensed. Objects may give off gendered auras that come from senses about personality, other people’s perceptions of the object (e.g., the labeling of the Eiffel tower as the Grand Madame of Paris), or gender might not be involved in the loving and desiring of objects at all.

In fact, many OS people also identify as cisgender, transgender, intersex, asexual, gay, bisexual, poly-amorous, and androgynous because object desire obscures dominant links between gender and sexual preference. OSI characterizes gender in ways that contradict normative perceptions of gender identity, especially in relation to sexual identity. Whereas (hetero/anthropo)normative conceptions of gender enforce a naturalistic connection between sex assigned at (human) birth and perceived gender identity, which then presumably translates into love and attraction, OSI builds upon previously provided hidden transcripts that emphasize the fluidity of attraction and intimacy to counter the monolithic assumptions about gender that percolate curiosities of the taboo. OSI carefully constructs and represents a world where gender is not merely reappropriated but transcends the confines of medical, social, and visual perception. Instead, it exists in an ethereal state that may or may not be apprehended but also may or

may not matter, given all the possible connections that humans and objects might formulate. For OSI, gender does not make or break any part of existence, including love.

Love

Love is one of the most frequent and complex concepts discussed in OSI rhetoric because love of objects disrupts dominant conventions. OSI defines love in opposition to normative and monolithic notions that consider its drive as positive and understand its expression as similar across relationships. Instead, OSI conceives of love as obsessive, abstract, and metaphorical. One of the questions that OSI responds to in the “What is OS?” Q&A section of the website is “what makes OS different from an obsession?” The response is that “truly there is not much difference.” To OSI, “Love is a feeling that preoccupies one’s thoughts,” which is the same thing as obsession. Love is putting all focus on the one desired, which is a level of obsession. The site goes on to suggest that because desire of objects is “unorthodox,” mainstream rhetoric often labels it an *obsession* instead of *love* in order to make it seem like a negative relation. Therefore, instead of characterizing love in ways consistent with perceptions of positivity, OSI embraces negative connotations of obsession, thereby disrupting normative conceptions that do not account for object love.

Object love is also described as residing on a spectrum, where humans have certain things to offer relationships and objects have others. All humans and objects, therefore, can and should be loved, but this love happens differently. The OSI website describes love as a bell curve, where various loving relationships exist together but emerge differently. At the middle and top of the bell curve is “the majority of those whose relationships that can be characterized by the similarities to whom and how they love.” In contrast, “Objectúm-sexuality finds its place at one end as a minority.” In this metaphor, all relationships where partners are like one another, such as human-to-human love, are considered mainstream, or (hetero/anthro)normative, love. OS love, then, is love where partners are not recognizably similar to one another, and therefore falls outside of traditional notions of love. Rather than (re)imagining OS with the charmed circle (Rubin, 1984), OSI develops an entirely new way to represent configurations of sexuality—as love on a bell curve. In other words, to call attention to the ways OS is excluded from and marginalized by dominant conceptions of love, OSI not only breaks down what constitutes hetero/anthroponormative love but also develops a theoretical model to publicly represent what a sociomaterial vision of love looks like. Such a complex and heterogenous vision is influenced by and connected to a foundational engagement with animism.

Animism

Animism, the belief that objects bear souls, is described by OSI as forming the basis of an orientation toward loving and desiring objects. For example, Erika Eiffel states in her FAQ that “if the object possesses no spirit, than [sic] love is not reciprocated.” Animism is a spiritual belief based in reciprocity, respect, and the interconnection of all beings, which is opposed to dominant, Western imperialist understandings of religion. On the “What is OS” section of the OSI website, animism is described as “the innate belief that objects are not inanimate but possess a spirit, soul, or energy to which one can connect with.” A link within the website to Eija-Riitta’s homepage provides a more in-depth discussion of the relationship between animism and OS. She states, “We believe that all objects (things) are LIVING and having a SOUL, (Animism). I think that is very important to see objects as living, if one should be able

to fall in love with an object [emphasis original].” In other words, for OS, a belief in animism facilitates an understanding of objects as intelligent, feeling, and communicative.

Animism is also about the belief that “artifacts (objects) have the same level of awareness as human beings.” In other words, animism views beings as hierarchically indifferent. As Eija-Riitta claims, “I see artifacts as equal to human beings, animals and plants.” Animism resists dominant categorizations of beings as biologically determined (i.e. the belief that biological life equates possession of a soul) and hierarchically classified (e.g., humans at the top of the proverbial food chain). Instead, this belief facilitates a relationship between humans and objects based in interconnectedness and accountability to one another, which leads to a more ethical view of the world.

In her discussion of OS and animism, Eija-Riitta states that people need to challenge the superiority of humans and, instead, adopt a view where all beings exist equally. She states, “The human race is neither more or less worthy than anything else on this planet. We all are equal, no matter what we are - objects, humans, animals or whatever.” Being OS and believing in animism, which to Eija are one in the same, are ways of seeing beyond this horizon of superiority in order to empathize with other beings. She claims that objects do not ask to be built just as “humans do not ask to be born,” therefore, anything that is born (including objects) has the same right to “exist and have a decent life.” As a spiritual belief, animism is about respect for all beings and acknowledgement of their (equal) rights.

Many OS members discuss in their “expressions” that, in many ways, resistance to OS is more about a different spiritual orientation than it is about “perverse sex.” For example, one OS member states “it’s the sanctions on us in the form of making us look ridiculous” such as seeing objects as having “a feeling soul and a conscious mind” that lead to “harassment with the normal society.” OSI counters this resistance by suggesting that because beings must bear a soul in order for love to be reciprocated; love cannot exist without a fundamental belief in animism, whether we call it that or not. In other words, OSI suggests that the basis for love should be a belief in the life, soul, and rights of other beings, and the extension of this perspective into human-object relations only makes us more accountable and ethical to the interconnectedness of all lifeworlds. In doing so, OSI attempts to disrupt dominant beliefs about inanimacy with visions of a unified animistic world. This rhetorical move counters the anthroponormative boundaries drawn by human exceptionalism, which position OS as taboo, while simultaneously providing a hidden transcript for envisioning all relationships, not just OS relationships, as facilitated by animism. Not only does this rhetorical move establish animism as the foundation of a queer posthuman counterpublic, it also positions this imagined world as one that is merely a rhetorical shift away from dismantling the taboos the dominant public sphere holds so dear; thus, showcasing the fragility of hetero/anthroponormative assumptions and representations. Where animism tends to confuse many people is at the point of communication.

Nonverbal Communication

Many sections on OSI address the question of how a relationship can develop with an object if an object cannot talk. Emerging from a belief in the equality of all beings and respect for the rights of objects is a view of human-object communication as non-verbally reciprocal. Object-relational communication is contrasted to dominant presumptions of communication as both verbal and nonverbal, usually with a heavy emphasis on the verbal. OSI claims that the dominant public relies so heavily on verbal communication that they often cannot conceive of relationships where nonverbal communication is a primary mode of interaction. Instead, they suggest “communication comes in many forms besides verbal.” In

fact, many OS individuals “commune” with objects “via sensations.” These sensations are more complex than verbal patterns of communication. They include psychic connection and telecommunication, which emerge from deep senses about an object’s consciousness, personality, and public knowledge about an object. This counters logocentrism—the valuing of speech and writing over other forms of communication—by advocating for human-object communication as a legitimate and ethical approach to interpersonal interaction.

Eija-Riitta states, “You might wonder how I communicate with artifacts. That is done by thought transference....Artifacts are also telepathic, so although I prefer to speak aloud to the objects, that is not necessary.” The OSI website explains further, “It is via our intense feelings that our interests are driven in everything related to the object. The more knowledge we learn and internalize, the more we develop a clearer ability to sense the object.” Many individual “Expressions” discuss the ways that communicating with an object includes getting to know an object, flirting with an object, and initiating and terminating a relationship with an object, which are all mutual processes of nonverbal communication. Objects telepathically communicate their level of interest in a particular relationship just as much, if not more, than their human counterparts and, in many instances, may even initiate a break up with their partner.

Animistic beliefs in the soul of objects and respect for their equal rights is what facilitates OS communication with objects and also what encourages an awareness of relational reciprocity as an ethical consideration. Communication with objects means deeply sensing and negotiating our impact on and accountability to one another. Therefore, interpersonal relationships are not necessarily dependent upon the verbal exchange of messages. Verbal communication may be one way of developing mutuality; however, nonverbal communication requires deeper and less definitive ways of developing relational connection. Thus, OSI challenges dominant understandings and presumptions of anthropocentric communication by encouraging people to take telecommunication seriously and to view it as a more complex and ethical mode of interacting. This calls attention to the ways dominant modes of interacting implicitly create boundaries around what is normal and what is taboo when it comes to how we live and love. In representing transference and telecommunication as diffuse and moral pathways for communicating, OSI contests taken-for-granted assumptions about communication while constructing a wider range of possible ethical entanglements among humans and nonhumans. One practice by which these entanglements are imagined is through the rhetorical framing of marriage.

Marriage

OSI often works within dominant terms and logics in order to analogize, appropriate, disrupt, and in some ways strategically assimilate into these frameworks, behaviors, and categories. Doing so constructs OS as both understandable within and resistive to normativity. Marriage to objects, as discussed on the OSI website, is a topic that non-OS people have a hard time comprehending. Marriage is employed by OSI in dominant ways as a legitimizing institution but also as an institution that signifies a life-long commitment to loving objects, which complicates and expands the function of marriage. Two of the founders of OSI, Erika Eiffel and Eija-Riitta Eklöf Berliner-Mauer, have married objects and changed their last names to signify these relationship. However, their stories about why they decided to symbolically marry objects and change their names reveal that marriage for OS is less about being recognized by a legal, religious, or even normative institution and more about utilizing marriage as a representative institution, which taps into its legitimizing capabilities. In other words, marriage is simply a category that symbolizes love and desire as real and true.

In particular, marriage is about symbolic identification with a specific kind of love, in this case object love, in a publicly recognized and acknowledged way. The OSI website states, “Erika came out about her long-time affection for the Berlin Wall and also iron bridge structures, including the matriarch of Bridges, the Eiffel Tower, which she unofficially married April 8, 2007.” In her personal expression she elaborates on her decision to marry, saying it is “merely a manifestation of my love for and commitment to Bridges, not marriage by any conventions.” Changing her last name, she says, was a “measure to illustrate my love for Bridges and a commitment to what I am, an objectum sexual.” In other words, marriage is not about legally sanctioned access to rights and privileges, a moral and/or religious affiliation, or even a subscription to the socially prescribed norm of monogamy. As Erika and Eija acknowledge, objects cannot participate in many of the rights afforded by marriage and many OS individuals are polyamorous. Therefore, labeling OS relationships as marriages is a rhetorical strategy for employing an already established and legitimized institution to publicly declare and recognize a particular orientation to love objects.

Employing marriage in this way is a disruption of what Goltz & Zingsheim (2010) discuss as the binary of “queer antisociality and normativity” (p. 294), through which resistance to marriage excludes relationships from social recognizability yet acquiescence to marriage proscribes (hetero/anthro)normativity. OSI refuses to abandon the discursive frame of marriage but instead leverages it as a portal to the (counter)public sphere. In doing so, OSI imagines marriage as a frame that ties humans and objects together in the world, thus disrupting the boundaries that paint humans and nonhumans as incompatible in relational arrangements. This reconfiguration, along with all the other rhetorical practices previously mentioned, demonstrates complex rhetorical work that challenges long held beliefs about relationships and reality.

Modalities for Communicating Taboo

The rhetorical work of OSI reveals how imagining a queer posthuman counterpublic requires employing a paradigmatic modality, which works to alter deeply embedded patterns of thought that produce taboo assumptions and representations. To counter these patterns, OSI develops terminological, ontological, and axiological shifts in norms, discourses, and representations about sexuality and human existence. Terminological shifts occur through OSI’s development of new language that is representative of OS and their adaptation of existing language to reflect OS experiences. Ontological shifts occur through OSI’s communication of a higher-level philosophy about the existence of beings and the (in)stability of meanings and modes of living and loving, in the context of OS and beyond the limits of sexuality. Axiological shifts occur through OSI’s development of criteria for ethical values and judgments in relation to OS and other processes of marginalization. Together, these shifts enable disruptions of hetero/anthroponormative formations of love, desire, and sexuality as well as the imagining of a sociomaterial (counter)public. By countering potential unfavorable reactions to OS as taboo, OSI engages in a higher-level project of articulating the foundations and consequences of a human-object orientation and, in doing so, carves out symbolic and material space for queer posthuman counterpublics.

Terminological Shifts

OSI is largely about terminology—the formation of identity and the development of a counterpublic through shared systems of language and reference. Without developing new language and adapting

existing language, objectum-sexuality—as a term and identity—would not exist. Communicating OS and, subsequently, human-object orientation, in understandable and relatable ways is dependent upon rhetorical practices that disrupt, construct, and appropriate terminology through alternative discourses and practices. Although OSI does not discuss OS as queer or posthuman, the theoretical assumptions underpinning these concepts offer significant insight into how these terminological modifications occur and how they yield paradigmatic shifts.

Communicating about objects in a way that resists reinforcing the category of human and disrupts normative conceptions of sexuality necessitates the creation of new language and the adaptation of existing terms. OSI consistently and systematically works to engage in this terminological project. From the outset, they create the term *objectum-sexuality* and its subsequent acronym, OS. From there, every term that is utilized to discuss OS and to communicate experiences of OS is invested in representing new meanings for concepts traditionally operated by the dominant public. For example, orientation is not *sexual* orientation, it is an inclination that extends beyond sexual desire. Sexuality is not defined by sex acts, it is sensual and/or intimate connection. Gender is not a defining biological, social, or performed characteristic, it is a sensed aura with varying significance. Love is not a feeling, state, emotion, or action, it is a drive toward obsession or the amount of distance between sameness and difference. Marriage is not a legal institution of privilege but, instead, a signifier of love and desire as real and true. In many ways, this rhetoric disrupts binaries such as human/non-human and sex/gender in favor of in-betweenness, ambiguity, and resistance to essentialization.

These terminological creations and conceptual adaptations are not necessarily free from the boundaries and constraints of the discourses they employ. As Sloop suggests (2004), although they may operate as transgressive representations, they are limited by being comparatives to a norm. However, even though they might not be subversive in the sense of complete transgression, “it is in these public representations and the ways individuals interpret and struggle over them that ideological transition and change can take place” (Sloop, 2004, p. 1). In other words, it is through the implicit and explicit acknowledgement of the limits of dominant terms and concepts, as well as their normative investments, that OSI counters taboo images and (re)presents them as queer posthuman possibilities. Although OSI seems to be striving, in some cases, for inclusion into a dominant public, they also interrogate the contradictions and limitations of heteronormative anthropocentrism to construct expanded and nuanced understandings of sexuality and identity. Such a project yields a terminological shift from anthropocentric heteronormativity to queer posthumanism, which gives way to even larger sociomaterial ontological moves.

Ontological Shifts

The queer-posthumanism implicit in OSI’s rhetoric challenges categorical and hierarchical separations of beings and, as an alternative, posits and embodies an interconnected mode of living and loving. This approach mirrors many of the tenets theorized in the work of object-oriented ontology (Bogost, 2012) and object-oriented sociality (Cetina, 1997). For example, Bogost’s (2012) work argues for understanding the life of objects as existing on an equal playing field with all other entities. Object-oriented ontology resists any form of exceptionalism among humans, animals, objects, etc. and, instead, sees everything as interconnected. Approaching the life of objects through a more relational-ontological point of view, Cetina (1997) argues that, too often, we consider the significance of objects based on either “intrinsic valuation [commodities]” or “external usefulness [instruments]” (p. 12). Instead, object-oriented sociality sees objects as holding the “capacity to unfold indefinitely” (p. 12). By acknowledging object agency,

she encourages humans to engage in 1) “mutual communicative partaking,” where subjects and objects “cross-over” one another to mutually produce knowledge (p. 18); and 2) “object solidarity,” which occurs through “human beings’ altruistic behavior toward an object world” (p. 23). Although OSI does not categorize OS as an object-oriented ontology or sociality, their equalizing appeals to and practices with objects and object-agency facilitate a similar sociomaterial ontological project.

OSI’s development of a human-object orientation that contradicts anthropocentric heteronormative binaries suggests that OSI is not only about identity and community formation but also about countering proscriptions of living and loving that are based in human-oriented ontologies. They offer an alternative ontological framework that complicates normative perspectives of agency, desire, and relationality. Doing so implicitly advocates for a flattening of the dominant entity-hierarchy and a multiplication of interactions among all entities while explicitly imagining and representing objects in the public sphere. For example, OSI’s emphasis on non-verbal communication as a mode of constructing and perceiving reality is often incompatible with the anthropocentric ontological paradigms that characterize the dominant public sphere. Sensuality and intimacy as spectral, gender as fluid and perceptual, love as metaphorical, animism as psychic interconnection, and communication as sensation all comprise an object-oriented ontology that (re)conceptualizes desire as human-object sociality while manifesting it through representation in a public sphere. This process deconstructs the impenetrable boundaries that constitute taboo to reconstruct a more fluid and heterogeneous lifeworld. These ontological shifts inform appeals to broader sociomaterial axiological practices.

Axiological Shifts

Whereas anthropocentric desire is predicated on an investment in specific objects-of-desire or the construction of the desiring self in relation to objects, OS is about radical accountability to all beings, including objects, as a foundation of desire. Therefore, OSI’s development of an object-oriented ontology is also, implicitly, a proposal for criteria of ethical values and judgments regarding sexuality and public interaction more broadly. These criteria parallel Bell’s (2012) advancement of “ecologies of concern,” which are networks of relationality that lead to conscientious living.

Bell (2012) suggest that life, energy, and desire are not just the property and domains of humans, or even animals, which anthropocentrism would have us believe. As an alternative, she advocates an ecological perspective, which “reminds us that any entity exists multiply in ways that may not be initially apparent” (p. 113). This ecological awareness, which illuminates the ways that all entities are entangled, creates a “shared concern” that forces us to see “each element is sustained because it is required by, and only *therefore* concerned with, the other” (p. 113). Ecologies of concern facilitate an ethical appeal for humans to “attend *better*—that is, more broadly—to the distributed agencies that are potentially of relevance in the emergence of an entity or situation” (p. 114). One of the ways Bell suggests that humans can attend to distributed agencies is through “non- or anti-anthropocentrism,” because this is a perspective that “invites the sorts of reflections that better explain processes at stake through the provocative opening up of boundaries between entities” (p. 119). What is at stake, for Bell, is that “the boundaries we articulate and the exclusions that we thereby perform are simultaneously ones about relevance and about ethics” (p. 117). In other words, demarcating boundaries around what counts as an agentic entity is always a process of exclusion, which not only determines what types of relational connections are taboo but also the significance of one entity over another. Ecologies of concern acknowledge multiple

possibilities for interaction, which is a more ethical endeavor, and one that OSI implicitly and explicitly uptakes, symbolically and materially.

Stemming from queer-posthumanism and object-oriented ontology, OSI presents many suggestions for interacting with others and the world more ethically. Most prominent are their discussions of animism and nonverbal communication, in which all entities bear souls and psychic connection can facilitate mutuality. Whether or not an audience agrees with these beliefs and claims, OSI presents compelling critiques of anthropocentrism and logocentrism as ethically unsound in theory and practice. In doing so they shift these dominant discourses and embody an axiology of relational interconnectivity, where ethical desiring, loving, and living hinges on attunement to and representation of distributed agency among all entities, in all spheres.

CONCLUSION: WHAT WE LEARN FROM OSI ABOUT TABOO COMMUNICATION

Answering questions about how OSI (en)counters the public warrants asking the question: how does OSI also reaffirm the public? Naming a desire and describing an experience that agitates or opposes normativity requires, first, making assumptions about what is dominant, which is inevitably a culturally specific endeavor. Largely, OSI assumes an audience steeped in Western colonialist religious practices and discourses that exclude animism. As Luciano & Chen (2019) remind us, posthuman ontological turns are not new, they are in fact an appropriation of indigenous beliefs and materialisms. That OSI perpetuates this in their queer posthuman worldmaking not only reveals the origins of their own philosophical assumptions but also their foothold in the dominant public sphere. Additionally, analogizing OS with heterosexuality, even if to disrupt it, suggests that OSI assumes an external audience who subscribes to assumptions about gender and sexuality established through this dominant discourse. Therefore, to infer that OSI acknowledges and works to overcome exclusion brought on by the shadows of taboo also affirms a particular vision and representation of a dominant public sphere. This is not to say that an analysis of OSI does not have consequentiality. Its emergence and persistence as a queer posthuman counterpublic demonstrates the nuances involved in countering the taboo from two distinct yet overlapping marginalized positionalities while simultaneously revealing the communicative resources (symbolic and material) involved in such a public project.

What this chapter reveals is that OSI is not simply an alternative or subaltern collective that emerges through shared identity and common struggle. As a queer posthuman counterpublic, the discursive work of OSI functions to (re)imagine and (re)present the socio-material world in a way that counters anthropocentric heteronormativity and its dominant configurations of the public. This counterpublic subsumes identity and cultural conditions in service of a project of world(re)imagining. What this suggests is that *taboo* is not just about communicating for or against particular identities or practices, nor is it simply about the production of dominant discourses, it is also about inclusion of marginalized subjects into the public through representation—a specifically queer-sociomaterial imagining. In countering taboo within a queer posthuman public, we can see that taboo is constitutive of broader discourses and paradigms; it is both a symbolic and material condition of world making.

We also learn from OSI that disrupting the taboo—especially when communicating about a subject that is so absent in the public sphere and that intersects with multiple layers of discrimination—requires an incredible amount of rhetorical work. This work is important because it carves out (counter)public spaces for more complex, queer, and ethical engagements with the sociomaterial world. However, this

work also reveals how deeply engrained taboos are and how difficult they are to overcome. OSI has been countering the dominant public sphere since the 1990s and it's likely that the majority of readers of this chapter will be learning about OS for the first time here. Nevertheless, OSI provides an extended and comprehensive look at the rhetorical strategies that communities deemed multiply taboo are burdened with employing in order to (en)counter the taboo in the public sphere. Thus, the framework outlined in this analysis of OSI provides a starting point for understanding the rhetorical processes that facilitate (en)countering multiple taboos in public communication.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Anthropocentric Heteronormativity: Reaffirms human-to-human sexuality as a normal and preferred dimension of hetero/sexuality.

Anthropocentrism: A perspective that positions human beings at the center of everything, which manifests in assumptions that human ways of being are the norm and fosters beliefs that humans are exceptional in comparison to all other entities.

Anthroponormativity: The taken-for-granted assumption that being human is the norm by which all other entities are judged (e.g., the binary division of human/nonhuman).

Counterpublic: Refers to collective resistance to identity-based exclusion and the development of discursive practices that are inclusive of marginalized identity and/or alternative discourses that uncover, resist, and transcend the ideological and practical differences that lead to dominance and exclusion and/or the ways groups, who are heterogenous in their marginality, strategically deploy (previously hidden) discourses in arguments against dominant conceptions and interests.

Heteronormativity: A worldview that upholds dominant understandings of gender as binary and prescribes heterosexual coupling as a normal and preferred sexual orientation.

Objectum-Sexuality: An emotional and/or romantic inclination towards objects.

Posthumanism: A philosophical perspective that interrogates and disrupts that stability of the category human, including binaries and assumptions that position humans as hierarchically superior to all other entities.

Public Sphere: An imagined space where information is exchanged and opinions are expressed, which has historically been dominated by the voices and lived experiences of people in power who have the agency to shape political, legal, and social proscriptions.

Queer Theory: A theoretical perspective that complicates heteronormative configurations of sex/gender and attraction/desire.

Queer-Posthuman Counterpublic: A rhetorical space that disrupts heteronormative moral divisions and anthropocentric paradigmatic distinctions in order to remake the world as less anthropocentrically heteronormative.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This definition comes from the Wikipedia entry on OS, which was authored by the OS community and is promoted on their website as a valid source of general information about the OS community (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Object_sexuality).
- ² This definition comes from the Wikipedia entry on animism, which readers are directed to via the OS website (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Object_sexuality).
- ³ The purpose of the OSI website is clearly outlined in its very first paragraph, which states: “This international website about objectum-sexuality, (widely known as Objektophil in Germany), is designed to offer a support network for objectum-sexuals (Objektophile) and education for friends and family about objectum-sexuality (Objektophil), and insight into our way of accepting, living, and adapting as individuals who are in love with objects.”

Chapter 17

Audio Ageplay and Sonic Spankings: The Rhetorical Work of Podcasts to Demystify Kink

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ABSTRACT

Global perspectives on sexuality are changing, with “deviancies” that were once considered entirely taboo occupying newly uncontroversial roles in society. However, one subsect of erotic expression remains largely unacceptable: kink. This totalizing demonization of alternative desire has led many to hide their sexuality from others, creating a crisis of shame rooted in the prohibition of open discourse. Thankfully, research indicates that kinky podcasts might provide a solution to this problem. This chapter examines six such shows—The Dildorks, Why Are People Into That?!, Dudes Spankin’ Dudes, The Big Little Podcast, the Brat Perversions Podcast, and Diaper Girl Gossip—and explains how their rhetorical choices help kinky listeners gain an alternative sexual education, improve their interpersonal communication and community building skills, and achieve personal affectual liberation.

INTRODUCTION

In an early episode of his now long running podcast, sex advice columnist and kink activist Dan Savage received a message from a distressed young listener. The individual — who describes themselves as a “24-year-old [straight] female ... or bi, I don’t really know” (Savage, 2010) — at first recounts a life of successful recovery and absolute bliss. Nearly four years of sobriety following a dangerous drug dependency? Check. A healthy and stable long-term partnership with an emotionally compatible lover? Check. Mind blowing action in the bedroom? Check, *check*, and *check*. On a first pass, the listener seems to describe a life enviable not just to those fighting substance addiction, but by any number of people who are stuck in unsatisfying relationships, who are attempting to escape domestic abusers, or who struggle to form meaningful bodily bonds with others.

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So, what is the problem? To use the listener's own words, the sex with her boyfriend is "amazing ... sometimes," but at other points:

[I]t can get a little routine, a little vanilla as people would say. And I don't know how to broach the topic of changing it, or getting kinky, or trying new things. I've had kinky sex in the past, but I've always been under the influence, like, out of my mind high and drunk, and I was able to initiate those things because I was so fucked up. But also because of those experiences, I've had really horrible situations where I was taken advantage of because I was drunk and high. And so I think I've kind of settled with this vanilla sex for a while because it feels safe. ... I'm working on all these issues, and I feel like I'm emotionally ready to try different things. My issue is just, I don't know where to get the courage to bring up this topic with my boyfriend. I mean, I don't even know where to start. (Savage, 2010)

Though it may seem like an interpersonal paradise from the outside, this woman's perfect relationship lacks one essential element: kink, or pleasure derived from the transformation of atypical, often negative actions into desirable ones. The sugar may be nice, and at times even *amazing*, but she needs to add some spice to the mix to feel fulfilled.

Within the context of a handbook on communication strategies, this listener's call is noteworthy for two major reasons. First, it describes a woman suffering not from uncertainty about what she wants in life, but from a breakdown of the language used to convey those desires. Every beat of her message evidences this fact, from her initial waffling about whether she should describe herself as heterosexual or bisexual, to her use of drugs to break free of the inhibitions that limit her expressive capabilities, to the conflation of kink with sexual abuse which led her to try and silence both parts of herself (the trauma and the desire) in order to feel safe. The listener knows she wants to be bound, or choked, or spanked, or diapered, or pierced, or to participate in whatever particular types of fetish play she happens to find arousing. She simply does not have the ability to communicate such needs with her partner sans substantive sensory impairment, and her struggle to do so is causing a level of anguish that necessitates external guidance.

Second, the call provides a compelling case study about how to resolve such articulatory dilemmas. Rather than respond to the woman asynchronously, as he does for most of his listeners, host Dan Savage decides to phone her directly. Their conversation begins with a series of yes or no questions: "When you were drunk and high, did you ever get on a bus? ... did you ever go to the movies? ... take a shit? ... eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner?" (Savage, 2010). Following nothing but positive responses, Savage affirms that the woman "can have kinky sex clean and sober just like you do all those things now clean and sober," making sure to clarify that the addiction was the problem, not the desire. The conversation continues at a breakneck pace, with the host outlining the specific words, sentences, and rhetorical techniques the listener can use to reveal her erotic needs to her boyfriend while ensuring that their interpersonal bonds remain strong. As the host notes, the goal is to utilize language in such a way as to "build an addition to [their] big sex house," a special "kink wing," without destroying its existing foundation. Finally, Savage reveals the major kicker. If the woman is still having trouble discussing these things with her boyfriend, he advises her to "play him the goddamn podcast, you and me talking, and then talk." If the listener's voice fails, rely on the host's voice to get things started.

In just a few short minutes, Dan Savage uses his audio platform to accomplish three incredible things. At the beginning of the conversation, he provides a concise but effective sexual education lesson about what the listener is feeling and why, employing a mixture of therapeutic and activist language that at once affirms her struggles while at the same time providing a reparative lens through which she can

begin to work through her kink-related traumas. After that, Savage models how the woman might begin communicating with her boyfriend about this subject, providing the specific details necessary to facilitate effective interpersonal discourse about such a sensitive cultural taboo. Finally, the host encourages her to think of the podcast as an active form of media, to treat it as a phenomenological performative tool whereby merely listening can itself serve as a communicative act. Though this conversation is focused on a single woman's sexual problems, the three communicative modes Savage employs during it — educational, interpersonal, and affective — raise interesting and important questions about the potential of podcasts as ero-rhetorical tools. Specifically, they ask researchers to consider the positive function of such shows on the lives of distraught kinky individuals, as well as how traditional scholarship can best facilitate them in achieving such noble ends.

This chapter attempts to accomplish both such things, providing a comprehensive theoretical exploration of how these podcasts function while advancing an overarching argument about why we should discuss them and the methodological approaches to employ during that process. It does so through a rhetorical analysis of six of these kinky shows — *The Dildorks* (2016-present), *Why Are People Into That?!* (2014-present), *Dudes Spankin' Dudes* (2016-present), *The Big Little Podcast* (2011-present), the *Brat Perversions Podcast* (2018-present), and *Diaper Girl Gossip* (2021-present) — breaking down the various strategies they employ for discussing such touchy subjects as BDSM and ageplay, among others. The chapter will focus in particular on these podcasts' ability to facilitate the three modes of communication utilized by Dan Savage, defined here as alternative sexual education, interpersonal communication and community building, and personal affectual liberation.

BACKGROUND

Global perspectives on sexuality are slowly but surely beginning to change. On the one hand, modes of orientation that used to be hopelessly fractured and suppressed by binaristic social structures — the “endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition” as famously posited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990, p. 1) — have since gained acceptance and at times appreciation within otherwise straight and “traditional” sexual communities. For evidence of this, look no further than the rise of LGBTQ allyship as an institutionalized system, a la the safe zones erected by various universities and employers, as well as the label's newfound prevalence as a marker of personal or professional identity for many heterosexual persons (Ji & Fujimoto, 2013; Poynter & Tubbs, 2008; Rivers & Swank, 2017). Meanwhile, acts of bodily “deviancy” that were once considered entirely taboo or even illegal, such as sodomy, have now been decriminalized in much of the world and play increasingly large, mostly uncontroversial roles in social discourse and education (Brady & Seymour, 2019; Hough, 2004; Weinmeyer, 2014). Even groups once staunchly opposed to all forms of alternative sexuality and queerness have since relented on some long controversial issues, as with the Republican Party of the United States dropping any “serious discussion about trying to overturn *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the landmark Supreme Court case that” forced holdout states to provide legal support and recognition for same-sex marriage (McGraw, 2021). However, despite this international trend toward more progressive erotic thinking, one subset of carnal expression remains an unacceptable subject matter within “polite” society: kink.

Kink as Taboo

Conceptions of kink vary widely based on the particular sexual proclivities under examination. However, Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy offer a usefully generalizable definition in their book series on sadomasochistic relationships, in which they refer to their preferred style of play as any “activity in which the participants eroticize sensations or emotions that would be unpleasant in a non-erotic context” (2003, p. 5). Within this framework, erotic does not refer exclusively to “genital sexuality,” the type of *vanilla* intercourse alluded to by Dan Savage’s distressed caller. Rather, it encompasses a “wide spectrum of emotions and sensations that are arousing, awakening, enlightening and stimulating — whether or not they” lead to traditional penetrative acts. Although this chapter localizes kink within the particular subfield of taboo sexual discourses, it adopts Easton and Hardy’s definition in order to more accurately convey the range of people who stand to benefit from interacting with fetishistic podcasts, along with the diverse forms of desire they currently or wish to indulge.

As this conception of the term implies, sensual acts that fall within the broad category of kink range from small, almost unnoticeable, and at times entirely psychological erotics to major decisions that impact every aspect of one’s identity and existence. For some people, this form of roleplay might involve nothing more than the use of simple but atypical paraphernalia in the bedroom, such as asking their partner to put them in diapers or lock a jingling pet collar around their neck. Others participate in more lifestyle-defining forms of power exchange in which they submit to consensual acts of extreme torture or agree to become another individual’s sexual slave for a negotiated period of time. That said, the majority of kinky individuals fall somewhere between these two extremes, choosing to participate in a handful of intense bedroom antics (most commonly bondage, a catch-all term referring to restraint via rope and similar accoutrements, and spanking) while incorporating select, usually subtle elements of power exchange into their everyday lives (as with couples who adopt nicknames like “daddy”).

Detailing this spectrum of erotic expression is important as it helps illustrate the fact that while kinksters are by all means a marginalized people, as this chapter will soon demonstrate, they are not a minority group. Indeed, surveys indicate that the majority of Western adults possess some form of presumed “unusual” fetish that would fit neatly into the categories outlined above. While the most conservative estimates only commit to about a fourth of the population having distinctly taboo fantasies, others indicate that up to 60% fall into that camp. Some consumer activist surveys (less transparent than their academic counterparts, though typically larger in scope) even posit that the figures might be quite a bit higher, arguing that up to 75% of adults may be reasonably categorized as kinky. However, when asking those same participants whether they ever take the initiative to act upon their desires, the numbers shrink dramatically — by around 30% for consumer surveys, and up to 50% for peer reviewed studies. This drop off means that for every adult who takes the initiative to actualize their erotic needs within the bedroom, between one and five have not yet been able to do so (Emery, 2016; Joyal & Carpentier, 2016; Joyal et al., 2015; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018).

Though there exist multiple reasons for this extreme drop off, the most relevant for this chapter is the fact that such acts remain a dangerously taboo topic within the public sphere. For people who view themselves as having normal erotic desires, kink must exist as a “policed and pathological not normal sexuality,” a type of lust which is “acceptable only when it falls under the rubric of normative American sexuality” and “understandable only when it is the symptom of a deviant type of person with a sick, damaged core” (Weiss, 2006, p. 105). For this reason, to reveal oneself as having a sexual fetish, even if said fetish is generally perceived to be tame or innocuous (such as a fixation on feet), is to invite unwanted

ridicule, judgement, and in some extreme cases, disbarment from a job or ejection from a family, friend, or religious group. This is true even within the social subsects which one might expect to show hospitality toward kinksters. To note but one example, young members of the American LGBTQ community have recently revived demands to prohibit kinky expression at Queer Pride events, despite fetish groups playing a significant role in the original gay liberation movement. The arguments proffered posit that whips and chains and similar items “render the space unsafe for minors” and other observers, playing into the “respectability politics” mentioned above with the goal of “[pushing] for LGBTQ people to be seen as ‘acceptable,’ or even ‘normal,’ in a heteronormative society” (Haasch and López, 2021). Of course, such reasoning relies on the tacit assumption that kink can never be acceptable or normal, and by extension reinforces that very same dogma. This totalizing demonization of “deviant” desire within both majority and minority groups serves a marginalizing function that has led many kinksters to hide their sexuality from others, believing they are not allowed to discuss their feelings with anyone but their most trusted confidants — and in many cases not even them, as evidenced by the fact that 25-35% of such individuals conceal their desires from therapists (Kolmes et al., 2006; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018; Sprott et al., 2017).

Contemporary research on this subject is distressingly sparse. However, the scholarship that does exist demonstrates that kinksters who have closeted themselves, hidden their proclivities away from the world for fear of unwarranted redress, almost always report feelings of intense and omnipresent shame as a result. This shame frequently manifests in struggles with interpersonal attachment, with many finding it difficult to form meaningful and genuine romantic, sexual, or platonic relationships as a direct result of their unmentionable “deviancy” (Domingue, 2019; Pohtinen, 2019; Vera, 2021). Note the key term in that sentence: unmentionable. Just as the epistemological structure of the hetero/homo closet has limited the expressive possibilities of those in the latter category — yielding one of the most harmful “performative effects of the self-contradictory discursive field of force created by” such a binary (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 9) — so too has the vanilla/kink closet served to strip away the communicatory faculties of most fetishists. The result is a generic illiteracy of the self, a structure of social identification that demands silence from anyone who happens to possess erotic deviancies. This mode of existence ensures that such individuals’ public-facing personas are constantly at odds with their bodily needs, leading to pressing psychological pain of the type expressed by Dan Savage’s listener (and often far worse). This finding, when combined with the data that well over half of all adults are in some way kinky, evidences the existence of a pressing and wide-spread mental health crisis, one rooted entirely in the inability to discuss acts like spanking and bondage.

Demystifying Kink

The current consensus by both clinicians and active kinksters is that the only way to reliably reverse the effects of this crisis is by forcing open the channels of communication, giving those interested in alternative erotics an opportunity to heal from their isolation-inflicted wounds via sustained connection with others (Newmahr, 2011; Shahbaz and Chirinos, 2017; Sprott et al., 2017). In theory, that advice sounds reasonable and remarkably easy to accomplish. However, the channels one would immediately associate with such reparative experiences — therapy, support organizations, local and online fetish groups, and so on — are in many cases not accessible to kinksters. This may be due to an individual’s economic or living status; trustworthy and experienced erotic confidants are harder to come by for those with limited disposable income, or who reside outside major cosmopolitan areas. It may also result from the twin burdens of fear and shame, as seen in the common reluctance by closeted clients to disclose atypical

sexual feelings to their therapists. And of course, other identificatory concerns complicate treatment even further. Note, for instance, “the absence of a kind of racial recognition” (Cruz, 2020, p. 821) described by many kinksters of color, a failure of discourse which renders such persons invisible and, by extension, inaudible to members of the hegemonically white contrasexual spaces they happen to have access to.

Thankfully, a recent internet movement has demonstrated that said communication is not only teachable on an individual and in-person basis, but is *also* achievable on a massive, reproducible, and asynchronous scale. Since their initial rise in popularity during the mid-2000s, podcasts — serialized, typically long-form audio programs which foreground spoken content; they are similar in content to radio talk shows but are for the most part pre-recorded and consumed on variable, user-defined schedules — have remained a steady fixture of fascination for rhetorical and media scholars. This is due to the unique affordances they offer to easily emulate those every day, embodied, interpersonal communication styles which are difficult to evoke via writing, film, social media, and other mediums of reproducible expression. As Christine Tulley puts it, podcasting “reasserts the body through a voice and lends the human quality often lacking in other” types of texts. Through this “focus on voice,” such programs “[allow] the speaker to take advantage of classical rhetorical techniques based in Greek and Roman oratory that are the foundation for many effective communication principles” (Tulley, 2011, p. 263). In this way, podcasts create for their audiences semi-interactive phenomenological spaces, structured forms of discourse that are entirely controlled by the show’s producers but whose rhetorical appeals make listeners feel like they are part of the conversation. Empowered by this affective relational mode, individuals gain the ability (and are subtly encouraged) to engage with these programs in the context of self-care, thereby “extracting sustenance from the objects of culture” by activating “reparative motives and positionalities” (Sedgwick, 2003, pp. 150-51). Such an argument recalls foundational rhetorical beliefs about speech’s ability to foster productive and lasting discourse (Gumperz, 1982), and meshes with the recent critical turn toward treating texts as facilitators of actualization and healing (Love, 2010).

Within the context of the mental health crisis afflicting kinksters, this phenomenological and reparative conceptualization of podcasts provides a promising potential solution — and one which, though it thus far lacks theoretical justification within the academy, may already be working on regular people. Beneath well-known podcasting subgenres like true crime and news commentary exists a hidden world of erotic programming, talk shows produced by members of fetish groups which focus on taboo topics like BDSM (or the transformation of discipline and punishment into pleasurable activities) and ageplay (assuming roles outside of one’s actual age for erotic purposes, most commonly that of the “adult baby” character). These podcasts enjoy a sizable presence amongst underground kink communities, with the most popular possessing fanbases that number in the tens of thousands. More importantly, said shows have proven beneficial to closeted kinksters, with listeners regularly leaving reviews which describe how the podcasts have facilitated their own deviant sexual awakenings as well as their ability to discuss such touchy subjects with their partners, suitors, and friends (Megatron & Melvoin-Berg, n.d.). Considering the scholarly silence on these programs (see Rosinski, 2021 for one of the only major examples) alongside their incredible communicative potential, this chapter will now take a closer look at a small selection of kinky podcasts through the rhetoro-affective methodological lens explained above. Through these analyses, it hopes to provide clear evidence of the positive impact such shows can and do have on closeted, shame-silenced listeners, thus affirming their status as reparative communication tools which general and professional readers alike should make ample use of.

THE RHETORICAL WORK OF PODCASTS TO DEMYSTIFY KINK

This section takes as its point of departure the three categories of aid intimated by Dan Savage during his interaction with a distressed caller: alternative sexual education, interpersonal communication and community building, and personal affectual liberation. Each section begins with a brief explanation and theoretical justification of the communicative function under review, followed by rhetorical analyses of two podcasts relevant to the topic. Though these analyses only discuss small snippets from the programs, they are representative of the shows in their entirety and provide enough detail to both evidence the arguments at hand and model how to effectively approach such media as a general listener and/or as a scholar. Specific podcasts were selected for this chapter based on their immediate identifiability as kinky programming, their willingness to discuss particularly taboo elements of fetish play and alternative lifestyles (as opposed to more general, vanilla sexual discourse), and the illustrative clarity their episodes provide within the context of academic research.

Alternative Sexual Education

Despite the enduring popularity of abstinence-only education amongst both legislative bodies and generic global citizenry, scholars widely agree that robust sexual awareness campaigns are invaluable for promoting healthier erotic habits, preventing domestic abuse, the transmission of disease, and unwanted pregnancy, and reducing the personal shame and cultural stigmas commonly connected to issues of bodily deviancy. Additionally, there exists widespread evidence that media-centered sexual education (in contrast to programs which function outside of the sphere of popular culture, such as those erected by activist groups and schools) is particularly helpful on these fronts, especially in countries like America where erotic imagery already plays a large role in mainstream art and advertising (Delgado & Austin, 2007; Keller & Brown, 2002). Meanwhile, podcasts have gained increasing traction within the academy as a preferred method for delivering all sorts of informational and educational content to otherwise less-receptive publics. This includes on topics considered vital to personal and social well-being, of which sexuality, mental health, and the overlap between the two undoubtedly are (Evans, 2008; Merhi, 2015; Nwosu et al., 2016). When combined with podcasts' reparative rhetorical potential, this all indicates the medium's impeccable positioning as a force for effective alternative sexual education, a way to communicate essential information about kink with closeted listeners whose existing exposure to the subject is likely either non-existent or intertwined with shame and harmful ideological presuppositions.

