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Article

"Society is not built for me": The seven components of compulsory sexuality as mechanisms of inequality for the asexual community

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Abstract

Compulsory sexuality, which makes sexual attraction normative and compulsory, positions asexuality as a deviation from this societal norm. This article establishes the structural link between compulsory sexuality and experiences of inequality by investigating the mechanisms through which compulsory sexuality creates and sustains inequalities in the everyday lives of asexuals. It makes a unique research contribution because of its novel conceptualisation of compulsory sexuality into seven components: Pathologisation, Dehumanisation, Invalidation, Invisibility, Alienation, Denial of Epistemic Authority, and Sexual Pressure. The data, consisting of narratives published on several 'confession'-style blogs on the social media platform Tumblr, shows evidence for all seven components as vehicles through which discrimination is enacted upon asexual individuals and the asexual community as a whole. I argue that these acts of oppression and discrimination enacted on asexuals compile to a broader issue of inequalities of respect and recognition caused by the epiphenomenon of compulsory sexuality.

Keywords
Compulsory sexuality; asexuality; inequality; sexual normativity

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Introduction

Compulsory sexuality, the notion that everyone experiences sexual attraction and engages in sexual activity, makes sexuality a necessary and central component of human experiences (Foster, 2017). It not only assumes that everyone is a sexual being, it also makes it compulsory to be one. Consequently, asexuality[2] is considered a deviation from this norm and asexuals are faced with social consequences, such as little to no media representation, pathologisation and exclusion from LGBTQIA+[3] community spaces (Deutsch, 2018). Even though asexuals and their experiences are still underrepresented in dominant academic and social discourses, they are increasingly discussed in sexuality studies and campaigns for asexual awareness (Decker, 2015).

However, so far, both academic and social efforts concerned with asexuality and inequality have been focused on individualised experiences of discrimination and microaggressions (see Deutsch, 2018; Foster, 2017). They often leave out structural mechanisms which play an essential role in creating and sustaining the inequalities that asexuals systematically face in a society that presupposes sexuality. Therefore, this article highlights these structural mechanisms and their effects by investigating how a culture of compulsory sexuality creates and sustains inequalities in the everyday lives of asexual-identified individuals and the asexual community. Specifically, this article aims:

1) To develop a conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between compulsory sexuality, asexuality, and inequality
2) To identify and analyse the mechanisms through which compulsory sexuality produces inequalities for the asexual community
3) To identify and analyse the forms of inequality experienced by the asexual community

To answer the research question, the concept of compulsory sexuality is operationalised and broken down into seven components which can be used to analyse the collected data. The data shows evidence for all seven components as vehicles through which discrimination is

[2] Asexuality is an umbrella term encompassing different variations of a lack of sexual attraction to others (Decker, 2015).

[3] 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and more' Community, sometimes shortened to 'Queer' Community.

enacted upon asexuals. Therefore, I argue that these acts of oppression and discrimination enacted on asexuals compile to a larger issue of inequalities of respect and recognition which are caused by the epiphenomenon of compulsory sexuality.

The article is divided into several sections. Firstly, the literature review summarises the state of research on inequality in connection to asexuality, as well as compulsory sexuality, to position this article within the broader research context. Secondly, the theoretical framework operationalises compulsory sexuality into seven components to build the theoretical tools of the analysis. Thirdly, the methodology outlines how relevant data is collected and analysed and which limitations arise from these methods. Fourthly, the analysis presents findings to establish how the seven components foster and sustain inequalities for asexuals. Furthermore, it reflects on overlaps and reciprocities between the components to adapt the previous conceptualisation of compulsory sexuality and to situate it within broader discourses on equality. Finally, the conclusion reflects on findings and implications for future research and activist efforts.

Literature Review

When it comes to analyses of asexuality in connection to inequality, the majority of the present-day research focuses on individual experiences of inequality in specific areas of everyday life, such as healthcare (Foster and Scherrer, 2014) and the judicial system (Emens, 2014), or it examines experiences of microaggressions and individual acts of discrimination (Deutsch, 2018; Foster, 2017). While this is undoubtedly valuable research, it presents a rather individualised notion of inequality. It does not consider larger social structures, systemic mechanisms, or possible connections between different social spheres. These elements are crucial, however, when attempting to observe larger patterns and create a comprehensive and structural analysis of how expectations of