The Dildorks evidences these arguments on a broad level, providing a strong and arguably foundational example of how to teach about kinky subjects within the context of general sexual health and education. Hosted by erotic educator Bex Caputo and journalist Kate Sloan, the show adheres to a relatively informal structure. Each week sees the duo discuss a different sex-related topic, some general, some specific, some vanilla, some kinky. The nature of said topic determines how structured their discourse is, with some requiring careful consideration before and audio editing after the recording session, while others allow for free-roaming conversation and uncut speech. In all cases, however, the dialogue featured on *The Dildorks* adheres to a few important rhetorical standards. First, Caputo and Sloan make a consistent effort to use casual, happy, and affirmative language when discussing sexual topics. The emotive space engendered by the hosts is that of no strings attached *pleasure*, which in turn intimates that the things they discuss (including kink) should be perceived as *pleasurable*. Second, Caputo and Sloan constantly invoke their own sexual lives and proclivities within the audio proceedings. Not only does this convey that

the two do indeed practice what they preach, as it were — these are not reclusive academics living lives of perceived chastity in pursuit of ever-engorging bibliographies, but genuinely erotic beings worthy of trust on these matters — but it invites the listener to enter their private kinky discourses. This establishes the subject as one which can and should be discussed openly, without shame or genuflection. Finally, the statements Caputo and Sloan make are always informed by their healthy and rigorous understanding of alternative sexual education, and they often foreground those educational elements within the audio text itself. The obvious benefit of such a choice is that their audience, made comfortable by the podcast's emotional appeals, will be more receptive to the information they provide. Less obvious, but just as important, is that such rhetorical choices convey the importance of approaching kink from the position of an informed speaker. *To be a successful fetishist*, the podcast appears to say, *you must put in the work to understand spanking and choking and diapering as comprehensively as possible*.

All three of *The Dildorks*' rhetorical standards are on full display in their episode about impact play, a form of kink most commonly referred to by the metonymic activity of spanking. They open immediately with affirmative erotic language: Sloan focuses on the fetish itself, stating "I really like hitting people, and getting hit," followed soon after by a giggle; meanwhile, Caputo emphasizes personal erotic identity, revealing that he is "kind of a pain slut" in a rising, playful cadence quickly and teasingly mimicked by his co-host (2018). From the first few seconds of the podcast, the duo use emotional appeals to intimate that kink is something fun, something silly, something to be casually discussed without a sense of shame. This transitions seamlessly into a broader exploration of their personal sex lives, using their aforementioned 'I' statements as a way to reveal the places they have received impact play, whether they identify as a dominant spanker or submissive spankee, the ways they enjoy being hit, the instruments they prefer to have used on them, and several other small nuances related to their personal erotic journeys. Then, after creating within the podcast a positive and intimate space of discourse, they subtly shift from talking about their own desires to relaying educational information about the topic. Signaled by the phrase "as a general tip," Sloan starts to provide physiological details about how to spank partners safely, how to gain more pleasure from the act, and so on. Solely through the precision of their speech, the hosts have found a way to provide engaging, destigmatizing, and accurate alternative sexual education to kinksters who may not have reasonable access to it in any other way.

The majority of kinky podcasts utilize some form of *The Dildorks*' rhetorical structure: speak pleasantly, speak intimately, speak educatedly. However, specific programs may emphasize one aspect over the others, or even add additional appeals on top, depending on the host's particular communicative goals. One useful example of this fact comes in the form of *Why Are People Into That?!*, a show created by author and sex activist Tina Horn. Just like Caputo and Sloan, Horn uses language to craft a positive emotive space that endears listeners to her as a person, as well as to unguarded kinky discourse as a broad form of expression. As the title of the program implies, though, the host's primary aim is the demystification of uniquely taboo erotic practices, those activities which uninformed individuals often respond to with fear or disgust or even anger.

Horn's episode on sexual enemas — the process of filling the rectum with liquid for practical or pleasurable purposes — provides a useful glimpse at how she does exactly that. After a casual and free-flowing introduction with expert guest Joe Osmundson, Horn transitions into the body of the podcast and asks directly, "Why are people into enemas?!" (2019). This gives her and Osmundson a chance to discuss the various reasons people might enjoy such an activity: it aids the process of having anal sex; it helps the body feel clean, renewed, and sexy; it engenders erotic fantasies, even if there is no chance of acting upon them in the near future; and it taps into a ritualistic, spiritual dimension frequently associated

with fetish play. By listing out these various kinky appeals, the show accomplishes two major things. First, thanks to the contra-stigmatic context created by Horn, each of these points becomes a moment of direct address. Those who would by nature react negatively to any or all of the above statements are invited to see what the “freaks” are up to, to hear about the reasons behind why they do such strange things. This is why the show’s title ends with an interrobang (“?!”) and features the phrase as a key part of its marketing, as Horn is attempting to reach audiences whose only exposure to fetish is as a shocking pathology. Second, of course, is that the rhetorical content of the podcast transforms that shocked address into an educational one. Rather than lean into the idea that deviant behavior should be leered at, Horn inverts those expectations by using empathetic and inviting language. Very quickly, the listener transitions from thinking *enemas are weird and bad*, to *enemas are more complicated than I thought*, before eventually ending with *maybe I should try out an enema sometime* — a reparative movement, and one especially valuable to those who possess kinky desires but have repressed them due to social stigma. And all the while, this emotional education is being paired with the same level of intellectual scrutiny seen in a show like *The Dildorks*, meaning the audience not only leaves the episode with an acceptance of enemas as sexual paraphernalia, but also possesses the tools necessary “to decide what is right for your [own] buttocks” (Horn, 2019).

Interpersonal Communication and Community Building

Even when kinky podcasts focus predominantly on general education, they still frequently cover topics related to interpersonal communication and how to interact with others more effectively. Indeed, hosts often provide additional resources designed to facilitate just that. To point out one relevant example, Bex Caputo features a checklist on his website that allows fans of *The Dildorks* to select which acts, terms, and emotions they are interested in experiencing during erotic situations. As he notes, the document is “a tool to use in an ongoing conversation about all the sexy things you want to do” (2018) and how you can explain those desires to potential partners. That podcasters feel it is important to provide these sorts of materials lines up with growing scholarly pressure to promote progressive sexual discourse techniques — such as transformative rules of consent — as a matter of extreme ethical, political, and preventative concern (Harris, 2017). This chapter recognizes the validity of these perspectives and regards them as an essential element of kinky podcast rhetorics.

With that said, the particular brand of interpersonal communication this section will focus on is slightly different, dealing instead with the common rhetorical concerns of communities and publics. In her book *Playing on the Edge*, Staci Newmahr describes the importance for kinksters of crafting connections with like-minded people. As individuals who live in a permanent mode of marginalization, acceptance into a fetish “community provides immediate reassurance that kindred spirits—and bodies and minds—exist. ... In this context,” social interaction and sexual play creates a uniting identity for deviant persons, one which is “important not merely because it represents shared interest in [BDSM], but because it represents shared histories of living on the margins” (Newmahr, 2011, p. 38). To put things in distinctly rhetorical terms, Newmahr is describing the function of fetish groups as counterpublics, locations in which the harmful, shameful standards of social discourse are nullified or reversed. To borrow language from Michael Warner, the beauty of this type of kinky congregation is that:

[N]o one is in the closet: the presumptive heterosexuality that constitutes the closet for individuals in ordinary speech is suspended. ... The individual struggle with stigma is transposed, as it were, to the

conflict between modes of publicness. The expansive nature of public address will seek to keep moving that frontier for a [contrasexual] public, to seek more and more places to circulate where people will recognize themselves in its address. (2002, pp. 86-87)

In other words, by becoming part of a fetish community, deviant individuals gain a personal voice, a discursual structure that allows them to push back against further marginalization, and a method of outreach that helps them bring other secret kinksters into the reparative fold. For many, these rhetorical tools are invaluable and provide the means by which their lives gain greater meaning. However, accessing them relies entirely on one's admission and continued acceptance into said groups. This is not always easy to accomplish, especially since communication practices which are "normative in the community," standards of expression erected in opposition to vanilla hegemony, are often not taught and "considered social ineptitude outside of the community" (Newmahr, 2011, p. 33).

This is where kinky podcasts come into play, as they frequently function as tools to help inform closeted people about fetish groups and model the rules necessary to become part of them, particularly when they narrow their focus from alternative erotics holistically toward particular categories of kink. A useful example of this comes from *Dudes Spankin' Dudes*, a male-on-male impact play and consensual corporal punishment show hosted by RedspankScott and SoupGoblin. While episodes of the program utilize a variety of different approaches, a consistent trend is the hosts' focus on and promotion of the spanking community. Of the 39 regular and 3 special episodes released at the time of writing, 17 feature impact play parties and events, dating, casual encounters, or online interactions as their primary topic.

The first of these instances discusses a Los Angeles-based spanking party known as Moonburn. The hosts begin the episode by advertising a similar event happening soon after the expected air date, intimating to listeners that the things they are about to hear are not history nor fantasy, but active types of kinky engagement that they themselves could participate in. The duo then transitions into the discussion about Moonburn, with Scott taking the reins to relay his personal experience. To start, Scott describes the party in spatial and legalistic terms, noting: the process of signing in and how much attendance costs; the name tags guests receive, which indicates whether they are interested in beating others, being beat, both, or simply watching; what the play room looks like and how it feels to be in there; rules regarding voyeurism and sexual conduct; how to approach someone if you are interested in erotic activity, even if you do not know them; and so on. For closeted members of the *Dudes Spankin' Dudes* audience, these details provide essential information about what to expect from an event that from the outside seems quite imposing and ensures that they avoid major faux pas when they decide to finally attend. After this, the co-host then transitions to a discussion of the actual spanking process itself, giving vivid descriptions of each of the erotic interactions he had at the most recent party. At a glance, this portion of the podcast might seem like an example of the affectual discourses detailed later in this chapter — after all, the very first story Scott tells is about a humiliation scene in which he forced a man to get on all fours and push a penny through the event space using nothing but his nose, accompanied by "periodically beat[ing] his ass" for motivation (RedspankScott & SoupGoblin, 2016). The primary purpose of this tale, however, is clearly functional, as the co-host emphasizes elements like the negotiation that happened prior to the scene, the spatial implications of making someone crawl around at Moonburn, and the aftermath experienced by the submissive partner (such as unexpected joint pain). As educational kinky podcasts arm listeners with essential sexual knowledge, *Dudes Spankin' Dudes* makes sure their audience knows the ins and outs of interpersonal communication expectations within the fetish communities they represent, providing a clear and comprehensible way in for closeted individuals.

It is important to emphasize the phrase “communities they represent” in the previous sentence. Alternative erotic groups are in no way monolithic, and differences in proclivity (not to mention age, location, and the like) often yield differences in expressive expectations. A useful example of this fact comes from *The Big Little Podcast*, a show about ageplay hosted by members of the scene known as Mako Allen, Spacey, and Mae. In one of this show’s episodes about fetish parties, the hosts and a medley of guests explore the various expectations they have of event attendees. Unlike with Moonburn, though, the advice they provide is far less specific, regimented, and concrete. Instead of describing an assembly-line sexual process — purchase ticket, acquire name tag, approach potential partner, negotiate scene, get spanked — Allen and company discuss a general vetting process for guests, focusing on one’s character and ability to act genuine, giving, and gracious toward others. They then encourage listeners to “bring their party face with them. Be ready to have a good time, to participate, and to start things themselves” (Allen et al., 2013). Indeed, for the ageplay events discussed on *The Big Little Podcast*, there is an expectation of semi-autonomy that is not always foregrounded in other communities and might prove troublesome or offensive at their gatherings. Kinky podcasts provide listeners a way to explore those communicatory nuances and test out the rhetorical skills that will help them enter their desired reparative counterpublic.

Personal Affectual Liberation

The previous two sections have discussed the importance of kinky podcasts for helping closeted individuals develop specific, easily demonstrable practical skills, those being a comprehensive alternative sexual education and interpersonal communicative faculties. However, the final rhetorical technique this chapter will explore does not yield benefits that manifest in a clear or tangible way. Instead, it makes use of the listener’s internal reparative faculties, ones which allow them to work through personal shame on a distinctly affective level. In her attempt to identify a queer form of phenomenological inquiry, Sara Ahmed (2006) emphasizes the importance of orientation, or “the significance of nearness or what is ready to hand,” in determining how an individual crafts their identity on an affective and experiential level (p. 544). Though the scholar’s argument is specifically about LGBTQ persons and “how we are oriented toward queer moments when objects slip” (p. 566) momentarily outside of the standard hegemonic order, another way to approach her central observation is by considering what would happen when the things “ready to hand” are depictions of a uniquely *fetishistic* constitution as opposed to emblems of vanilla heteronormativity — as is the case in these kinky podcasts. In this scenario, the perceived nature of the phenomenological interaction between show, host, and listener changes on a structural level. Specifically, what on the outside serves a contra-cultural function, reparative rhetorics played out on and through fetishistic bodies via alternative education and counterpublic formation, on the inside serves as a tool of total emotional reacculturation, reparative rhetorics ingested by the body and taken to its affirmation. To contextualize this alongside Ahmed’s original argument: just as hormone replacement therapy quite literally shifts the emotional potency and physical capabilities of transgender men and women, thereby relieving feelings of dysphoria, the affective experience created by having kinky audio discourses “ready to hand” in place of standard vanilla alternatives transforms one’s responsive nature to them, in turn relieving any feelings of fear, disgust, confusion, or loneliness one might have about their own deviant identity and/or the deviant identities of others.

While all kinky podcasts have the capability to enact this form of phenomenological address — think back to the *Dudes Spankin’ Dudes* story which, despite its functional purpose, is initially and immediately interpretable as affective — those which foreground the listener’s erotic impulses provide the clearest

examples for analysis. One such show is the *Brat Perversions Podcast*, hosted by a dominatrix known by the name of MissBratDom. To some degree, the content of MissBratDom's speech directly mimics that found in her previously analyzed contemporaries, as when she introduces an erotic concept and explains what it is as a form of alternative sexual education. However, her tone and the particularities of her language are completely different, creating an emotive space unique from the casual pleurability of, say, a *Dildorks*. By contrast, MissBratDom is all about getting her listeners hot and bothered, encouraging them to revel in her speech as if they were actually participating in a scene with her. As illustration, read closely her description of "lesbian sissy" transformations, a form of identity play related to crossdressing:

It's like being feminized by your girlfriend, it's fun. ... You wearing her panties, bras, dresses. Imagine that. Can you figure that? [laugh] Maybe being helped by her when you're wearing her pantyhose? Hmm? Your clitty will feel different when you feel the nylons. It's like another form of sex. (MissBratDom, 2018)

The difference between MissBratDom's rhetoric and that of the other hosts discussed so far should be immediately apparent: point of view. Whereas informational kinky programs emphasize first person 'I' statements, an ethical appeal to develop trust with closeted individuals, *Brat Perversions* utilizes second person 'you' statements, making those closeted individuals direct participants in the action. The goal of a podcast such as this is not to bring the audience into an existing discourse, shifting their intellectual and social relationship to deviancy. Instead, it attempts to build a discourse within each individual listener, encouraging sexual responses to taboo concepts that may at first have seemed weird, or scary, or disgusting. The audio text orients those who interact with it toward experiential pleasure, and by having said pleasure "ready to hand" at the click of a button, a closeted "lesbian sissy" (or otherwise erotically marginalized individual) can conduct the reparative work necessary to understand and accept their feelings on an affectual level.

Phenomenologically centered kinky podcasts are also unique in the sense that they can more easily incorporate other modalities without disrupting the embodied communicative functions afforded by audio-centric texts (as outlined earlier by Tulley, 2011). After all, if a show's central goal is to evoke direct erotic responses from its audience, incorporating the sexual affects that work in other mediums is a logical decision. This is precisely the form of rhetoric at work in *Diaper Girl Gossip*, a video podcast hosted by pornographic ageplayers Mindlessly Diapered (aka Paige) and Baby Blair. Typical episodes of the program begin with a greeting from Paige: "Hi hi every-baby." As with MissBratDom's use of second person pronouns, this statement immediately positions the viewer as a participant in the fetishistic proceedings, a playmate sitting down for a playdate with Paige and Blair. The video content quickly reinforces this reading. Each episode finds the hosts, displayed simultaneously via split-screen, in rooms filled with ageplay paraphernalia like stuffed animals and dolls. The duo sits cross-legged on the floor, a stance which provides an unimpeded look at their fetishistic garments — typically a diaper and childish shirt, or an adult onesie — and their microphones are close enough to capture minute crinkles and rustles as they move. And move they do, as the hosts often participate in common ageplay activities while they discuss kinky topics, like when Paige spent an episode playing with a Princess Elsa doll (Diapered & Blair, 2021). Just like with *Brat Perversions*, these rhetorical choices all serve the purpose of eliciting erotic responses from the closeted viewer, encouraging them to immerse fully in the combined optical-sonic phenomenological space and "regress" alongside the two hosts. As they begin to do so, their body starts to accept its kinky desires, repairing their affective responses to make them consistent with their real-time contrasexual experiences.

To conclude this section, an important word of caution. Though shows like the *Brat Perversions Podcast* and *Diaper Girl Gossip* can be incredibly beneficial for their respective audiences, they often lack the scholastic rigor of a *Why Are People Into That?!* or the communal grounding of a *Big Little Podcast*. This means that the specific sexual perspectives of the hosts, including ones which are factually incorrect or ethically questionable, may not receive any significant pushback or correction during the production process. This does not mean scholars and general listeners should avoid these shows. However, it is unwise to rely on them as one's first or exclusive source of kinky podcast rhetorics.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are significant theoretical limitations to the approaches taken above. Most obviously, these three categories do not encompass the full range of what kinky podcasts have to offer. Some may blend the selected rhetorical strategies in largely unrecognizable ways, while others, especially those still developing their fanbases or which discuss fetishes outside of those mentioned here, may utilize different techniques entirely. Additionally, these arguments should not be taken as *carte blanche* to treat kinky podcasting as an entirely positive medium with no faults. Though the hosts of these shows have clear and significant incentives, both internal (fighting stigma) and external (developing counterpublics), to produce rigorous and beneficial content for their listeners, each program must be evaluated on its own merits to determine the impact and ethicality of its parole.

Despite these limitations and the complexity inherent to this topic, the arguments provided here should be more than enough to justify treating kinky podcasting as a medium uniquely well suited to reparative rhetorical strategies and the demystification of erotic taboos. For general readers, this chapter recommends engaging with such shows to learn more about one's own sexuality and to better understand a major marginalized group within contemporary society. For communication, media, and related scholars, this chapter recommends making ample use of these programs for informational purposes, to find relevant cases to study and, in appropriate contexts, as tools to incorporate into pedagogical practices.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The goal of this chapter is not to create a narrowly construed canon of acceptable kink podcasts, nor is it to limit discourse on this topic to a rigid rhetorical typology. Rather, its primary purpose is to serve as a starting point from which readers may begin to locate the shows that will best serve their personal communicatory needs — whether those needs be understanding and accepting aspects of one's own deviant sexuality, facilitating healthy and productive conversations with loved ones, finding clear and ethical resources to share with adult learners, or something else entirely. With this aim in mind, the Additional Reading section appended to this chapter provides a brief list of podcasts which are of comparable quality to the six analyzed here, but which foreground aspects of kink left underdiscussed by those shows.

This list should also serve as a point of departure for future scholarship, as it highlights some of the identificatory limitations inherent to this study. Most notable among these are a lack of intersectional analysis related to issues of race and limited reference to transgender persons and perspectives. Fetish podcasts as a genre still largely resemble the spaces erected by traditional leather communities, ones which frequently excluded or further marginalized kinksters of color as well as limited gender expres-

sion within a particular range of “acceptable” deviancy. As a result, while the programs analyzed in this chapter make active attempts to feature non-white and non-cisgender guests (and indeed, *The Dildorks*’ Bex Caputo is openly transmasculine), these are exceptions which prove the rule. However, this status quo is slowly beginning to shift. Podcasts like *Kinks with KeKe* (2018-present) are carving out spaces wherein BIPOC fetishists can discuss how sexual issues are inextricably intertwined with broader histories of race and ethnicity, providing an intersectional lens to examine such culturally loaded subjects as the use of slave imagery in BDSM. At the same time, shows like *The Performers Pod* (2021-present) are giving voice to the concerns of the transgender community and making visible the ways in which contemporary sexual representation fails to accommodate those located outside cisnormative bodily standards. As podcasts such as these grow in number, they will provide a new point of reference that may expand the findings outlined throughout this study in meaningful ways.

CONCLUSION

Returning to the call this chapter opened with, perhaps the most remarkable element of Dan Savage’s conversation with his listener is not the ease with which the host offered advice, nor the quality of his reparative rhetorics. Rather, what makes the talk so effective is the fact that it exists at all, that it is an endlessly reproducible instance of education, of interpersonal communication, of phenomenological response, and of care for kinky individuals. As demonstrated earlier, audio shows dealing with alternative sexual content operate in a variety of disparate ways, foregrounding different elements based on their particular social, political, or interpersonal goals. However, they all serve a centrally important healing function for their listeners simply by their existence as kinky podcasts — the medium is, in this case, very much the message (McLuhan et al., 2001). That Dan Savage can speak to *you*, or your partner, or your friend, or a complete and total stranger about fetishes, can speak candidly and informedly and affectually about spanking or ageplay or bondage, is what makes these programs such powerful communicative tools. The rest is simply the rhetorical icing on top.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Ageplay: Assuming roles outside of one's actual age for erotic purposes, most commonly that of the "adult baby" character.

BDSM: The transformation of discipline and punishment into pleasurable activities. Spelled out, the acronym stands for Bondage (BD), Dominance and Submission (DS), and Sadomasochism (SM).

Bondage: A catch-all term referring to restraint via rope and similar accoutrements.

Closet: An LGBTQ term referring to individuals who do not disclose their sexual identity or proclivities to others. If someone is "in the closet," they are unable (by choice or necessity) to communicate openly about their desires.

Counterpublic: A location of discourse that sits outside of, and is in opposition to, the rhetorical standards of mainstream society. They arise through the formation of communities by marginalized peoples.

Dominant: An individual who enjoys being on the giving end of kinky acts, such as spanking or humiliation.

Fetish: A common synonym for kink, especially within general discourses. Some scholars use the term to indicate more intense, identificatory, or pathologizing behavior, though such distinctions are unnecessary for productive rhetorical scholarship.

Kink: Erotic activities, arousing or otherwise, in which participants transform conventionally negative actions and feelings into desirable ones.

Podcast: A serialized, typically long-form audio program which foregrounds spoken content. Similar in content to radio talk shows, but usually pre-recorded and consumed on variable, user-defined schedules.

Submissive: An individual who enjoys being on the receiving end of kinky acts, such as spanking or humiliation.

Vanilla: Any form of sexual expression which is not considered kinky. This varies by person, but often implies heterosexual, penetrative intercourse featuring no erotic paraphernalia.

Chapter 18

Sex Beyond Commitment: Exploring Taboo Communication About Non-Monogamy in Open and Closed Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Extra-relational sexual involvement is generally a taboo topic, with most Americans expecting their partners to remain faithful and monogamous in their relationship. However, while some couples exhibit traditional, monogamous relationships, other couples engage in consensually open arrangements for one or both partners. The spectrum of how relationships manifest make the taboo topic even more complex. This chapter examines episodes of Dr. Esther Perel’s podcast Where Should We Begin? wherein couples seek therapy to discuss their primary romantic relationships after non-monogamy. Using relational dialectics theory, themes were identified through open-coding episode transcripts. Prominent among those codes were identification of relational needs, primary dialectical tensions, and fetishes within the relationships. The communicative practices of couples who experience non-monogamy as a result of open relationships as compared to those who experience affairs are explored throughout the themes.

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INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of Americans, nearly 97%, disapprove of extramarital sex and expect sexual monogamy in their relationships (Allen et al., 2005). The rates of reported extra-relational intimacies significantly decreased between 2000 and 2016, during that same time American adults demonstrated a perceptual change with a statistically significant decrease in the number who reported affairs as always wrong (Labrecque & Whisman, 2017). Even though year-over-year engagement in extra-relational intimacies declined, perceptions of those activities became more favorable. Extra-relational involvement, a taboo topic among couples and society at large, can range from emotional engagements to sexual relationships. Recognizing relational expectations may have been breached in cases of physical sexual involvement, emotional involvement, or even online involvement broadens the research scope on the topic of sex outside committed relationships (Allen et al., 2005). Researchers further acknowledge extramarital relations can manifest as a blatant “marital betrayal, although some couples may incorporate [extramarital involvement] into a satisfying open marriage” (Allen et al., 2005, p. 102). These types of relationships may also associate “infidelity” with “romantic emotional involvement or sexual activity with a person other than the primary partner,” blurring the line between previously agreed upon consensual non-monogamy and other types of romantic affairs (Fernandes, 2009, p. 6). Whatever the circumstance, extra-relational intimacy is the leading cause of relationship dissolution (Betzig, 1989, p. 669) and “one of the most common reasons to seek therapy” as a couple (Urganci et al., 2021, p. 1407).

This chapter focuses on the taboo nature of intimacy outside committed relationships. In this case study, episodes of a couple’s therapy podcast were chosen to highlight the similarities and differences in relational dialectics and individual needs of those facing extra-relational intimacies in two contexts: dalliances that occurred in an agreed upon manner in open relationships and those that occurred in secret and are popularly read as affairs. In selecting the cases to examine, the *Where Should We Begin?* series, dubbed “a podcast for anyone who has ever loved” served as a starting point (Gimlet Media, n.d.). Hosted by world renowned psychotherapist and couple’s counselor Dr. Esther Perel, the series allows listeners to hear from real, anonymous couples as they share the “raw, intimate, and profound” details of whatever brought them into the therapy session (Gimlet Media, n.d.). The podcast began airing in May 2017. November 2021 marks the fifth season of the show, bringing the total episode count to 51. This project selected six episodes specifically focused on couples who had experienced extra-relational intimacies. The selected episodes aired between November 2017 and September 2020.

BACKGROUND

Exploring Taboo

Topics are often classified as taboo (i.e., off limits, prohibited, or forbidden) within relationships for the sake of relational health. Serial arguing, for example, can add stress to a relationship, especially if the arguing is perceived as irresolvable (Christensen et al., 2017; Roloff & Johnson, 2001). Often, taboo topics are “socially stigmatized enough to make people feel uncomfortable” to the point people avoid the topics altogether (Cooper, 2007, p. 28). Taboo topics often originate from social and cultural beliefs, symbols (e.g., words), and/or access to topic information (Amusa, 2021; Bock et al., 2019; Christensen

et al., 2017). In this case, socio-cultural norms about the privacy of one's sex life renders discussion of activities in open relationships or non-monogamy taboo.

Some couples find topics so taboo, they become difficult to discuss leading to no discussion at all. Establishing a topic as taboo within a relationship may prevent relationship progress, as partners avoid reintroducing the topic and therefore never deal with their struggles surrounding the taboo topic. In the event the problem gets worse, or the relationship becomes strong enough to handle the topic, research suggests classifying a topic as taboo should not mean it is permanently off the table (Roloff & Johnson, 2001). While it may be necessary for the health of the relationship to embargo a taboo for a period of time, that topic can be reintroduced down the road when the relationship is in a stronger place to deal with the issue. Furthermore, research finds discussing an off-limits topic may actually provide an opportunity for individuals to work through their feelings, which could de-taboo the topic for individuals involved (Christensen et al., 2017). Individuals can also use social scripts to address seemingly taboo topics in a less threatening way (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011). Those social scripts may be provided by examples from popular culture including television, film, and podcasts.

The present study explores the taboo within interpersonal relationships. While this study's concept is a unique and vital addition to understanding the taboo, the idea of taboo within relationships is not a new one (e.g., Crowley, 2017; High & Crowley, 2018). For example, whether a topic is taboo may impact how an individual seeks social support, which could result in a "support gap" (High & Crowley, 2018). Specifically, if individuals perceive their stressor as taboo, they did not seek as much support as they desired – though they often received more support than they sought. Interpersonal relationships might also benefit from de-stigmatizing socially constructed taboo issues through discussing sex and sexuality (Hayden, 2010; Javaid, 2020) as well as sexually transmitted infections and diseases (e.g., Arendt et al., 2019; Muturi & An, 2010; Ndlovu & Ngwenya, 2010; Reinius et al., 2021; Yang & Pittman, 2017). Central to each of these sexually themed interpersonal topics is the typically unspoken nature of the issues at hand. Many are culturally held as private, and therefore off-limits or taboo, topics—not meant for conversation.

In the context of this research, the taboo is ever-present. To address taboo topics in their relationships, many couples choose to explore therapy. Whether consensual or not, previous research suggests society assigns a taboo label to extra-relational intimacies, which can make such conversations between romantic partners difficult (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013; A. Moors et al., 2013). Understanding the always/already taboo nature of discussing sex, as well as sex outside of a committed relationship, this study tackles taboo intentionally. Knowing the sample is subdivided – with half of the episodes devoted to open relationships and half to non-consensual non-monogamy – the taboo natures of each act are under interrogation. Primary here is how the couples perceive themselves and their partners after experiencing non-monogamy and how they communicate about their needs in the relationship.

Extra-Relational Intimacies

Most Western cultures view monogamy as the optimal and most fulfilling form of romantic partnering (e.g., Conley et al., 2012; Conley, Moors, et al., 2013; Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013; A. Moors et al., 2013; Perel, 2006). There are, however, many exceptions to traditional monogamous relationships. These range from discrete liaisons partners do not discuss, to mutual "swinging" agreements, to open relationships including publicly disclosed (and even celebrated) love affairs with third partners (e.g., Conley et al., 2018; DeMaris, 2013). Connotatively, open relationships are most commonly known to

include to sexual openness with partners outside the primary relationship. Some also use the term to refer to flexibility and communication within the union (e.e., Doheny, 2007; Rubin & Adams, 1986). Public perception, though, devalues and stigmatizes consensually non-monogamous relationships as likely to be less satisfying and with lower relationship quality. Individuals who engage in consensual non-monogamy are seen as “fundamentally flawed” for their choice to entertain extra-relational intimacies (e.g., Conley, Moors, et al., 2013; A. Moors et al., 2013). The flaw, however, appears to exist with the public’s perception and not with the couples. In their study investigating the sex lives of monogamous versus consensually non-monogamous couples, Conley et al., (2018) found monogamous people report slightly lower sexual satisfaction and fewer orgasms than those in consensually non-monogamous relationships. Further, their research indicates “relationship satisfaction did not differ” in the two types of couples (Conley et al., 2018, p. 509).

While consensual non-monogamy may not be the culturally expected norm, it provides individual benefits for those who partake. Beyond the benefits discussed above, Dixon (1985) found married women who engaged in non-monogamy with other women reported improvement to their overall sex lives, more satisfaction in their heterosexual sex lives, and some improvement in their primary (married) relational satisfaction (p. 115). Additionally, Varni (1974) found individuals report higher levels of warmth, closeness, and love toward their primary partner resulting from their experiences with consensual non-monogamy.

Favorable attitudes about extra-relational sex are positively related to the likelihood of engaging in sex outside a primary relationship. The association is not exclusive or causal; some who disapprove of extra-relational sex still engage in it while others who approve may never partake (Labrecque & Whisman, 2017). Research indicates, regardless of how extra-relational intimacies manifest, the way couples deal with the repercussions vary greatly and require “elaborate communication skills” (Buunk, 1982, p. 17). For those who seek nontraditional or open relationships, these communication skills may not come naturally but may be enhanced with the help of a couple’s therapist.

Longitudinal research documents most people view extra-relational intimacies as a violation of committed relationship agreements (explicit or assumed), and couples who experience extra-relational intimacies were significantly more likely to report separation or divorce (DeMaris, 2013). More importantly, these results were persistent even when considering the quality of the relationship before the affair, which partner was the offender, relational satisfaction, relationship length, disapproval of divorce, advice from third parties, and whether or not there were children in the home (DeMaris, 2013). The only buffer on the damaging effects of extra-relational intimacies on a relationship seems to be religion, or lack thereof. Very religious couples reported stronger negative effects on their relationships after affairs compared to their not-as-religious counterparts (DeMaris, 2013). However, when researchers examined divorce or separation rates for couples who were in “traditional” marriages compared to divorce or separation rates for those in “sexually open marriages” with explicit agreements about acceptable relations outside of the primary marriage, the differences were not statistically significant (Rubin & Adams, 1986). These research outcomes—1) extra-relational intimacies are generally damaging to the relationship and 2) consensual non-monogamy does not lead to significantly lower rates of divorce than relationships that experience affairs—provide an exploratory gap. To address this gap, this study investigates how those in open-relationships and those in unagreed upon non-monogamy differ in their communication patterns and relational needs. These parallel taboo topics are explored in this chapter by examining podcast episodes featuring couple’s therapy.

In the context of this study, the term “open relationship” is used in favor of the more common “open marriage,” because not all cases in the sample include marriage and, more specifically, taboo issues

related to exploring sex outside of a primary relationship impact committed couples regardless of their marital status. Acknowledging the taboos of seeking extra-relational intimacies impacts the communication patterns and relational needs of all those involved is vital in this study, whether the couples are married or not. Additionally, while the term “affair” is used in this study to indicate intimacy outside of a primary relationship, broader language choices also include secret extra-relational intimacies and unagreed upon—or non-consensual—non-monogamy. Note that in the sample, extra-relational intimacies include sexual activity between self-identified men and women as well as relations between people of the same sex. While those inclusions are necessary based on the content in the cases, recognizing intimacy in its many forms between people of different sex, gender identities, and sexual orientations is a clear way to recognize the current state of sexual affairs. Additionally, individuals are referred to by the pronouns and relational labels used in the show’s published transcripts. If the podcast episode identified someone as “husband” or “he,” the same language is used for consistency. While it is likely specific individuals in each case are cisgender (as no indication was given otherwise), it is also important and proper to note the communication and relational dynamics of non-monogamy impact people of all identities and orientations.

Tuning in to Podcasts

Podcasts allow listeners a unique opportunity to listen in on conversations, usually between two or more speakers. As a medium, podcasts allow “for a certain production of ideas that is ongoing, fluid and contested - not unlike everyday social interaction. In podcast conversations, change of tone, ironies, sarcasm, laughter, and a host of other emotional expressions are commonplace” (Lundström & Lundström, 2021, p. 296). Those conversational intricacies allow audience members and researchers alike to explore social fields that may otherwise be inaccessible. The intimate conversations Perel facilitates provide listeners a glimpse into how others handle difficult situations. Most podcast listeners are well-educated, earn a substantial annual household income, and, despite a variety of motivations for listening (e.g., entertainment, library building, etc.), ultimately value the content to which they listen (McClung & Johnson, 2010). The relative portability and light neural processing load of podcasts also allow for multitasking, wherein listeners may partake while also completing household chores or other daily tasks (Perks & Turner, 2019). Central across studies is the social aspect of podcasts. Podcasts allow listeners to join niche communities that create engaging and contextualized social interactions, which in turn further motivates listeners to engage with future episodes (e.g., McClung & Johnson, 2010; Perks & Turner, 2019). The self-selection of podcast playlists, coupled with their portability and potential for listener learning, opens an avenue for research.

A variety of characteristics of Perel’s *Where Should We Begin?* may attract listeners. Primary among these is the host herself. Research suggests an expert source with perceived credibility, like Perel as an established psychotherapist and author, is more likely to be downloaded (Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2021). Through the episodes selected for this study and the therapy content they contain, listeners hear the struggles of everyday couples—struggles that may be similar to those listeners experience in their own relationships. Research indicates podcast listeners find community, solace, and sameness in podcasts; hearing problems like the ones they have in their own relationships via the podcast medium can be helpful to listeners (e.g., Pavelko & Myrick, 2020; Zehelein, 2019).

It is worth noting that when discussing taboo topics, individuals can be influenced by models, even those in the media. The results of an experimental study demonstrate there is potential in learning how to

handle difficult or taboo topics via media models and how they demonstrate social scripts (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011). The study found if viewers identify with the characters who model the behavior (discussing sexual history and safe sex practices with sexual partners, in this case), the viewers are more likely to enact the same behavior (or have similar discussions) themselves. Therefore, understanding the content of therapy sessions released in podcast episodes could provide a glimpse into how listeners can craft their perceptions of how to handle the topic of non-monogamy, agreed upon or not.

RELATIONAL DIALECTICS THEORY

To investigate how communication manifests between the two types of couples – those who are in consensual open relationships and those who experienced unagreed upon non-monogamy – this research was grounded in relational dialectics theory (RDT). RDT describes making meaning within relationships based on individual and relational identities and how they contribute to meaning through communication. This meaning-making often manifests in the struggle between competing discourses (Baxter, 2004b, 2011). Those competing discourses are known as dialectical tensions. As relationships are made and maintained through dialogue, tensions arise as a result of competing worldviews, differing priorities, and changing needs. According to RDT, communication creates socially constructed meaning that, as conversations introduce different perspectives, can reshape and/or replace existing meaning. When individuals engage in dialogue, they “must fuse their perspectives to some extent while sustaining the uniqueness of their individual perspectives. Participants thus form a unity in conversation but only through two clearly differentiated voices or perspectives” (Baxter, 2004b, pp. 181–182). Dialectical tensions in relationships are not always contradictory or contentious, but they do illuminate areas for discussion and exploration by the couple.

RDT has often been used to better understand communication around difficult topics (e.g., Brummett, 2017; Hintz & Brown, 2020; Pederson, 2014). For example, when applied to interracial romantic relationships, researchers found participants prefer to highlight similar, joint meanings rather than focus on differences that could threaten the relationship (Brummett, 2017). In another study, researchers investigated childfree narratives (Hintz & Brown, 2020). Here, researchers found tension exists between 1) those who see childbearing as natural and something that should be desired by young couples via discourses of reproductive normativity and 2) those who emphasize childbearing as a choice that should be planned accordingly and, in fact, is not necessary to have a fulfilling life via discourses of reproductive autonomy. In these two research studies, the tensions demonstrate the ability to choose to frame issues as farther apart or closer together in order to diminish or inflate the dialectic at hand.

Focused on communicating individual experiences and making meaning of circumstances, RDT provides a framework to analyze co-constructed discourse. That discourse offers researchers and clinicians a contextual understanding of how couples deal with taboo topics (e.g., extra-relational intimacies) in an often culturally perceived taboo environment (e.g., therapy). While there are some fairly common discursive struggles across most relationships, such as integration-separation, stability-change, and expression-nonexpression, Baxter (2004a) is clear such contradictions can manifest in a variety of forms and can be unique to the couple and their context. Part of this study is to investigate how tensions manifest within couples who discuss non-monogamy and, more specifically, if those tensions differ when a couple experiences non-monogamy consensually versus non-consensually.

Most relevant to the current research are previous investigations about forgiveness and transgression. True to most research dealing with relational dialectics, research about forgiveness reveals a “complicated and often-conflictual process negotiated over time, rather than a singular decision or event” (Carr & Wang, 2012, p. 51). When trying to negotiate forgiveness and create a meaning for forgiveness for a hurtful situation, individuals must deal with balancing their own internal thoughts and processes in relation to other parties involved (e.g., Carr & Wang, 2012; Pederson, 2014). Research about forgiveness allows for a glimpse into how other taboo topics, like extra-relational intimacies, may be better understood through the lens of RDT.

Together, relational dialectics theory and an understanding of the taboo nature of conversation around extra-relational intimacies enable interpretive paradigms to further investigate how consensual and non-consensual extra-relational intimacies and the communication about them exist in the context of therapy podcast episodes. Based on previous research and the theoretical framework, the following research questions are posed: 1) How do couples communicate their different needs after engagement in extra-relational intimacies? 2) What relational dialectics emerge as competing tensions between couples after extra-relational intimacy?

METHOD

Content analysis formed the methodological footing of this study. Texts consisted of six podcast episodes: three featuring couples who agreed to open their relationships and three who found themselves dealing with infidelity. Two of the authors co-coded the audio transcripts of each episode. These transcripts consisted of 108 pages (37,383 words) transcribed from 4 hours and 23 minutes of original podcast time. Transcripts were made available on the *Where Should We Begin?* website (Gimlet Media, 2021). Coding and analysis took on a grounded theory approach to allow emergent codes and categories to speak for themselves (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindolf & Taylor, 2011). Eight major themes emerged in open coding. In order to most succinctly address the research questions and to make the data set more manageable, the two primary codes will be addressed.

The next section begins with a discussion of the code dealing with understanding the emotional and practical needs of the relational other after non-monogamy in answer to the first research question. This code appeared 48 total times across all six episodes. Exploring the differences and similarities between the needs of couples who engaged in open relationships or affairs (or other unagreed upon relations) introduces the couples/cases to the reader/listener and establishes the primary exigence occurring in the relationship post-non-monogamy. In addressing the second research question, the next code includes discussions of how the individuals perceived themselves and their relational other after non-monogamy—a code appearing 109 total times across all six episodes. This central code laid the groundwork for identifying the primary dialectical tensions at work in each relationship. After meeting the couples and exploring their needs, this next section establishes the tensions and explores how those tensions emerged in both open relationships and those experiencing affairs.

RESULTS

Differences in Needs: Open Relationships vs. Affairs

Therapeutic and long-term relational needs differ between couples engaged in open relationships compared to those who experience extra-relational intimacies. Given the unagreed upon, unknown, or secret nature of the extra-relational activities undertaken by the offending party, the aggrieved partners had many more questions about the unknown. The secrecy surrounding the affair situations inevitably led to questioning the offending partner, which creates a space for discursive struggles that help the couple broach the taboo affair topic. In what follows, there are depictions of the different ways the couples communicated about the taboo of extra-relational intimacy based on their engagement in open relationships or unagreed upon non-monogamy.

Open Relationships

Among partners who agreed to open their relationships, the greatest need came in the desire for reassurance about the health of their primary relationship. That need was compounded, as some of those who embraced openness found opportunities for growth or additional realizations about themselves in the arms of others. For example, a long-married couple *sort of* agreed to open their marriage when the wife voiced her desire to explore her sexuality with women. Her husband did not explicitly agree or disagree with the arrangement, as he was raised to be stoic and rather unfeeling, leaving him without a voice in the decision (Perel, 2019). Their situation becomes even more complicated when the wife realizes she has romantic feelings for her new female partner. The husband reveals his need for affirmation when he says, “I just sometimes feel like it’s unfair to compare that feeling that you had with her to [our] marriage of 11 years” (Perel, 2019). At the same time, she found out more about herself and her needs – sexual and otherwise – in the relationship she conducted outside their marriage. In those moments of revelation, she knew she wanted to stay with her husband *and* to do so, he would have to be more accommodating of her sexual needs.

The unmarried couple realized their consensual open relationship highlighted a missing connection within the primary relationship as well. This older dating couple entered the open relationship agreement because of his desire to focus his energy and time toward helping other people (Perel, 2018). As a chaplain who spent time at Ground Zero, he has since dedicated his life to living for those who died on 9/11. His devotion to his work, in addition to the obligations he has to his family and grandchildren, leaves him very little time to spend with his girlfriend. She is also a busy professional with family-care obligations, but she wants more from the relationship. In finding solace with other men outside of their dating relationship, she realizes she wants more stability. She wants to be cared for and comforted in a way her family of origin never provided. Those needs are disparate; one partner seeks validity in work and the other seeks validity in a romantic relationship.

The final couple that opened their marriage did so at the behest of the wife. She suggested the way to improve their notably miserable sex life, which had never been good for either of them, was to explore sexuality outside of their marriage (Perel, 2020a). Her outside explorations markedly improved their sex life, as she claims their intimacy is “better now that it has ever been in our marriage. Like it is a dream come true for both of us” (Perel, 2020a). The price of that improvement, though, is the husband’s perception that he has to “figure out how to cope” with the “knowledge that my wife has sex with other

people” (Perel, 2020a). For her, opening the marriage not only improved their sex life, but functioned to reclaim her sexuality. She grew up in a restrictive religious household where “[i]t was other people’s rules, other people’s definitions that shaped everything...my sexuality has never been mine” (Perel, 2020a). Her need to take control of her life from past dominating institutions conflicted with his need for marriage stability. He even questions, “what kind of man let’s [sic] his wife do this?” (Perel, 2020a). While he knew his wife was seeking sexual gratification elsewhere and he acknowledges their relationship is stronger after her experiences, he still questions his gender role within the marriage. His claim of “what kind of man...” functions as a knee-jerk, socially-ingrained response representing a centuries old patriarchal gender construct. This response signals he still seeks some sort of control in his wife’s exploration.

Affairs

In conjunction with open relationships, some couples in the sample engaged in non-consensual non-monogamy – or affairs. Understandably, the needs the partners face when their relationships are secretly unmoored differ from those who openly explored non-monogamy. For example, the couple who had both engaged in infidelity discussed the differing role sex plays in their relationship (Perel, 2020c). For the wife, sex is a matter of being seen and valued. She made comments like, “I knew that I was craving his attention, and I knew that that’s something that I needed” and “I don’t want to be the one to say, ‘hey, you didn’t come and kiss me.’ But yet I still do” (Perel, 2020c). Meanwhile, the husband sees sex as a way to connect and express love. He says, “My thoughts are more like, if you really love me, you’d want to be sexual with me” (Perel, 2020c). This couple experiences a discursive struggle with sex as form of validation and sex as a demonstration of romance. In this case, while sex is a primary focus for both partners, their lack of communication about it puts them at odds. Each one perceives the need for sex in the relationship differently and, therefore, neither one’s needs are met.

In another episode, a wife seeks greater understanding about why her husband continues to look for gratification outside their marriage (Perel, 2020b). As the husband explains how he feels out of control about his constant need to seek “the solace of strangers,” his reconnection with a childhood girlfriend is what really pushed the couple to a point of decision: continue or terminate the relationship (Perel, 2020b). In their discussion, the wife presents her need to create an open space that seeks understanding. She needs time and space to reconcile her beliefs about the man she married, whom she now sees as a chronic philanderer. The husband dismisses her needs and expresses frustration in constantly talking about the issues. He wants his wife to simply put his infidelities behind them. The wife’s lack of understanding about his secretive actions drives her need for expression: “If I’m feeling depressed or I’m feeling anxious or if something’s triggering me, I shouldn’t have to apologize for it...” (Perel, 2020b). When partners air these sentiments, they realize the value in openly and honestly expressing their needs and desires from the relationship while not diminishing the valid emotions that emerge in those conversations.

In the last case of those who experienced affairs, a husband discovered his wife’s affair by reading through her email (Perel, 2017). She kept it a secret from him. In conversation with Perel he lashes out,

What angers me and hurts me is this is not something we did together. In fact, like I say, I would have appreciated you letting me know that the rules of our marriage had changed and that all of a sudden, you’d decided that we were going to have an open relationship. That would have been nice. Then I could have spent the summer finding some partner, not that I wanted to. (Perel, 2017)

While not actively seeking extramarital relations, he felt hurt that she did not discuss her feelings with him. For her though, the affair was revelatory. She says, “it made me access my own individualization,” which brought her out of the constraints of being someone’s wife or someone’s mother (Perel, 2017). Instead, she got to be her own assertive woman for the first time. She had the chance to explore who she was and to bring that energy back home to her husband. He acknowledges he also “benefitted from the energy when you chose me” (Perel, 2017). Very much like the last case in the previous section, she needed space to learn about herself and experience her own freedom. This act benefited her approach to the marriage but left her husband with a sense of anger and betrayal. He says, “It’s a terrible feeling to be angry and to feel feelings of hatred towards somebody who you love and who you’ve created a family with,” noting that although he wants to move past the situation, the hurt it caused him is undeniable (Perel, 2017).

Those who experienced non-consensual extra-relational intimacies had a different range of needs. In the first instance, the couple needs to find a way to put themselves on the same page sexually. They each desire intimacy and connection with their partner but have disparate views of what that looks like. For this couple, moving past their preconceived notions of what relationships ought to look like and intentionally building their own is key. In the second case, the wife really needed a space to process the feelings of hurt and betrayal she felt in the wake of her husband’s infidelity. His flippant attitude about just moving on, or it just being in his nature to cheat, are barriers to her process. In the last instance, the cheated-on husband needs the space to feel angry about the situation while realizing his wife’s infidelity actually improved her self-confidence, their marriage, and their sexual connection.

These examples illustrate that there is no unified template of needs that emerges from couples who have experienced extra-relational intimacies in secret. What the conversations did reveal, however, were the partners’ individualized needs – needing more from a partner, needing stability within the primary relationship, and needing reassurance the primary relationship was strong enough to weather the extra-relational intimacies. Essentially, these needs function as a cry for stasis. Each of the pairs needed to know they could still safely root themselves in the primary relationship without fear of being abandoned for a new person. Those who enacted infidelity would do best to provide the space, time, and answers their partners need in processing relational disruption—but there is no universal set of needs that emerge in these cases.

Exploring Relational Dialectics

In coding the episodes, a series of dialectical tensions emerged. Three of the couples manifested tension as *stability versus change*, one as *inclusion versus seclusion*, another as *deprivation versus indulgence*, and one as *privacy versus revelation*. In this section, these tensions are explored within each relationship specifically. The section is subdivided, grouping together the parts of the data set dealing with open relationships and the affairs. There are three cases per subsection. Dividing the data set in this way reveals significant differences in relational dialectics.

Open Relationships

To begin, a couple who spent their decade of marriage having a miserable sexual connection discussed their agreement for the wife to explore herself and her sexuality outside of the marriage (Perel, 2020a). The wife grew up in a restrictive religious household and found herself constrained again by the institu-

tion of marriage. Finding herself mired in anger toward the power structures that ruled her life, the move to open their marriage allowed her to push past that anger and find joy in sex—an act that actually improved her marriage’s sexual component. The husband’s response and reflection on his wife’s activities, however, illustrate his perception of self was compromised through his reluctant agreement to open the marriage. He goes so far as to paint an image of being just one of the horses in his wife’s stable: “And she comes along and says, ‘Hey, I want to come ride you now.’ Great, I love being ridden... and the next day is another horse, the next day and another horse... It feels like there’s a cap on my happiness... Am I kind or am I a pushover? Am I kind or am I a weakling?” (Perel, 2020a).

Simplifying relational roles into these poles illustrates the *stability versus change* dialectical tension. He validates his feelings by saying “...it is not only in my head that attention is being taken away from me and applied to other people” (Perel, 2020a). In questioning his own value, the husband reveals dialectical tensions that signal his need to feel prioritized in the relationship and return to a state of stability. While the husband expresses fears his wife will find someone better in the future (i.e., the *change* portion of the dialectical tension pair), she reassures him, “my heart is completely in. I don’t want anything compromising us” (Perel, 2020a). With his wife’s encouragement, he realizes she only dreams about building a future with him despite her activities outside of their marriage. Although he remains hesitant, he seems to trust his wife and appears open to working toward a happy future together. While the husband requires assurance his position in the marriage is stable (*stability*), she acknowledges she has to explore her sexuality outside of the marriage (*change*).

Another example of a *stability versus change* tension pair occurs with a 10-year married couple with two small children. The wife, in particular, found she wanted more connection both physically and emotionally. She expressed a desire to explore sexual relationships with women, and the couple opened their marriage so she could engage other partnerships with his knowledge (Perel, 2019). While he did not want to deny her from exploring her sexuality with women, the non-monogamy became more of an accommodation than an agreement. Perel called it an “abandonment prevention strategy” rather than a mutual agreement toward non-monogamy (Perel, 2019). In effect, rather than risk losing his wife, he reluctantly agreed to the arrangement even though “watching her fall in love with someone else was about the most painful thing that [he has ever] experienced” (Perel, 2019). This example illustrates another iteration of the *stability versus change* dialectical tension. Their relationship was uprooted in their decision to open their relationship. At the same time, both parties chose to stay together and maintain their marriage relationship.

To ground and balance the relationship during this *stability versus change* tension, the couple emphasized the need for enhanced communication. That decision did not come easily, as the wife talks about being torn, saying she’s “weighing very much what’s inside versus what’s outside and whether or not [she] wants what’s outside” (Perel, 2020b). While it may be difficult to engage in what Perel called a relational “gut renovation,” this couple used communication to arrive at a place of stasis. She clearly indicated she spent time considering the benefits of stability alongside the benefits of change and has decided on the relational stability she finds with her husband. To balance these needs, the couple agreed to move forward with increased focus on communicating desires and initiating sex—a *change* that actually enhanced *stability*. Change was necessary for both of them: her in receiving the sexual gratification she desires and him in knowing his confidence can be restored. That series of changes, undertaken together, can return them to a place of relational stability.

The last of the couples in an open relationship faced an entirely different dialectical tension: *deprivation versus indulgence*. This couple, the only unmarried/dating couple in the sample, are in their fifties

(Perel, 2018). They have each been married before, had other invested romantic relationships, and find themselves together at this time in their lives when they both have many other obligations (e.g., work, family, elder care, volunteerism, etc.) that do not allow them much time together. To that end, their relationship is open. She is free, and encouraged, to engage with other men romantically. She finds that freedom necessary at this point, as she sees a need to develop “Plan B, right now” (Perel, 2018). That Plan B comes in the form of a relational exit strategy with a soft landing in another relationship. The woman’s approach represents the *indulgence* side of the dialectical tension between the partners. He encourages her to engage that indulgence and return to tell him all about it. For him, her indulgence is his sexual pleasure. He intentionally deprives himself of her presence for her to indulge more freely in others.

In opposition to *indulgence*, both partners experience *deprivation*. Together, they have very little time for one another as a couple. The man focuses his time and energies on humanitarian work as a religious chaplain. In doing so, he deprives himself of his partner’s attention and affection for the sake of devoting his time to help others. In the woman’s view, however, that arrangement is “not sustainable emotionally. It’s not what I want. I would want more of him” (Perel, 2018). She feels deprived of him in the relationship; her access to “more of him” is restricted. While the man recognizes he cannot spend as much time together as she would like, he sees the open relationship as a way for her to find sexual gratification with other men to accommodate the deprivation she feels (Perel, 2018). Here, both partners experience both indulgence and deprivation simultaneously. The woman indulges in non-monogamy but is sexually deprived of a connection with her primary male partner. The man indulges in acts of service but deprives himself of sexual intimacy with his primary female partner. As a tension, this *deprivation versus indulgence* lifestyle can be maintained through more concerted efforts in communication and ensuring quality time together.

Affairs

For the couple who both grew up in Latter-day Saints households, the legacy of her family’s strict adherence to religious beliefs still impacts her adult life twenty years later (Perel, 2020c). From a relational perspective, infidelity began with the husband’s viewing of pornography, which started in adolescence and carried over into married life. While the husband views pornography as a recreational activity that may inspire bedroom antics, the wife finds it abhorrent. This disagreement in perspective illustrates the *privacy versus revelation* dialectical tension. Perel explains this tension when addressing their communicative problem surrounding pornography:

It’s a sad bind that you both got yourself in because he wanted to share it with you. And then once he knew that you were not open to it and turned off by it big time, he took it privately, in order not to impose it on you, and felt “okay, [pornography will] be my personal sexual world. I’ll have one world with you and one world with myself.” And he didn’t mean to not tell you, but when he told you, there was not a good consequence. (Perel, 2020c)

Having spent their twenty-year married life questioning her husband’s bedroom motives and wishing for a stronger connection with him, the wife experienced a revelation about her husband’s desires. In response to the years of miserable sexual connection, the wife begins to travel with her sister-in-law and would visit night clubs, get drunk, and hook up with strangers. The wife is careful to clarify, “there was no penetrative sex,” but on half a dozen occasions she found herself in the arms of another man

(Perel, 2020c). A year after finding out about her infidelities, the husband also sought out affirmation in the form of an affair, escalating his infidelities from viewing pornography to extramarital relations.

The once-*private* desires and beliefs caused the couple to individually experience *revelation* of themselves and their partnership. Now, living in the aftermath of multiple infidelities conducted by both parties, the couple essentially co-parents as roommates rather than living together as spouses. Through the *privacy versus revelation* tension, both acknowledge problems in clearly communicating their needs and feelings. She says, “I feel like he doesn’t like to share things with me, doesn’t like to communicate. More so now as the years have gone by, I feel like I withdraw a lot more when I feel him being distant” (Perel, 2020c). What was once shared information in this union has transformed into private information. As such, both partners continue to experience a revelation about the shifting status of their relationship.

The primary dialectical tension for the second couple, who was living in the aftermath of the husband’s affair with a childhood girlfriend, was *stability versus change*. The husband continues to downplay the extra-relational activity as a personal character flaw he may or may not be able to control (Perel, 2020b). While Perel generally maintains a neutral therapeutic tone in her sessions, in this instance she calls the husband out, saying his attempt to reframe the affair is “shitty” (Perel, 2020b). His shitty actions, character flaws or not, impact his wife’s perception of herself. Specifically, the wife says she feels like she “wasn’t enough” and his actions make her “feel diminished. It makes me feel replaceable” (Perel, 2020b). That replaceability is not focused specifically on the wife, but on their whole family. They have two daughters together with whom the husband has a hard time identifying. The mistress, though, has two sons with whom he connects through shared interests.

All while this affair was conducted in secret, the wife was at home “giving him the stability. I was trying to be loving, calm, and compassionate, and a good mother. I was trying to do all these things. I thought I was really giving you everything you wanted” (Perel, 2020b). Knowing his experience as the child of divorced parents impacted his worldview, the wife did everything she knew how to do to provide and demonstrate stability in their relationship. Still, he sought change despite his experiences of having felt “abandoned” by his father as a child (Perel, 2020b). The stability she provides and the stability he professes to want are undermined by his need for attention and desire for excitement and change. He even acknowledges the need for change would take him right back to his mistress (or another woman) immediately should their primary relationship end in divorce. He does not want to be alone; he wants stability – but he perpetually undercuts that very stronghold in his own marriage. His desire for excitement and change also means the wife is seriously considering change. She does not know how much longer she can put up with his antics and childlike behavior. She no longer wants to be the person who will let his actions “all slide by,” as she values herself more than to continue to let him hurt her in the same way (Perel, 2020b). In the end, he claims to desire the stability of their relationship and marriage but also acknowledges that if it does not work out, he will immediately change his circumstances to avoid life alone. Should their relationship status change, Perel agrees, it will have to be the wife’s ultimate decision.

In the final case of those who experienced unagreed upon extra-relational intimacies, a woman has stepped outside of her 10-year marriage to engage with a man she met while away at job training (Perel, 2017). In conducting the affair, the wife finds she does not experience guilt about her transgression. In fact, she feels very good about what she found out about herself and her own power during the liaison. She does, however, feel guilty for hurting her husband. These competing feelings highlight the *inclusion versus seclusion* dialectical tension. She needed a chance to seclude herself from societal pressures related to the obligations of the roles of wife and mother and find a way to work back to an understanding of herself. Her self-understanding to this point has been limited, as she found herself married to a man ten

years her senior and immediately taking on a more child-like position in the marriage. She entertained the affair as a way to include more of her own singular identity into her self-perception aside from her identities as younger woman, wife, and mother. During their session, Perel notes: “It isn’t so much that you want to get away from him and much more that you want to find other parts of you” (2017). At the same time, the husband deeply felt the violation of not having been included in the knowledge his wife was having an affair. That tension is a primary one for those who experience the secrecy of affairs, especially when the offender comes back with more self-confidence or self-awareness. A fresher, more confident woman has come back to the marriage ready to take on life as a fuller version of herself. Yet, this is a person who her husband does not recognize. He has been excluded from her transformation and does not fully understand the choices she made or how they may impact the primary relationship.

The Added Taboo of Fetish

In half of the sample set (or three of the episodes), the couples discussed fetishes as part of their rationale to seek extra-relational intimacies (Perel, 2018, 2020b, 2020c). In the case of the older unmarried couple, the idea of extra-relational encounters brought the male partner pleasure. He initiated the idea of opening their relationship, as he found gratification knowing his partner was sexually engaging with other men. He discovered his desire to be cuckolded during his previous marriage but also felt shame about his fetish. To him, his professional identity as a chaplain did not square with what he perceived to be deviant sexual desires (Perel, 2018). After the dissolution of his previous marriage, he began entering relationships fully disclosing his fetish while hoping those feelings would magically disappear over time. In the current relationship, he still loves finding sexual conquests for his girlfriend and hearing all about her encounters. She feels a sense of freedom in the arrangement, but also felt she was engaging in those activities for him and not really for herself (Perel, 2018).

The couple who lived with divergent views of pornography also experienced a fetish in their relationship. The wife characterized her husband as having a fetish with watching pornography, which was not characterized as a fetish from his purview (Perel, 2020c). Her upbringing in an extremely religious (and thus anti-pornography) family still serves as the basis for her understanding of pornography as a fetish. While they both waited until marriage to engage in sex, she felt he had many sexual experiences based on his viewing of pornography beginning in adolescence. Still, in their marriage, she finds him engaging in both fetish and infidelity when he views pornography. The same is true any time he attempts to be sexually adventurous or switches things up in the bedroom. She aggressively questions, “Well, where did you see that? Or where’d you get it from?” indicating her discomfort with what she perceives as his fetish (Perel, 2020c). She was unable to see pornography as a means to engage in new and interesting types of sexual play with her husband. Instead, she found that exploration “gross” and prompted her to emotionally disengage from sex immediately (Perel, 2020c). Assuming he brought fetishized ideas from pornography into the bedroom, any new sexual experiences triggered her.

For the husband who found himself reconnecting with a childhood girlfriend, fetish also lurked. Beyond engaging in an extramarital affair, he had been “seeking solace” in online chatrooms for years (Perel, 2020b). His wife was unaware of this behavior. Again, as he has a tendency to deflect, he says he went to the chatrooms fishing for the dopamine hit of engaging in coy conversation (Perel, 2020b). Perel and the wife note that cheating in general (which includes seeking companionship in online chatrooms) is the husband’s fetish (Perel, 2020b). He, on the other hand, claims he continues chatting as a way to see himself as a likeable person, someone who an internet stranger might like to converse with

for a couple minutes (Perel, 2020b). In their conversations about the husband's behavior, the affairs and the fetish were one in the same.

This discussion reveals three different types of fetish: cuckolding, pornography, and infidelity via sexually-laden online chat (in addition to an actual extramarital affair). In the first instance, it was the male partner's joy in being cuckolded that led him to ask his girlfriend to open their relationship and sexually engage with other men. He enjoyed the intimacy and energy his partners (ranging from his former wife, through several girlfriends, to his current partner) brought back into their relationship and bedroom. This fetish was not a surprise or a relational violation; instead, they sought help from Perel as a couple to find common ground in their relationship. The last two discussions of fetish are clearly perceived as problematic by their relational others and are classified as affairs within the context of their conversation – even though pornography and online chatting alone are not, in all cases or relationships, viewed as sexual infidelity. The hidden nature of both fetishes garnered surprise, confusion, and disgust when revealed (or found out by) the relational other. While present in half the sample set, fetishes demonstrate both the possibility to generate positive relational outcomes with clear paths to sexual pleasure and perceptions of infidelity capable of rupturing the primary relationship.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As indicated by Betzig (1989), extra-relational intimacy is the leading cause of relationship dissolution (p. 669). Along with that knowledge comes the possible antecedent of dissolution—seeking therapy. As theorized by Urganci et al. (2021) and demonstrated in these sessions of couples counseling, extra-relational intimacy is a major exigency for seeking therapy. One key takeaway from this study and the podcast episodes under examination is the problem was never really about sex; the problem had much more to do with other factors in the relationship or in the individuals. Competing narratives about sex, the role sex ought to take in a relationship, or other perceptions individuals brought into the relationship opened the pathway to seeking intimacy outside the primary relationship. While it may have been the taboo of sex that took these couples into Perel's office, it became clear that conversation about transgressions could be curative: not just to the pain of the infidelity but to the relationship as a whole. As demonstrated in this data set, relational dissolution is not the only option after extra-relational intimacy. Instead, a clear and open conversation – possibly in the therapy setting – can illuminate the underlying circumstances that led to infidelity.

A second key takeaway is that even consensual non-monogamy comes with its hang-ups, insecurities, loneliness, and bitterness. The conversations had by these couples, tensions they experienced, and the needs they expressed, were not significantly different based on type of extra-relational intimacy. While those who dealt with affairs did seek understanding at a higher rate (as their partner's transgressions had been secret), couples in open relationships also sought understanding. They simply did so in a different way. While those who experienced infidelity in secret sought to understand their partner's motives, means, needs, and intentions, the consensually non-monogamous also sought greater understanding of their partners, as the partner engaged in the external relationship often returned to the primary relationship in a different form. To that end, open relationships are prone to communication problems, a need for understanding, and relational uncertainty just like closed relationships that develop infidelity. Preparing to expect relational issues even when the extra-relational intimacy is agreed upon, bounded,

and discussed seems to be the best path forward. Knowing open communication and therapy are likely the best salves in those relationships is key.

Finally, examining the theoretical relationship between dialectical tensions and lived experiences of extra-relational intimacy demonstrated a need to be cognizant of the primary tensions in the relationship. Whether those tensions are explored by the couples themselves and attended to frequently or explored in therapy, taking stock of tensions—and keeping track as they change and morph—is necessary. Again, the couples in this data set did not experience extra-relational sex as a primary need to seek therapy. The initial tensions in their relationships—tensions that existed prior to intimacy—led them to the place where sex occurred outside of the primary relationship. Knowing those tensions, communicating about them, and tracking partners' individual needs is one more route to avoiding non-consensual non-monogamy.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This chapter illuminated the similarities and differences between couples experiencing non-monogamy in the contexts of open relationships and affairs. Further research is needed to investigate relational outcomes beyond a couple's existing tensions. Committed relationships come in many forms, including intentional ethical non-monogamy (e.g., Conley et al., 2018; Harrison, 2019; A. C. Moors et al., 2015). Even though ethical non-monogamy comes with an agreed upon (or negotiated) set of rules and boundaries, it is still a system that can lead to insecurities and discomfort. At the same time, cheating or unagreed upon non-monogamy can cause the same tensions and more. Even in the negotiated space of ethical non-monogamy, relationship dissolution may occur and further study is needed to investigate rates of breakup between consensual and non-consensual non-monogamous relationships.

A second major area of future research comes from the understanding of podcasts as a means to social learning. Podcast listeners curate their own playlists and select the genre and topics they choose to engage. While it is posited listeners engage and learn from podcasts (Perks et al., 2019; Perks & Turner, 2019), more research is needed to determine not only why audience members make the listening choices they make but also if or how they perceive learning related to podcasts.

As an addition to the sex outside of committed relationships literature, this chapter also opens the door for further research into the relationship between fetish and non-monogamy. As demonstrated in these cases, the partners who displayed fetishes did so for a variety of reasons in both open and closed communication manners. The older chaplain who enjoyed his cuckold position with his girlfriend required non-monogamy to fulfill his fetish. His experience stands in contrast to the other two men categorized as having fetishes: one who watched porn and the other who engaged in online chat activities. Both men in the latter category entertained their fetishes without the prior consent of the partners. The man who watched porn continued to do so even though his wife asked him to stop. The other engaged in sexual chatroom entertainment without the knowledge or consent of his wife. All three of these men found satisfaction in their fetishes, but their partners were left with questions. More research is needed to illuminate the space between fetish and non-monogamy—both when a third partner is required (as in cuckolding) and when the other partner could participate (if they desire and are included).

CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on couples who sought therapy after non-monogamy. As previously argued, issues with each couple ran deeper than extra-relational intimacies. In that way, sex outside of the relationship became an indicator of relational problems. The focus on couples in this particular situation, however, does implicate non-monogamy as a relational difficulty requiring therapeutic intervention. This study was not designed to demonstrate a causal link between non-monogamy and therapy seeking, nor was it able to capture the potential differences for those couples who seek therapy as compared to those who do not. It is possible the threat of non-monogamy in relationships has been inflated given the intentional focus on couples seeking therapy after extra-relational intimacies. The conclusions must be taken for the context in which they are found. The couples agreed to be recorded in the therapy sessions, which suggests a certain bias or possible filtration of information they were willing to share. Couples who may not have been willing to share their stories in the podcast may have provided additional insights that may have changed the themes, and, in turn, the inferences drawn from the texts.

Second, the quantity of couples/episodes presents a limited data set. Including more couples into the analyses could have presented different perspectives on extra-relational intimacies and the resulting outcomes for couples. While this study balanced the content (three consensually open relationships and three affairs), future research may benefit from including more couples to enrich both content and findings. Additionally, the qualitative nature of this research, coupled with the small sample size, prevents generalizability. Future research should investigate these questions in ways that provide insight as to whether the emergent themes from this analysis are consistent in the larger population.

The findings and conclusions in this study provide a range of contributions to the discussion of taboo topics, including sexual infidelity. First, these findings help to better understand potential impacts of extra-relational intimacies and how they differ between those engaged in open relationships and those who experience affairs. Second, this research provides a glimpse into the communication patterns that occur between partners in relationships that have become non-monogamous, by choice or by chance, and who are working to stay together. This uncovering of patterns brings the discussion about infidelity into the light of day rather than keeping it cloaked in taboo, secrecy, shame, and guilt. Having a model to work from, knowing that others have the same problems, and finding tenable solutions is valuable to the reader and podcast listener. Third, this work examines these incredibly difficult conversations—ones so hard they need to be moderated by a therapist—in a way that provides examples for promoting further discussion about sexual in/fidelity to foster relational growth. Finally, this chapter opens the door to help therapists, counselors, and mediators further support couples going through these situations. This study offers information and guidance regarding conflict resolution to provide paths toward satisfactory outcomes for couples and individuals (together or separately) who find themselves in the same conundrum. Through the needs and dialectical tensions that arose in the sample, professionals can better prepare to handle such conflicts in their own workplace. Additionally, other listeners may be able to learn from the examples set by the couples, with Perel's guidance, as ways to promote healthy communication and relationships while normalizing the tensions and struggles that may result from discussing the taboo.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Affair: A secretive or unagreed upon sexual relationship between people in which one or more parties are married to someone else.

Extramarital Relationships: A sexual relationship between a married person and someone other than their legal spouse. This also includes single people who have sex with married people.

Fetish: A form of sexual desire in which gratification is linked to a particular action, item, or body part.

Interpersonal Communication: The study of communication between two people.

Non-Monogamy: The overarching term encapsulating many forms or practices of non-dyadic intimacy particularly in exchanges of sex and love.

Relational Communication: A subgenre of interpersonal communication focusing on the study of communication patterns and styles between two people in close relationships.

Relational Dialectics Theory: An interpersonal communication theory focused on close personal relationships that highlights tensions and struggles. When worldviews, desires, and decision-making tendencies differ between partners in a relationship, dialectical tensions may emerge.

Taboo: Implied prohibitions of actions or ways of speaking that are socio-culturally bound.

Therapy: The practice of meeting with a licensed therapist, counselor, or social worker to resolve conflict, problematic behaviors, and/or tensions.

Chapter 19

Taboo Topics and Sexual Education in Indian Schools: How and What Teachers Communicate?

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ABSTRACT

Although India faces problems of the very high rate of population growth, sexual abuse, rape, teen pregnancy, even a high rate of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV, Indian schools are not yet ready to deliver on the topic to sensitize the young minds. There is no study on whether teachers are imparting this education and most importantly how they are communicating with the young individuals in the classroom. The chapter seeks to find how the taboo topics are discussed in the class and the communication strategies adopted by the teachers. For the study, teachers have been considered as respondents to examine their communication-related challenges and the strategies while communicating with the adolescent student. The study concludes that due to lack of any training, teachers do not know what and how to deliver the topics under sexuality education.

INTRODUCTION

India has a large population of adolescents but a majority lack awareness and understanding of sexual health and behaviour. During the adolescent period, young people experience changes in their physiology and emotions manifesting in undesirable behaviours and attitudes. Several studies have pointed out that incorrect and inadequate information on this has created serious misunderstandings in the youth making them adopt unhealthy practices and behaviour toward sex. Researchers all over the world have been emphasizing the distinct role of school in imparting sex education to young people and to fill in the gaps in their knowledge. It has been found that boys and girls grow up worrying about sexuality

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due to a lack of proper information. In most schools in India, however, there is a serious lack of proper dialogue and deliberation on the topics. In the past, the inclusion of sex education in school programmes had raised severe criticism and was banned in schools across multiple states in India because of the discomfort and shame associated with it (Chadha, 2007; Gentleman, 2007; Zaheer, 2007). Although many parents and teachers feel the necessity of sex education in schools, discussions around these topics have been seen as taboos and are avoided in Indian homes and in schools. Despite reports that the frequency of pre-marital sex is increasingly common among young people, discussing topics related to sex are generally considered taboo as doing so is against Indian values and culture (Abraham & Kumar, 1999; Bio-Medicine, 2005; Biswas, 2003; Sachdev, 1998; Sharma, 2005).

The taboo nature of sexual communication has some negative effects. Adolescents aged 10-19 are reported having engaged in sexual activity and are at risk of unhealthy sex practices as they lack the knowledge needed to engage in sex safely. Additionally, the number of rape cases reported each year has continued to rise (The Hindu, 2021, July 7). Although the statistics are worrisome, prevention and protection strategies against risky behaviour are generally not taught to young people. As young boys and girls are now socially maturing earlier, Indian teachers are facing issues developing and delivering age-appropriate sex education integrated into their curriculum. While most of the sex education course curricula are often focussed on the middle and late teenage years, it has been found worldwide that late teen years have now become “too late” to begin teaching about sex because many children are experiencing sexual changes even before the age of ten or eleven. Further, elementary and primary level students have been found to have developed the cognitive capacity to understand many concepts related to sex largely due to their exposure to social media. Though India has faced continued problems with high population growth, sexual abuse and rape, teenage pregnancy, and high rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), it has not yet shown it is prepared to remedy the problem through sex education in its schools. As of now, no comprehensive plan exists to cover the range of health and sex-related topics to mollify these issues. Even basic topics like conception, contraception, STIs, pleasure, and consent are not currently taught.

The absence of proper and adequate discussions has led to several deep-rooted misconceptions. One such misconception is that boys in Indian society do not need sex education, because they do not get abused or raped. The general attitude toward learning about sex in India is that it will happen as a natural process of learning and that separate education and training programs are not required, though the evidence suggests that pervading wisdom to be incorrect. In fact, many parents oppose sex education because of a concern over corrupting their children via sex education when they should learn about sex on their own or after marriage. A large section of the Indian population believes that teaching topics like homosexuality or LGBTQ studies will negatively affect society because they promote homosexuality as normal and may encourage homosexuality within children; an idea considered wrong and against nature within the culture. Menstruation is still considered to be a women’s topic with men having a limited role or no role in any discussion of women’s menstrual cycles. Discussions around appropriate sexual behaviour with the opposite gender remain inadequate. Each of these concerns put adolescents at risk. The lack of proper sexual communication education is particularly concerning as it has led to health hazard for young girls (Gundi & Subramaniam, 2019). They are at risk not only of their lack of knowledge, but of potentially life-altering risks like teenage pregnancy, unsafe abortions, STIs, and, most importantly, sexual violence, all of which are rising at alarming rates. In fact, The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA; 2014) states that while adolescent fertility rates have fallen drastically, by

more than 50% or more in many countries, there are still 70,000 adolescent deaths due to complications from the pregnancy or childbirth.

Challenging taboos about sex education is difficult as even those who would provide the education have expressed their desires not to do so. In 2007, teachers in Uttar Pradesh, the largest state in India, publicly burned materials in bonfires to protest sex education (India Together, 2008). The resistance to sex education remains a decade and a half later as sexually explicit and provocative imagery or words are still unacceptable, even in popular media, because they may cause feelings of embarrassment, discomfort, or shame within the family sphere. Within Indian culture exists a deep-rooted *patriarchal mind-set* filled with longstanding socio-cultural practices; any initiatives by the government towards changing those sociocultural norms have not yet yielded the desired result. Rather, it appears the taboo nature of sex and sexuality is too strong despite the dire need for better sex education resources. Teachers in India are the product of the same societal pressures and, thus, may feel hesitant to teach sex education to the students. To overcome those hurdles, teachers require education and training so that they can provide appropriate information and behave properly with children on sex-related topics. Ironically, in India, teacher education programmes do not include courses on sexual education or how to deal with such topics. Therefore, there is an urgent need to discuss the challenges of teaching such an important education at the school level.

The extant literature supports this cultural aversion to sexual communication, making it taboo. Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes (2006) found certain taboo topics (e.g. sex; death) can cause discomfort, mental disturbance, and embarrassment for those who are forced to engage with stimuli related to them. Other researchers found that feelings of guilt, shame and discomfort to accompany “uncomfortable topics” when the interlocutor believes they may be transgressing the norms of conscience (Keltner and Buswell, 1997; Eisenberg, 2000; Heywood, 2002). Freud (1912) had also discussed the emotional ambivalence these topics can create on the part of the audience, provoking mixed emotions of fear and excitement. Though negative response to sexual topics must be navigated, the extant research has also shown positive responses to stimuli with sexual symbols and imagery is possible (LaTour, 1990).

Despite the challenges facing sex education in India, it is clear that adolescence is a tumultuous period where young people require not only the right information about sex, but appropriate communication from their teachers and parents about the physiological, emotional, and psychological changes young people face. Puberty and adolescence are a intensely stressful time in sexual development, and the young, ill-informed individuals are at high risk of the adverse sexual health consequences discussed above. Young people today are simply more sexually active when compared to previous generations (Kamrani et al., 2011). The fear of undesired and unhealthy sexual health outcomes like pregnancy, unsafe abortions, and STIs is well founded, especially in India, as young people are simply not informed about how to protect themselves. This is a direct result of inadequate and inaccurate information. It makes them more vulnerable to the risks. Teachers play an essential role in imparting sexuality education at the school level. Their work is paramount in extending children’s healthy development as children spend significant time with their teachers throughout the school day.

The good news is that awareness has developed among young people that something should be done to improve the situation. More and more young people all over the world have joined together to call for their right to sex and sexuality education (UNESCO 2018). Sex education has been duly emphasized by the World Association for Sexual Health (WAS) as a ‘basic human right’. The revision to the sexual rights (2014) as declared by WAS has focussed on the need for and right to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). UNESCO has concluded that proper education on sex and sexuality provides children

with the opportunity to know their values and attitude and in return helps in reducing sexually related risks. This ultimately helps the young individuals make an informed choice about their future. Although school-based sexuality education has been part of UNESCO's effort towards effective sex education and sexually transmitted infection prevention programme, unfortunately, India has not adopted the programme in earnest at this time.

Review of Literature

Numerous studies dealing with sexuality education have found teachers reticent and uncomfortable discussing sexual matters with their students (Kirby et al., 2006; Nayak & Bose, 1997; Smith et al., 2003; Verma, Surender & Guruswamy, 1997). However, studies conducted in various countries such as the United States (Fisher et al. 2015), India (Toor, 2016), Nigeria (Ogunjimi 2006) and Canada (McKay et al. 2014), reveal that still, a large majority of parents and teachers promote school-based sexuality education. Most countries have adopted an abstinence-only programme to deliver sexuality education to school children. In the United States, some states offer abstinence-only programmes, but these programmes have not been quite effective in curbing risks when compared to comprehensive and evidence-based programmes for the promotion of sexual health. Abstinence-only based education has deep roots in parental fears that teaching comprehensive sex education will promote promiscuity among young people (Dhillon, 2006, Smith, Kippax, Aggleton & Tyrer, 2003). It is a fear that if children know or hear about sexual behaviours, they may be enticed to engage in them. It is a repressive take on the sexual health of young people, so much so that some researchers have suggested it can lead to "forms of oppression and marginalisation" (Ratner, 2016). Indeed, abstinence only programs have been found to discourage "controversial topics," and even in cases where that is untrue, there is still a lack of explicit instructions from school administrations (Fredman, Schultz, and Hoffman, 2015). Overcoming teacher reluctance to teach education is one challenge, but even those who are open to teaching comprehensive sex education are handcuffed because they lack sufficient pedagogical tools and proper training (Javadnoori M, 2016, Martin, 2020). Improving the system around sex education is essential.

Although outwardly, communicating taboo topics might seem simple and straight, it is intensely difficult to directly express or discuss taboo topics, images, and symbols associated with sex, especially with young students in India. Even in more sexually progressive countries, like the UK and the United States, it is extremely challenging to foster a comfortable environment in a sexuality education classroom and encouraging students to be communicative in the class remains to be difficult (Benton & Daniel, 1996). In the Indian context, discussing such topics seems an uphill task. There are highly categorized taboo topics but essential for students and it is a point of concern about how to strategically and effectively communicate them with the students while respecting the religious, social and cultural norms and values of the society. Many studies have highlighted building trust among the students and the need for sexuality education to be integrated into the recipient's values, traditions and beliefs. Unless they have culturally sensitive materials, the recipient may have difficulty in acceptance of the programme (UNFPA, 2019, Singhal & Rogers, 2003). One more approach to such education which has been proven to be effective is the use of metaphors, euphemism and humour (Piotrow, Kincaid, Rimon & Rinehart, 1997; Singhal & Rogers, 1999).

Previous researchers have explored the methods and approaches for sex education by integrating theoretical frameworks. The pedagogical practices and course content are designed as per the student's age groups and their cognitive abilities. Goldman (2010) rightfully identifies three stages to receive the

education i.e, early adolescent from age 10 to 14 years, the middle age group from 15 to 17 age groups and late age groups from 18 years to 20. There are meaningful differences in the pedagogical strategies employed by these programmes, especially considering directness versus indirectness, the use of colloquial or technical terms while keeping within the confines of social acceptability, efficacy, and the completeness of the information provided. In terms of social acceptability, the direct approach rates poorly. The effectiveness of direct strategies was medium-to-low as being overly frank about taboo topics may distract students from the point of the lesson being taught (Sorcar, 2019). With the indirect approach, social acceptability is higher, but the effectiveness and completeness of the education are low because of taboo avoidance. Therefore, researchers have suggested that mixed methods and approaches may be used for different modules of a sexual education curriculum, depending on the nature of the taboo in the module and the culture where it is being taught. On the framework of teaching approaches, the liberal approach encourages free and frank discussion whereas the conservative approach is apt for the indirect approach and focuses more on morality and family life, right and wrong. The most modern and “progressive approach” is the feminist approach as pointed out by Lees (1993). Lees’s approach seeks to question assumptions about social norms and gender bias, particularly in matters of sex and gender inequality. The feminist approach is not yet employed in the Indian context as India, being a conservative and patriarchal culture, uses abstinence-only approaches if sex education is taught in the first place. Sorcar (2019) in his research on HIV in India found that students from India but residing in the US have better knowledge of AIDs and its prevention than their counterparts living in India. The difference between the level of education in those students points towards several questions like teaching methods, approaches, course content, policy and practices, which all need serious attention and deliberation. In Sorcar’s (2019) research, he has further discussed the acceptability of the images in school books such as breastfeeding, man-woman intimacy, and childbirth, which were sharply objected to by the general public and parents. Consequently, those images have been banned in the Indian school books and in their places, more indirect and subtle images have been used. Euphemism plays an important role in circumventing the taboo-ness of sexual communication in India.

The current chapter will explore the ideas presented above more deeply to examine how sex education is taught in Indian schools and the communication methods and strategies teachers adopt toward sex education. Doing so will provide a ripe foundation for communication strategies to tackle sex as a taboo topic, especially in India.

The Present Context

The discussion of this study is on sex education in Indian schools and the challenges of communicating them which have negative norms and involve actions, practices, or states which carry a strong social stigma. The word “*taboo*” comes from the Tongan word *tabu* (Webster’s Dictionary, 2003), for something “forbidden” or “banned”. Capitan Cook defined the term taboo during his third voyage around the world (Allan & Burrige, 2006). Taboos as pointed by Douglas are social prohibitions created over time and reinforced by communitywide complicity (Douglas, 2002). They are inextricably linked to culture and thus vary significantly across the world; what is taboo in one culture may be completely acceptable in another. The difficulty of discussing taboo topics is significantly exacerbated by the social stigma associated with the topics or anything related to sex (Bennett, 2000; Reuters, 2006; Sharma, 2005; Solomon & Chakraborty, 2004; Wong, Lee & Tsang, 2004). Certain words, symbols and images are considered to be utterly profane in Indian households. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to

discuss and communicate any such topics as they are social taboos. All of this poses an enormous challenge as to how to teach sex education topics effectively to the adolescents while respecting social and cultural norms and values.

With more than 1.3 billion people in India, approximately 30% is made up of young people between the ages of 10 and 24. India's government, in alignment with its sustainable development goals (SDGs), has been focusing on education deemed pertinent to the youth of the nation. The government's efforts are evident in national and state-level programmes and policies, which aim to address issues of their health including adolescent reproductive and sexual health (ARSH). The Ministry of Human Resource Development in partnership with UNFPA has introduced the adolescent education programme (AEP) in some government and private schools. Known as a life skills education programme, the curriculum of AEP covers topics like changes during adolescence, body image, sexual violence and abuse, positive relationships, gender-based stereotypes, gender discrimination, HIV/AIDS etc. The truth is that the proposal to include sex education was strongly opposed by certain sections of the society as they thought that to be unnecessary and would cause more harm than good on the sensitive minds of young people. However, the government is taking important steps to give more comprehensive sex education (CSE) to school children.

Currently, under the AEP, schools impart life skills as part of the overall curriculum, which is integrated across subjects and classes. As per a report, the aim of CSE is to create a safe, non-judgmental space where students can raise questions, challenge stereotypes and build perspectives in an enabling and supportive environment in which the teachers display empathy and a non-judgmental attitude (Pravah YP Foundation, 2017). CSE is a very recent discussion in India. In 2014, India's health minister had proposed yoga to be compulsory rather than sex education and encouraged abstinence-based training over comprehensive sex education. Despite objections, the prime minister of India rolled out sex education in Indian schools in 2018. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Human Resource & Development released guidelines for sexual education to be imparted in schools the same year. The guidelines were considered to be highly controversial and certain organizations objected to that by suggesting if required counselling could be provided to the school students. Despite these issues, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has launched a national level programme called *Ayushman Bharat Yojana*, which aims at making holistic improvements in India's health care system. The programme emphasizes teachers with good communication skills and their ability to connect with students should be selected.

Teachers play a pivotal role in sex education, and researchers have concluded that through school-based programmes a country can reach a large number of young people. Oomen (2020) suggests those teachers could use role-playing and activity-based pedagogical tools to increase effectiveness when taught by trained teachers. Besides, school settings provide a conducive environment that aids in the delivery of such education at the appropriate age (Gordon 2008). School-based comprehensive sexuality education programmes have proved to be more effective in imparting correct, relevant as well as age-appropriate education (Montgomery et al, 2016, Herat et al, 2018)). Other studies have identified the significance of community readiness and engagement to tackle the resistance to sex education. India's 2020 national educational policy (NEP) includes sex education, even though the phrase itself is not used within the curriculum, framed as 'adolescence education.' The hesitation to call sex education by its name indicates the problem that the Indians have with the word 'sex.' The term sex education was included in the original draft of the policy for raising awareness of consent, family planning, respect for women, STIs, and other issues in secondary schools. However, before the final policy was issued, the Ministry of Education sought public opinion and consulted with other stakeholders, which brought various changes

throughout the policy, including the omission of the words “sex education.” In many states of India, the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) attempted to impart sex education and developed a curriculum that was ultimately banned entirely from public schools (Chadha, 2007; Gentleman, 2007; Sabha, 2007; Sify News, 2007; Zaheer, 2007).

To add to the complex situation, there are levels of taboo in India and the level of communicating on such topics also varies. The level of difficulty in teaching taboo topics is associated with the type of subject and content in question, as distinguished by Schroder (1998). Schroder argues that there exist seven types of taboos, making a general distinction between primary and secondary taboos. Primary taboos include identifying objects, people, and their actions, whereas secondary taboos include communication, thoughts, words, and feelings. Secondary taboos occur primarily on the interpersonal level. Communicating about sexual transmitted infections, like HIV, is an example where taboos may occur on multiple levels. The person who has HIV may serve as one type of taboos, but more sensitive topics like sex work, homosexuality, and other sex-based topics can be difficult to discuss within interpersonal relationships because they are illegal in India. Due to this, health care workers in many cases are unable to provide necessary information and education (Agoramoorthy & Minna, 2007). Research indicates that many taboos are related to the human body and its transformation (Allan & Burrige, 2006). For example, although there have been significant efforts in India to educate women about breast cancer and menstruation-related issues, open discussion about breast cancer does not occur frequently because the word “cancer” invokes feelings of hopelessness and death. In India, much like other parts of the world, speaking about one’s breasts is considered taboo. Because of this, large swathes of women neglect regular breast exams and free check-ups for early detection and prevention of breast cancer. Only through proper education on sexual health and wellness can individuals learn to properly protect themselves.

Thus far, there are no formal studies on teacher’s attitudes and perception toward teaching sex education in school. Though colloquial experience and popular news coverage suggests the aversion teachers feel as describe in the preceding pages, a deeper examination of how sex education is delivered in India is needed. The pages that follow will explicate many important questions for sex education in cultures in which our sex lives are deeply repressed. This chapter examines the broad scope of actors related to in-school sex education. For example, we questioned what strategies are deployed by teachers and their effect towards teaching on sex. Some teachers may feel ashamed or awkward when talking about sexual taboo. Furthermore, we asked how teachers ensure their course meets curricular objectives and what assessment criteria are used to ensure compliance and efficacy. Additionally, we asked students about their experience by questioning whether students felt uncomfortable with sex education or if they shied away from sex-related topics with their teachers. We also asked whether students receive support in their sex education from their parents. Finally, we questioned what happens when students do not have proper access to sex education materials. For example, when they do not have knowledge resources about sex and the risks associated with it, where and how do they fill in the gaps? Where does their knowledge come from? In absence of an established and efficacious curriculum, defined pedagogical methods and tools, competent communication techniques, and the lack of consent and involvement from parents and the community at large, any sex education program will struggle. However, improving those conditions may be of great benefit to society at large.

Communication Strategies in Teaching Taboo Topics

There is a huge difference between merely mentioning the topics and discussing them comprehensively in class. The challenge is how to communicate accurate and effective sex education without sounding offensive or profane and at the same time keeping the objectives of the programme undiluted. When taboo topics are taught, it is important to know and plan the range of pedagogical and communication strategies which may be employed by the teachers. Do the teachers tell real stories or use metaphors and symbols while illustrating a concept? The use of humour is considered to be an effective method particularly when a teacher wants the students to open up and take part in the discussion. Thomson and Scott (1991) call sex education ‘social events’ where the struggle between the knowledge of students and sex education messages and objectives may produce laughter in the class. At the same time, teachers maintain restraints as to what exactly to say, where to draw the line, which examples they can give in the class, which terms they can use and will be acceptable. Bonnie Trudell (1992, 1993) suggests that teacher’s restraint in the classroom produces a ‘defensive teaching’ strategy to avoid potentially uncomfortable moments which could lead to “personal vulnerability and parental complaint” (Kehily, 2010). As the study rightly illustrates their approaches to sex education is shaped by their past experiences as students. The power relationship between the two is significant in mediating the classroom discussion and the education that happens in the social context (Kehily, 2002, 2014, Nayak, 1996; Lupton & Tulloch, 1996).

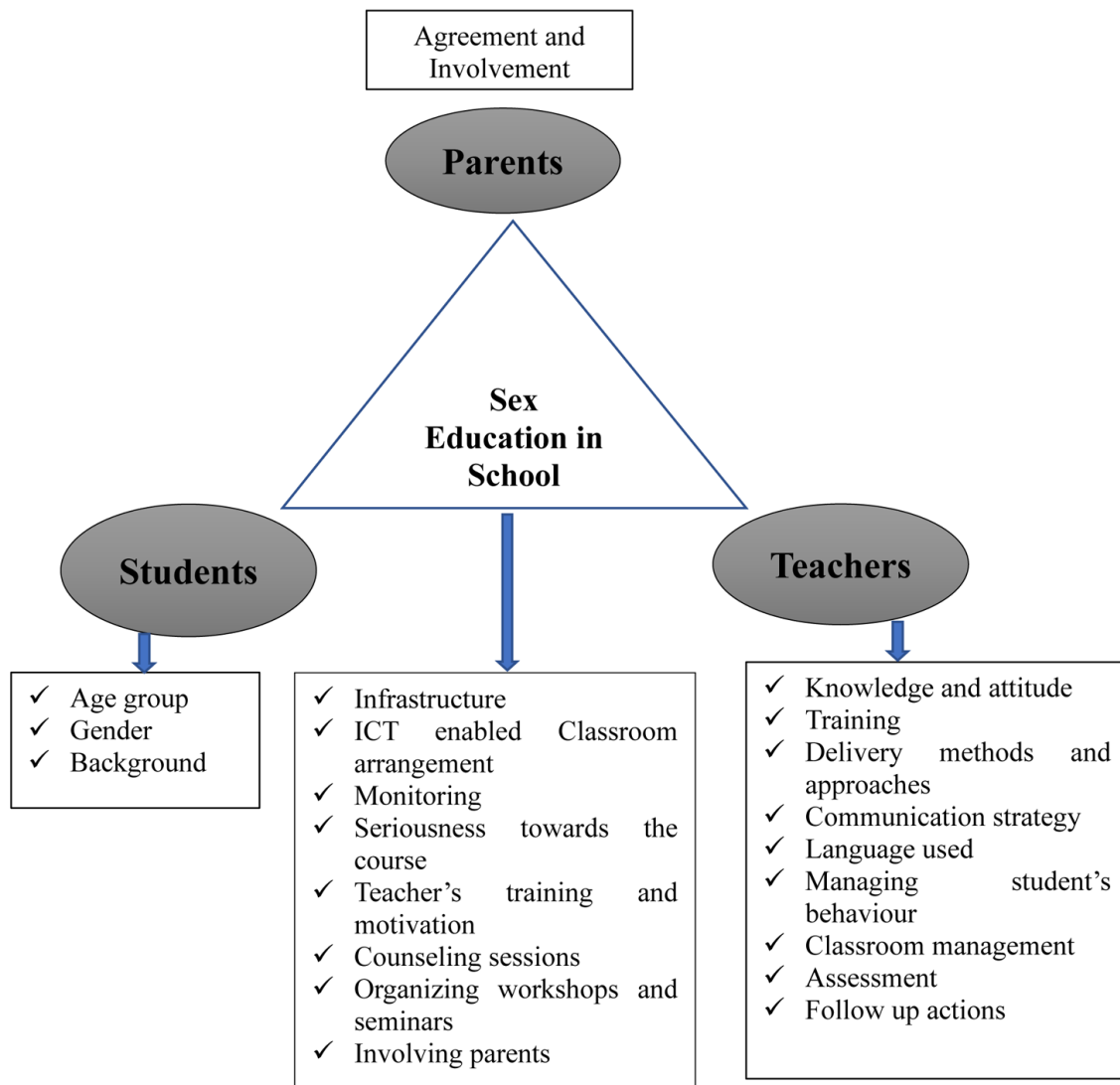
Teachers and researchers are divided on the method of delivery- whether to adopt the formal or informal method of delivery. In this education, formal methods may not be so appropriate to teaching and learning and many researchers have concluded on the need for more informal approaches to sexuality education as the students will be more open and confide in teachers. (Measor, 1989; Holland et al., 1990 & Redman, 1994; Thomson, 1994; Lupton & Tulloch, 1996; Epstein & Johnson, 1998). However, in delivering such topics, the use of technical terms in a formal method may create a level of comfort for the teacher as well as the students than the commonplace terms but has the risk of distancing the subject from the students. Some teachers believe in talking about taboo topics directly to the students so that the inhibitions and embarrassment associated with that may be resolved gradually while some adopt the indirect approach for the sake of comfort and more participation. Oomen (2020) in his project in India identifies rightly that in a society where sex is taboo, learning sex education indirectly and online is a great solution. In India, media content in the Hindi language has become quite popular.

Research studies have unequivocally discussed the pedagogical and communication difficulty in teaching taboo topics particularly with adolescents in school. Sex Education through ICT has proven to be more effective than other traditional approaches of face-to-face and therefore is advocated for public health purposes (Burnett, Magel, Harrington & Taylor, 1989; Lightfoot, Comulada & Stover, 2007). ICT based applications like “interactive teaching AIDS” which has worked better for HIV/AIDS prevention education to the people who often find it difficult to discuss these topics, particularly related to sexual practices” (Sorcar, 2019).

Besides teaching pedagogy and delivery, equally important is the policy and preparation of a curriculum on sex education that can be socially and culturally acceptable, appropriate for different age groups and at the same time resulting in the change of behaviour and attitude. To enhance participation during such lessons, schools develop policies and devise strategies like separating children by their gender. As Kehily (2010) points out in his research, policy approaches to sex education should stress the importance of curriculum, content, encouraging certain pedagogical approaches over others which should strike the

right note. The successful implementation of the programme is largely dependent on the vital role of the stakeholders in sexuality education as shown in the figure below:

Figure 1. Role of important stakeholders towards sex education in India



Based on the findings of the extant literature and the challenges that face sex education in India, this chapter explored more deeply the issues of sex education and taboo. Though many within Indian culture would prefer the “easier” option of avoiding conversations about sex and other taboos entirely, sex education is compulsory in the school curriculum and thus must be addressed using a broad range of communication strategies and pedagogical tactics. Thus, this chapter studied how sexual taboo is

discussed in Indian classrooms and those teaching strategies that teachers adopt for sex education. Our research questions were as follows:

1. How is sex education taught in Indian classrooms?
2. Do Indian teachers prefer to adopt a direct or indirect approach to sex education?
3. What are teachers' attitudes toward teaching sex education?
4. What metaphors, humour, and storytelling do teachers use to explain sex concepts?
5. What information and communication technologies do teachers use for sex education?

METHODOLOGY

This is the first enquiry of its kind for the researchers to assess the delivery methods and communication strategies adopted by Indian teachers on sexual education in which a cross-sectional study was conducted in 10 schools from selected places in India. Intending to generalize its findings, the study recruited secondary school teachers in India for participation. Respondents were recruited from both urban and semi-rural areas of two states. Schools have been selected from both urban and rural areas and respondents were selected based on their experience and exposure to this topic using judgemental sampling. A multistage sampling procedure was adopted in selecting the participants for the study. The sample was representative of co-educational schools with an almost equal number of boys and girls studying at the secondary level. The study selected a purposive sample of 10 co-ed schools included in the study from the states of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh because they have the highest count of student enrolment in the last two years. From those schools, 200 secondary school teachers were selected to participate in this study based on their prior experience of discussing sexuality education to grade IX and X students in some form or the other. The questionnaire was distributed all 200 teachers, out of which 112 teachers responded for a response rate of 56%. All responses were analysed for the study purpose. Respondent's demographic information such as age, gender, mother tongue, religion, was gathered. The frequency of communicating with students in the class, other subjects they teach, languages they use in the classroom, and specific ICT infrastructures in their respective schools were also gathered. A pilot study was conducted in two schools with 10 respondents for the validity and reliability of the survey instrument.

The gender of the participants was near equal with 45% identifying as male and 55% identifying as female. Most teachers, 70%, were from urban schools while the remaining were from more rural areas. The majority of the respondents, 80% were over 40 years of age and the remainder were younger than 40 years old. The language of instruction was mixed, most teachers used both their regional language and English in the classroom. In more rural areas, teachers relied more heavily on native tongues (i.e. Odia and Telugu languages used in more rural parts of the country), whereas urban centres tended to use English more frequently when explaining terms. Urban areas also had greater access to ICTs. The majority of public and private schools in Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha, have adequate computer infrastructure whereas the rural schools of Odisha lacked the availability of such facilities. The majority of teachers use regional language as well as English in the class. Teachers from rural schools use mostly native languages i.e. Odia and Telugu languages whereas those who are teaching in urban schools use more English terms while explaining. The majority of the schools, public and private schools in Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha have adequate computer infrastructure whereas the rural schools in Odisha lack the availability of such facilities. The majority of schools in Andhra Pradesh had ICT

facilities. Finally, though all of the participants taught sex education, they also teach other subjects in the curriculum outside of sex education. Teachers teach other subjects like Social Sciences and Science.

Our aim was to examine their instructional method, communication-related difficulties, and the strategies adopted while teaching sexuality education. The study aimed to ascertain the perceived barriers in discussing taboo topics with adolescent students. To further our understanding, we additionally conducted interviews with teachers who had the highest levels of teaching experiences on sex education. A total of 20 in-depth interviews were conducted. Data was collected using a pretested structured questionnaire that had been developed from a previous pilot study. For the sake of confidentiality, participants were given the option of not mentioning their names. The questions were written in English and translated into regional languages.

Major Findings and Analysis

RQ1: Contrary to the previous studies, which had discussed that teachers are not adequately trained on teaching sex education in schools, most of the teachers from urban schools are now trained on what and how to deliver messages about taboo topics like sex, and also how to use various delivery or communication strategies in discussing sex education in the classroom. Schools in urban areas organise workshops or seminars to create an awareness among the children in which the less sensitive topics like menstruation, and ‘bad touch, good touch’ are mostly discussed with very little or almost no interaction from the audience. Parents were invited with very few appearances even in urban schools. The majority of the teachers (around 70%) have discussed the causes of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), physiological changes during puberty and bodily changes through audio and video. Teachers revealed that some students show uneasy and awkward behaviour in the class, and instead of rebuking the students, they prefer to silently take note of their behaviour and try to create a conducive environment to make them attentive and serious. In cases in which a student has any misconception on any one of the topics under sex education, the teachers clarify the doubts either in a small group or privately.

Teachers suggested that appropriate images and videos are being identified to be able to pass on correct messages while keeping in mind the comfort level of both the teachers and the students. The majority of the teachers are concerned about the non-involvement of the parents and suggest that the role of parents is as important as the role of teachers and they should be integrated into the programmes as essential stakeholders. Teachers even suggested that parent-teacher meetings should be arranged for open discussion with them on the course content and the objectives and then only, the course should be delivered after taking the due consent of the parents. Some teachers suggested that there should be separate classes for boys and girls. Most of the teachers advocated for open seminars, debates, and discussions and these are to be integrated into the curriculum. Some teachers highlighted the importance of introducing the topics related to health and hygiene during the primary level and slowly introducing the sex education topics in the secondary and higher secondary level in a phased manner. The majority of the teachers confirm that more training sessions are required on how to impart sex education to the young mass.

RQ2: On the method of delivering, most of the teachers support either a direct or indirect approach, but not a mixed approach as they think that might dilute the learning objectives of the course.

RQ3: To ascertain the attitude of the teachers towards imparting sex education, approximately 50% of teachers, mostly from urban schools with only 5% teachers from rural schools responded affirmatively on the importance of imparting sex education and around the same percentage of teachers responded that the teaching materials should be age-appropriate and culture-sensitive. Very few teachers have

admitted to having discussed the third gender in the class briefly. The respondents admitted feelings of discomfort but since the students are not completely ignorant, classroom discussions are less awkward than expected. Teachers admitted to being using English terms and phrases to get a level of comfort. On the other hand, most of the respondents from rural schools were reluctant towards participating in the study and the subject. The teachers are in support of creating awareness of good touch and bad touch, awareness of bodily changes and menstruation.

RQ4: Fewer (30%) of teachers preferred to use more commonly used colloquial terms than technical terms or jargon, although they admitted to having a sense of discomfort in the initial sessions. The teachers were also mindful of their tone and body language in attempt to try to keep their facial expressions normal and professional. Teachers mostly teach through real-life cases, small groups discussion, use of animation or videos in class, and role play, which sometimes create lighter moments in the class. The teachers did not usually use humour or metaphors while discussing these topics and mostly focus on culturally correct information.

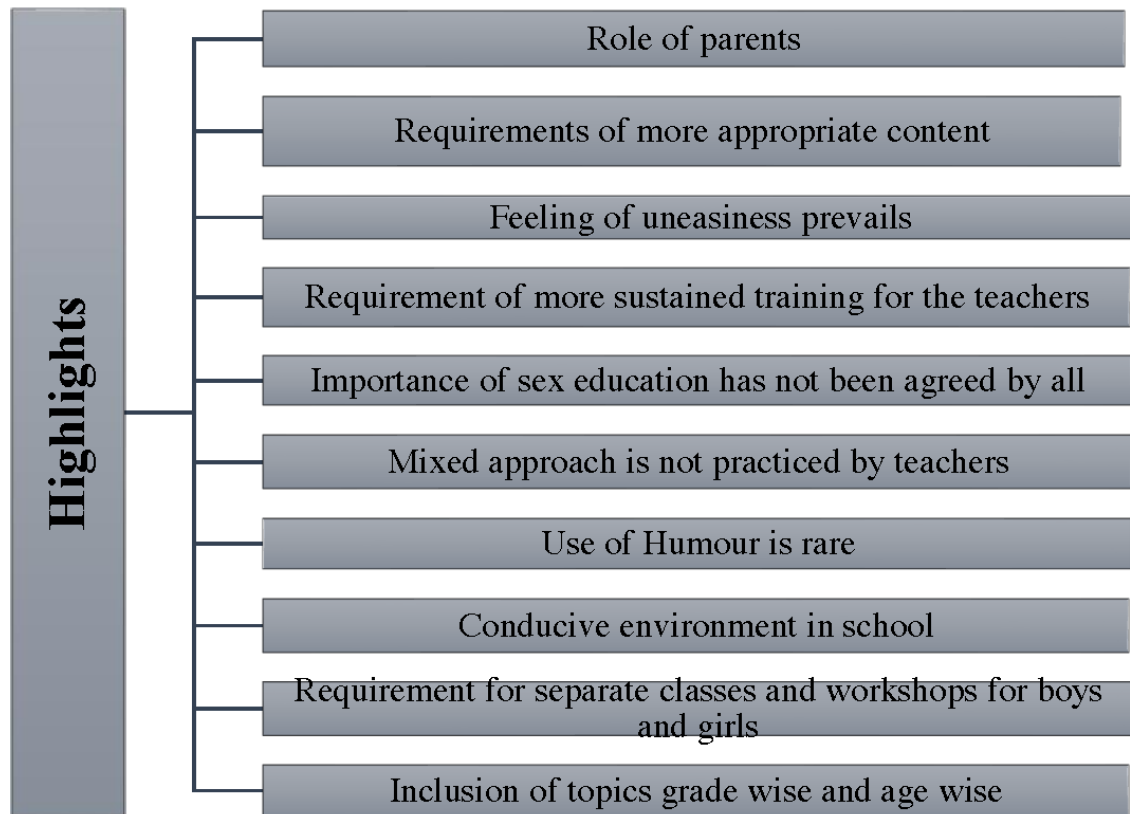
RQ5: All teachers responded that ICT application, with culturally appropriate learning materials, would maximise the learning of the students. On assessing the student's learning, teachers said that the assessment takes place through a quiz and situation-based role plays. At the end of the course, teachers submit a final report to the higher authority highlighting the issues and challenges they faced during the delivery of the course besides submitting the evaluation report to the school management.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In India, sex education is about discussing taboo topics and the delivery of such topics in school poses several challenges for the teachers as well as the students. 'Sex' and anything related to this word and action is against the value system and carries a strong social stigma. India is a country with a deep patriarchal mindset and any communication on this topic is prohibited, even at home. The government has started making efforts for comprehensive sexuality education for adolescents from the primary school level, but additional training is always needed, especially in rural areas where they do not receive the same level of training as do their more urban counterparts.

Although the teachers address the issues related to STIs and AIDS, many sensitive discussions related to the transmission of the disease are avoided as it creates feelings of discomfort in them and due to the stigma attached to those living with HIV/AIDS. Generally speaking, topics like sexually transmitted diseases are avoided in the classroom due to their taboo nature. Topics like good touch versus bad touch, bodily changes, and menstruation were easier for teachers to communicate, which in turn allowed them to avoid other important topics that felt awkward or shameful.

Figure 2. Highlights of the findings



Communication taboos remain to be the most difficult challenge to overcome. In Indian culture, there are some highly taboo topics, and the issue remains as to how and what to communicate while respecting culture, norms and values. The use of ICT has proven to be a boon for the sex education programme through which accurate content can also be provided. At the same time, it is equally important to ascertain that the students gain knowledge and absorb the message. Thus, to include comprehensive sex education for young individuals is extremely difficult in the Indian context but the effectiveness of the programme will depend on the social context, teacher's attitude, level of acceptance and training on what exactly they should discuss. The topics should be scientific and information accurate while at the same time respecting culturally accepted norms and values.

In India, teachers seem to be not yet ready to facilitate sexual education topics. Discussion on the topics requires not only the correct knowledge on the topics but the use of various communication methods, appropriate for different topics and new computer applications. This will maximise the teaching and learning of taboo topics. To make the programme effective, teachers should be trained on CSE with adequate training on their communication skills, use of appropriate tone and language which is neither too profane nor too technical. Developing competence and comfortability with sex education will allow for more relaxed body language, lowering barriers of awkwardness. Ultimately, displaying the right attitude towards comprehensive sex education, with an aura of genuine sensitivity and maturity, can make great strides in reducing the taboo-ness of sexual communication, especially with younger school children.

Policymakers, schools and teachers should be aware of the deeper issues of sex education through in-depth studies to be able to come up with appropriate instructional methods, communication strategy, content, the appropriateness of the above and assessment on the students' learning on sex education in India.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Adolescent Education Programme (AEP): A life skills education programme, the curriculum of AEP covers topics like changes during adolescence, body image, sexual violence and abuse, positive relationships, gender-based stereotypes, gender discrimination, HIV/AIDS, etc.

Aushman Bharat Yojana: A Hindi term which means “planning for a blessed India.”

Comprehensive Sex Education (CSE): Sex education that encompasses the physiological, biological, emotional, and social aspects of puberty and sexuality.

National Aids Control Organization: A division of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in India. NACO attempted to impart sex education and developed a curriculum that was ultimately banned entirely from public schools.

National Education Policy (NEP): The 2020 education policy instituted in India. Notably, the policy included topics related to sex education, but did not use the term, instead framing it as ‘adolescence education.’

Odia: The official state language spoken in Odisha.

Sexual Transmitted Infection (STI): The category of bacteria, viruses, and parasites that are known to be transmitted through sexual contact.

Telugu: The official state language spoken in Andhra Pradesh.

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA): A sexual and reproductive health agency whose mission is to improve sex education worldwide.

World Association for Sexual Health (WAS): An organization dedicated to promoting sexual health throughout the world.

Section 5

Health Communication

Chapter 20

Communicating Quadriplegia: An Autoethnography of Disability Perceptions.

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ABSTRACT

Autoethnography is an intriguing and promising qualitative research method that gives voice to personal experience to extend psychological and sociological understanding. The author's experience of having a spinal cord injury (SCI) provides the reader with insight regarding perceptions of quadriplegia and informalities of addressing disabilities in communication settings. Education on communication is valuable because it helps people who have not had previous exposure to disabilities understand guidelines for appropriate and ethical behavior when having a conversation with an individual with disabilities. Taboo conversations that are mishandled can lead to adverse physical and mental health outcomes in society. This chapter includes quantitative and qualitative research to provide evidence of these negative social and health outcomes and present communication and coping strategies for dealing with the more difficult conversations associated with quadriplegia and paralysis.

DISABILITY AS TABOO: DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS IN RESTAURANTS

Mobility is something that we may take for granted. For example, I can recall a time when I arrived at the parking lot of a local restaurant in my red Toyota, handicap-accessible, minivan. My dad had freshly painted the wheels black for my 25th birthday. My girlfriend is driving as I ride in the passenger seat; however, onlookers may notice that my chair looks slightly different from the others. My chair is the wheelchair that I use every day to go *everywhere*. It is not only the place where I sit and rest, it is also my only source of mobility—a way for me to move around independently despite my paralysis. I am labeled a person with quadriplegia—the loss of nerve function in all four limbs—due to a cervical fracture in the fourth vertebra in my neck resulting in permanent spinal cord injury. For me, mobility is a challenge that I must confront directly. In the pages that follow are stories about my disability. This autoethnography will introduce readers to the influential role that communication plays in mollifying taboos related to

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recovery and rehabilitee for those with spinal cord injuries and other disabilities. Through my experience, I will explicate communication strategies to overcome taboos related to disability and disability studies.

To continue the story, my girlfriend parks the vehicle and deploys the ramp that allows me to drive my chair out of the van. The process is clangorous, causing those walking in and out of the restaurant to turn their attention to us. Sometimes people stare; but other times, they scurry past while avoiding eye contact. I smile as they walk past and, if the person is friendly enough to look at me, I might say hello. Occasionally, young children will look in awe because my minivan just might be the closest thing to a real-life Transformer that they've ever seen (see Figure 1). If their parents see them staring, they will quickly tug their child by the arm, all the while averting their eyes in hopes their little one doesn't say or do anything "offensive." My presence is taboo. However, children can be naïve to social filters that my appearance unspeakable, and in my personal experience, they often ask the best questions about my disability. I finish rolling my chair down the ramp toward the front door of the restaurant. My girlfriend holds the door open for me, and I move through to greet the hostess.

I understand that not many people look like me. Oftentimes, I will see a person pause to readjust or give me an inquisitive face upon my arrival. The nonverbals speak just as loudly as what is said. As humans, we communicate through a vast linguistic system developed long over the evolution of our species, an innovation that is unique to the human species alone (Fisher & Marcus, 2006). This communication also involves universal facial expressions, which are reflective of the endless stream of perceptions, feelings, and thoughts at both the conscious and the unconscious levels (Mlodinow, 2012). If a person has never seen an individual with a high spinal cord injury, they are often unable to hide the implicit expression of confusion. Nonverbal signaling and reading facial signals are automatic and performed outside the conscious awareness and control (Mlodinow, 2012). Our nonverbal cues unconsciously communicate information about ourselves and our state of mind. The gestures people make, the position in which they hold their body gate, the expressions they wear on their faces, and the nonverbal qualities of their speech all contribute to our perception of others.

We implicitly categorize those perceptions using schemas that help produce habitual thoughts and behaviors. Schemas are the mental structures that humans use to organize knowledge and guide cognitive processes and behavior. Individuals use schemata to categorize objects and events based on common elements and characteristics to assist in interpreting and making predictions about the world (Michalak, 2019). Neurobiological theories suggest that schemas support new learning by accelerating consolidation processes with schema-consistent information achieving rapid assimilation into cortical structures and independence from the hippocampus (an area of the brain associated with memory; Gilboa and Marlatte, 2017, McClelland, 2013, Tse et al., 2007). In support of this rapid consolidation theory, several studies show the differential engagement of cortical structures versus the hippocampus during diagnosing, retrieving items and memories that are consistent or inconsistent with prior knowledge (Bein et al., 2014, Brod et al., 2015, Reggev et al., 2016, Van Kesteren et al., 2010).

We form schemas based on our life experiences. For the multitude of people who have never been exposed to a person with high-level quadriplegia, they lack the necessary experiences to have developed a schema for the physical conditions related-to and appearance associated with paralysis. My presence is taboo for them as my appearance registers as contradictory to the image of others to which they are accustomed. I am a puzzle that their brain struggles to diagnose. The "auto-pilot" version of how the world should look and work doesn't apply to me; their schemata are no longer useful. My presence becomes taboo.

I consider myself to be fortunate to live in the society that we do. My senior year of high school was looking much like any normal teenager. I was looking forward to graduating and moving on to college. I was captain of my high school football team and a starting left-fielder on the varsity baseball team. I am an extrovert at heart with a friendly smile. My life changed on February 27, 2015, when I had a snow sledding accident on a fateful Friday afternoon in which I fractured my C4 vertebrae causing paralysis from the neck down. Unlike other animals that suffer severe spinal injuries, I was not left to die. If not for modern science and medicine, I may have suffered the same fate. According to the National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center, roughly 296,000 people in the United States suffer from spinal cord injuries (Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center, 2021). Comparatively, that represents just a small fraction of U.S. citizens. Being a person with quadriplegia, I have a higher level of disfunction than most. My diagnosis makes me a tiny minority within the disability community. I cannot feed myself, brush my teeth, hug a loved one or give someone the middle finger if they offend me. I'm a six-foot-one-inch tall, intelligent, and sarcastic 25-year-old with the physical abilities of a toddler.

A life of paralysis is very different from the daily norms that the majority of people experience. I cannot do the same things as other people. If I were not paralyzed, I would hold the door of the restaurant open for my girlfriend, or any other person leaving the restaurant, but I can't. I was taught that masculine men should hold the door, but I can't hold the door when I need the door held for myself. On almost every occasion, the hostess will ask me if we prefer a table or a booth; yet another example of my presence not fitting into the hostess' schema. It is hard not to laugh at the thought of trying to hoist myself out of my wheelchair and into the booth. I refrain from the sarcastic response, but I wish the hostess understood that if it were just my girlfriend and myself, we would require an entire lift assist with a sling just to sit in that booth. I understand that the host or hostess simply does not realize that what they are asking is slightly offensive. The taboo nature of disability has robbed us of the right questions. With the proper education, business and their employees could make small linguistic decisions to communicatively navigate these everyday transactions with people with disabilities. The question could easily change into, "'Sir, can you stand to sit in a booth, or would you like to remain in your wheelchair at a table?'" Worse yet, although uncommon, on occasion the hostess will ignore me completely as if I am incapable of comprehending the conversation. They wait until the person that's with me enters the restaurant to ask, "Table or booth?" My wheelchair is a part of my life, my wardrobe, and my personality. I do not want someone to avoid conversation or refuse to acknowledge my existence because of my wheelchair—to treat my presence as unspeakable. There is absolutely nothing I can do about being a wheelchair user, and for me, it is more comfortable if a person just asks a question about my chair or disability if they have questions.

I have become accustomed to the room becoming quiet as I roll through the door and begin enjoying an appetizer or drink. When our entrée arrives, my girlfriend always gives me the first bite of the meal, then shortly after takes a first bite of her own. I usually sit and smile with a mouth full of food, waiting for reassurance that she is enjoying the meal. Other restaurant-goers subtly watch us consume our meal from all corners of the room. Something as quaint as eating becomes a show for others to see. An intriguing enigma that typically follows is that other couples will begin trying to imitate my girlfriend feeding me my meals. They place themselves in her shoes to simulate our life, if only for a moment. I see gender norms at play. The presumably more feminine partner in the relationship will feed their masculine partners a bite of food off their plate. As these couples replicate taking bites off each other's forks, my girlfriend begins to notice the "imitation phenomenon." She watches people copy our behavior and asks if it bothers me. Honestly, I had never noticed anyone else do it before. Eating in this way never stood

out to me because *that's just how I eat*. I only began noticing after she described it to me. Before long, a frequency illusion occurred. I started noticing it in our roommate and his girlfriend and then in our friends and my parents. Now, we observe it occasionally at tables in public occupied by strangers. Even my grandparents, born in the 1930s and, without a doubt, a part of the silent generation, have participated in the imitation phenomenon. Though they have been married 58 years, their upbringing causes them to be averse to public displays of affection. Yet, the last time we went out to eat, my grandmother was so impressed by her food that she imitated the way that my girlfriend feeds me and offered my grandpa a bite of her food from her fork. My grandfather raised his eyebrows and looked at her like she was crazy. A couple of seconds passed by, and then he reluctantly took the bite off the fork. My girlfriend and I looked at each other and smiled.

We never say anything to our dinner guests or the strangers around us. We would never want anyone to feel uncomfortable or to feel like they were being analyzed. I don't think that anyone intends to offend me when they imitate how I eat. I would even argue that it could be an unconscious action. People like to place themselves in my girlfriend's shoes and try to mirror our life. It probably looks quite sweet and possibly like something in a movie from the outside.

Of course, what people do not want to do is place themselves in my shoes. Many people do not understand my injury, nor do they see the other side effects of my paralysis – my hypertonia or hyperreflexia. Hyperreflexia is defined as overactive or overresponsive reflexes. It manifests itself through the disinhibition of nerves, causing me to have violent muscle spasms in my legs that make me kick my partner while she is trying to help me get in bed. Hypertonia is a condition in which I have too much muscle tone so that arms or legs are stiff and difficult to move. The muscle overactivity that happens with hypertonia occurs when communication between the brain and spinal cord is affected by injury or illness. They also do not see my suprapubic catheter that goes directly into my bladder and my bag that contains my urine strapped to my thigh. People most certainly have no idea of what my bowel program consists of, and if they did, I can assure you that they would not want to be imitating my life. Our relationship is most undoubtedly uncommon and strays far from the idea of 'traditional.' This meal, however, is not unusual for me. It is a snapshot of my daily life where I am reliant on another person to feed me every meal, every day.

Odd and inappropriate conversations occur frequently. In one situation, my friends and I were having dinner at a local restaurant. A woman approached my friends during the middle of our meal and told them that it delighted her to see such kind gentlemen feeding this young man his meal. She *did not speak to me* and only praised my friends for their kind gestures. Of course, they smiled and welcomed the compliment. However, after she left our table, my friend turned to me and asked, "What the hell am I supposed to do? Let you starve?" We laughed and continued with the meal. Just recently, I was having dinner with a friend from out of town and my roommate. A group of four people sitting at the next table over watched my friends and I enjoy our meal. After about 40 minutes of objectively watching us eat and pretending they were not, the man at the table looked in our direction and asked my friend, "Did you guys build that chair for him?" They had obviously been having a conversation about my wheelchair as they sat mere feet away from us. I do not believe the man meant to offend me by disrupting our meal to ask about my wheelchair. However, *he did not ask me* about my wheelchair. It seemed as though he assumed *he could not communicate with me* about my wheelchair; instead, he asked my friends. My chair has a chrome frame and red wheels (Figure 2). I am a fan of the saying, "If you cannot stand up, stand out." Though my wheelchair is a part of my identity, I am not defined by it. Despite what these instances would suggest the general public to understand, a wheelchair is not a marker that I am intellectually

challenge. Wheelchair mobility opens opportunities for wheelchair users to study, work, engage in social activities, and to gain access to services, such as healthcare. It is a tool I use to help me engage with the world in ways that I would not be otherwise able to without the mobility it provides.

Though people common avoid my presence as detailed above, it is also not uncommon that those who do engage with me will do so in inappropriate ways. While at a meal with my parents, an older couple approached our table and asked if they could speak with us. She began regaling us with stories about her experience with a brain tumor. After receiving some negative test results, the woman had a religious experience in her sleep. The following day she spoke to the doctors about her experience. They dismissed it as a dream and took her out of her room for additional testing. To the amazement of the doctors and herself, the imaging results showed that her brain tumor was completely gone. She believed God himself had given her another chance at life. By this point, our food had arrived at the table, and my mother was trying to feed me quietly as the woman spoke because she didn't want my food to get cold, waiting for the woman to finish her story. Despite being a spiritual man, I found difficulty in not questioning her sobriety or mental well-being. She appeared genuine and it was clear that she had an experience that she believed to be accurate and, ultimately, if she was healthy, that's all that mattered. She asked my parents and me if she and her husband could pray over us and our meal. I would do anything to cure my spinal cord, so I absolutely allowed a woman who claims to have spoken to God to pray over me and my meal. This story is interesting, and I am telling it for a specific reason. Not because of the specifics of her story, but rather that it represents the informal ways that people approach me when they acknowledge my presence. If our table were filled with non-disabled people, this woman would not have approached us to tell us how God can heal even the most wicked of afflictions. Though she was sweet, and genuine, though she did not offend my parents or myself by speaking to us, our experience was most definitely abnormal. Unfortunately for me, despite the prayers, my spinal cord injury remains.

As you can see in the stories above, even the simple act of enjoying a meal in a restaurant is fraught with challenges. Because disabilities are frequently treated as taboo topics, people lack the basic scripts and competencies to communicate with those who have disabilities. Though my presence may challenge the norms and stereotypes of the quintessential "everyday life," I deserve the same basic respects shown to others without disabilities. It is necessary we develop a communication praxis in which the everyday citizen understands when to engage with people with disabilities (e.g., during the course of their work like when seating the party or taking an order) and when not to engage (e.g. approaching a stranger while they are trying to eat a hot meal). Many people with disabilities are not opposed to or offended by talking about what causes their disability or the assistive devices they have with them. However, respect for a person's privacy or consideration for someone's personal space should be given to a person with a disability just as it is given to an individual without a disability. *My presence is normal.*

SENSATIONS NOT TO BE FELT AND QUESTIONS THAT SHOULDN'T BE ASKED

I have often thought about explaining a day in my life as a person with quadriplegia. About a week into my spinal cord injury, the rehabilitation team in the critical care unit of the hospital came to my room and decided that I needed to sit upright in the bed and place my feet onto the floor. This would be the first time I had sat up in over a week. It would be the first time I got to feel what my body would do without the perception of feeling from the shoulders down. I had two great physical therapists during my time in

critical care; however, I think they underestimated the size of my 6'2", 185-pound body because when they began to lift me my dead weight gave them trouble. The therapist recollected themselves and helped me get upright and stable. They then placed my feet flat on the floor and asked me how I was feeling. I looked down and realized for the first time that I could not feel my feet on the cold floor even though I did not have any socks or shoes. I began to grasp that I could no longer feel anything in my feet, legs, abdomen, arms, and even, unfortunately, in my hands. The reality was setting in. The stimulus was too much for my brain to conceptualize at that moment. My eyes rolled back in my head, and I passed out.

There are many common misconceptions and misunderstandings about my injury. Most people are under the impression that paralysis means that I cannot have sensory perception below, and in some cases above, the level of neurological damage (i.e. my C4 vertebrae), including all sensory perception in the neck, face, and top of the head. Truthfully, it is a horror to be trapped inside of a body that does not work. One of the worst side effects frequently associated with paralysis is neuropathic pain. Though I have no sensation of feeling on the outside of my skin from about the chest down, inside of my body I feel a perpetual tingling and burning sensation. Most people have experienced neuropathic pain if they've ever fallen asleep with too much pressure on a limb or sat down in a specific position for too long. We often describe it as our foot has fallen "asleep." To a small degree, that is what neuropathic pain feels like. It can be described as the static channel on the television when you turn it to the wrong channel or having hundreds of ants crawling on your skin. Something interesting that occurs with my neuropathic tingling is that when I try to concentrate on a particular area of my body, the neuropathic pain seems to focus and heighten in that area. When I think about a specific area like my toes, what I can best describe in words is an electrical pulse sensation that thumps down my foot and into my toes. When I try to move my big toe on my right foot as I write this sentence, an electrical "tap tap" occurs in my feet. Though there is no movement on the outside, the sensation occurs almost on command every single time I try. Experiencing neuropathic nerve pain is common for those with neurological disorders, especially those with spinal cord injuries (Turner et al., 2001). Gabapentin is an anticonvulsant used extensively for the management of neuropathic pain following SCI with anecdotal evidence of efficacy (Ness et al., 1998). My experience with neuropathic pain medication was unpleasant. My head felt like a 60-pound bowling ball when I was first injured and medicated for nerve pain. I ultimately decided that I preferred the tingling and burning sensation over feeling nothing at all.

Another problematic symptom of paralysis due to spinal cord injury is spasticity and hyperreflexia. Though hyperreflexia can occur following traumatic brain injuries and is observed in severe spinal multiple sclerosis, it is most evident in spinal cord injuries (Sandel et al., 1986). Most people with spinal cord injuries develop spasticity—a debilitating condition involving involuntary movements, co-contraction of antagonistic muscles, and hyperreflexia (Bilchak et al., 2021). Among a sample of one-year post-injury chronic SCI participants, 65–78% have symptoms of spasticity (Sköld et al., 1999). The symptoms of spasticity would be what I, and many others, refer to as muscle spasms. Muscle spasticity could be compared to a muscle cramp that people experience when they are dehydrated and experience muscle fatigue. These are violent muscle flexions that occur from my spinal cord injury level down. The American Spinal Injury Association (ASIA) developed a scale including five subdivisions to help classify the severity of spinal injuries and predict why some people with spinal cord injuries develop spasticity. The scale includes: (A) Complete motor and sensory function disorder; (B) Motor complete, sensory incomplete function disorder; (C) Motor and sensory incomplete function disorder; (D) Useful motor function with or without auxiliary means; and (E) No motor or sensory function disorder (Capaul et al., 1994). In individuals with cervical SCI, 93% of those diagnosed as ASIA A and 78% of those

diagnosed as ASIA B–D reported having symptoms of spasticity. In individuals with thoracic SCI, 72% of those diagnosed as ASIA A and 73% of those diagnosed as ASIA B–D reported symptoms of spasticity (Sköld et al., 1999). For reference, I have a classification of an incomplete ASIA B injury. The muscle spasticity that occurs in my body can cause my entire body to shoot out flat as a board or make my abdominal muscles flex inward. If I am sitting upright in my chair, the spasticity can cause me to fall over when abdominal muscles flex inward. If it causes my back muscles to spasm violently backward, it causes me to fold over my backrest. With rehabilitation, I have strengthened my core to anticipate and protect myself when spasticity occurs. However, there are instances when it is too strong, or I am not in the proper position to protect myself, causing accidents.

During the day, I can manage these muscle spasms by stretching out my arms, legs, neck, and back. Unfortunately, when I first get into bed and throughout the night, my hyperreflexia and spasticity increase tenfold. I believe this occurs because I lie very still for multiple hours compared to being active during the day. When I lie still for an extended period, my muscles and joints become stiff and very rigid. It becomes harder to move around, and when I do move, my body tends to extend into a full-body muscle spasm violently. Another cause of this spasticity is the bedsheets and the blanket that I put over my body while lying in bed. Without a spinal cord injury, the human body recognizes through the spinal cord's sensory perception that although the bedsheets might be cold, they do not pose a danger to the skin; therefore, allowing people to relax and fall asleep. In my experience with my spinal cord injury, my body cannot distinguish what is dangerous to the skin and what is not. Suppose a person without a spinal cord injury reaches down and touches a hot pan. An electrical signal is passed from pain receptors and nerves in the fingers, through the spinal cord, and into the brain instantaneously. The person reacts by pulling their hand away from the hot pan. In a person with a spinal cord injury, the body cannot distinguish anything at all. This unidentifiable stimulus leads to the human body treating everything like a hot pan, whether the stimulus is bedsheets, cold water, or an actual hot pan. As I move around at night, the blanket on top of me and the bedsheets underneath rub my skin and often cause increased spasticity. This increased spasticity makes it hard for me to sleep, and it can sometimes be dangerous for my partner. If my arms are on her, I can push her forcefully, or sometimes my nails catch her skin, and I scratch her deeply. My spasticity has awoken both of us, quite unpleasantly, at 3:00 AM from the dead of sleep.

Muscle spasticity can be confusing for those around me. People who lack knowledge about spinal cord injuries often confuse involuntary movement due to spasticity with voluntary muscle movements one would expect in the course of everyday life. When they see my fingers flex or open, they believe that I am purposefully moving my fingers when, in reality, these movements are unconscious and involuntary. Three months post-injury I graduated from high school. At the time, I was waiting for my motorized wheelchair, which would have allowed me to roll myself across stage. Instead, I borrowed a tilt-in-space wheelchair that required a non-disabled person to push me along. A tilt in space chair is designed to tilt backward very quickly. When my body was first adjusting to paralysis, I had very low blood pressure, especially when I got out of bed. When this situation would happen, you could tilt the wheelchair back, and my feet would physically be above my head, causing my blood pressure to regulate. It was in this chair that I was to be pushed across stage. When it came time to receive my diploma, I was nervous. Unfortunately, a side effect of increased nerves is that I will experience high levels of muscle spasticity. In the moments leading to my name being called, I had no time to tilt backward to regulate my blood pressure and control my muscle spasticity. As I began to roll across the stage, my wrist and finger extensor muscles had a spasm, and my hands shot up like I was celebrating. This caused confusion for my community, who was well aware of my accident, and I received a thunderous applause for

my muscle movement. I could only smile and laugh at my hands as it looked like I was counting to ten to display paralysis recovery. Usually, this situation would not be a big deal, but due to extensive news coverage following my accident, my recovery process had gained a lot of attention. Everyone was aware of my paralysis and that I was unable to move my hands in fingers. Those who were observant enough to notice the spasms thought it was a conscious effort on my part to commemorate a momentous occasion. It was not. It was involuntary.

My experience at graduation made clear to me the need we have for improved health communication education. Health communication is the examination and practice of communicating health information, such as in public health campaigns, education, and between doctor and patient. Health communication gives us essential tools the influence and advance attitudes, to promote behavioral change, and to empower individuals with disabilities. Within the health community is the medical model of disability, which defined disability and disabled persons by their condition or impairment. The medical model of disability is intrinsic to the individual, can reduce the individual's quality of life, and induces clear disadvantages. Furthermore, under the medical model of disability, the focus is on the individual's impairment, how it excludes them from a neurotypical society, and how medicine can be used to treat their disability (Fisher & Goodley, 2007). This approach can lead policymakers and service managers to focus on equalizing people with impairments for what is wrong with their bodies.

After the graduation ceremony, I was approached and asked if there had been a miracle that suddenly allowed me to move my hands. Though well meant, the person asking may not realize the side effects of spinal cord injury nor the physical challenges described earlier in this section. With no knowledge of health communication, we are limited to able-bodied paradigmatic thinking and a medical model of what disability should look like. It is a poorly drawn schematic that doesn't account for the nuance of what I go through. It is hard to explain to someone who does not have prior mental models of unconscious muscle movements that my muscle spasms are not my choice. Instead, I was just trying to enjoy the moment of finishing high school after mere months earlier having barely survived my accident. I relied on a machine to breathe for me; I was barely alive. It was a triumph that I was even on stage at all. As I wished to simply celebrate the moment, I was thrust into explaining my disability, the medical concepts of spasticity, and that I had not miraculously recovered, to a stranger. I recognized that these people were just excited, but I saw the joy and excitement leave their faces as they felt disappointed by the news. I was able to smile politely in the moment, but as soon as they turned away, I felt the negativity over my physical condition begin to enter my mind. I wish I could have shared the great news that my hands had suddenly started working and I was back on track to a "normal" life. But I could not because they had not.

Much like my experiences when trying to catch a meal at a restaurant, I am unduly burdened as a person with a disability to educate those around me and try to assimilate into neurotypical expectations of society. Though many disabled people, myself included, are not opposed to, or offended by talking about our disorder's physical and mental side effects, a lack of health communication competency leads to inappropriate questions and inappropriate timing. Basic respect for persons, like respecting one's privacy and personal space can be lacking for those who want to know about disability. The same care that is afforded to non-disabled people should be afforded to those of us with disabilities. Normalization of our presence may reduce the stigmatization and taboo that we feel.

SEXUAL STIGMAS, STEREOTYPES, AND NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF PEOPLE WITH PARALYSIS.

Despite the significant role that sex can play in the lives of all people, disabled and non-disabled alike, sexual health and wellness is another area of disability studies that has received little attention in the research literature. The perception of the disabled as having different sexual abilities and sexual functionalities may have important implications for how society will treat them. The stigmas, limited communication, and inadequate resources concerning sexuality and disability can have detrimental effects on the physical and psychological health of disabled young people, along with their well-being (Shah, 2017). Other research has indicated that sexual esteem, body esteem, and sexual satisfaction were strong predictors of self-esteem in people with a physical disability (Taleporos & McCabe, 2002). Like others who are not disabled, people with disabilities experience feelings of desire and love, seek sexual gratification, and many hope to sustain long-term sexual relationships that will lead to starting a family whom they can also care for (Anderson & Kitchin, 2000). The pervasive assumption that disabled people are asexual creates barriers to sexual opportunities for disabled young people, causing them to have lower levels of sexual knowledge and inadequate sex education than their non-disabled peers (Shah, 2017). Sometimes, people's negative attitudes towards disabled individuals lead to evident dissatisfaction, anxiety, judgment, and even avoidance of physical contact (Park et al., 2003).

I experienced such discrimination in a past relationship. During that time, the woman's father believed that we were sexuality abstinent, but not for reasons of waiting until marriage or finding the right moment. Her father was under the impression that I was physically unable to achieve erection. While at a high school basketball game in my hometown, her father was overheard having a conversation in the stands about my sexual ability. He was quoted saying, "At least I don't have to worry about my daughter getting pregnant." My next-door-neighbor interjected into the conversation and proceeded to educate my girlfriends father about my sexual abilities. My next-door neighbor was involved in the discussion, and she proceeded to educate my girlfriend's father about my sexual abilities. She, who is known for being an outspoken woman, proceeded to burst out laughing. She told my girlfriend's father, "You realize that Garrett can still get a hard-on; he just has a different physical sensation than what he did before his injury." I can only hope that her father was at least a little embarrassed. I know that I most certainly was embarrassed when I found out that a conversation was held in public, within my community, in front of a crowd of people who know who I am. For any person, a spinal cord injury is a traumatic, life-altering event. Open discussion of what I can and can't do sexually was yet another byproduct of a lack of health communication competence.

Unfortunately, SCI is associated with sexual impairment symptoms, and for a young person trying to explore their sexuality, this can be very difficult. In the immediate post-injury period, both men and women can lose the ability to have reflexive sexual responses as well the ability to facilitate self-arousal. As the spinal cord heals and reflexes return, erection in men and vaginal lubrication in women can be achieved with genital stimulation if the sacral spinal segments and peripheral pathway conveying sensations are intact (Sipski et al., 2001). However, it is a common misconception that once a person has a spinal cord injury, they can no longer be sexually active. If I could put a dollar in a jar for every time, a person asked me, "Does your penis still work?" I would not need to live off disability benefits provided by the government. In general, the frequency of sexual activity and intercourse decline after a spinal cord injury, but the absence of sexual expression can result from the biological and psychological consequences of the spinal cord injury or reflect the psychological manifestation of emotional loss

and detachment (Alexander et al., 1993; Weiss and Diamond, 1966). Researchers must create a positive relationship between sex education and sexual activity in the SCI rehabilitation and recovery process. Education about sexual recovery should start in inpatient rehabilitation and continue into outpatient therapy if needed. Even though sexual education should be available in the acute inpatient rehabilitation period, the patient advocate should also tailor the information to the individual's particular needs to process the ramifications of their injury. Just as a person would before their injury, individuals should explore their bodies and whatever senses are available to discover the most sensual and pleasing areas.

Research has made considerable advancements in the options available to help with male erectile dysfunction following a spinal cord injury with oral medications being the most frequently used option. Erectile dysfunction medication induces blood flow into the penis resulting in an erection. Some SCI patients utilize both oral medicine and vacuum therapy, which draws blood into the penis using a hand-held pump. A constriction band is then placed over the penis to maintain the erection for intercourse. The assistive device used for vacuum therapy is colloquially referred to as a "penis pump." Individuals who have trouble or less success with oral medications can temporarily restore erections by injecting penile medications into the base of the penis. If reflexive sexual responses never return to the individual with a spinal cord injury, a penile implant can be surgically inserted to help restore sexual functioning. Working in tandem with their urologist, a male with SCI may return to an active sex life. Another common misconception associated with paralysis is that women cannot become pregnant or carry a child in their womb. Having a spinal cord injury does not affect a woman's ability to naturally become pregnant, carry, and deliver a baby, so the decision to have children is made in much the same way as anyone else (McLain et al., 2015). Fortunately, some resources have been developed to help maximize sexual ability after SCI or similar neurological disorders, such as *PleasureABLE: Sexual Device Manual for Persons with Disabilities* (Bailar-Heath et al., 2009).

Addition work is needed as research in sexual ability and perceptions of people with disabilities remains scarce but essential to continue to improve the lives of those in need. Education during screening, assessment, intervention, and discussion of techniques needs to continue to improve. The comfort level of educators, staff, and trainees needs to be evaluated to ensure that they can adequately communicate how to teach people with disabilities, especially young adults, how to express their sexual identity, sexual self-concept, and to know that they have self-worth. Education with an applied practical strategic intervention is needed to address sexuality as a relationship with oneself and others to develop strong clinical practices that optimize and enhance rehabilitation outcomes. Furthermore, improved health education for both disabled and non-disabled people can help to break down mental barriers constructed by neurotypical understandings of sex. Though the repertoire of tools might change slightly, the sex life of disabled people is not as lacking as society at large may assume.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this autoethnography of my disability was to introduce the influential role that communication has played in my recovery and rehabilitation as a disabled person. Both educators and people with disability should be aware of effective strategies for socialization as they may help people with disabilities to competently engage in "taboo" conversations about their condition. It requires effort from those with disabilities and the non-disabled. If a person with a disability is unwilling and unable to discuss the "unspeakable" aspects of their condition, education for the general public may be held back. Though

speaking on one's condition may be considered taboo, there is earnest conversation being sought out by non-disabled people who may desire to learn more about disability and how they can help. That person may also lack the necessary education and the proper guidelines needed for mediating that conversation. Thus, it is my opinion that the disabled community must help to educate our unaware peers in an appropriate and positive communication style.

Communication education is essential for people who may not have had exposure to a person with a disability to understand the guidelines for appropriate and ethical behavior when having a conversation with an individual with disabilities. A negative social experience can lead to adverse social and health outcomes for not only the non-disabled person but the person with the disability. In light of this, health educators should provide communication and coping strategies for dealing with the more difficult conversations associated with quadriplegia and paralysis. Future research should continue to evaluate how neuropsychological and sociological assessments can enhance communication in inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation outcomes by identifying cognitive characteristics of difficult taboo conversations that positively engage therapy. Therapy improvement can ultimately be used to maximize the effectiveness of individualized treatment plans to improve subsequent outcomes of communication strategies for not only people with disabilities but for the non-disabled as well.

Most importantly, these are difficult conversations that must be had. My presence is not unspeakable, my experience is understandable, and the taboo nature of disability holds down a community that is all too often defined by what they cannot do, rather than by what they do.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

ASIA Scale: The American Spinal Injury Association (ASIA) impairment scale or AIS describes a person's functional impairment due to an SCI. This scale indicates how much sensation a person feels after light touch and a pinprick at multiple points on the body and tests critical motions on both sides of the body.

Autoethnography: Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just, and socially-conscious acts.

Disability: A physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in specific tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions.

Hippocampus: A curved elongated ridge that extends over the floor of the descending horn of each lateral ventricle of the brain that consists of gray matter covered on the ventricular surface with white matter. This area of the brain is involved in forming, storing, and processing memory.

Hyperreflexia: Overactivity of physiological reflexes, usually observed in the extremities and limbs. However, hyperreflexia spasticity can be present in organs as well.

Hypertonia: The condition of exhibiting excessive muscular tone or tension.

Implicit: Present but not consciously held or recognized.

Paralysis: Complete or partial loss of function, especially when involving the motion or sensation in a part of the body.

Perceptions: A mental image/quick, acute, and intuitive cognition.

Quadriplegia: One affected with partial or complete paralysis of both the arms and legs, primarily due to spinal cord injury or disease in the neck region.

Rehabilitation: Restoration especially by therapeutic means to an improved condition of physical function.

Schemas: A mental codification of experience that includes a particular organized way of perceiving cognitively and responding to a complex situation or set of stimuli.

Sexual Abstinence: The fact or practice of restraining oneself from indulging in sexual activity.

Spasticity: A spastic state or condition. Especially in muscular hypertonicity with increased tendon reflexes.

Spinal Cord: The cord of nervous tissue that extends from the brain lengthwise along the back in the spinal canal, gives off the pairs of spinal nerves, carries impulses to and from the brain, and serves as a center for initiating and coordinating many reflex acts.

Spinal Cord Injury: Damage to any part of the spinal cord or nerves at the end of the spinal canal. A spinal cord injury often causes permanent loss of strength, sensation, and function below the injury site.

Taboo: A prohibition imposed by social custom or as a protective measure/something that is not acceptable to say, mention, or do.

APPENDIX

Figure 1. The author rides in a red Toyota Sienna minivan that is modified to be handicap accessible for the passenger and the driver.



Figure 2. The author uses a customized “Box” brand wheelchair. The wheelchair was designed and created by Mike Box.



Chapter 21

Conceptualizing Psychiatric “Dirty Work” and Stigma in the Breakdown of the Therapeutic Alliance: A Phenomenological Lens on Mental Illness Discourse

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ABSTRACT

While effective patient-provider relationships can provide vast practical benefits to health outcomes in patients, the fragile therapeutic alliance existing between mental health practitioners and patients has been made ever-contentious due to a lengthy history of neglect, abuse, stigmatization, and misunderstanding. In turn, psychiatric and psychological institutions such as behavioral health centers struggle to address not only increasing rates of mental illness and suicide, but also the emotional labor exhaustion and social taint experienced by their employees. In turn, this piece explores the dialectic tensions between mental health providers and patients through considerations of the ever-present materiality of mental illness stigma, psychiatric “dirty work,” and social taint as they occur in total mental health institutions and conceptualizes the lived experience of mental health practitioners and patients through the establishment of a phenomenological imperative in mental health discourse.

INTRODUCTION

The door once open, I offered no further resistance. First, I was knocked down. Then for several minutes I was kicked about the room--struck, kneed and choked . . . My shins, elbows, and back were cut by his heavy shoes . . . As it was, I was severely cut and bruised. When my strength was nearly gone, I feigned

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unconsciousness. This ruse alone saved me from further punishment, for usually a premeditated assault is not ended until the patient is mute and helpless. When they had accomplished their purpose, they left me huddled in a corner to wear out the night as best I might--to live or die for all they cared. Strange as it may seem, I slept well” (Beers, 1981, p. 52).

According to Street and colleagues (2009), meaningful patient-provider relationships can create pathways to positive health outcomes through increased access to care, greater patient knowledge, shared understanding, high-quality medical decisions, enhanced therapeutic alliance, and perhaps most importantly, patient agency and empowerment. Unfortunately, however, Clifford Beers’ account of being assaulted while wearing a straitjacket by his psychiatrist and attendants is only one of many examples of how an institutionalized history of violence, abuse, neglect, misunderstanding, and stigmatization have muddled the mental health patient-provider relationship. Despite the numerous advances in both public policy and psychiatric practices that have occurred since Beers published his autobiography, *A Mind that Found Itself*, in 1908, from the deinstitutionalization of the American asylum system to the banning of the use of iron chains in mental health facilities, this relationship remains contentious, ever-complicated by the stigma that construes both the mentally ill and mental health practitioners as dangerous, unstable, and untrustworthy (Ebsworth & Foster, 2015).

Addressing this fragile relationship is a matter of life and death; while standard Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has been shown to improve mental health outcomes across a wide range of mental illnesses (Erlangsen et al., 2014), only 9.5% of the US adult population engaged in psychotherapeutic treatment in 2019 (CDC, 2020). In turn, untreated mental illnesses significantly increase the risk for suicide and self-harm behaviors, with 90% of individuals who killed themselves having a diagnosable mental illness at the time of their deaths (AFSP, 2021) and only 46% of these individuals having actually received a diagnosis (NAMI, 2021). Due to the public’s stigmatized view of and lack of engagement with preventative mental health services, behavioral health centers have become the last line of defense in providing crisis intervention services, utilizing a combination of voluntary and involuntary inpatient and outpatient services to rehabilitate patients with severe mental illness, substance abuse disorders, and self-harm ideation or attempts (N-MHSS, 2018). Therefore, behavioral health experts, including psychiatrists – psychologists, psychiatric nurses, and substance abuse experts – provide critical and often life-saving services for many underserved and disadvantaged communities; yet despite such advocacy and service, no one demographic holds a more stigmatized view of mentally ill people than these mental health providers (Huggett et al., 2017; Knaak et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2015). Current scholarship suggests that this practitioner-based stigma could be a major contributor to the 70% of mentally ill individuals who do not seek treatment from healthcare staff (Henderson et al., 2013; Karp, 2020).

As such, it is critical to consider the extent to which the organizational culture of behavioral health centers contributes to this stigma and its effects on mental health outcomes. Although awareness campaigns such as #SeizetheAwkward and Be Vocal have attempted to address the prevalent public stigma surrounding mental illness, mental health issues remain an extremely taboo subject (Parcesepe & Cabassa, 2013) that situates mentally ill individuals themselves as dangerous and undesirable, thus similarly establishing mental health practitioners as dirty workers, who have self-described out-patient psychiatric care as “shit work” (Morris, 2015). Therefore, grounded in the existential turn of the philosophy of phenomenology and the consequent understanding that truth and insight are situated within the materiality of culture and historical epoch, this piece places the breakdown of the therapeutic relationship between mentally

ill individuals and mental health practitioners through intersectional considerations of lived experience across time, space, and place.

Firstly, this piece explores the history of abuse and neglect present within the American psychiatric system, the consequent creation of the “psychiatric survivor” movement, and the dialectic tension this has festered between the conceptualization of mental health practitioners as both caretakers and jailers. Secondly, this piece conceptualizes the lived experience of mentally ill individuals through narrative sensemaking against the materiality of ever-present stigma, arguing that the influence of stigma is always-already present, becoming a material force that actively impacts an individual’s decision-making processes and behavioral judgments. This piece then tracks the influence of stigma transfer on the lived experience of mental health practitioners as dirty workers, exploring how “emotional dirt” and “social taint” directly contribute to psychiatric burnout and actively undermine the efficacy of mental health services. Moreover, this piece proposes communicologies of feminist organizing as a means of disrupting the total organizational structure of behavior health centers that obscures opportunities to address such dialectic tensions. Finally, utilizing these considerations, this piece identifies an imperative for phenomenological analysis, specifically through critical narrative analysis (Langdridge, 2017), of stigma-reduction campaigns meant to address the influence of mental illness stigma on mental health literacy and consequent health-seeking behavior in mentally ill individuals.

Phenomenological psychopathology serves as a critical means of moving beyond positivist understandings of what it means to be mentally ill, instead favoring the personal factors that influence each individual’s manifestation of symptoms, resulting in personalized interventions and systems of care that privilege the experience of the patient. In turn, approaches based in phenomenological psychopathology, such as critical narrative analysis, can be utilized to derive insights that address prominent stigmas through identifying the multivariate factors that contribute to the lived experience of mentally ill individuals. Whether utilized within behavioral health centers themselves to address the outstanding tensions in the therapeutic alliance or to address public stigma as situated within culture, stigma-reduction campaigns meant to address the taboo nature of dialogues concerning mental health must be grounded in the lived experience of those impacted. It is only through understanding these lived experiences that the means through which constructs of mental illness as taboo directly influence the therapeutic alliance can truly be understood.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Behavioral Health Centers: “Reformed” Remnants of the American Asylum Empire

In order to understand the tenuous current state of the therapeutic alliance between severely mentally ill individuals and mental health practitioners, it is critical to consider the implications of the historical treatment of such individuals by psychiatric institutions. In arguably the most comprehensive history of mental health treatment ever written, *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault (1965) details how conceptualizations of madness in Western thought have developed in concert with the current social zeitgeist, resulting in severe implications for accepted understandings and consequent treatment of severe mental illness over time. For instance, at the height of the Renaissance in the 15th century, many writers’ and theorists’ perspectives on “madness” were informed by engagement with ancient Greco-Roman medi-

cal treatises on the four humors, which were previously unavailable during the Judeo-Christian disdain of pagan works during the Dark Ages (Foucault, 1965). Based on the belief that conditions now known as depression (then called “melancholy”) were the result of an objective imbalance between the four humors, Shakespeare crafted severely mentally ill characters such as King Lear, Ophelia, and Macbeth, who were meant to serve as the ultimate embodiment of cosmic tragedy while being nonetheless capable of engaging in meaningful dialogue and interactions (Herold, 1995; Neely, 1991). Beginning in the 17th century, however, accompanying the onset of the “Age of Reason” semi-scientific objectivity concerning severe mental illness vanished, and “The Great Confinement” as Foucault (1965) coins it, began. This era saw the wide-spread physical confinement of severely mentally ill people in European societies on the basis of what was perceived to be the asocial immorality of madness and consequent lack of capitalistic contribution to society, an understanding that would later fuel the inclusion of mentally ill people in Nazi concentration camps under the classification “*Arbeitsscheu*,” literally translating to “work-shy” (Strous, 2007). During this era, infamous medical institutions/workhouses would arise such as *Hôpital général de Paris*, which would become the standard model for later asylum systems. Beginning in the nineteenth century, however, Foucault (1965) argues that the “Modern Era” was characterized by a transition of mental illness treatment from workhouses to psychiatric facilities, as overseen by medical doctors who became committed to finding evidence-based practices for “curing” mental illness, while confining those who could not be “cured” (Foucault, 1965).

Despite the fact that Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* (1965) is one of the most comprehensive accounts of severe mental illness ever written, the “Modern Era” in which his analysis ended still featured some notably archaic understandings of and treatments for mental illness, as realized through the vast network of asylums existing in the United States and Europe at the time his book was published. Unlike the attributes of the “Modern Era,” Foucault (1965) describes, early American psychiatric institutions in the nineteenth century often housed over a thousand patients; the sheer size of these institutions made individual treatment practically impossible, and thus contributed to the American conceptualization of insanity as untreatable (Levine, 1981). In turn, American psychiatric institutions at this time were little more than workhouses and prisons seeking to encourage capitalistic conformity in the “insane poor” – connecting the intersectional taboos of poverty, as reinforced through the predominant Protestant work ethic of the epoch and the taboo of mentally ill as demons – untrained and often abusive attendants often denied the basic human rights of patients under the guise of “treatment” (Hubert, 2002). Following his experience in such facilities over the course of three periods of institutionalization, Clifford Beers, whose account was cited at the beginning of this work, partnered with clinicians to form the National Committee for Mental Hygiene in 1909, which was renamed in 2006 to the well-known mental health advocacy nonprofit, Mental Health America (MHA, 2021). The National Committee for Mental Hygiene would spearhead psychiatric reform issues in the United States, including lobbying against widespread forced and unpaid labor of psychiatric patients in American asylums and promoting mental health legislation reform.

The efforts of the mental hygiene movement reached their peak in the 1940s, when over 6,000 conscientious objectors to World War II were assigned to work in psychiatric hospitals and asylums (Robbins, 1980). These conscientious objectors were horrified by the inhumane treatment of patients they witnessed in these facilities and were instrumental in exposing these practices to the public (Shapiro, 2006). Public outcry mounted, resulting in two distinct movements: the deinstitutionalization movement, or public support of closing large systems of overcrowded and abusive asylums, as well as the anti-psychiatry movement, whose supporters believed that the failures of the asylum system were due to

the inherent failure of psychiatry as a medical discipline (Brown, 1981). The anti-psychiatry movement was (and continues to be) heralded by individuals who call themselves “ex-inmates,” “ex-patients,” or “survivors” who have experienced trauma at the hands of these systems (McLean, 2000). Such has created a dialectic multi-directional taboo in that psychiatric establishments are stigmatized by the general public, as well as the patients who are often forced to utilize their services. The public outcry stoked by these movements and the traumatic experiences of their advocates prompted the passage of the National Mental Health Act in 1946, which created the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), a critical resource to this day for the funding of mental health research in the United States (McLean, 2000). In 1963, Congress passed the Community Mental Health Act, which re-allocated funding previously provided to public mental health hospitals to the creation of community mental health centers or, what are now known as behavioral health centers, which were designed to treat local communities through individualized, short-term care in- and outpatient care as needed (Rocheft, 1993).

In the decade that followed, 90% of public mental health hospitals would close. Unfortunately, the community mental health centers that arose came nowhere close to meeting the needs of the mental ill population in the United States. This is due in part to the fact that community mental health funding has by no means been stable and has been drastically cut from administration to administration (McLean, 2000). Such funding issues have resulted in the vast majority of behavioral centers being located in urban centers, creating massive disparities in treatment for minority groups and individuals in lower socioeconomic strata (Williams et al., 2017). As such, while deinstitutionalization ended many of the systematic abuses perpetrated by the American asylum system, behavioral health centers have been left underfunded, under-staffed, and tasked with attempting to mediate a monolithic history of violence, maltreatment, and institutional failures of the psychiatric discipline. Although massive institutional and disciplinary advances have since occurred, the stigma associated with such failures remains pervasive. The legacy of *Hôpital général de Paris* and its contemporaries have yet to be forgotten; if anything, the ever-present stigma these institutions helped to generate is no less present, only more difficult to effectively identify and counter.

Narrative Sensemaking through Stigmatization: The Seen Unseen

Etymologically derived from the Latin noun stigma, stigmatis (n.) translating literally to “blemish,” the concept of “stigma,” serves two primary purposes: to distinguish the unacceptable from the acceptable and to assign value on the basis of this distinction. Consequently, engaging in a behavior that has been designated as unacceptable is prohibited through culturally situated taboo, which can be conceptually understood as the promise of collective social reprisal to such a perceived violation (Oates et al., 2017). In terms of narrative sensemaking, or the means through which individuals situate their identities through the construction of conducive narratives, identity construction can become contingent on distinguishing oneself from narratively established enemies or others (Anderson, 2020). Historically, conceptualizations of stigma were based on physical distinctions; for instance, the Roman practice of crucifixion was reserved specifically for non-Roman criminals who, upon their death, would have large wounds in their palms and feet, referred to as stigmata. These wounds served as posthumous physical representations of their otherness in the forms of both nationhood and criminality (Retief & Cilliers, 2003). Similarly, in ancient Grecian city-states, captured runaway slaves would be branded with a tattoo on their foreheads that read: “I have escaped, catch me” (Kamen, 2020). Perhaps one of the most prominent recent examples of such physical stigmatization is the “system of triangles” utilized in Nazi concentration camps, with

prisoners wearing armbands emblazoned with one of thirty distinct symbols that distinguished difference on the basis of multiple axes, for instance, distinguishing an individual as both *Absceichen fur Juden*, or of Hebrew descent, and *Arbeitsscheu*, or anti-social (Strous, 2007). In turn, these physical distinctions constructed the physical reality of the individuals who suffer the brands; a stigmatized runaway slave would be confined to the homestead, around individuals who know he need not be recaptured; stigmatized citizens of the German Reich lived in fear of institutional systematic punishment at the hands of the fascist German government, as well as informal social punishment such as that which occurred during the infamous *Kristallnacht*, when rioters destroyed Jewish storefronts and synagogues (Goeschel, 2009). In this sense, stigmatization occurs as a means of self-replicating narrative sensemaking; the dominant class distinguishes itself from that which it does not accept and physically calls attention to those characteristics, which then justifies collective social action against those characteristics based on their distinction in the form of taboo. These narrative accounts are performed synchronically, or through interactions, through a myriad of more innocuous performances, such as describing events as “insane,” to the endemic termination of schizophrenic individuals at their workplaces, all in pursuit of narrative stigma coherence (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011). While systematic physical stigmatization is largely absent from modern Western society, socio-cultural stigmatization still has a significant effect on individuals and often manifests physically in the lived experience of mentally ill individuals, as the implications of stigma are always-already constructing our physical reality.

Current stigma scholarship categorizes stigma into two distinct types. The institutional physical representations of stigma discussed thus far can be categorized as public stigma, “the prejudice and discrimination endorsed by the general population that affects a person” (Corrigan et al., 2012). However, public stigma can be distinguished from self-stigma, the process through which an individual internalizes negative stereotypes propagated through public stigma (Pattyn et al., 2014), as realized through four distinct stages: *awareness*, when an individual is informed of the existence of the stigma; *agreement*, when an individual accepts the stigma as true; *application*, when an individual adapts their behaviors and understandings to align with the stigma; and finally, *harm*, whereby an individual harms him or herself (either physically, emotionally, or socially) due to their deviance from accepted values (Corrigan & Rao, 2012). According to modified labeling theory, the diffusion of public stigma through socialization processes can lead individuals to anticipate discrimination based on their mental illness and, in turn, begin to enact behaviors associated with mental illness stigma (Link et al, 1989). In turn, both perceived and experienced stigma can affect individual behaviors, including limiting self-disclosure and minimizing health-seeking behaviors such as pursuing diagnosis and treatment, exponentially increasing risks for suicide utilization (Bradvik, 2018). In this sense, the influence of stigma surrounding mental illness manifests itself physically an always-already awareness of the implication of one’s being-in-the-world, or the inherent inability to separate one’s being from their life experiences (Langdridge, 2017). From an existential-phenomenological perspective, just as an “I have escaped” tattoo physically limits the places a slave can go and the people with whom he can interact, the ever-present implications of being identified as “mentally ill,” such as perceptions that mentally ill individuals are unstable, dangerous, lazy, etc., prevent such individuals from expressing their feelings, pursuing mental health resources, and limiting interactions that could expose their true identity. While Maisenbach (2010) argues that stigmatized individuals will not always internalize stigmas and can employ a variety of strategies to manage stigma, low mental health literacy rates make effective utilization of such strategies increasingly difficult. Consistent with current scholarship concerning “taboo” issues, the stigma of mental illness

prevents effective social support and health literacy (Hindman & Yan, 2015; Moyer-Guse et al., 2011). Once identified as mentally ill, however, the physicality of mental health stigma only increases.

A great deal of public stigma concerning mental illness is based on neoliberalism derived from Cartesian mind-body dualism – the belief that the mind and body are two distinct entities that interact with one another – leading individuals to perceive mentally ill individuals as too weak to use their physical body to overcome their ethereal mind, despite the materiality of our brains (Thibaut, 2018). This has factored to directly into classifying post-deinstitutionalization mental health facilities as “behavioral health centers;” mental illness is classified relationally in terms of behavior with others; deviation from the accepted physicality of these relationships becomes the impetus for treatment rather than an individual’s personal experience with their symptoms (Lake, 2017). “Recovery” then adopts a similarly relational definition; the patient has not recovered until their behavior in society aligns with acceptable norms rather than when an individual truly experiences fewer symptoms or, more importantly, when the root cause of these symptoms is effectively identified and addressed. However, this stigma is so pervasive that it not only impacts individual health outcomes but it diffuses and alters the efficacy of behavioral health centers and systems of care themselves, specifically, the very therapeutic alliances between mental health practitioners and patients.

The Therapeutic Alliance as “Dirty Work”

Despite going through massive phases of institutional reform, the psychiatric discipline, as well as behavioral health centers and their employees, have been unable to escape the perception of mental health services as “dirty work” (Ashworth & Kreiner, 1999), tasks and occupations perceived to be “disgusting” or “degrading” (Hughes, 1951; Wolfe et al., 2018). Arguably, the public stigma surrounding mental health is so poignant that it is difficult to understand why someone would willingly choose to commit her life to interact with mentally ill people; the assumption becomes that no neurotypical person would choose such a role, and, in turn, the instability attributed to mental illness is then attributed to mental health practitioners (Ebsworth & Foster, 2017). As such, mental health practitioners often experience stigma transfer, or stigma that is derived from an affiliation with an identity group or organization that experiences stigma itself (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009). Although the presence of a strong therapeutic alliance, or the measure of mutual engagement in the therapeutic process of both a psychologist and a patient, shares a positive relationship with desirable mental health outcomes, mental health practitioners will inherently be further stigmatized the more they do their jobs and engage meaningfully with their patients (Ardito & Rabellino, 2011; Degan et al., 2014; Stubbe, 2018).

Perhaps it is the social taint (Ashworth & Kreiner, 1999) of the therapeutic alliance that leads psychologists to characteristically rate the therapeutic engagement of their patients lower than patients perceive their own involvement in treatment (Degnan et al., 2016; Hartmann et al., 2015; Heinonen et al., 2014). This tension can be further conceptualized as the “emotional taint” or “emotional dirt” involved in the therapeutic alliance, as emotional interaction with stigmatized mentally ill populations “contaminates” the practitioners and assists in socially delineating practitioners from the general “clean” population, who have achieved this social purity through the social distance they maintain from these stigmatized groups (McMurphy & Ward, 2014; Rivera, 2014). Unfortunately, this factors directly into the development of practitioners’ stigmatized perceptions of their patients. Practitioners do not feel appreciated because they do not see regular improvement and begin to believe that their patients are not involved enough in the treatment; in turn, practitioners begin to resent their patients (Huggett et al., 2017; Stiawa et al.,

2020; Wong et al., 2015). This focus on relationality and “behavioral” improvement rather than considering an individual’s mental illness disorder and consequent symptoms in context completely overlooks the myriad of intermingling factors that can influence mental health outcomes beyond the quality of the treatment itself, such as patient exposure to trauma, comorbid conditions, biological factors, etc. (Fairburn & Cooper, 2011; Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). Nonetheless, the personal stakes mental health practitioners have in the recovery of their patients, fueled by public stigma, leads practitioners to adopt the very same stigma themselves.

This vicious cycle could explain why mental health practitioners are the only demographic to report a more stigmatized perception of mentally ill people after engaging in anti-stigma interventions. For instance, Wong and colleagues (2015), in partnership with the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA), conducted a study of the efficacy of in our own voice interventions (IOOV), which consist of individuals who have recovered from serious mental illnesses sharing their experiences. For most demographics, perceived stigma was significantly reduced (though less so in male populations compared to that of female populations), yet, “After the IOOV presentation, mental health professionals were significantly more likely to agree with the statement that people with a mental illness are ‘never going to be able to contribute to society much’” (Wong et al., 2015). While this study found that IOOV interventions did somewhat reduce some stigmatizing beliefs held by mental health practitioners, these improvements were significantly smaller than for the general population (Wong et al., 2015). Wong and colleagues (2015) also conducted a brief study of the provider education program (PEP), a presentation led by a mentally ill individual, a family care provider, and a mental health practitioner; this program is intended specifically for practitioners and reports some reduction in stigmatized perceptions but voluntary attendance to these programs is so small that the true efficacy of the intervention cannot be determined. Such suggests that the recorded improvement could be the result of the bias in voluntary respondents: practitioners who are dedicated to improving their practice and reducing stigma. Perhaps when mental health practitioners are exposed to narratives from individuals who have recovered from a mental illness, fueled by stigma, they are only reminded of the patients they were unable to truly help; thus, driven by stigmatized understandings, practitioners attribute this failure to stigma-derived characteristics of all mentally ill people, such as laziness, unproductivity, and instability. Stigma thus becomes a defensive means of narrative sensemaking and emotion management for mental health practitioners as they attempt to treat underserved populations beneath the shadow of the failing yet nonetheless powerful total psychiatric organization.

Feminist Organizing in the Total Psychiatric Institution

It was sociologist Erving Goffman’s (1961) study of the American asylum system that led him to develop the concept of the “total institution,” or organizations that dominate all aspects of everyday life through regimentation that blurred, if not completely erased, the distinction between private and public interactions. Although patients are no longer restrained by iron chains in modern American behavioral health centers, these institutions still possess an iron-clad claim to the emotional expression of their employees. For mental health practitioners, their relative mental stability and “normalcy” serve as the distinction between themselves and their patients; it is the relative stability of the practitioner which supposedly allows for objective diagnosis in treatment. This concept has been thoroughly critiqued by phenomenological psychologists and philosophers, who argue that mental illness cannot truly be understood objectively due to its highly contextual and existential nature (Kusters, 2014; Laird, 1959). Laird (1959) further

argues, “No one *has* schizophrenia, like having a cold. That patient has not ‘got’ schizophrenia. He is schizophrenic . . . The therapist’s hate, as well as his love, is, therefore, in the highest degree relevant. What this schizophrenic is to us determines very considerably what we are to him, and hence his actions” (p. 34). Nonetheless, while attempting to promote honest self-disclosure in their patients, mental health practitioners are expected to actively perform their mental stability (Fixsen & Ridge, 2012), arguably embodying Sartre’s (1943) concept of *bad faith*, a means of self-deception in which an individual acts inauthentically to satisfy external pressures. Further influenced by the vicious cycle of stigma previously discussed, mental health practitioners’ denial of their own mental health challenges becomes an identity imperative within the total psychiatric institution.

Tracy (2000) argues that emotional labor in total institutions, specifically the management of one’s feelings and emotional expressions to satisfy organizational expectations, as mental health practitioners do on a daily basis, can lead directly to burnout. While Tracy’s (2000) work concerned cruise ship employees, the same burnout is widely documented in the mental health profession, specifically called “psychiatric burnout” (APA-PRPS, 2018), which consists of three main components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization of clients, and feelings of ineffectiveness or lack of personal accomplishment (National Academy of Medicine, 2021). The American Psychological Foundation (2018) found that between 21% of 61% of mental health practitioners experience burnout, while in a study of 9,000 psychotherapists, Simionato and Simpson (2018) found that over half of their respondents reported moderate-high levels of stress and burnout. In the context of behavioral health centers, psychiatric nurses, who are responsible for the moment-to-moment interactions with and treatment of patients, are especially susceptible to burnout, with both the emotional wellbeing of patients and psychiatric nurses being significantly affected by the quality of inpatient psychiatric environments (Hanrahan et al., 2010; Morse et al., 2012; Wampole, 2018). Moreover, it is critical to consider the fact that emotional labor for mental health practitioners in behavioral health centers is further complicated by these individuals’ potential for exposure to trauma in their workplace. In particular, psychiatric nurses could be exposed to suicide, self-harm behaviors, incontinence, unsettling behavior, and a myriad of other stressors including managing physical and emotional interpersonal conflicts (Hall & Hall, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014; Townsend & Morgan, 2018). By not being allowed the opportunity to address and unpack potentially traumatic workplace experiences, this emotional labor could be a direct contributor to stigmatized perceptions in mental health practitioners; their only option is to be apathetic towards the patients they are supposed to be treating. Otherwise, these practitioners may experience psychiatric burnout and risk institutional judgment or even losing their jobs (Zoller, 2013).

The extensive emotional labor required of employment within the total psychiatric institution propagates the vicious cycle of stigmatization that occurs between patients and mental health practitioners and, thus, is increasingly worthy of reform. As such, theories of feminist organizing could provide a great deal of critical insight into addressing these issues. For instance, Ashcraft (2001; 2006) proposes a model of feminist bureaucracy and its main components, organized dissonance and strategic incongruity, which frame tensions as meaningful and necessary dialectics, potentially serving as an avenue for introducing innovation into the supposedly objective, diagnostic nature of current psychiatric practice. Behavioral health centers that utilized these organizational shifts would create opportunities for employees to wield their lived experience in the workplace to identify and challenge practices that are harmful to their emotional expression and actively collaborate to create innovative solutions. Moreover, Ashcraft & Mumby (2003) and Buzzanell (1994) utilize a feminist communicology of organization to advocate for integrative thinking and connectedness in the fostering of meaningful organizing. In the

context of behavioral health centers, this could mean that patients and mental health practitioners could come together to determine for themselves what sort of training would be most effective in minimizing the cyclical stigmatization which occurs in psychiatric institutions. Rather than continuing to foster the distinction of sane/insane, and objective/subjective, these dialectic tensions could be openly explored and used to derive advancements in mental health care that benefit practitioners and patients. The current divide between these two groups forces both patients and practitioners to suffer, while collective self-disclosure would have a pointedly ironic therapeutic quality.

Therefore, any program, training, or intervention that is created to reduce the vicious cycle of stigmatization that occurs in behavioral health centers and within individual therapeutic alliances must consider several key factors: the historical tradition of abuse and mismanagement that has characterized psychiatric institutions, the multi-dimensional and intersectional influences of stigma on the therapeutic alliance, the pressure of total psychiatric institutions on emotion work in mental health practitioners, and actively consider existential approaches that are derived from the lived experiences of mental health practitioners and psychiatric patients. As such, to effectively conduct a thematic analysis of training programs, stigma-reduction programs, or even organizational imperatives developed to address these issues, this work borrows from a methodology situated within the existential turn of psychological study, specifically: phenomenological psychology.

Establishing the Phenomenological Imperative

The philosophical practice of phenomenology began with the work of Edmund Husserl, a German mathematician who sought to challenge the notion that positivist, or universal, truths could be realistically determined by considering the means through which the human experience influences how the world appears to us (Langdrige, 2007). Husserl challenged the Cartesian view of consciousness wherein an individual's object of focus is always turned inward; we are aware of our own thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and this prevents true engagement with the world; we only engage with our mental presentations that which surrounds us (Felgl, 1958). Instead, Husserl posited an outward focus of consciousness in the form of *intentionality*, or the idea that there is always an external object of our focus; as such, our consciousness is always relationally formed through our interactions with the world, thus situating thought within the *public realm of consciousness* (Langdrige, 2007). Therefore, the focus of phenomenology is not what things *are*, but rather, how they seem in their appearing, in our experience with them. Husserl further distinguishes between *noema* (that which is experienced) and *noesis* (the means by which something is experienced) in order to situate the being-in-the-world, or the extent to which existence and experience are inexorably linked (Langdrige, 2007).

Despite this linkage, however, Husserl introduced the concept of *epoché*, through which we address the presuppositions that drive our experience and attempt to understand how they are doing so in a given interaction. The process of utilizing *epoché*, also referred to as *bracketing*, allows us to challenge the natural attitude, or the natural state of the human mind that assumes we are perceiving phenomena in their entirety, prompting us instead to become critically aware of the hidden aspects of that which we perceive. The bracketing process can be divided into three critical elements: 1) Description – complementing the qualitative ideal of thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in which the total experience of consciousness is described in as much detail as possible, excluding all aspects of a phenomenon that are not involved in conscious experience; 2) Horizontalization – actively refusing to privilege some perceived details over others and resisting the urge to immediately create hierarchies of meaning; no

matter how mundane, every minute detail must be observed and considered before consideration of whole relationships; 3) Verification – positing the influence of relationships between details and returning to the text to justify our reasoning (Langdridge, 2007). These considerations, in turn, based so deeply on the importance of human experience, directly led to the existential turn that would create phenomenological psychopathology.

The existential turn in phenomenological psychology was championed by an acolyte of Husserl’s, Martin Heidegger. Rather than referring to individuals as humans, Heidegger referred to individuals as *Dasein*, often translated as being-in-the-world but which translates from German to literally “being there” to establish that temporality is the defining aspect of existence (Heidegger, 1962). The *Dasein* is never static, but always considering what it will become while actively becoming; rather than a tree which simply is, the *Dasein* never is but is constantly becoming; human experience cannot be described as a noun but as a gerund – conscious existence is dynamic and fluid (Heidegger, 1962). This concept would become fundamental to the development of phenomenological psychopathology, as our understanding of mental illness must be grounded in the context of an individual’s experience and their own development rather than positivist assumptions of what we should expect from, for example, a schizophrenic individual (Merleau-Ponty, 1974). The existential turn therefore influenced the hermeneutic turn in phenomenological psychopathology, which argued that the goal of science should not be to produce a-historical and a-cultural truths about the world but to situate knowledge within space and place, specifically within history and culture. Such informed the development of the preceding literature review of this piece (Gadamer, 1975).

These considerations culminated in the work of Paul Ricoeur, who posits two modes of interpreting meaning: *demythologizing*, which involves empathetic utilization of our own life experience to engage with the systems of meaning-making apparent in the text, mirroring the participatory paradigm of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 2015), as well as *demystifying*, derived from a sense of “revolutionary suspicion” that seeks to uncover hidden meaning that is obscured within a text (Ricoeur, 1984). Ricoeur’s work thus becomes inextricably connected with narrative theory, as Ricoeur argues that intrinsic human meaning can only be discovered through analyzing the relationship between metaphor and narrative, which provides insight into the gerundive process of human sensemaking systems (Ricoeur, 1981). As such, the application of phenomenology to the psychological process allows for deeper consideration of the lived experience of mentally ill people through a critical contextual emphasis on their own being-in-the-world. It is this same critical eye and existential commitment that stigma scholars must bring to our analysis of stigma reduction campaigns, organizational imperatives, and training systems.

While there are several forms of phenomenological psychological analysis, each of which emphasizes different critical turns in phenomenological philosophy, I believe that critical narrative analysis, based on both descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenological psychopathology and emphasizing exploration of experience through a critical analysis of narrative accounts, provides an extremely beneficial framework (Langdridge, 2007). Although this method was designed to analyze interviews conducted with severely mentally ill individuals to uncover their narrative sensemaking practices, I believe that it can also help to derive meaningful insights concerning the narrative strategies behavioral health centers use to establish the perceived experience of both mental health practitioners and patients. To understand the current pitfalls in the therapeutic alliance, we must consider interactions from the standpoint of each individual involved in this relationship and create appropriate strategies to address the critical concerns of each party. Through six key stages which complement standards of qualitative communication scholarship,

critical narrative analysis (CNA) can assist scholars in pursuing the phenomenological imperative of understanding the lived experiences which influence the efficacy of the therapeutic alliance.

CRITICAL NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Stage 1: A Critique of the Illusions of the Subject

Critical narrative analysis is initiated by reflexive self-critique in which the researcher utilizes the critical hermeneutics of suspicion to determine how aspects of her lived experience could impact the questions she asks, the data she will interpret, and the very basis of her analysis. Langdrige (2007) identifies six hermeneutics of suspicion, though when delving into the specifics of each hermeneutic, there are likely sub-classes worthy of distinction. Using myself as an example, as a mentally ill man suffering from generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and having recovered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), I have had interactions with psychiatrists, psychologists, both positive and negative, that inform my perception of the American mental health system. Having experienced stigmatized perceptions of mental health in relation to my own masculine performance, I have a very personal stake in uncovering, identifying, and addressing stigmatized practices, the very same practices that kept me from seeking treatment for symptoms I had been experiencing since I was a child. While I have been traumatized by interactions with the American mental health system, I have in many ways been saved by it, but only because of my privilege as a middle-class white man, which afforded me more access to mental health resources than most. It is this experience that drives my research and my desire to improve this system. I cannot engage in this process without my mental illness or my experience; as such, embodying the participatory qualitative paradigm, in the proposed analysis, I will have to consider how the materials I am analyzing inform and are informed by my own experience as a mentally ill man (Link & Guba, 2015). As such, effective critical narrative analysis involves a researcher’s rigorous self-reflexive critique of his own subjectivity.

Stage 2: Identifying Narratives, Narrative Tone, and Rhetorical Function

After engaging with the text through the process of horizontalization, in which no detail is privileged, the researcher must identify the distinct narratives that are occurring within a given text. The researcher can distinguish between narratives through consideration of tone, function, attitude, perspective, purpose, and argumentative strategies, then organize each narrative accordingly. In current qualitative scholarship, this would most closely resemble the process of axial coding, through which a researcher identifies recurrent motives which speak to the emic perspective of the subject, or their perception of reality (Fetterman, 1989). Thematic connections are not considered yet; rather, points of focus are simply identified and organized into narratives. These narratives factor directly into consideration of lived experience, as we must understand not only what is being said, but also how discourse can help us to identify the most prominent issues of concern and those narratives which are being left out. If the narratives identified do not speak to the lived experience of mentally ill individuals, the critic must then identify opportunities for these narratives to be existentially altered.

Stage 3: Identities and Identity Work

Following the identification of concurrent narratives, critical narrative analysis tasks the researcher with considering the rhetorical work that each narrative contributes to identity sensemaking. How does this individual (or institution) perceive itself? What does he think his role or purpose is? Who are his perceived allies and enemies, and what are the consequences of these associations? How does this organization want to portray its connection to certain issues? What are the implications for these connections? This process aligns with Murphy (1998) and Tracy’s (2000) work concerning relative authenticity and emotion management in total institutions; we must not only consider what identity the respondent is attempting to convey but also the degree to which this identity is authentic or allows for discursive resistance behind the scenes.

Stage 4: Thematic Priorities and Relationships

Having identified the identity work being conducted in the text, the researcher should have the information necessary to begin grouping key information into themes, in so far as they relative to the rhetorical construction of identity and narrative function. In current qualitative scholarship, this most closely resembles the process of open coding suggested by Denzin & Lincoln (2000), through which the researcher identifies meaningful connections in recurring motifs and relates these themes at a macro level with research questions in the form of “key frames.” Langdridge (2007) distinguishes critical narrative analysis, however, by emphasizing the importance of horizontalization in thematic identification; themes should not be more highly valued than any other detail in a text but should be used to supplement our understanding of the recurrent aspects of the text that help to construct identity through narrative.

Stage 5: Destabilizing the Narrative

Once the researcher identifies the major narratives and groups them thematically, she must utilize the same hermeneutic circle with which she interrogated her own subject position to foster a hermeneutic of suspicion in consideration of the subject’s perspectives. While stage two tasks the researcher with considering the identity of the subject, stage five prompts the researcher to actively confront the social pressures which could inform the means by which the subject is utilizing narrative strategies. In this stage, Langdridge (2007) states that engagement with current critical-cultural and sociological theories is essential to understanding the basis of these sensemaking practices. For example, if a scholar were analyzing training materials meant to reduce stigmatized perceptions held by mental health practitioners working at a behavioral health center, she might consult critical scholarship in organizational communication, such as the work of Tracy (2000) in consideration of how total organizations choose to represent the emotional well-being and needs of their employees.

Stage 6: Critical Synthesis

Finally, critical narrative analysis tasks the researcher with synthesizing the findings of the study in a manner that privileges the voice of the subject. All findings should be contextualized within the implications they have on the lived experience of the subject, in direct consideration of their being-in-the-world. Researchers should be making a point to discuss the hermeneutic(s) of suspicion used in their own self-

reflexivity, as well as their interrogation of the subject position of the respondent. Critical synthesis within critical narrative analysis allows opportunities for researchers to provide phenomenological guidelines that future scholars can use to continue their research; expanding the reach of the participatory paradigm and allowing other scholars to contribute to the ongoing discussion. This final step of the analysis should be as transparent as possible, thus limiting the effects of unidentified or undisclosed bias. The existential experience of both the researcher and the subject should be made pointedly clear. In turn, this completed process allows for the creation of analyses that can effectively identify the role that lived experience plays in the trainings meant to improve the lives of mentally ill individuals.

Implications for Future Research

Critical narrative analysis, as situated in the traditions and philosophy of phenomenological psychopathology, provides an insightful framework for conducting thematic analysis that speaks to presentations of identity, especially in the case of mental health. Through further engagement with stigma scholarship, the historical and political position of behavioral health centers themselves, feminist communicology of organizing, and scholarship concerning the influence and importance of the therapeutic alliance on health outcomes, all of which will help to form my hermeneutics of suspicion, it is my hope that scholars can utilize this framework to engage directly with stigma reduction training programs and campaigns in order to determine how these resources can be improved and effectively represent the lives of behavioral health center employees, as well the lives of the patients they treat. For instance, college campuses throughout the United States utilize training programs such as green dot (Alteristic, 2021), campus connect (SPRC, 2007), and QPR (QPRI, 2021) in an attempt to address the stigma surrounding mental illness and suicide, but do these programs present mentally ill individuals fairly or accurately? Some police departments utilize CIT (CITI, 2021) training in an attempt to address the extremely high rate of fatal occurrences between severely mentally ill individuals and law enforcement officials (TAC, 2015), but does this training effectively characterize severely mentally ill people based on their experience in these interactions? Critical analyses of such programs and answers to even these most basic of questions simply do not exist. It is our job as advocates and stigma scholars to pursue answers to these questions to address the ever-apparent implications of stigma in American mental healthcare.

CONCLUSION

As this chapter’s coverage of the current literature suggests, the stigma present in the American mental health system has disastrous impacts on both mental health practitioners and their patients. It is only through understanding the existential nature of both of these groups that we can hope to enact meaningful change – a process that will require a great deal of affective labor from both parties – that we can address the complexities and dialectics of the taboo nature of mental illness and consequently better the lives and preventing the deaths of mentally ill individuals in our country and around the world.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Asylum: An institution that cared for mentally ill individuals, the majority of which would close following the passage of the Community Mental Health Act in 1963.

Behavioral Health: Considerations of the means by which mental processes impact everyday life in the form of action and behavior.

Critical Narrative Analysis: A critical means of analysis that affords scholars the opportunity to utilize phenomenological principles to consider the relative efficacy of mental health discourse.

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Emotional Labor: The process of managing feelings and emotional expression in order to fulfill the requirements of a certain occupation.

Health-Seeking Behaviors: Those actions (or inactions) that individuals undertake when they believe they are experiencing a health problem for the purpose of finding an appropriate healthcare solution.

Institutionalization: The process by which mentally ill individuals are subjected and admitted to mental health treatment centers.

Patient-Provider Communication: The communicative processes that occur between healthcare providers and their patients.

Stigma Transfer: Stigma that is derived from an affiliation with an identity group or organization that experiences stigma itself.

“Total Institution”: As coined by Erving Goffman, organizations that dominate all aspects of everyday life through regimentation that blurred, if not completely erased, the distinction between private and public interactions.

Section 6

Grief Communication

Chapter 22

Grief as Taboo: Lewis, Burleson, and the Communication of Grief

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ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores the communication of grief, often viewed as a taboo topic of conversation. The study connects author/Christian apologist C. S. Lewis's views of grief, as provided in his book *A Grief Observed* to communication scholar Brant Burleson's research on supportive, comforting messages. Loss and grief connected to jobs, grades, missed opportunities, relationship breakups, and so forth are worthy of study because loss affects communication. However, this inquiry examines the loss associated with the death of someone deeply loved. Lewis's reflections on what grief feels like and how it changes over time are overviewed, as are his reflections on how communication with the bereft occurs and ought not to occur. Burleson's work on supportive communication is summarized, including the comforting effects of messages with religious content. Parallels are drawn between Lewis's ideas and interpersonal communication scholarship on the oft-viewed taboo topic of grief.*

Grief still feels like fear. Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting; just hanging about waiting for something to happen. It gives life a permanently provisional feeling. It doesn't seem worth starting anything. I can't settle down. I yawn, I fidget, I smoke too much. Up till this I always had too little time. Now there is nothing but time. Almost pure time, empty successiveness. (Lewis, 1961, p. 33)

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INTRODUCTION

Grief is a part of life. In writer for *The New York Times* A. C. Shilton's view (2021), "Grief is an innate part of what it means to live a full and rich life as a human" (p. D6). Most, if not all, people experience grief and sorrow and all need support and comfort. If this experience is universal and human, why is grief so often viewed as a taboo subject of communication?

Baxter and Wilmot (1985) define a taboo topic as a "form of informational control," meaning a topic perceived to be "off limits to one or both of the relationship parties" (p. 254). In her work on family secrets, Vangelisti (1994) conceptualized a taboo topic as something people refrain from speaking about "to avoid negative reactions from others" (p. 116). Is part of the taboo view of grief connected to how little education, training, advice, or role modeling many people receive on how to communicate grief or respond to others' grief? One goal of this chapter is to counter the view that communicating about grief is taboo. In that pursuit, the objective of this chapter is to address this question: What is the best way to communicate with someone who is grieving, given a prevailing view that grief is a taboo topic?

BACKGROUND

A long-held interest in C. S. Lewis, particularly his most personal book, *A Grief Observed* (1961), prompted this author's current inquiry into grief as a taboo topic of communication. While many people know and admire Lewis for his writing and radio sermons, only in recent decades have scholars from the discipline of communication begun to study Lewis as a "master communicator" (Beebe, 2020, p. 1). When this chapter's author studied Lewis at Oxford, under communication scholar Professor Steven Beebe's tutelage, Lewis's writing about grief was of compelling interest. But it became clear that effort needed to be made to ground or connect Lewis to a contemporary program of research that resided in the communication discipline. That motive led to a bridge between Lewis's work on grief and interpersonal communication scholar Brant Burleson's research on supportive and comforting communication.

Lewis links grief and communication in *A Grief Observed*. When reading about how Lewis grieved the death of his beloved wife, Joy, passages about the awkwardness of people's communication with him about his loss emerge as salient. People often admit that their aversion to grief events stems from an awkwardness about what to say or how to comfort the bereft. Confronting such emotions happens less frequently for most people than happier occasions, so people also tend to have less experiences that are instructive in how to communicate about a loss and how to respond appropriately to the bereft.

Role models for grief and communication tend to be members of the clergy, people in roles that require certain rituals or conventions of communication. As Thai (2018) explains, "Religion may offer words of comfort, for every religion has its rituals and ceremonies to mark out death and grieving" (p. 1). However, Thai also contends that "religious ritual does not always offer the interpersonal or conversational words we need to support one another, to help each other grieve" (p. 1). The average layperson is untrained in forms of communication readily produced by members of the clergy, nor would such communication from a layperson likely be perceived as appropriate. The absence of experience in how to effectively respond to someone's grief contributes to the view that expressions of grief are taboo, as though grief should be censored.

Professor Emeritus of gerontology Kenneth Doka (1984; 2002) has published extensively on grief, describing how grief becomes "disenfranchised" (p. 5). Doka (2002) contends that often the bereaved

are “not accorded a ‘right to grieve.’ That right to grieve may not be accorded for many reasons, such as the ways a person grieves, the nature of the loss, or the nature of the relationship.” He adds, “Although the person experiences grief, that grief is not openly acknowledged or publicly observed” (p. 5). While most cultures around the world legitimize grief experienced over the loss of someone deeply loved, other types of loss are subject to “grief rules,” which Doka (2002, p. 6) views as expectations or norms that dictate to the bereft how to behave, feel, and think. For example, the loss of one’s job or livelihood, infertility, a marital separation or divorce, a decline in health, or a relocation may cause feelings of grief, but those feelings are less recognized and validated than those associated with the loss of a loved one. Arguably, grief over such losses is also less often communicated to others.

The context or setting for expressions of grief also plays a role in how and *if* grief is a topic of communication. Bauer and Murray (2018) conducted interviews with workers across a variety of professions who had experienced the death of a loved one, to discover how those workers dealt with their grief when back on the job. One interviewee felt like her work team was a second family; she was the most comfortable of all the interviewees in expressing her grief at work. However, she described her crying episodes at work as “not uncontrollable,” reporting that she only shed “little, tiny little tears” the first day back at work after her bereavement period (p. 68). Most interviewees drew a solid boundary between public and private spheres, explaining how they focused on the work at hand and catching up on missed tasks and projects. They talked of keeping emotions in check and communication of their grief restrained with colleagues, supervisors, and clients because “you’re at work, not at *home*” (p. 68). While their study explores how grieving people minimize or downplay their grief at work rather than how coworkers respond to grief, Bauer and Murray’s results further reinforce the notion many people hold that grief is taboo—something to be contained, managed, and relegated to the home front or other private settings.

Because of its view as taboo, communication about grief tends not to be a topic that receives much, if any, coverage in communication courses, which some contend is an oversight. Granted, some communication scholars include coverage of the topic in their courses, but these offerings are more the exception than the rule. Interpersonal communication courses and research tend to focus more on the positive, choosing to explore the more “rosy” aspects of relationship initiation, development, and maintenance. Journals and textbooks are rife with studies of how to communicate attraction, how to initiate conversations in hopes they will lead to other conversations, and the art and skill of self-disclosing, listening, and responding to show interest in someone, learn about others, and reveal oneself. Even research on conflict tends to focus on how to resolve or manage it, so as to enhance closeness in a relationship. Studies on breakups focus on efficacious methods of ending relationships, so that one or both parties feel as affirmed as possible, given the situation. Less research exists on how to express feelings of profound loss, how to behave appropriately at a funeral or memorial service, or how to not embarrass oneself when struggling for the “right thing to say” to people who grieve.

One caveat deserves mention: In the early 1990s, Cupach and Spitzberg edited a volume entitled *The Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication*, which was a radical departure for interpersonal communication scholarship since it examined the underbelly of relating to others. Since that time, more edited volumes and offshoot studies by other scholars have been published. However, surveys of the topics included in these works reveal little to no examination of grief, loss, and bereavement, nor responses of comfort and support to such emotional states. Instead, areas receiving “dark side” attention include such topics as these: avoidance, secrets, deception, hurtful messages, partner complaints and criticism, teasing, bullying, stalking, sexual harassment, sexual assault, infidelity, revenge, and jealousy. This handbook on taboo topics offers an opportunity to examine why some subjects are difficult to discuss—why some

subjects give many people pause and anxiety, often leading to embarrassment, inappropriateness, and communication avoidance.

Perhaps another reason for the lesser emphasis on communication and grief as a topic of research and teaching is personal. One's own experiences with grief (and its faithful companion, dread) make it a difficult thing to think and write about. People in the throes of grief might be in the best position to study it, but why would people want to study something as devastating as grief when they are going through it or have recently emerged out of it? Grief saps energy and creativity. If one moves past it, one may not likely to want to revisit it because of its power to take over one's life or because of something more basic—a simple need to *move on*. Granted, people do publish accounts of their grieving experiences, but such work tends to emerge more in the popular press, less in scholarly research. Certainly, other works address the grieving process—Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's work on the stages of grief is likely the most well-known. But these resources tend to come more from a psychological, therapeutic, even spiritual standpoint than a communication one (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2007).

Here is an alternative theory: What if a bereft person *doesn't* move on? Who gets to say how long a mourning period should be? Perhaps grief as a topic of research and teaching is complicated by individualistic approaches to it, meaning each person is different in responses to loss. Does one's culture pressure people to "get it together" and recover from loss on some pre-ordained timetable? If one feels that kind of pressure, one's communication will reflect it. People's responses to others who grieve will likely convey a desire to help them get over it. What if someone *never* gets over it? When this author's mother died, leaving her in the throes of deep grief, this author often said to people, "I won't ever get over it, but I'll get through it."

Pop culture critic S. E. Smith (2020) wrote an article (ironically for *Bitch* magazine) entitled "Good Grief," in which she interrogated how grief is depicted in the media and dealt with in U.S. culture. She contended that society's lack of tolerance for individuals' varying responses to grief and trajectories for coping with it have created a view of grief as illness. In television shows that feature frequent death (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was her prime example), rarely is grief depicted; when it is depicted, it tends to be fleeting, as though expressing the emotions surrounding loss won't be tolerated too long by viewing audiences. Smith wrote:

The raw reality of a grief that cannot be muffled after some quiet crying in the bathtub is disruptive to a world where discussions of mourning often include the phrase "moving on". . . . Society's tolerance for grief is finite, though this does not reflect the reality of how people respond to death. Grieving takes time, something a busy society does not offer, despite the fact that each death is different, each mourner is unique, and everyone processes trauma differently. Does grief make us sick, or are we sick of grief? (pp. 26-27)

A fear or dread of experiencing grief *again* may also keep people from studying it or offering instruction on how to communicate it or respond to it. Granted, repeated grieving is likely in this life, as people lose other people, goals, and things that give pleasure or comfort in this life (including one's own health and vitality). But experiencing a grief passage in one's life, coupled with the fear of a "repeat performance," may make it low on the list of topics one might want to pursue for a scholarly or instructional endeavor.

"Lion" of the communication discipline Brant Burleson began researching comforting communication in the 1980s. Studies later evolved into broader investigations of supportive communication, specifically person-centered messages applied to a variety of contexts (Burleson, 2008; Burleson et al., 2007; Bur-

leson et al., 2011; MacGeorge et al., 2011; Rack et al., 2008; Wilkum & MacGeorge, 2010). Burleson's studies continued until his untimely death in 2010; since then, his spouse, colleagues, and students have extended the work. A great deal of Burleson and colleagues' research speaks to communication and grief. It presents an odd mix of "rosy" and "dark," in that it explores supportive communication, but also messages associated with loss, in an effort to help people learn how to communicate with others in some of their darkest hours. It also offers hope, in that people might learn how to say something that truly helps someone in a time of loss or need. Burleson's studies speak to this notion of taboo topics, offering practical suggestions derived from research, to help people use person-centered messages to overcome the challenges of talking about grief. High and Dillard's (2012) meta-analysis of messages that successfully console the bereft reinforce Burleson's findings. In studies included in the meta-analysis, participants indicated that verbal person-centered messages were significantly associated with perceptions of positive social support. Research on supportive and comforting messages creates an interesting bridge between C. S. Lewis and communication scholarship.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Given the state of research and teaching on the subject, the purpose of this chapter is to explore grief, primarily in terms of communicating with people who grieve. This exploration is not about grief pertaining to things like job losses, disappointing grades, missed opportunities, relationship breakups, or other losses that can be significant in life, but not comparable to grieving the death of someone deeply loved. All loss is worthy of study because loss affects communication, but the focus for the current inquiry is the kind of loss Lewis experienced and wrote about and which, in part, Burleson examined—grieving the death of someone deeply loved. The need is great to diminish or remove the taboo descriptor from this kind of unique human communication.

C. S. Lewis and Grief

C. S. Lewis married later in life than was typical for his day. He married American Joy Davidman Gresham in a civil ceremony, at first more as a way to help his friend stay in England than out of romantic love for her. Later "eros" love emerged and he married Joy in a religious ceremony, all the while knowing she was afflicted with cancer and would not likely live long (Dorsett, 1988; Lewis, 1960). By all accounts, they had an extraordinary relationship (Sayer, 1988). After Joy's death in 1960, Lewis experienced overwhelming grief. He put pen to paper, as his assistant Walter Hooper (1996) suggests, as a means of expressing his emotions and thoughts, using a familiar practice that allowed him to vent and work through this period. The result was a short work entitled *A Grief Observed* (hereafter referred to as *Grief*; Lewis, 1961), which Hooper says is "the result of a brave man turning his attention towards his own pain and carefully observing what it was doing to him" (p. 194).

Lewis' tutee and biographer George Sayer (1988) calls *Grief* "desperately truthful" and views it as Lewis's attempt to liberate himself from emotions that impeded his spiritual development (p. 393). Alister McGrath (2013a, 2013b), more recent Lewis biographer, writes that Lewis's exploration of grief is "unrelenting in its intellectual questioning and probing" (2013a, p. 342) and "documented without any attempt to blunt its force or soften its tone" (2013b, p. 10). Lewis did not write *Grief* intending its

publication, but later agreed to publish it under the pseudonym N. W. Clerk (Sayer, 1988). Since it was not originally written with publication in mind, perhaps the work is even more revealing.

One learns the most about Lewis's grief experience from reading *Grief* because, by most accounts, Lewis talked to few people directly about what he was going through. (Lewis would have likely validated Doka's view of grieving rules.) Perhaps Lewis also viewed grief as a taboo topic. One of Lewis's tutees, John Wain (1992), writes of some disappointment with Lewis's impersonality, suggesting the following:

Lewis's inability to share his inner life is of course no disgrace to Lewis. On the rare occasions when some kind of personal element was needed—in his work or in his relationships with people—what held him back was not lack of honesty but simply a deep-seated inhibition that he could not break. (p. 70)

Whether this is a fair assessment or not is not the issue; it merely represents one viewpoint from one of Lewis's students. Like many in the teaching profession, revealing personal experiences and emotions is not something readily done with students. Perhaps, rather than being inhibited or viewing grief as a taboo topic, Lewis drew a boundary with those he tutored. Maybe he was simply a private person, generally less forthcoming about personal matters, which makes the revelations in *Grief* all the more powerful.

Grief reveals Lewis's progression through stages of bereavement after the death of his wife, Joy (referred to as H. in the book). Readers of *Grief* witness Lewis reveal an emotional state, then shift to a more intellectual or academic discussion of various thoughts, only to shift back again to his emotions. The back and forth—the yelling and the musing—offers interesting insights into the grieving process. Such shifts are also indicative of deep grief. Rational moments of pondering and articulating ideas butt up against periods of anguish, bewilderment, and anger, during which communication may fail us. In his analysis of *Grief*, Hooper (1996) divides Lewis's journey into four parts, labeled consecutively: “The trough of despair,” “Beginning the climb,” “A slow ascent,” and “Into the dawn” (pp. 196-199). These labels are not indicative of Lewis's steady climb from despair to understanding; shifts back and forth through varying states of being emerge throughout all but the last passage.

“Back and forth” may be imprecise language here, because Lewis implies that grief is cyclical or that it occurs in waves. In *Grief*, Lewis likens his grief to a bomber jet, “circling round and dropping its bombs each time the circle brings it overhead” (p. 41). He contrasts grief (the metaphor of the bomber's menacing circling) with pain, which he describes as a “steady barrage” of soldiers below in a trench, “hours of it with no let-up for a moment” (p. 41).

Others who have written accounts of their grief experiences over the death of a deeply loved spouse also use a wave metaphor or language similar to it. Joan Didion (2005), in her bestselling book *The Year of Magical Thinking*, details the sudden, unexpected death of her husband and her resulting grief. Didion writes the following:

Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life. Virtually everyone who has ever experienced grief mentions this phenomenon of “waves.” (p. 27)

Author Sheldon Vanauken (1977) became friends with Lewis through their correspondence first about Christianity, then later about love, loss, and grief. Lewis called Vanauken's loss of his wife, Davy, and how it drew Vanauken closer to God a “severe mercy,” later the title of Vanauken's book. The experiences chronicled in Vanauken's and Lewis's correspondence would no doubt become resources when Lewis

Grief as Taboo

later grieved his own spouse's death. While Vanauken doesn't describe grief as occurring in waves per se, he uses similar language:

For one instant Davy stands before me, warm and real and alive. That is followed an instant later by the awful awareness that this Davy, too, is dead. Then, irresistibly, come the tears. On the day following, she will not stand before me; there will be no tears. Each memory calls forth warm living reality once; it is followed by another little death and the tears. (pp. 194-195)

Lewis's Descriptions of People's Reactions to His Grief

Pertinent to this chapter and its focus on the communication of taboo topics are two passages in *Grief*: (1) Lewis's descriptions of people's reactions to him during his grieving period; and (2) Lewis's thoughts about what people say when trying to console the bereft. In regard to the former, within the first few pages of *Grief*, Lewis writes:

An odd byproduct of my loss is that I'm aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet. At work, at the club, in the street, I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up their minds whether they'll "say something about it" or not. I hate it if they do, and if they don't. Some funk it altogether. R. has been avoiding me for a week. I like best the well brought-up young men, almost boys, who walk up to me as if I were a dentist, turn very red, get it over, and then edge away to the bar as quickly as they decently can. Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers. To some I'm worse than an embarrassment. I am a death's head. (pp. 10-11)

Lewis takes note of other people's discomfort when they see him during this period after Joy's death. It is fascinating that he would notice with such detail the looks on people's faces as they decide whether or not to approach him and what to say if they do. The language of "will they 'say something about it'" from the above excerpt reveals how significantly Lewis's grief and loss affect his perceptions of the world around him during this period of time. He tends to process everything through a veil of sorrow, which is quite often the case for people in deep grief. But since Lewis was a keen observer of human behavior, it is also likely that his perceptions were more accurate than other grievers' might be (Beebe, 2020). No doubt, people did not know what to do or say around him during this period of time.

On those rare occasions in which Lewis ventured out into public after Joy's death, Lewis believed himself to be a source of embarrassment for people. Again, this is a common reaction for bereaved people who tend to cloister themselves. Dealing with the mundane world while grieving, especially grieving someone who has departed the mundane world, can cause people to become solitary. The bereft often prefer their own company or other private distractions so they don't have to put on a brave face for people or even register people's discomfort with their presence. These responses reinforce the "grief as taboo" notion. For many people, being in the company of someone who is obviously grieving *is* awkward, even if it should not be. Is saying something about the event that caused the grief the most helpful thing, versus ignoring it and operating as if it did not happen, as if there were a grander scheme of things and life simply continues? Ignoring or denying grief contributes to its view as taboo. If one says something, is one dwelling on a negative or is one helping another person process an event in his or her life? If grief is ignored, is that unfeeling or a means of helping the person feel normal? It is quite the dilemma.

But Lewis explains that it is a dilemma for the bereft as well. Lewis writes "I hate it if they do, and if they don't," meaning people's decision to "say something about it" (*Grief*, p. 10). Lewis's being of two minds on the issue is indicative of grief as well, because most grieving people are anything but consistent. Lewis mentions someone, identified only as "R." who has "been avoiding me for a week" (p. 10). From

reading Hooper's (1996) *Companion and Guide*, one might guess that the R. is Roger Lancelyn Green, a friend whose company Joy and Lewis enjoyed on a trip to Greece not too long before Joy's death. R. might possibly be R. E. Havard, long-time Lewis friend and fellow member of the Inklings (a renowned group of scholar/friends that included J. R. R. Tolkien, during Lewis's days at Oxford). Hooper writes that Lewis dined with several Inklings' members in the years after Joy's death, including Havard, but whether either Green or Havard was present enough in Lewis's life right after Joy's death—enough for Lewis to perceive being avoided by the man—one can only venture a guess.

Since Lewis was an educator, it is not surprising that he would find the reactions of “well brought-up young men, almost boys” the most interesting. In terms of nonverbal communication, Lewis's description is telling, first about how the young men spot Lewis and blush, then try to decide whether to approach him or not. Those who approach Lewis do so warily, as though he were a dentist, say something awkward (and brief), then head to a bar immediately thereafter. Lewis writes that these young men “edge away,” which is another interesting detail of nonverbal communication—the fact that they “edge away” instead of moving away quickly, walking away normally, or choosing to walk with Lewis and extend their company with him. When we “edge away” from someone, this kinesic cue nonverbally communicates our discomfort because it is not a quick or definite motion. As another explanation, edging away may reveal ambivalence about removing oneself physically from the other person, more like a slow retreat than a definitive or typical separation. The encounters with the young men must have been brief, but it is likely they were many, given Lewis's notoriety and the small-town locales in which he lived and worked.

It feels odd to be the cause of someone's embarrassment. This odd feeling likely led Lewis to suggest that the bereft be isolated like lepers (Some people view the whole notion of talking about leprosy or lepers to be taboo). This passage offers us a glimpse into Lewis's caring soul, that he would be dismayed at being the cause of someone's discomfort, someone's dilemma as to how to behave. Lewis would not have wanted it so.

From an interpersonal communication standpoint, Lewis's encounters with people and their attempts to respond to him appropriately during his bereavement are telling. It is likely that few people in Lewis's day (and, arguably, this is still the case) received any direct instruction on communicating with the bereft. They also likely had few role models of people who communicated sensitively in grief situations. Many Christian clergy speak either in Biblical terms, as though Scripture “heals all wounds,” or in clichés that their seminary days taught them to say or that they have learned by rote. When in discomfort, many people resort to the old tried and true; perhaps they should not.

Lewis's Thoughts on Comforting Communication: What Not to Say

The second aspect about communication found in *Grief* that warrants more in-depth exploration is a passage about things people say to the bereft that do not provide help or comfort. Lewis is thorough in this regard, providing six examples with which he takes issue. He does not appear to do this to criticize well-intended people; some examples are his own thoughts, not necessarily what people actually said to him. His critique seems more in keeping with a general reflection on the experience, coupled with his interest in human communication.

What Not to Say #1: Hooper (1996) labels Chapter Two of *Grief* the beginning of a healing process or a climb out of the depths of despair. In this chapter, Lewis writes that it is less than a month after Joy's death and that he was “appalled” when he re-read his first chapter of *Grief*. His being appalled chiefly surrounds what he perceives as self-interest in how he was processing Joy's passing. He expresses

concerns about the “slow, insidious beginning of a process that will make the H. I think of into a more and more imaginary woman” (p. 18). Lewis then critiques the statement “She will live on forever in my memory,” which he likens to Egyptians keeping the dead with them by embalming them (p. 20). Falling in love with Joy’s memory Lewis views as “a sort of incest” (p. 20). Saying something about a dead loved one “living on in memory” constitutes ineffective communication, in Lewis’s estimation.

What Not to Say #2: Next, Lewis ponders where Joy is now or where she “went” upon her death, a common pondering for many of us. Lewis writes: “Kind people have said to me, ‘She is with God.’ In one sense that is most certain. But I find that this question, however important it may be in itself, is not after all very important in relation to grief” (p. 24). Lewis then offers one of his classic supposals—a technique used to great effect to get readers/listeners to transcend the confines of their minds to consider other possibilities. This particular supposal is about how humans, upon death, might take the shape of “supercosmic, eternal somethings,” such as “spheres,” “globes,” or “circles” that intersect (p. 24). When people attempt to situate Joy as being with God, that is not comforting to Lewis because he writes that his “heart and body are crying out, come back, come back. Be a circle, touching my circle on the plane of Nature” (pp. 24-25).

What Not to Say #3: Lewis’s passage about intersecting circles leads to another communicative response to the bereft that Lewis calls into question—the suggestion that the departed loved one “goes on” or “lives on” elsewhere. This cliché to the bereft is understandable, a feeble attempt to express something one may feel is taboo. It is *something to say when one does not know what to say*, but Lewis exposes it for the poor attempt it is. Again, Lewis does not criticize people who try to console him, but instead offers thoughts that give pause about communication, comfort, and grief.

What Not to Say #4: After the passage about where Joy has “gone” and the idea that she “lives on” somewhere, Lewis addresses someone referred to only as “poor C.,” who quotes to him St. Paul’s words from the Bible, “Do not mourn like those that have no hope.” This statement astonishes Lewis (*Grief*, p. 26). He explains that he finds it curious that people should encourage the bereft to apply to themselves “words so obviously addressed to our betters” (p. 26). Lewis writes that St. Paul’s message only comforts people who “love God better than the dead,” so one can assume that, at that moment in his grieving process, Lewis does not see himself in this description (loving God more than Joy). Thus, the advice is astonishing (and one can assume, of no consolation to him).

What Not to Say #5: Next on the list of what *not* to say is that the loved one is at peace now that she or he is dead. Lewis asks, “What makes them so sure of this?” (*Grief*, p. 27). This assumption raises the author of this chapter’s ire as well, when someone suggests that one’s dearly departed loved ones were not in peace on this earth (with oneself), so it is good that they are dead so they can now be at peace. Lewis is right—how does one know the loved one is at peace? Is there no conflict in heaven? Lewis questions, “Why are they so sure that all anguish ends with death?” and contemplates if Joy grieves her separation from Lewis just as Lewis grieves her death (p. 27). Why assume peace is achieved through death? Why believe it is comforting to tell someone who is grieving a death that the person was not in peace while alive, but now peaceful in death? That harkens back to a comment often heard during “the viewing,” a public ritual some families hold when a loved one has passed. People often stare down into a casket and remark, “He/she looks so peaceful.” Why say this? Is it because morticians do their level best to make dead people look happy to be dead, or at least peaceful about the fact that they are dead?

What Not to Say #6: In Lewis’s view, “She is in God’s hands” is another disconcerting, failed effort to comfort. Lewis debunks this statement, suggesting that Joy was in God’s hands all the time she was alive, but he saw what God’s hands “did to her here” (*Grief*, p. 27). In a show of anger toward God for

ravaging Joy with illness, Lewis wonders if God's hands "suddenly become gentler" upon Joy's death (p. 27). This writing may be Lewis's means of instructing us about poor uses of language or it may simply reflect the agony he felt at the time and his anger toward God (which he later resolves).

The experience of one of this author's university colleagues reinforces Lewis's view of this aspect of grief communication. After the sudden, unexpected death of her husband in the spring of 2013, the colleague said that the worst thing communicated to her was the following email sentiment: "I cannot mourn Robb because I only feel joy that he is with our Lord." This colleague felt something Lewis felt: Messages about the departed loved one being "with God" or "in God's hands" provide little comfort and can actually have an opposite effect than intended. The fact that the loved one is now "with God" means that she or he is no longer "with us," which is the source of the grief. A related cringe worthy comment of this sort is when people suggest "God has called your loved one home." Many people do not believe (a) that God caused someone's death, and (b) that God calls anyone home, like a mother would shout down the street for her kids to stop playing and come home for supper. Lewis found no consolation in such statements.

Interpersonal Communication to Comfort and Support

Communication scholar Brant Burleson produced a substantial body of work on comforting and supportive communication. The research launched in the early 1980s, with an emphasis on communicating to comfort others (Burleson, 1983, 1984; Burleson & Samter, 1985). Over time, Burleson and colleagues broadened the inquiry into supportive messages—how to construct them, which messages evoke the most positive responses from others, how supportive messages impact relationships, etc. (Burleson, 2008; Burleson et al., 2005, 2007; Henningsen et al., 2009; Servaty-Seib & Burleson, 2007). The framework Burleson built informs current research (Bodie et al., 2016, 2018, 2021; Carr & Wilder, 2016; Frost et al., 2017; Harvey-Knowles, 2018; High & Crowley, 2018; High & Solomon, 2014, 2016; Rains et al., 2020). The research extends to healthcare settings, including studies examining effective ways caregivers and health professionals can construct supportive messages for patients and family members (Harvey et al., 2019; Ray et al., 2021). Studies of supportive messages delivered via social media also extend Burleson's work (High & Buehler, 2019; Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Owlett, 2018; Pennington, 2013, 2017; Rossetto et al., 2015; Sabra, 2017; Thai & Moore, 2018).

Burleson on Supportive Communication

An overview of supportive communication research can be found in Burleson and colleagues' chapter in *The SAGE Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* (MacGeorge et al., 2011). The chapter begins personally, with an explanation of what transpired since the first version of the chapter was published in the handbook ten years prior. Most notably, the first and third author married and became parents. Then, sadly, Brant Burleson died of esophageal cancer just before the chapter revision was completed. The correspondence of the work activity to the personal tragedy is stunning, but perhaps it empowers the research. In a fitting tribute, the chapter closes with what Burleson would have recommended as future directions for research on supportive communication.

Supportive communication is defined by MacGeorge et al. (2011) as "verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid" (p. 317). Research on supportive communication has its roots in both sociological and psychological perspectives,

with a great deal of research emerging from psychotherapists and clinical psychologists, obviously in the business of helping people in need of aid. However, MacGeorge et al. (2011) distinguish communication perspectives from that of sociology and psychology in five regards: (1) the central role of communication in helping others; (2) a direct link between communication and well-being; (3) a focus on intentionality, specifically helpers' intentional responses to targets' perceived needs; (4) an emphasis on quality of communication as opposed to a quantity or "more is better" approach; and (5) documenting links between supportive communication and emotional distress, problem-solving, and coping.

Burleson (2008) conducted multiple studies examining types of supportive messages and their effects on people with varying demographics, psychological characteristics, and situations that cause distress. Supportive message types differ according to person-centeredness, defined as "the extent to which messages explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualize the distressed other's feelings and perspective" (p. 208). Messages are typified as Highly Person-Centered (HPC), Moderately Person-Centered (MPC), and Low Person-Centered (LPC). HPC messages recognize and legitimize a person's feelings and help the person communicate her or his emotions, often framing feelings within a broader context. MPC messages also recognize a person's feelings, but the recognition is more implicit than explicit; sympathy is extended and attempts are made to distract the person from what he or she is feeling. LPC messages deny, even criticize, a person's feelings and contain advice as to how she or he should behave and feel. (Here, again, is a connection to Doka's (2002) grieving rules.) While Burleson and colleagues do not expressly say so, empathy is more associated with HPC messages than MPCs or LPCs.

Burleson (2008) addressed this central question: "Do different types of people prefer different types of comforting messages when coping with different degrees of upset?" (p. 212). Beyond subject and helper demographics (e.g., age, sex, nationality) and psychological characteristics, Burleson explored the level of severity of the problem causing the distress (mild, moderate, and severe problems with corresponding emotional upset). The upshot of these studies was this: Regardless of demographics (subjects' or helpers'), psychological characteristics, or severity of problem, people significantly preferred HPC messages over MPCs and, especially, LPCs. According to Burleson (2008), HPCs "explicitly recognize and legitimize the other's feelings, help the other to articulate those feelings, elaborate reasons why those feelings might be felt, and assist the other to see how those feelings fit in a broader context" (p. 208). Highly person-centered messages have been determined to help people in need (1) behave in ways that help safeguard or restore their health; (2) return to a healthy level of self-esteem; (3) feel better about the upsetting problem or situation; and (4) reduce the impact of emotional distress on their health (MacGeorge et al., 2011). In short, HPC messages are extremely *audience-centered*, thus they are perceived as preferable and most helpful.

Burleson and Colleagues on Communication and Grief

After years of work on communication, support, and comfort, Brant Burleson and various colleagues and students focused attention on a specific form of supportive communication which is germane to this chapter: the taboo topic of communication and grief over the death of someone deeply loved. Interestingly enough, their term for this variable is "grief management" (Burleson et al., 2007, 2011). What would Lewis think of trying to "manage" grief? Is grief something to be managed or merely abided?

Rack et al. (2008) examined bereaved young adults' perceptions of grief management messages. These researchers first make the case for studying grief (pervasiveness, devastation to one's health and well-being, etc.), then justify studying young bereaved adults, citing research on college years as a life

period in which a significant percentage of people first experience grief over a close loved one's death. Rack et al. (2008) suggest that grief is best conceptualized as a social process rather than a private, internal one, contending that "People rarely grieve alone" (p. 401). Here we find a key contrast between the Burleson camp and its views of grieving as a social, communicative process and C. S. Lewis, who grieved in private and wrote as a way to process what he was experiencing, never intending his words to be published.

Rack et al. (2008) asked 105 bereaved young adults to assess the helpfulness of sixteen communication strategies, varied by level of person centeredness, designed to comfort people who are grieving. Other variables examined in the study were subject demographics (e.g., comparing college-aged subjects to other age groups of bereft subjects in previous studies; sex/gender), personality characteristics (e.g., the extent to which subjects believed social support was available to them; a subject's tendency to prefer cognition to emotion), and situational factors (e.g., cause of death of the loved one; level of closeness to the deceased loved one). Of the sixteen categories of helping messages in Rack et al. (2008), three correspond to Lewis's critique of communication to the bereft.

Category 1: Discuss Being Reunited: This category contains such messages as "Someday you will reconnect," "Your spirits will always be together," and "In time, your spirits will be reunited" (Rack et al., 2008, p. 412). These statements represent people's attempts to situate the dearly departed, as though people need to have a sense that, just as they were together with their loved one in life, so will they be when both are dead. These messages correspond with Lewis's thoughts about where Joy "went" upon her death, whether she was "with God," and a view of Joy "going on" (*Grief*, p. 24). Just as Lewis found such thoughts and comments unhelpful, so did subjects in Rack et al.'s (2008) study. Respondents rated messages from a low score of 1 (very harmful) through 5 (very helpful). Messages within the Discuss Being Reunited category drew an average score of 3.28. These messages are not the worst things one could say or do for someone who is grieving, but they are not the best.

Category 2: Highlight the Positive: Messages in this category include "He/she is no longer suffering," "He/she is no longer in any pain," and "He/she no longer has any worries" (Rack et al., 2008, p. 412). These statements were perceived by subjects to be about as unhelpful as messages in the first category, receiving a 3.19 average score. A Category 2 message corresponds to Lewis's discussion of the loved one finally being at peace in death, reflective of Lewis's question, "Why are they so sure that all anguish ends with death?" (*Grief*, p. 27). Subjects in Rack et al.'s (2008) study found these kinds of messages about as unhelpful as did Lewis.

Category 3: Provide a Religious Perspective: This category is reflected in messages such as "It is God's will," "We are not always meant to understand God's purpose," and "The Lord works in mysterious ways" (p. 413). (That last statement gets said *a lot* at funerals and memorial services, and probably should not). Messages in this category were perceived by subjects to be less helpful than messages from the first and second categories, receiving a 3.01 average score. Such attempts to use religion or faith to comfort someone who is grieving correspond to Lewis's critique of the person who quoted Scripture to him, saying "Do not mourn like those who have no hope" (*Grief*, p. 26). Apparently, a bereft person would rather hear someone's thoughts on where the dearly departed have gone than to hear conjecture about God's hand in the passing.

In terms of Category 3 messages, researchers continue to further investigate perceptions of religious comforting messages. In Wilkum and MacGeorge's (2010) study, contrary to earlier research findings, subjects responded positively to comforting messages containing religious content, most specifically those implying a heavenly reunion between the grieving person and the deceased loved one. Other re-

search detected an ethnicity effect. In two studies, HPCs were generally preferred to less person-centered messages; however, African-American and Asian-American subjects viewed emotional support as a less-important skill and rated HPC messages as less effective and sensitive than Euro-American subjects (Samter & Burleson, 2005; Samter et al., 1997). Samter et al. (2011) cited research documenting African-Americans' "higher levels of religiosity" than other U.S. cultural groups (p. 8). They then compared Euro-American and African-American subjects' views of two sets of comforting messages: (1) religious strategies in which such concepts as God, religion, prayer, and faith were embedded in HPCs, MPCs, and LPCs; and (2) non-religious strategies. Findings revealed that Euro-American subjects responded more favorably to non-religious strategies (regardless of the level of person-centeredness), viewing them as more sensitive and effective forms of comforting communication, while African-American subjects perceived just the opposite, preferring religious strategies.

Research continues in this area in an effort to more fully understand the effects of religious content in messages designed to offer comfort to people who are grieving. Perhaps, with continued study, we can determine how to best communicate with the bereft, an endeavor C. S. Lewis likely would have appreciated.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the topic of communication and grief, specifically grief over the death of someone deeply loved, in an effort to make grief less of a taboo topic of communication. The key question that drove this chapter was, What is the best way to communicate with someone who is grieving?

C. S. Lewis addresses communication and grief in his book, *A Grief Observed*, in which he describes his experience with grief over the death of his wife. Lewis explores what grief feels like and how it changes over time, as well as how communication with the bereft occurs and ought *not* to occur. In that discussion of what *not* to say, six examples Lewis provides in *Grief* were examined in this chapter, augmented by a colleague's anecdote and opinions stemming from this author's own grief experiences. The discussion then shifted to an examination of contributions from a line of research interpersonal communication scholars have pursued for decades. In specific, Brant Burleson's body of work on comforting and supportive communication was reviewed, with particular attention to person-centered messages, including messages with religious content, and their comforting effects on the bereft. Parallels were drawn between Lewis's reflections and research findings by interpersonal communication scholars on grief and communication.

In an age of openness where people are encouraged to tell all, to blur the lines between private and public, one wonders if perhaps communication and grief should not meet. Maybe, in keeping with how Lewis handled it, grief is a solitary experience, something that truly cannot be shared orally, supported, or "managed." When studying communication, sometimes a realization comes that communication may not "fix" all situations, heal all wounds, or, in this case, bring a grieving person along. It may be, rather, that the journey must simply be experienced and (hopefully) endured. Perhaps this author has just nullified her own research.

This author comes to this conclusion only, in the next moment, to come to a different one. As a communication scholar/professor, this author believes that "talking about it makes it better," and that if scholars continue to research the best things to say and the best way to say them, scholar-teachers can

help people in the throes of grief, strengthening relationships along the way. The research begun by Brant Burleson and continued through the efforts of his colleagues and their students holds promise that people can better understand how to communicate most effectively with the bereft.

With all this pondering, this author has certainly thought about her own grief experiences. She has grieved deeply the loss of a loved one three times in this life. During those periods, did anyone say anything that made a difference, that truly helped or diminished the grief? Memories fade regarding someone doing so, so perhaps no one did; more likely, the emotion and exhaustion of the experience made people's communication a blur. But it is easy to clearly remember the people who were *there*, who by their presence or gestures were of great comfort. One often hears people say, as a justification for not attending a funeral or not approaching someone who is grieving, "I just don't know the right thing to say." This statement, when made to this author, draws the reply: "There is no right thing to say. Just be there (aka, vote with your feet)." Not having the right thing to say is no excuse to avoid the discomfort of grief, so maybe nonverbal communication should take precedence over verbal when it comes to grief.

Such back and forth views on the "to communicate, to not communicate" issue are akin to the movement many grieving people feel, like Didion's waves or Lewis's circling. Suffice it to say that the more difficult aspects of communication—those elements that are not rosy, that do not necessarily lead to some grand "aha" of clarity, or that do not engender intimacy between people, but that represent some of the rawest moments of our humanity—those communicative moments must continue to receive attention as scholars conduct research and professors teach students. Communicating about grief and with people who grieve simply should not be taboo.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Bereavement: A time of grieving or mourning great loss, typically of someone or something deeply loved.

Comforting Communication: Communication that soothes people in time of need, loss, grief, and so forth.

Grief: A common response to the loss of someone or something.

Highly Person-Centered Messages: Messages that recognize and legitimize a person's feelings and help the person communicate emotions, often framing feelings within a broader context.

Low Person-Centered Messages: Messages that deny, even criticize, a person's feelings and contain advice as to how she or he should behave and feel.

Moderately Person-Centered Messages: Messages that also recognize a person's feelings, but the recognition is more implicit than explicit; sympathy is extended and attempts are made to distract the person from what he or she feels.

Person-Centered Messages: Communication designed with a specific person in mind; messages geared to only one person.

Supportive Communication: Verbal and nonverbal communication that affirms or reinforces others.

Chapter 23

Communication and Disenfranchised Grief: Managing the Unrecognized Grief of Pet Loss

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ABSTRACT

It's a painful reality for many pet owners that at some point there will come a time when they must grieve the loss of their animal companion. In fact, the death of a pet is perhaps one of the most common sources of stress that families experience, occurring almost two times more frequently than stress associated with children leaving home. However, the profound sense of anguish one feels after losing their pet is often invalidated, unrecognized, or unsupported by others. Doka refers to this stifling of the grieving process as disenfranchised grief, where individuals are sometimes shamed, dismissed, or discouraged from experiencing/expressing grief. Despite a growing body of literature detailing the experience of pet loss, few scholars have explored how this type of loss is communicatively disenfranchised and managed. Thus, the current chapter surveys scholarship on human-pet relationships and disenfranchised grief in order to develop a research agenda for communication scholars interested in studying disenfranchised grief, pet loss, or the intersection of these topics.

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I posted a few days ago about my 14 year old kitty passing. I've had her since she was a kitten and her brother and I are really struggling to adjust. She passed on Monday. He's getting better and so am I – I don't cry as much and I'm doing my work and chores.

But I'm still really, really sad. I'm not enjoying much of anything and I have a hard time laughing or even playing with the other cat. I'm writing about my kitty, all the good times we've had and trying to grieve that way...

But my partner is very different. He was sad and devastated on Monday but by Tuesday evening he was getting frustrated with me crying. Last night he was almost pretending nothing happened. I know he's sad too, but he compartmentalizes so much that for him, this is a coping mechanism.

He's frustrated by my sadness and I'm frustrated by his attempts to joke and laugh and just go about life as if nothing happened.

I don't know how to navigate this. I need his support, I feel so alone in this grief, even though I know he is just grieving differently. But being around each other is really hard right now. And I desperately want him to hold me and comfort me and for us to share our memories of her... (Excerpt from post to r/Petloss).

INTRODUCTION

It's a painful reality for many pet owners that at some point there will come a time when they must grieve the loss of their animal companion. Whether the animal dies, runs away, is stolen, or becomes lost through other means, loss is an inevitable part of the relationship between pets and their human counterparts. In fact, the death of a pet is perhaps one of the most common sources of stress that families experience, occurring almost two times more frequently than stress associated with children leaving home (Gage & Holcomb, 1991). For many individuals, losing a pet gives rise to grief - a common response to loss involving emotional (e.g., feelings of despair or guilt), physical (e.g., insomnia, loss of appetite), cognitive (e.g., hazy thoughts, suicidal ideations), behavioral (e.g., lack of motivation, self-destructive behaviors), and spiritual/identity-related (e.g., shifts in values or beliefs) symptoms. Although grief is typically associated with loss-by-death, we maintain that individuals can experience intense distress from other forms of loss as well. For example, older persons placed in long-term care facilities confront feelings of grief that come from their loss of home and sense of familiarity (Van Humbeeck et al., 2018). In another non-death grief study, Bailey (2018) found that partners of alleged sex offenders experienced grief resulting from psychosocial loss – a loss occurring when the departed person is still alive, but has been physically, socially, mentally, or spiritually altered in some way so that the “person they once were” is gone. Grief is even present in moments where there is no clearly defined loss (i.e., ambiguous loss; Boss, 1999; Boss et al., 2011), such as when the family members of trans persons treat the transition process as a “living death” (Norwood, 2013).

Unfortunately, the profound sense of anguish one feels after losing their pet is often invalidated, unrecognized, or unsupported by others (Kemp et al., 2016; Meyers, 2002), as the loss of an animal is

commonly seen as less significant than the loss of a human, and thus, undeserving of mourning when they are gone. Doka (1989; 2002) refers to this stifling of the grieving process as disenfranchised grief. Despite a growing body of literature detailing the experience of pet loss (see Kemp et al., 2016, for a review of qualitative studies), few, if any, scholars have explored how this type of loss is communicatively disenfranchised and subsequently managed. Thus, the current chapter surveys scholarship on human-pet relationships and disenfranchised grief in order to develop a research agenda for communication scholars interested in studying disenfranchised grief, pet loss, or the intersection of these topics.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUR PETS

The significance of animals in human lives has been well documented by historians and anthropologists. At the end of the Ice Age, most human societies transitioned from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to one that relied on agriculture; this shift fundamentally changed the relationship between humans and animals. A mutual process of coevolution, the domestication of animals subsequently led to farming and animal husbandry (i.e., breeding/caring for animals). Over time, animals began to take on roles in human society that did not include overt utilitarian purposes, such as companion animals (Gray & Young, 2011; Serpell, 1996; Walsh, 2009). The American Veterinary Medical Association has long argued for the mutually beneficial relationship between people and animals (“Human-animal bond,” 2016). Historically, companion animals, such as dogs and birds, have been instrumental in helping individuals combat anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Fine, 2015). In fact, many pet owners share that companion animals provide benefits in the form of “affectionate attachments,” known as the human-animal bond (Beck & Katcher, 2003; O’Haire, 2010).

Indeed, the human-animal bond has persisted across time. At the end of 2016, nearly 57% of American households owned a pet, and pet ownership is on the rise (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2018). Many pet owners consider their animal companions to be a member of the family (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Fox, 2006; Power, 2008); in fact, 88% of American pet owners report that they view their pet as a bona fide member of the family unit (Ballard, 2019). The recognition of our pets as formal members of the family is paralleled in the emotional connections we form with them. For example, Kurdek (2008) found that college students with high attachment to their pet dogs experienced emotional bonds similar to those felt towards parents and siblings. Some scholars have hypothesized that we develop closeness with our animal companions because they fulfill attachment functions such as providing a sense of safety and comfort (Doherty & Feeney, 2004; Sable, 1995). In some cases, pets act as an alternative for traditional family roles to people who are unable to or are uninterested in having a human child. Greenebaum’s (2004) ethnographic account of “Yappy Hour” at a local dog cafe revealed that participants viewed themselves not as pet owners, but as mothers and fathers to their “fur babies.” Because pets naturally take on child-like roles in many family structures, it is unsurprising that high attachment to pets is most common among singles, divorcees, widows, childless couples, newlyweds, and empty-nesters (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988).

The status of pets within the family is (re)constructed through symbolic interaction between pet guardians and their animal companion(s). Belk’s (1996) metaphor analysis of human-pet relationships revealed that pets gain status as family members through anthropomorphism (i.e., attributing human characteristics to nonhuman things) and taking part in family rituals. For example, we give our pets names, talk to them as we would a baby, dress them up in clothes, house them in aquariums in our bed-

rooms, and include them in our family photos. Other times we might sneak the family pet a bit of “table food” so that they can enjoy a meal with us, and we may even throw our pets birthday parties or “gotcha days” to celebrate their presence in our lives and in our homes. No matter what symbolic behaviors we engage in with our pets, Belk (1996) asserts that “they [pets] are clearly objects of affection as well as sources of gratification. It is their metaphoric status as loved ones that keeps pets from being regarded as mindless machines, programmed computer games, or even livestock” (p. 139).

Scholarship on human-animal interaction maintains that pets play a critical role in the upkeep of individuals’ physical and mental wellbeing. Physiologically, pet ownership has been linked to decreased risks associated with coronary heart disease (Anderson et al., 1992), and in one study, individuals who owned a pet had higher rates of survivability following hospitalization than those persons without a pet (Friedmann et al., 1980). One hypothesis for this correlation is that owning a pet provides opportunities for exercise and access to social support as individuals attempt to manage uncertainty associated with their health condition. In terms of their contribution to mental health, many individuals report feeling a sense of unconditional love and support from their pets that is beneficial in coping with distressing life events, such as bereavement (Akiyama et al., 1987; Bolin, 1987). Indeed, many pet owners report that their relationship with their pet offers a safe, trusting environment where they can share their thoughts freely without interruption or criticism (Brooks et al., 2016). Moreover, the comfort and affection provided by pets has been shown to reduce feelings of loneliness, especially among the elderly (Rijken & van Beek, 2011) and those living with chronic illnesses (Stern et al., 2013; Wells, 2009). Owning a pet has also been found to draw attention away from distressing psychological symptoms associated with mental illness, such as suicidal ideations, auditory hallucinations, panic attacks, and irritability (Brooks et al., 2016, Stern et al., 2013). And, pets can have a positive impact on our overall self-concept and wellbeing; owning a companion animal has been associated with higher self-esteem, greater intellectual development, and enhanced perspective-taking abilities (Purewal et al., 2017). Additionally, animals serve as a “social lubricant” for interaction among humans (Fine, 2015). For example, companion animals can encourage human-to-human interaction when caretakers take their animals to parks or pet-friendly stores. In these situations, the animal may function as an ice-breaker when individuals begin a conversation about the pet’s breed, care, or behaviors. Purewal and colleagues (2017) found that having a companion animal increased individuals’ social networks and social interaction. Lastly, relationships with animal companions can offer invaluable opportunities for self-reflection, existential meaning making, and identity formation (Brooks et al., 2016), as many individuals report that pet ownership provides their life with an overall sense of purpose and value (Bradley & Bennet, 2015). As we have exemplified, pets can significantly enrich the lives of their human counterparts.

Experiencing Pet Loss

Given that we develop close, familial relationships with our pets, the inevitable loss of an animal companion can be devastating and cause intense feelings of bereavement. Research has shown that the closer an individual is to their animal companion, the more intense and persisting grief responses become (Field et al., 2009; Gerwolls & Labott, 1993; Sharkin & Knox, 2003). In some cases, grief following pet loss can become so intense that it mirrors the trauma of losing a human family member or romantic partner (Archer & Winchester, 1994; Field et al., 2009; Podrazik et al., 2000). For example, symptoms of grieving the death of a pet include feelings of despair and anguish, social isolation, interruptions in sleep and appetite, and seeing “grief ghosts” (i.e., hallucinations of the lost; Gerwolls & Labott, 1993;

McCutcheon & Fleming, 2002). Unfortunately, the loss of a pet also means that the bereaved lose a once valuable source of social support and potentially the connections they had to the human world through these pets (e.g., casual conversations at the park and/or interactions with veterinarians and staff).

While the term “pet loss” is most commonly used to describe scenarios involving the death of a companion animal, we argue that grief can arise from other forms of loss as well. Each year, approximately 6.5 million companion animals enter U.S. animal shelters, and 1.5 million shelter animals are euthanized (ASPCA, 2021). Relinquishment of a pet to an animal shelter is yet another source of grief for many owners, with the decision to surrender an animal being neither a casual nor a trivial one (DiGiacomo et al., 1998). Distress as the result of pet relinquishment in childhood can be felt by adults even decades after and exacerbated in some cases by parents not allowing their children to grieve the loss (Edwards et al., 2019).

DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

Even though losing a pet can be a significantly traumatic experience for pet owners, the resulting grief is not always recognized by friends, family, or other members of their support network. In fact, Rémillard et al.'s (2017) analysis of phone calls made to a pet loss hotline revealed that 23% of callers had no source of support to rely on as they grieved. At a cultural level, their findings suggest that pet loss is not yet fully seen as a socially acceptable reason for grief. Indeed, many individuals lamenting over the loss of their pet experience disenfranchised grief, a phenomenon conceptualized by Doka (1989) as “grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (p. 4). Kenneth Doka's seminal writings on disenfranchised grief emerged from a robust body of literature that detailed the experience of human loss from psychological (e.g., Kübler-Ross, 1969; Lindemann, 1944) and bio-physiological perspectives (Engel, 1961; Fredrick, 1971). Yet, very few scholars at the time had studied the social dimensions of loss, prompting him to inquire about the larger sociocultural dynamics that influence the experience and expression of grief.

Grieving Rules

Doka (2002) writes that “To understand the social aspect of grief, it is important to remember that every society has norms that govern not only behavior but also affect and cognition” (p. 6). As a result, the theory of disenfranchised grief is deeply rooted in Hochschild's (1979; 1990) notion of feeling rules, or social expectations for behavior that dictate how one should experience emotion in a given circumstance. Messages that describe how we ought to feel (e.g., “I know I shouldn't be sad right now”; “You should be more grateful”) are testaments to these rules and are based on mutual expectations for how we should feel in a particular situation. Similarly, display rules (Matsumoto, 1990; Planalp, 1999) are norms that guide the actual expression of emotion, rather than how they are cognitively experienced. Doka adapted these ideas to form the central premise of disenfranchised grief: grieving rules. Much like feeling rules, grieving rules “attempt to specify who, what, where, how, how long, and for whom [or what] people should grieve” (Doka, 1989, p. 4). In fact, grieving rules are more than a collection of social and cultural variables that impact the grief experience – they are a core component to the grieving process (Brabant, 2002) and significantly influence how messages are experienced and exchanged as one grieves.

For example, grieving rules often manifest in organizational policies that define what losses constitute time off and how organizational members should respond to one another's suffering (Hazen, 2003). Expressions that minimize one's emotions, such as telling the bereaved to "suck it up and move on," is another example of how grieving rules contribute to the disenfranchisement of grief. There are even moments when individuals disenfranchise their own emotions out of fear of stigma or backlash for not following grieving rules, a phenomenon which is discussed later in this chapter. Indeed, grieving rules are the vehicle by which grief becomes taboo.

One grieving rule shared by many Western cultures is that grief is mainly reserved for the loss of human family members. Yet, it seems problematic to restrain grief to the nuclear family. As Doka (2002) asserts, "human beings exist in intimate networks that include both kin and non-kin. They harbor attachments to fellow humans, animals, and even places and things" (p. 7). Indeed, humans develop profoundly deep connections with both human and nonhuman things, and all of these things are deserving of grief regardless of what a society dictates. The expansive scope of disenfranchised grief scholarship is a perfect example of how grieving rules limit loss. Disenfranchised grief has been explored in bereavement as it relates to substance abuse (Valentine et al., 2016), healthcare chaplains (Spidell et al., 2011), sexual intimacy (Radosh & Simkin, 2016), perinatal loss (Hazen, 2003), adolescent romantic relationships (Kaczmarek & Backlund, 1991), ex-spouses (Tullis, 2017), and incarcerated sex offenders (Bailey, 2018).

Five Types of Disenfranchised Grief

In his original volume, Doka (1989) offered three ways in which grief becomes disenfranchised: (1) the relationship is not recognized, (2) the loss is not acknowledged, and (3) the griever is excluded. His second anthology, *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice*, introduces two additional categories of disenfranchisement: (4) the circumstances of the death are stigmatized and (5) the way an individual grieves is invalidated (Doka, 2002). Taken together, these five categories constitute a non-exhaustive typology of disenfranchised grief; each type is described in detail below.

Unrecognized Relationships

As previously mentioned, grief is often restricted to (human) familial relationships. This pattern of thinking is rooted in Western ideologies which position the family as central to one's being (Laslett, 1977). Consequently, the significance of other non-kin ties are mostly unrecognized or unappreciated by society at large. In these instances, grief becomes disenfranchised because there is little or no acknowledgement that the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased was meaningful. The closeness of the relationship may not be fully understood, or in some cases, may not be socially sanctioned. For example, Bailey (2018) found that romantic partners of incarcerated sex offenders experienced disenfranchised grief if they planned to remain in a relationship with their loved one. One participant described an event in which it was assumed she would file for divorce even though she had no intention to do so:

Health and Human Services would come over and the social worker says, 'Well let me know when you're ready to get the divorce and I'll help you with it,' not thinking that I'd stay with my husband, but I wanted to stay with him. I mean he's a good man. I may love him but I don't love his crime or what he did. (p. 654)

Here, the social worker's assumption that the participant would file for divorce following her husband's incarceration complicates feelings of grief by ignoring the history shared between the bereaved (the wife) and the lost (the incarcerated husband).

Humans' relationships with animals extends across a wide range of contexts - emotional closeness is not confined to those animals that act exclusively as pets. For example, police officers have been found to develop incredibly close relationships with their police dogs, who act as both a companion and colleague. In fact, over three-quarters of officers in one study reported that their canines played an important role in their family and helped reduce work-related stressors (Hart et al. 2000). Children with autism spectrum disorder or other learning disabilities also experience close relationships with their support-animals who offer opportunities for social development and self-discovery (Carlisle et al., 2018). Yet another relevant example is the role that psychiatric service-dogs play in facilitating healing among veterans with PTSD and their families (Nieforth et al., 2021). In these scenarios, the service-dog not only promoted resilience among veterans; they also "enabled and empowered family time" (p. 8). Future scholarship might explore how these groups experienced pet loss, especially given their unique relational context.

Unacknowledged Losses

Grief can become disenfranchised when the loss itself goes unacknowledged or is perceived as having little impact on the griever. Perinatal death is one such example, with a good deal of scholarship detailing how this particular type of loss is minimized by others (Hazen, 2003; Lang et al., 2011; Mulvihill & Walsh, 2014). For example, following the loss of a child, many couples report feeling a lack of understanding from their community, including family, friends, and healthcare professionals (Lang et al., 2011). Within the context of pet loss, individuals might also feel dismissed or forgotten as veterinary professionals, coworkers, family, and friends minimize their grief. Doka (2002) explicitly notes that the loss of a companion animal may not be deemed worthy of grief in some societies.

Furthermore, grief may rear its head even as individuals *anticipate* loss; this "secondary grief" can also become disenfranchised. Rando's (2000) early work on anticipatory mourning posits that grief begins before a person has even passed. Indeed, in many cases where loss is imminent (e.g., terminal illness) there are often smaller losses accrued along the way. For example, pet owners looking after an animal with cancer may long for happier and healthier days while they grieve the loss of once-fun activities such as walks in the park or playtime. Anticipatory mourning can also lead to self-disenfranchisement, or instances where the griever restricts their own grieving process as the resulting grief tends to involve contradictory intrapersonal reactions that complicate the grieving process. Bouchal et al. (2011) claim that anticipatory mourning involves "striving to be with the person in the present, longing for and grieving the person as he or she was, and simultaneously planning for a life with the possibility that the ill individual may not be part of that future" (p. 49). As people prepare for the passing of a loved one the resulting anticipatory grief may not be recognized, especially given that those secondary losses are not always as "concrete."

Excluded Grievers

In some cases, the bereaved person is thought to not be capable of experiencing grief, resulting in a lack of support, exclusion from grieving rituals, and limited opportunity for emotional expression. In essence, these individuals are robbed of their right to grieve. This is an especially common experience among

children, the elderly, and those with mental/developmental impairments. Despite evidence suggesting that these populations are in fact capable of comprehending death and experiencing bereavement (e.g., Backhouse & Graham, 2013; Carlisle et al., 2018; Gilrane-McGarry & Taggart, 2012), they continue to be excluded from grieving practices. This ostracism is reflective of broader societal attitudes towards these groups.

Pets play central roles in the lives of children and the elderly, and their passing can have major implications for development in both stages in life. The loss of a pet may be a child's first experience with death, or loss at all for that matter (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). Family communication processes surrounding the passing of a beloved animal companion is an important moment in children's lives and impacts how they understand loss as they enter adulthood. It is critical that adults remain authentic, yet age-appropriate, when processing the loss of an animal companion with a child. Perhaps one reason that adults shield children from pet loss is to delay having a difficult conversation about the finality of life. Meyers (2002) asserts that adults "must be willing to address the possibility that they may be trying to protect *themselves* from the uncomfortable task of talking with children about death and dying" (p. 255). Indeed, misinformation about the reality of pet loss at a young age can distort children's understanding of death, and complicate grief later in life.

Animal companions act as a sense of comfort and consistency for older adults experiencing physical decline (Sife, 2005), and are often some of the closest attachments among geriatrics whose peers may have already passed (Meyers, 2002). One reason for this could be that caring for pets provides older persons with a sense of purpose; taking care of an animal cultivates daily routines and a feeling of being needed. A pet may also be the last living connection one has to a deceased spouse; "perhaps the animal was the spouse's pet and thus represents an emotional link with the deceased spouse. When this pet dies, such an emotional tie no longer exists. Losing such a bond can intensify the grief experienced" (Carmack, 1991, p. 84). The loss of a pet might force older pet owners to confront questions about their own mortality.

Grievors may also be stripped of grieving rights if they are thought to have some sort of blame in the loss. For example, around 50 percent of owners who euthanize their animals are likely to feel guilt (Adams et al., 1999). The loss of a pet might also happen through an accidental death that was the fault of the owner; a lack of physical, mental, or financial resources to care for the pet; or leaving an abusive home and not being able to take a beloved pet. Ultimately, people may experience uncertainty and doubt about their decisions surrounding the loss of a pet, which in turn could exclude them even further from the opportunity to fully grieve their loss.

Stigmatized Deaths/Losses

Stigma, defined as "a simplified, standardized image of the disgrace of certain people that is held in common by a community at large" (Smith, 2007, p. 464), is the mechanism by which grief is sanctioned. Doka's (1989; 2002) early work on disenfranchised grief exemplifies how the very nature of a death/loss - such as loss by HIV/AIDS, drug overdose, or suicide - can be particularly stigmatizing for those left behind. In the case of pet death, a stigmatized loss could be the result of a death or illness considered the "fault" of the griever. Other circumstances such as relinquishment, loss, or euthanasia due to behavioral issues rather than ill health could result in stigma. In these circumstances, owners presumably have "control" and have made decisions about the loss, and therefore may be more hesitant to talk about their grief for fear of judgement. In fact, individuals use indirect support-seeking strategies rather than direct if they think their help-seeking will be stigmatized (MacGeorge et al., 2011). This may make it more

difficult for people to ask for support from close others when they need it. Further, these more delicate cases of companion animal death inhibit solicitation or offering of support by others.

Recent scholarship has documented the taboo nature of seeking care for mental health (Greenwell, 2019). However the establishment of veterinary social workers (VSW) is one more solution for individuals grieving the loss of a pet. Although there are only a few hundred trained clinicians in the U.S. (Cima, 2020), they can provide proactive support for grieving clients. These clinicians are most often housed within private practice and schools of veterinary medicine, and provide resources such as referrals to support groups and counselling which can normalize help-seeking as well as alleviate the stigma associated with pet loss. Further, because veterinarians can also become invested emotionally in their patients, they may also grieve when they die. This can make it challenging for veterinarians to provide support for clients following the death of a pet (Dunn et al., 2005). A social worker can therefore provide a “stable and rational network between the grieving client and the veterinarian” (p. 68).

Invalidated Grieving Practices

Finally, grief can become disenfranchised when its expression is incompatible with a culture’s grieving rules. Martin and Doka (2000) maintain that there are three primary styles of grieving that run along a spectrum: intuitive, instrumental, and intuitive-instrumental. These three ways of grieving are rooted in how grief/loss is experienced internally and expressed externally (Martin & Doka, 2011). As put forth by Martin and Doka (2000), *intuitive grieving* is characterized by deep, affective responses to grief. Intuitive griever often express painful feelings and emotions associated with grief through behaviors such as crying, wailing, or shouting. These individuals also lean into grief and readjust slowly to life following a loss. On the other hand, *instrumental grieving* consists of cognitive and behavioral responses to grief, rather than intense emotional manifestations. Instrumental griever typically deal with feelings of grief more silently than their intuitive counterparts and are more reluctant to publicly grieve. They often process grief through behaviors such as ruminating. Instrumental griever also attempt to problem-solve their way out of mourning, where the goal of coping is to eliminate feelings of grief and readjust to life as quickly as possible. Lastly, *instrumental-intuitive grieving* blends aspects of both instrumental and intuitive grief responses, although one style may be more pronounced than the other.

As seen in the opening vignette, differences in grieving styles/practices can cause significant strife for families grieving the loss of a pet. Instrumental griever may view the outward affective responses associated with intuitive griever as boisterous, inappropriate, and/or pessimistic. On the contrary, intuitive griever might view the stoicism associated with instrumental griever as cold, aloof, and/or distant. It’s important to note that one style is not “better” than the other; there is no “right” way to grieve.

How one grieves can be considered taboo when their grief expressions are not congruent with hegemonic standards of gender. Typically, men tend to lean more towards instrumental grieving styles, while women are often intuitive griever (Martin & Doka, 2000). While some scholarship has naively minimized the role of one’s gender identity in experiencing grief (e.g., Versalle & McDowell, 2005), a substantial amount of literature exists that details the challenges of expressing grief in a way that does not align with conventional gender norms; this is especially the case for men. For instance, fathers who lose a child are often expected to put their own feelings aside to comfort their partner (McCreight, 2004). Indeed, women’s roles in the family have traditionally centered around bearing/raising children; consequently, when a child passes, the mother-child relationship receives priority in grief. Widowed men also experience intense emotional turmoil throughout the grieving process, as stereotypical masculine ideals

often pressure men to withhold emotions that are deemed to be irrational, out-of-control, or otherwise feminine (e.g., sadness, fear, guilt, etc.; Bennett, 2007). Even in the context of pet loss, men must negotiate tension between gender and their preferred ways of grieving. For example, after witnessing his dog get struck by a vehicle, one pet owner posted to an online pet-loss forum (r/petloss) saying, “I feel I can’t talk to anyone about it, because I can’t even think about it without crying. And (I know this will sound kind of stupid, but that’s how I was brought up) real men don’t cry.” It is apparent that gender is a significant factor in shaping the ways that a person can express/experience their bereavement.

Gender aside, the context in which grieving practices are enacted is also a central factor in determining the “appropriateness” of grief expressions. For example, scholarship on the role of emotions in the workplace has shown that grief is stifled by organizational values of rationality and productivity (Bento, 1994; Eyetsmitan, 1998). As a result, organizational members find themselves feeling unsupported and/or unrecognized in their bereavement. They may face challenges in taking bereavement leave (Bauer & Murray, 2018), balancing the “grief role” and the “worker role” (Bento, 1994), and seeking support from colleagues (Hazen, 2008). Organizations might unobtrusively direct employees to embrace a more problem-solving orientation to grief (instrumental grieving) as opposed to leaning into their emotions (intuitive grieving).

Of course, those ways of grieving that are already stigmatized might become more deviant/taboo when practiced in response to the loss of a pet. For example, intuitive grief expressions are generally perceived as being inappropriate in organizational contexts, and bereaved employees are at even higher risk for disenfranchisement when those expressions are in response to the loss of a pet. Because the significance of pet loss is often unacknowledged (Meyers, 2002), non-normative grieving practices enacted by bereaved pet owners are more likely to become disenfranchised. Thus, the stigma associated with grieving a pet is compounded and layered.

It is important to note that this typology of grief is not exhaustive, nor are the forms of disenfranchisement mutually exclusive. Grief can be disenfranchised for any number of the reasons listed here. For example, a pet owner who loses a beloved animal they have cared for after only a few weeks might experience disenfranchised grief because neither the loss nor the relationship is socially recognized.

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND THE DUALITY OF DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

Given that grief becomes disenfranchised through social interaction (Brabant, 2002; Doka, 1989; Doka, 2002), we believe that theories of interpersonal communication are uniquely poised to address how these five types of disenfranchised grief are communicatively managed. More specifically, the theoretical lenses discussed here have the potential to explain how disenfranchised grief can become *re-enfranchised* through compassion, rituals/sensemaking, resilience, and hope. These frameworks might also illuminate the complicated nature of close relationship management when coping with pet loss. Thus, the remainder of the chapter focuses on communicative frameworks for the future exploration of disenfranchised grief.

Supportive Communication and Communal Coping

Close relationships with others can help mitigate the effect of negative life events, as people who are suffering from loss seem to seek supportive interactions with others (Silver et al., 1990). Supportive

communication plays a central role in coping with grief (Rack et al., 2008). However, even with the best of intentions, supportive communication can go awry as the process of offering social support often stimulates multiple internal conflicts within both the support provider and seeker. For example, people can experience ambivalence when seeking support (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995), and sometimes have the added stressor of navigating face-threatening scenarios (Goldsmith, 1994). Therefore, people can experience dilemmas when they support one another. For example, support seeking can contribute to stigmatization, leaving help-seekers feeling less in control and competent (Burleson et al., 1994). Likewise, unwanted help can invade privacy and even impose the help-provider's beliefs on the recipient. For example, when faced with someone who is perceived to be coping poorly as a result of a death, people may attempt to provide advice to encourage the bereaved to cope in a way that is considered more appropriate and positive which ultimately was considered unhelpful by the support recipient (Toller, 2011). Further, when grief becomes disenfranchised, it isolates the bereaved and limits networks from which they may receive supportive messages. As a result, many individuals facing pet loss turn to mediated forms of support, such as pet-loss hotlines (Rémillard et al., 2017) or discussion forums focused on pet loss. These sanctuaries for grieving pet owners represent sites of communal coping, a phenomenon where individuals perceive shared stressors as a collective issue, and thus, feel a responsibility to support others facing the same misfortune (Lyons et al., 1998).

Grieving Rituals and Communicative Sense-Making

Grief is both an intra- and interpersonal affair. In other words, as individuals adjust to life following a significant loss, their interactions with others allow them to sort through thoughts and feelings of bereavement. As Neimeyer et al. (2002) assert, "the meaning making triggered by loss is pursued at the juncture of self and system rather than only in the private thoughts and feelings of the bereaved individual. Thus, the self is constituted and reconstituted in relation to an embracing social world" (p. 239). When someone's grief becomes disenfranchised, however, the bereaved person often loses valuable networks of support and coping. Grieving rituals are one way that individuals can re-enfranchise their grief, as they offer personal channels for expressing feelings of bereavement and memorializing the lost. In fact, Schachter and Finneran (2013) discovered that grieving persons found personal grieving rituals to be more meaningful than public ceremonies, such as funerals.

The death literature details four therapeutic properties of grieving rituals (Sas & Coman, 2016). Firstly, grieving rituals are *structured*; they consist of pre-determined action(s) and are bound temporally. For example, one might begin/end their grieving ritual by lighting a candle or saying a prayer. The structure of rituals allows individuals to "contain" their grief to the ritual context (Romanoff, 1998), and offers a sense of control amidst grief's messy and chaotic nature (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Reeves, 2011). Second, grieving rituals consist of *sacred symbolism*, which can consist of photos, prayers, special texts, music, and/or behaviors that offer mementos and remembrances (e.g., Instagram photos or Facebook memories), "Where special meaning is found in individual's natural (not supernatural) experience which becomes sacred for the individual" (Sas & Coman, 2016, p. 6). Third, *socialities* refer to the social dimensions of grieving rituals. Of course, grieving rituals can be performed alone (Doka, 2012); but, opening up grieving rituals to trusted friends and family has been found to be particularly effective in combating feelings of isolation caused by bereavement (Castle & Phillips, 2003). However, if disenfranchised grief is brought about by those who are typically part of one's support network, the social dimensions of meaning-making through rituals must be reinvented. Individuals might join new networks (e.g., local grief

groups, online support groups, therapy, or counseling) that are more sympathetic to their grief process. These new connections might also provide a repertoire of creative ways of personalizing the grieving process. For example, grieving rituals that are high in *uniqueness* (i.e., personally designed to meet the needs of the bereaved) are often more powerful than conventional ceremonies that commemorate loss. They allow grieving pet owners to carry on the legacy of their animal companion while simultaneously responding to their emotional needs. Engaging in a personal grieving ritual not only affords pet owners an opportunity for closure, but also acts as a way for them to make sense of losing a cherished relationship.

Communication scholars would benefit greatly by tapping into the therapeutic components of grieving rituals. Future studies on communication and grieving rituals might explore the ways in which ritual practices influence participants' relationships with one another. Grieving rituals are often powerful emotional experiences for those involved (Castle & Phillips, 2003); sharing such an emotionally charged experience may very well lead to a greater degree of emotional closeness among ritual participants (see Berg-Cross et al., 1993). Moreover, it would be particularly useful to explore how grieving rituals are communicatively enacted online, as cyberspace is becoming a frequent site of grieving (Morehouse & Crandall, 2014).

When attempting to cope with the loss of a pet, pet owners might attempt to recount stories of the loss, share cherished memories, or engage in rituals that honor the legacy of the pet. While some pet owners report taking part in rituals (e.g., funerals, cremation ceremonies, giving a monetary contribution to a veterinary school in a pet's honor), these rituals are not necessarily widespread in practice (Pilgram, 2010). Communication scholars might approach future research on pet loss using theories such as Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM; Koenig Kellas & Kranstuber Horstman, 2015). Narratives we share and hear often have enduring influences on our beliefs, values, and actions (Koenig Kellas, 2018), and play an integral role in addressing stigma surrounding complex issues (e.g., Flood-Grady & Koenig Kellas, 2019). Further, telling stories can play a healing role, and in fact the absence of stories particularly within families, may limit emotional relief from difficult events such as death (Sedney et al., 1994). Narrative theories might also be useful for scholars to understand how storytelling helps shape identity after death, family narratives of pet loss, or how people find meaning after the death of a pet.

Resilience and Hope

One way that communication scholars might explore disenfranchised grief is by employing conceptual frameworks of resilience and hope. With the emergence of research in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) conversations of well-being have shifted away from "distressed psychological states to those that are working, functioning, and empowering" (Socha & Beck, 2015, p. 174). Many scholars in interpersonal, applied, and family communication have added to this shift by studying positive interpersonal messages and processes that contribute to health and well-being, including hope and resilience (see Beck & Socha, 2015; Buzzanell, 2010; Socha & Pitts, 2012; Pitts & Socha, 2013).

Communicative resilience is based on both ecological and developmental approaches to resilience (Beck & Socha, 2015; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012), where resilience processes include messages that promote the engagement in revised patterns of communication to create new normalcies, the anchoring of identities, and the mitigation of negative feelings experienced during and as a result of adversity (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). This process-oriented view of resilience is a complex negotiation that happens throughout the life-span with a "collaborative exchange that invites participation of family, workplace, community, and interorganizational network members. As a new story, identity, mode of being and be-

having, and/or linkage is crafted, there must be others who support and elaborate on the new version” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 9). Accordingly, resilience is not necessarily a sense of “getting back to normal,” but the creation of new normals based on positive adaptations to adversity that can depend on whether the event was, a) permanent or not permanent, b) a singular or accumulated events, and c) unexpected or forecasted (Buzzanell & Houston, 2018).

Beck and Socha (2015) highlight an important research path toward understanding not only the communication of resilience, but also hope. According to Snyder et al. (1991), “Hope is a positive motivation state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful a) agency (goal directed energy), and b) pathways (planning to meet those goals)” (p. 287). In accepting this view of hope, one might examine relationships and processes associated with communicating hope, as well as the outcomes associated with new abilities for motivation and action that moves one toward the achievement of goals. Within hope theory, Beck and Socha (2015) note, “...it is from others that we learn pathways thinking, that is, how to scale obstacles that impeded us, as well as realize that we are worthy of survival” (Beck & Socha, 2015, p. 4-5). Additionally, Vangelisti (2015) highlights two important considerations in studying the communication of hope and resilience, a) examining individual, relational, and/or community level processes within a particular life-span stage, and b) examining the antecedents, processes, and/or outcomes.

In the context of pet loss, we might typically see individuals and families engage in a number of resilience and hope processes to manage the disruption that comes from end-of-life decisions; potential costs; and the social and emotional health of family members as it relates to the loss of a beloved companion. For example, prison inmates who train dogs, foster families that foster companion animals, Service Dog trainers, and or even families that lose a pet or return it to a shelter due to a strain on financial or emotional resources might need to reorient to a new way of being when a animal companion is no longer there. For many, these animals have provided purpose, cultivating hopeful expectations for their lives in the midst of healing from post-traumatic stress (Nieforth et al., 2021). Future research could use hope and communicative resilience frameworks to discover more than a “return to normal,” but how people can and do transform after the loss of a beloved pet.

On the other hand, disenfranchised grief can make transformational healing processes challenging when invalidating messages originate from typically supportive strong ties, turning resilience networks into sources perceived by the griever as dismissive. For example, Buzzanell (2010) discusses the importance of messages and discourses that legitimize negative feelings like anger and sadness while foregrounding positive action. For those experiencing grief, this kind of communication and emotion work is a key component in the construction of resilience, yet it is unclear who might offer opportunities for the reframing of these adverse events. Future research could explore varying types of communities that might offer the reframing of one’s experiences before, during, and after the death of a pet companion. For example, one might seek out weak tie networks like online support groups where individuals can gain insight, information, and comfort from hearing about the experiences of others. One might also be connected with well-trained social workers through veterinary services (Cima, 2020). Communication frameworks could be useful for mental health professionals assisting individuals in the communicative management of the challenges related to disenfranchised grief. These examples could also inform what Buzzanell (2010) suggests as putting alternative logics to work, or seeking creative responses to deal with the systems and structures that might impede resilience processes. Communicative resilience might be useful in illuminating how individuals and families circumvent traditionally understood grieving structures and systems, the structures and systems that do not fully allow disenfranchised grievers the privileges of authentic grief expressions and processes. For example, communication scholars could

explore and critique framing processes, societal narratives around grief and mental health, health care services that are not accessible to disenfranchised grievers, or systemic inequities surrounding who is permitted to grief, in what spaces, and for how long. Certainly, how people, organizations, and societies organize around the loss of a family pet might influence how people can engage in transformational processes by which a new normal is constructed and where resilience includes the enactment of agency and proactive movement toward growth (Buzzanell, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Grief is an inevitable part of the human experience. Yet as exemplified in this chapter, not everyone is afforded the same opportunity to express their grief – this holds especially true for those individuals mourning the loss of an animal companion. Indeed, despite evidence suggesting that our pets play central roles in our families and in our lives, grief associated with pet loss is often invalidated or unacknowledged (Meyers, 2002). Regardless of how or why a person's grief becomes disenfranchised, the disenfranchisement of grief impedes bereaved pet guardians on their journey towards healing. Thus, it is imperative that communication scholars continue exploring ways to *re-enfranchise* grief that has become taboo.

We would like to close by recognizing that the journey towards healing from loss of any kind is filled with highs and lows. Put simply, grieving is not an upward, linear progression. Many models of bereavement assume that feelings of grief gradually dissipate over time (e.g., Kübler-Ross, 1969), or that grief reduces down into a neatly encapsulated, more easily manageable form. Tonkin (1996) proposed an alternative model – one in which people “grow around their grief” rather than have their grief “shrink” inside them. This model emphasizes that even after one has effectively made peace with their bereavement, grief can return and be just as raw and powerful as it was immediately following the loss. For instance, a person might drive past a dog park they once frequented years following the loss of their pet and be overcome with grief, fondness, and nostalgia. Moreover, Tonkin's model highlights how as individuals attempt to create new normals and tentatively “move on” with their lives following loss, they gain skills to more effectively cope and manage feelings of grief despite how painful/uncomfortable this process may be. Indeed, grief is transformational (Neimeyer et al., 2002). Consider this closing excerpt from r/petloss:

After losing my dog on my birthday almost a year ago, I still miss him every day. Even though my life goes on, I still wish he was with me. Allow yourself to be upset for as long as you need to. Look at old photos and videos as much as you want. One day they will make you smile instead of cry. (Excerpt from post to r/Petloss)

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Communicative Resilience: A process model of resilience by which individuals respond to adversity by creating new normalcies, anchoring salient identities, and/or mitigating negative emotional consequences.

Disenfranchised Grief: A form of grief that occurs when a persons' experience/expressions of grief do not align with normative, socio-cultural grieving rules.

Grieving Rules: Socio-cultural norms that dictate how one should experience and express grief, as well as what constitutes appropriate (inter)actions when navigating loss.

Human-Animal Relationships: Social ties/bonds that exist between humans and nonhuman animals.

Supportive Communication: Verbal and nonverbal messages that tend to the perceived distress of others.

Chapter 24

When God Doesn't Make Sense: Non-Religious Communications at the End of Life

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ABSTRACT

Death is a fact of life. Ultimately, everyone will eventually have to face the prospect of their own death or the (forthcoming) death of someone close to them. Therefore, it is important to understand the communication scripts used by families and close friends to talk about death and dying. Talking about death can be difficult for all of those involved. Many people will rely on religious messages; however, for a major section of the population in the United States who are not religious, those messages are both ineffective and inappropriate. The chapter explores the grief communication of non-religious people as they navigated terminal diagnoses and the sudden death of a loved one. Participants were interviewed about the challenges they faced while dealing with messages about death and dying.

INTRODUCTION

Death is a fact of life. Ultimately, everyone will eventually have to face the prospect of their own death or the (forthcoming) death of someone close to them. Therefore, it is important to understand the communication scripts used by families and close friends to talk about death and dying. Talking about death can be difficult for all of those involved. In many places death is a taboo topic (Wright et al., 2013). Even physicians struggle with communication strategies for informing a patient of a terminal diagnosis and the prospect of having a limited number of months left to live (Fallowfield & Jenkins, 2004). Studies show the mere act of providing care for a terminally ill loved one can lead to negative health outcomes for the caregiver (Rabow et al., 2004). Many families find difficulty in piercing through the taboo nature of death communication (Wright et al., 2013). Those families may find difficulty in broaching topics

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like advanced care directives, deteriorating health, final wishes, how to preserve the memory of the person once they have died, and the nature of death itself. Grieving can be a difficult process and losing a beloved family member can leave the bereaved feeling as though they have lost an important part of themselves (Klass & Marwitt, 1988-1989). What is clear is that facing death is difficult and improving our communication tools for grief communication can help to ameliorate the potentially negative effects of grieving.

The prospect of death can lead people to examine their religious beliefs. Keeley (2007) found that 67% of survivors reported discussing religion during their final conversations—those conversations that occur between the time of terminal diagnosis and death. For these people, discussing religion with their loved one operated to validate their beliefs and affirm both parties' belief in an afterlife. However, communicating about death can be even more challenging for the remaining portion of the population who do not believe in the many available grief scripts that rely on religious overtures and platitudes, such as the death being a part of God's master plan, the deceased now being in a better place, or that their loved one is now an angel looking over them (Christina, 2011).

To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with a religious approach to grief communication. However, this chapter calls into question how one might provide social support when God (or religion) does not make sense as a framework for explaining death, dying, and grief. Though many people benefit and find solace in religious messages, a substantial part of the population in the United States may not find those messages useful. "Nones"—irreligious people who identify as agnostic, deist, or who hold secular beliefs—are a growing community who currently make up over 20-26% of the population in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2012; Smith, 2021). For Nones, religious grief messages may be unwelcomed and inappropriate, despite a communicator's intent to be helpful. Inappropriate grief messages can be perceived as salt in an already gaping wound, leading to anger, frustration, and even alienation. Rebecca Hensler, founder of a popular Facebook group and website called Grief Beyond Belief, felt alienated after the death of her 3-month-old son (Christina, 2011). Founded in 2011, Grief Beyond Belief has over twenty-three thousand likes and six-thousand five-hundred members on Facebook. Spaces like Grief Beyond Belief act as forums for peer-to-peer support and faith-free grief communication. Religious scripts may have a boomerang effect for Nones, causing the recipient to feel alienated by the religious nature of the message instead of feeling support. A very well-intentioned message of condolence can lead to a negative outcome for the bereaved and those who support them (Christina, 2011). Grief is an inevitability regardless of one's relationship to religion. Being atheist, spiritual but non-religious, or otherwise religiously unaffiliated does not make one immune to the negative health effects of grief and bereavement. However, it can limit effective communication strategies that rely on religious affiliation as the underlying warrant for why support messages should work. There is a dire need for a deeper understanding of non-religious grief communication. Following a brief review of literature on end-of-life communication, this chapter examines effective communication scripts used to talk about death, dying, or planning for the end-of-life in interpersonal relationships in which at least one person identifies as non-religious. The chapter broadens the pool of resources available to Nones and their loved ones by highlighting both effective and ineffective messages used to navigate the treacherous waters of the grieving process and end-of-life communication.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

End-of-life conversations have a rich history in the field of communication. Keeley and colleagues have laid the seminal foundation for end-of-life communication research in their discussion of “final conversations” (FC). Final conversations include “the verbal and nonverbal messages shared between terminally ill individuals and their relational partners” in the time period between diagnosis and death (Keeley, 2007; 2021). Those final conversations are characterized by six themes: love, identity, spiritual/religious, difficult relationship talk, everyday talk, and instrumental talk (See Generous & Keeley, 2021 for overview of FC themes). As defined above, final conversations may only include messages exchanged between terminally ill patients and their loved ones, but as Keeley’s oeuvre suggests, final conversations are an exemplary subset of the end-of-life messages that make up the broader category of grief messages. Thus, end-of-life messages may include the grief communication experienced following the loss of a loved one, even when their death is sudden or unexpected. Those conversations may occur between bereaving parties, the bereaved and other relational partners, and so on. Including all end-of-life messages gives a robust, aerial view of the important messages delivered in times of grief. Both those who are able to have final conversations and those who experience a sudden loss are forced to navigate the difficult terrain of coping with the death, managing faith conversations with family and friends, and respecting the final wishes of the deceased. The current chapter built upon Keeley’s (2007, 2017) work of examining grief communication in our interpersonal relationships (e.g., friends, family, spouses, children), by adding to it the context of sudden deaths. Communication topics included issues of mortality, caregiving, terminal illness, advanced care directives, final wishes, sudden death, and planning for the death of a loved one. Furthermore, in each interpersonal relationship included in this chapter at least one communicator identified as non-religious or non-spiritual (i.e. a “None”). Family, friends, and colleagues all face grief whether they were able to prepare for final conversations, as seen in the case of terminal diagnoses, or not, as seen in the case of a sudden death.

Communication about Death and Dying

End-of-life communication is a taboo topic for many families (Wright et al., 2013). Facing mortality is its own challenge, but many communicators find difficulty discussing death with others. A critical review of end-of-life communication shows a clear call for further research on the role of communication for terminally ill patients and their surviving loved ones (Rabow et al. 2004). A need exists for communication to be measured alongside health outcomes to form a more complete picture. Topics needing additional attention include caregiving, advanced care directive creation and planning, and the role of religion during end-of-life conversations. Each of these is integral to how religious people and Nones alike communicate about death. However, research on Nones is sparse. End-of-life communication is, in part, as much of a story about loved ones as it is a story about the terminally ill or deceased individual.

The management of care for a loved one can have a mental and physical toll on the caregiver, in addition to the toll that the prospect of dying has on the terminally ill patient (Wright et al., 2013). Loved ones of terminally ill patients or survivors of those who died suddenly typically do not have any formal training in communicating about health or grief. Receiving additional training or supportive care through insurance can be difficult because insurance companies do not often offer reimbursement to clients for non-biological, psychosocial care (Reb, 2003). In fact, 20% of caregivers report high financial strain, 30% have stopped being able to save money, and 25% have accrued debt as a result of caregiving (National

Alliance for Caregiving & AARP, 2020). Due to the lack of training in both communication about dying and medical care, caregivers have the additional burdens of learning to provide physical and mental support to a sick patient while trying to cope with the patient's sickness and/or death at the same time. The dual bind of offering strong support while also being vulnerable puts caregivers in an unenviable position. In fact, 74% of family caregivers of patients with dementia experience concern about maintaining their own health, with 27% of caregivers delaying health care for themselves (Kasper et al., 2014; National Poll on Healthy Aging, 2017; Shrestha, 2021). Providing resources to teach caregivers and sick patients about how to communicate about the end of life would greatly help to reduce stress felt during end-of-life conversations (Reb, 2003).

Communication about death and dying may also change across the lifespan. Advanced care directives are an important concern that become more salient as patients become older and more likely to get sick, but which can be useful at any age. Advanced care directives are those documents that detail a patient's wishes for end-of-life care. Examples include a do-not-resuscitate order (DNR), assigning a durable power of attorney who will make medical decisions on behalf of the patient if the patient is unable to do so, and a living will which details one's final wishes and how one would like one's property to be dispersed. For example, many patients suffering from cancer believe DNR orders are more appropriate than allowing cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) due to concerns over quality of life and the possibility of prolonging the illness (Elliot & Olver, 2007). Mori and colleagues (2020) found Japanese cancer patients who held DNR orders and who died during hospitalization were more likely to fall into the category of "late" adoption of DNR orders. The authors speculate the reason for late adoption was due to the patient's poor prognosis and a lack of willingness by physicians to discuss the "bad news" until a relationship of trust is built between the physician, patient, and the patient's family. Similar results were found in Chinese hospitals where the majority of DNR orders (82%) were signed within 3 days of the patient's death and 41% of those were signed on the day the patient died (Huang et al., 2018). Advanced care directives can remove the ambiguity of one's medical wishes by ensuring doctors know when a patient no longer wishes to seek life-saving treatment or palliative care.

A tangential issue related to advanced care directives is the assignment of durable power of attorney for health care decisions. In cases in which the patient becomes incapacitated or unable to make health care decisions for themselves, a power of attorney steps in to advocate on the patient's behalf to ensure their needs and preferences are maintained throughout their care regime. Assigning a person with durable power of attorney for health care decisions indicates the patient trusts their surrogate to make healthcare decisions for the patient should they be unable to advocate for themselves. Marital partners are frequently selected to act as power of attorney for health care decisions, as they have a higher likelihood of understanding a patient's final wishes than other surrogates. The process of choosing a power of attorney may be more important than the power of attorney's capability to accurately carry out the patient's wishes (Moorman, 2011). Trust and respect are core values in end-of-life communication. A loved one holding surrogate power of attorneys may not always accurately understand a patient's end-of-life plans (Shalowitz et al., 2006). For many patients, advanced care directives are un(der)prepared because the prospect of death can have an immobilizing effect on communication within families. Despite advanced care directives being a vital part of end-of life communication, less than half of patients have an advanced care directive on record and between 65 and 76% of those who have one on record are not aware of its existence (Kass-Bartelmes, 2003). Even areas where end-of-life health decisions are made frequently, advanced care directives are less common than one would expect. Only 28% of home health care patients, 65% of nursing home residents, and 88% of hospice care patients have an advanced care

directive in their medical records (Jones et al., 2011). The taboo nature of end-of-life communication and a lack of advanced health care directives may leave the bereaved in the difficult position of having to guess about the correct course of action in terms of palliative care, do-not-resuscitate orders, and funeral wishes. Despite being a difficult conversation, advanced care directives and conversations about medical preferences are necessary for health surrogates to carry out their roles successfully.

Although many barriers to communication about death and dying exist, McQuellon and Cowan (2000) argue that having end-of-life conversations can help people deal with the prospect of death and enhance their understanding of the meaning of life. Benefits may emerge for both terminally ill patients and their loved ones. Grief and bereavement are similar, but distinct, constructs. Keeley (2007) notes that the grieving process can begin upon diagnosis of a terminal illness, and thus, grief can begin prior to the death of a loved one.

Religion plays a significant role in the end-of-life messages that terminally ill patients have with their loved ones and thus must be considered an important component of grief. Indeed, the prospect of death can cause people to examine their religious beliefs. Keeley (2007) found 67% of survivors recollected having discussed some aspect of religion, whether a dormant or active part of their life currently, during the final conversations prior to a loved one's death. Despite one in five Americans identifying as non-religious, religion may still emerge as a topic during the end of life. Regardless, identifying as a None does not disqualify a person from needing support during grief and bereavement processes. In fact, many tools that would be useful for non-religious communication may remain useful for people who are religious as well. Therefore, a deeper examination of social support at the end of life for Nones is necessary.

The Need for Social Support

As patients experience illness they will likely find themselves requiring support from others. After all, a terminal diagnosis "generates consequences that extend beyond the patient" (Knepper & Arrington, 2020, p. 20). Social support can take many forms. McGeorge, Feng, and Burleson (2011) define social support as "verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid" (p. 317). Additionally, social support is meant to "reduce uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's experience" (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987, p. 19). The intent of the communication plays an important role because supportive communication can be used to help recipients deal with stressors (Patterson, 2002; Thoits, 1995) and can act as a buffer against future stressors (Cohen & McKay, 1984). Having a significant illness can be stressful, and many patients will seek help from friends, family, and spouses (Neuling & Winefield, 1988) because a strong social support network may play a significant role in positive health outcomes related to grief (Toller, 2011). Social support becomes particularly important in older adults as supportive messages and behaviors function similarly to assets that patients may use to offset the deficits and challenges they face (Brocklehurst, 1985; Rockwood et al, 1994; Madhavan, 2021). A broad range of outlets are available to ensure sick patients and their loved ones are getting the support they need.

Social support is multidimensional. Antonucci and Israel (1986) offered confiding, reassurance, showing respect, providing care for people who are sick, talking with people when they are upset, nervous, or depressed, and talking about health as ways one might show support. Cutrona and colleagues (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992) developed a system for coding supportive messages including

informational support, emotional support, esteem support, network support, and tangible support. The multidimensional model of supportive communication put forth by Cutrona and Russell (1990) has been cited and used in studies for a variety of health contexts, such as communication with patients with chronic disorders (e.g., Knepper & Arrington, 2020; Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991; Stanton et al., 2007; Uchino, 2009), social support's effect on endocrine and immune function (e.g. Uchino et al., 1996), and communication in the family (e.g. Collins et al., 1993; Craig & Johnson, 2011; Marsh & Day, 2021)). Social support provides opportunities for feelings of belonging, something that many grieving people need, even if they do not actively seek social support (Thoits, 2011). As grief can begin prior to death, social support is important to consider for terminally ill patients, loved ones of terminally ill patients, and surviving loved ones who are grieving death, whether sudden or progressive.

Sometimes the support offered does not meet its intended goal. Uchino (2009) separates received social support from perceived social support. Received social support is the message sent to a recipient without consideration for how it is interpreted. Perceived support represents the message recipient's interpretation of the support received or not received. Not all communication efforts successfully meet their goals; therefore, a discrepancy may exist between the amount and type of support received and the amount and type of support perceived. This discrepancy can be called support concordance, which refers to the extent by which parties in a relationship agree that supportive or unsupportive communication has occurred (Antonucci & Israel, 1986; Coriell & Cohen, 1995; Norton & Manne, 2007). Concordance is a measure of fidelity between intended and received support.

Communication that does not meet the support needs of the recipient, whether that be messages perceived as negative, unsupportive, or even complete lack of support can lead to negative health outcomes (Toller, 2011). Support concordance can occur alongside social support during times of grief (grief support) and could have a drastic impact on one's ability to go through the grieving process, even affecting mortality rates for surviving caregivers (Rabow et al., 2004). Speaking to Albrecht and Adelman's (1987) definition of supportive communication, control or perceived lack of control over one's situation may affect one's ability to reduce or manage uncertainty about the grieving process (Cutrona, 1996). Because of the dominance of religion in many people's lives, religious supportive communication is common, and often desired, during times of grief. Yet nearly one-third of people do not discuss religion at the end-of-life and 20% of US-Americans identify as a None (Pew Research Center, 2012). Religious supportive communication may cause higher levels of support discordance for Nones, making traditional grief scripts with religious undertones inappropriate and potentially harmful to Nones. Therefore, the current chapter sought to explore how Nones communicate about the end of life to determine what messages were sent and received and which messages were most appropriate or inappropriate surrounding grief.

Improving End-of-Life Communication

While a small body of literature exists about end-of-life communication, much of it focuses on health outcomes instead of communication outcomes (Wright et al., 2013). Additional research from scholars trained in communication was needed. The extant literature on grief messages notes that the communication aspect was a paramount feature for patient health and in caregiver health alike (Rabow et al., 2004). A better understanding of how to properly communicate about death improved health outcomes. Although communication skills have entered the purview of medical training, there is a dearth of evidence to outline effective communicative scripts for communication about death and dying, especially scripts that are devoid of religion. The field of communication is uniquely suited to rapidly expand our

understanding about how to communicate about death, dying, and bereavement, and the effects of those communication efforts, especially in understudied populations like Nones. Some end-of-life communicators may question the role of religion in their lives and in the grieving process, but still require respect and compassion from others. Grief and bereavement may act as a confounding factor in one's decision to question or let go of one's religious beliefs. Regardless of whether one identifies as religious or not, we must develop communication scripts that help interlocutors manage end-of-life messages to dispel the taboo that pervades grief communication.

METHODS

The study included in this chapter utilized a convenience sample of people who recently experienced end-of-life communication. Participants were asked to identify the conversations about death and dying that they had either with a patient who had a terminal diagnosis or conversations with friends and family members that occurred just after the sudden death of a loved one. Though participants were allowed to discuss the memories that were most vivid to them, they were requested to discuss only one person with a terminal diagnosis or who had died, and that the memories be recent enough that they felt they could accurately recall the conversations. Upon IRB approval, the research team advertised in online community message boards, on college campuses, and in local health centers seeking participants to talk about end-of-life communication. Though current patients and their loved ones were invited to participate, the final population of the study primarily consisted of participants for whom the person on topic had already died. In addition to requiring the end-of-life communication to be recent, at least one of the communicators had to identify as non-religious. In total, 23 participants were included in the study. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 53. Of the 23 participants, two identified as of Asian descent, one identified as Hispanic, and the remaining 87% (20) identified as White. Seventy eight percent of participants identified as female while the remainder identified as male. Interviews averaged between 30-45 minutes in length.

Upon expressing interest, participants were invited to an interview on various aspects of end-of-life communication. Participants were asked multiple open-ended questions to describe the person who died, the nature of the illness or death, and the interpersonal conversations that occurred between people about death, dying, and grieving. Participants were then asked a series of questions relating to the participants' overall thoughts on the process of grief, grieving without religion, the religious and non-religious support they provided or received, and support the participants wished they had received. Participants were asked about their perception of the effectiveness of the social support they received during their grieving process and that support's concordance. Finally, participants were asked whether they discussed the medical and posthumous preferences of the deceased, to assess the participants' efficacy of being able to carry out the (final) wishes of their loved one.

Although the study was originally designed to analyze the social support features of grief communication, the codes were not predetermined. The participants' open-ended responses were parsed for themes of support used to help their grieving process. Additionally, themes of unsupportive messages, incorrect/inappropriate messages, and non-support were analyzed. During the coding process it became clear that social support was an important feature of the grieving process, but only one of many themes participants wished to discuss. A second round of thematic analysis was done without the social support framework to identify underlying themes that did not fit the social support literature. After coding

the data, the researchers discussed the themes to coordinate and resolve differences in how the data was coded. Using constant comparative techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the authors refined the data, condensed coding categories, and developed a final set of themes. Themes were evaluated using three criteria: The theme must be repeated within a singular interview, the theme must be repeated across interviews, and the theme emerge forcefully from the content around it (e.g. was uttered emphatically in comparison to other messages, was identified as an important issue by the participant, etc.). Finally, to assist in adding to the richness of the discussion, the themes were supported by isolating exemplary cases of the participants' own words (Charmaz, 2006). The following themes emerged.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support is an essential factor in one's ability to cope with life's hardships effectively. The extant literature shows that having a strong support network, especially the care of an intimate partner or marital spouse can be associated with a variety of positive outcomes, including compliance with medical advice and lowering one's vulnerability to depression (Brown & Harris, 1978; Rodgers, 1987; Waltz, 1986). Indeed, cancer survivors have shown effective social support to be directly correlated with emotional well-being. Those survivors who received ample social support also held more positive cancer beliefs—"cognitive perceptions regarding cancer, such as attitudes toward getting cancer"—and health self-efficacy—one's ability to take care of one's own health (Niu et al., 2021, p. 516). Conversely, a lack of proper social support has shown to have a negative effect on care outcomes in patients with communication disorders (e.g. aphasia, Parkinson's disease). Perceived social support acted as a facilitator to therapeutic success while a lack of social support acted as a barrier for effective treatment (Eadie et al., 2018). Due to the complex nature of interpersonal relationships, those who are grieving will have idiosyncratic wants and needs that they seek from their end-of-life and grief messages, but the perception of social support appears to be paramount.

Though the extant social support literature clearly argues for the value of informational and esteem support, those themes did not appear frequently nor forcefully within the study included in this chapter to warrant inclusion in the themes below. However, emotional and social network support played an immense role in the participant's ability to cope with the death of a loved one. In regard to emotional and social network support, participants experienced a wide array of both support and non-support in their grief communication.

Emotional Support and Social Network Support (Communicating Love and Caring)

Grief and bereavement are times of intense emotional turmoil. Many participants expressed feeling stressed about the grief process, both in their role as someone providing support and receiving support. In times of grief, emotional support that communicates love and caring may also serve as a message about a grieving person's belonging to a social network. Therefore, emotional and social network support were effective tools in communicating about death and dying. For example, Debra described her instinct to run toward others who were grieving as a sign of belonging. After her husband's suicide, Debra found herself needing to provide emotional support for her young children. She noted that finding a specific message was often unnecessary; instead, being present in the moment for her children made an impact.

Lucille had a similar experience after the sudden death of her father, who presented seizure symptoms and was later diagnosed with bleeding in his brain. The support Lucille received from her husband was described as “abundantly comforting” because he listened so thoroughly. Lucille felt it was nice to have her spouse act as her caretaker in that moment, giving her the space for emotional outbursts, crying, and general sadness. The lack of a need to explain why she felt sad was beneficial. Again, her husband’s mere presence as a support figure made a difference.

It was unsurprising to find that providing proper emotional support led to positive outcomes for the participants. Research has shown social support to reduce stress and improve health outcomes related to the wide spectrum of somatic, psychosomatic, and psychiatric disorders so commonly associated with grief (c.f., Bruce, 2002; Ehler & Straub, 1998; Kraemer et al., 2001). The importance of perceived social support is also supported by prior research with a focus on both the availability of support and the adequacy of the support received (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Holahan & Moos, 1981; Procidano & Heller, 1983). Both support recipients and their relational partners have indicated improved emotional, relational, and even physical health outcomes when they perceived social support to be available and effective (Farris & Keeley, 2017). Social support can have a blunting effect against stressors where those who perceive they are receiving or will receive adequate support may reframe the stressor as less impactful, producing lower levels of anxiety as evidenced by measuring free cortisol levels in saliva (Heinrichs et al., 2003). In the same study, Heinrichs and colleagues found that participants received further anxiolytic response when social support was administered alongside intranasal oxytocin. Anxiolytic medicines are used to treat anxiety and social phobia disorders. Oxytocin has been linked with social interaction and anti-stress effects and can be released naturally in the body in response to touch, temperature, and positive social interactions (Uvnäs-Moberg et al., 2015). The study included in this chapter provides support for the extant research in showing perceived support as paramount in grief communication. Participants commonly noted that the communication scripts they needed were much less about saying the right thing at the right time and, instead, about feeling emotionally and socially supported.

Non-Support and Unsupportive Support

Providing support is not an easy endeavor. For some participants, the lack of support from others, or support efforts that felt incorrect or inappropriate, did more harm than good. Whitey discussed her resentment toward her community following her father’s death from colon cancer. She described herself as being unsupported due to half-hearted platitudes and gestures, such as someone making a casserole. Though there was an outpouring of support at the outset of her father’s death, she questioned where those same people were a month later. After describing awkwardness at her father’s funeral, Whitey suggested that the difficulty in talking about death and a fear of saying the wrong thing were what caused people to shy away from providing support when she needed it. Gina, whose father died in his sleep after an extended struggle with a blood clotting disease, said she felt helpless to give support to her mother and brother. She said, “There’s nothing I can say to make her feel better. . . there is nothing any of us can say to each other to make any of us feel better. . . . We’re all going through the exact same thing so how are we supposed to make each other feel better if we all feel like shit?”

Even caregivers struggled to give continued support. Raymond, the primary caregiver for his grandmother who had Alzheimer’s disease, found himself “preoccupied somewhere along the track with [a] sort of minutia of getting through every day” and forgetting to have meaningful conversations because he felt his grandmother lacked the lucidity to engage with the messages. Mackenzie also found herself

seeking moments in which her grandmother's Alzheimer's had not robbed her of her memory. She described a "blank Alzheimer's stare" between brief moments of recognition. The "normal" moments proved difficult too. Mackenzie's grandmother attempted to speak with her about her impending death by saying, "I don't think I've got much longer to live," but Mackenzie rebuffed the discussion as she did not feel ready to accept what she knew would inevitably happen. These stories highlight the difficult positions faced by those who are grieving and those who are providing support. The same script or behavior may be "right" in one moment but entirely wrong in another. Sometimes saying nothing was the most appropriate response.

Those who are grieving may experience a range of needs for tangible support. Normally, helping in planning a funeral could be viewed as a positive form of tangible support that is needed by many people following the death of a loved one. However, the participants in the current study found themselves faced with non-support and unsupportive messages throughout the funeral planning process. Although the participants expressed thankfulness in the financial and tangible support they received during the planning stages, they also ran into many interpersonal challenges related to the funeral. In particular, the participants expressed feeling hurt when the family planned a religious ceremony despite the deceased being non-religious. Forcing religion on the ceremony was generally viewed as a concession made for surviving family members and loved ones, but disrespectful to the memory of the person they were attempting to honor. Jamie expressed frustration with her lack of control over the content at her boyfriend's funeral. Though her boyfriend was an atheist, he came from a devout family. The overtly religious ceremony did not provide an outlet for Jamie. She said "The funeral was no help to me at all, it was horrible. It felt like the funeral of a stranger." Jamie argued that her boyfriend, who died of a sudden aneurysm, would not have wanted a religious funeral. Elizabeth had a similar experience after her aunt died suddenly from heart illness and complications. Elizabeth's mother and her nine siblings had been raised as Jehovah's Witnesses but were no longer religious. Because Elizabeth was a known atheist, she was disallowed from speaking at the funeral because her words might contradict her grandmother's faith. Religious funeral planning was an additional stressor when the deceased was not religious; however, the converse problem did not exist. Non-religious participants were accepting of religious ceremonies when they felt it honored the deceased's wishes.

GRIEF MESSAGES OTHER THAN SOCIAL SUPPORT

Examining One's Religious (Non)Beliefs

Not all messages sent during times of grief are meant to provide social support. One line of questioning during the interview asked participants to examine needs that went unmet during end-of-life conversations. An interesting pattern emerged as participants examined unmet needs alongside their faith or religion. Five participants found themselves questioning their faith and religiosity in the aftermath of the death of their loved one. Gina, who had previously visited church only sparingly, found herself trying religion as a source of relief for the emotional pain she felt. She said, "I don't know why I decided to go to church. I guess [it was] a way to cope. . . . Some people can go from not believing in anything and they go to church and all of a sudden become believers. I don't know, maybe that would have helped them more than it did me. . . . I don't regret going to church those couple of times, but it wasn't my cure." Alexander, whose ex-girlfriend/close friend died in a car accident just weeks prior to his interview, noted that he

hoped for some sort of heaven where he might see her again, even if he didn't necessarily believe it to exist. Olivia, too, found herself pondering the afterlife after her father died unexpectedly from heart illness and complications. She expressed that she wished she could believe in heaven because it would have a comforting effect. Claire described the multiple conversations she had with her toddler daughter after her husband died due to complications from a stroke. Though her daughter chose to believe in heaven, Claire said she had not ruled out the possibility of heaven existing, but she did not feel comfortable promoting the idea to her child. Instead, she utilized equivocal responses to allow her child to believe in the afterlife even if Claire felt unsure. After losing his great-grandmother, Jeremy questioned not only whether heaven existed, but if he would be allowed into heaven upon his death. Each of these examples showcase an internal struggle that some Nones feel when navigating conversations about death and the afterlife with their loved ones. The underlying theme of these messages relied on the participant or their conversational partners finding comfort in believing in the afterlife and hedging their bets to be allowed into heaven if it does exist. Though the participants questioned their faith, they generally concluded that they still did not believe in heaven even if imagining heaven brought them a sense of relief.

Seeking a Sense of Normality with Illness

Facing illness can be difficult but maintaining a sense of normality was desired by the participants. Although only a few of the departed discussed received a formal diagnosis, many had long-term health issues that required changes in interpersonal dynamics and social behaviors. After having end-of-life conversations with a friend who died from cancer, Trevor noted the importance of treating terminal patients as autonomous agents. Though the illness may require a shift in some aspects of life, Trevor felt it was important not to "do anything different" unless required. His friend, John, was going to die and infantilizing him would have served to only humiliate him along the way. Mackenzie's family sought normality as well. After spending a day mourning her grandmother's Alzheimer's disease, she returned to her mother for her favorite meal and to watch television together. Jay and her mother provided support for her father, who suffered from congestive heart failure, by showing support and grace when he struggled in his fatherly duties because of his illness. Saree's family chose to use topic avoidance as a tool for stress management. The uncertainty of her grandmother's breast cancer created a paradox for Saree as she cared for her grandmother in hospice. Describing a time in which she tried to convince her grandmother to take her pain medication, she said, "It's kind of needed, you might want to [avoid talking about it] so you're more comfortable, so you're not hurting all the time." But when her grandmother expressed a fear of dying, Saree and her family said, "We just didn't talk about the fact that she was going to. We avoided the things that hurt her feelings, because why hurt her feelings if it's just close to the end?"

The juxtaposition of looking inward to one's own grief and outward toward a sick loved one was an unenviable position. What was clear for these participants was that regardless of whether death and dying were taboo topics in their families, seeking a way in which those dying could have a sense of normality before they perished was a valued coping behavior. Though they noted topic avoidance was not particularly helpful in advancing through the stages of grief, some families necessitated topic avoidance to maintain functionality. For those who were open to end-of-life messages, clear communication about death ameliorated the terrible realization that someone they loved was going to soon be dead. These participants coped by showing appreciation for the time left with their loved one rather than worrying about the difficulties that lied ahead.

God Didn't Kill My Loved One

A common source of pain for participants was the continued notion that the death of their loved one was a part of the grand design of a higher being. Though Jeremy's family avoided the religious component of their end-of-life messages, he did hear that "God will take [his grandmother] home," which was met with skepticism. Jamie's family told her that "God only takes the most beautiful flowers" and that although "we don't understand the reason now, we will one day." Mackenzie went so far as to challenge a coworker who told her "It's all part of God's plan," regarding her grandmother slowly deteriorating into dementia. She felt, "If that's the kind of God you worship, then I don't want any part of it." Such religious messages tarnished her relationship with her coworker.

Trevor recognized that those delivering the messages were not likely acting maliciously, but did suspect that they knew religious messages were not comforting. He felt that hearing messages like "They've passed on to some other place" or "I'll pray for you" were ultimately disingenuous to the situation and served as a "final fuck you" to end the conversation. He suggested those messages don't help him or people like him. Religious messages may be borne of differing perspectives on the afterlife. Jamie pointed out that "If you're religious, you don't have to worry about if you'll see them again, you know you'll see them again," but for Nones, the same could not be said. Perhaps Jay put it best when she said, "When somebody passes away, even if you're religious, it still feels like God doesn't make sense all the time."

Multiple participants thought that religious end-of-life messages were a coping mechanism that sought to find reason in death, though not needing a reason seemed more appropriate for non-religious people. Claire described herself as being free of the desire to find a grand, overarching reason for her husband's stroke. Her daughter struggled in seeking to blame something for her father's death, but Claire told her there does not have to be a reason why somebody got sick. It was something that had happened, it was sad, and there was no big mystery to figure out. Jamie felt similarly. She said, "I didn't have to find a reason [for his death], but I was saddled with the pain of knowing that I will never see him again, that our conversations are over, that all of that is gone." Suggesting God was the reason their loved one was dead boomeranged for participants. For most, the messages were not only unhelpful, but hurtful as well. They did not believe God killed their loved one, nor did they want to worship a God who would have done so.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Due to the taboo nature of death communication, recruitment for this project was difficult. At the outset, the research team hoped to include current patients with a terminal diagnosis, those patients' loved ones, and those who were grieving the loss of a loved one whether that was due to the effects of a disease or a sudden death. Including these different groups of grieving people would have allowed the parsing of different perspectives of social support concordance depending on one's position in the interpersonal relationship and one's experience in the grieving process. For example, those who grieve someone who died due to ongoing or chronic illness may require different support strategies than those who grieve someone who died suddenly due to health or other trauma (e.g., murder, car accident, SIDS). Lack of sample size is a common issue in qualitative research that is only exacerbated by discussing taboo topics. Despite efforts to recruit in various forums, the majority of participants wanted to discuss a loved one who had died suddenly and their interactions with family and friends in the wake of their loved one's death. The taboo nature of grief communication, of talking about death and dying, and of religion in

mixed social circles with religious and non-religious people each served as limiting factors in recruitment. Broadening the scope of the study may have provided a wider recruitment pool, which could be useful for future studies.

CONCLUSION

Social support at the end of life is an important part of the grieving and bereavement process. Whether one is the terminally ill patient, the caregiver of a sick family member, or the survived loved one of someone who died suddenly, talking about death is difficult but it must be addressed. Social support at the end of life can have life-sustaining effects (Rabow et al., 2004). While many religious resources exist both in local communities (e.g., churches, support groups) and online, far fewer resources emerge for Nones to find information on the grieving process and to seek non-religious social support. Because resources are limited, it is important to garner a deeper understanding of what messages Nones view as most effective; doing so will ensure that the few sources available for Nones and their loved ones are competent in providing support.

The data from the study included in this chapter showed emotional and social network support to be highly effective when communicating with the bereaved. Additionally, placing religion into inappropriate contexts, blaming God for death and illness, and having improper tangible support made grieving more difficult. As religious people and Nones may have different desires for how to treat their posthumous remains, as well different desires about funeral services, it was important to understand if the participants felt capable of doing what was desired by the deceased. Although patients with terminal or chronic illness may have more ample opportunity to discuss their desires for advanced care directives and posthumous wishes, participants who experienced the sudden death of a loved one may have still discussed end-of-life wishes as a precautionary measure, such as medical wishes if one were to be left in a vegetative state. Parsing communication about the functional needs of Nones and their loved ones at the end of life can provide valuable information on how to provide social support. Lifting the shroud of taboo to make end-of-life communication both normal and desired is a necessary step forward.

Though this research sought to develop a series of communication scripts useful for Nones and those who communicate with them about the end of life, what was found was that grief communication needs are idiosyncratic to the terminally ill patient, to those who grieve them, and to those who try to provide support as part of a social network. What not to say became clear, but ample opportunity remains to tackle grief messaging to ensure those who are struggling to deal with death are receiving the support they need. Maybe there isn't a perfect thing to say as we face our deaths but respecting one's religious status and trying to be a supporting presence surely makes a difference. Fortunately, the lessons to be learned from the participants in the study included in this chapter are useful *regardless of one's religious status*. Developing the communication competence needed to identify what messages are useful in the current communication context can have a lasting impact on a person's ability to grieve the loss of an individual one cares about. For Nones, focusing on emotional and social network support and avoiding religious messaging were the most useful strategies to show grief support when turning to God doesn't make sense.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Advanced Care Directive: A legal document, such as a living will, that provides guidance for medical and health care decisions. Additionally, advanced care directives may assign durable power of attorney for medical decisions to an individual to act as proxy in cases in which the patient becomes incapable or incompetent to make healthcare decisions on their own behalf.

Bereavement: The state of feeling emotional pain resulting from the loss of a beloved family member or friend.

End-of-Life Communication: Includes messages surrounding death and dying. Topics include but are not limited to final wishes, funeral plans, advanced care directives, and grief.

Final Conversations: The conversations that occur between a patient and their loved ones from the time of a terminal diagnosis until the patient's death; Conversations about one's impending or eventual death.

Grief: The intense emotional pain experienced alongside loss.

“Nones”: People who identify as atheist, agnostic, or irreligious in some way.

Social Support: Comprises the communication techniques used to attend to various social needs.

Sudden Death: An unexpected death that is either instantaneous or which occurs quite suddenly.

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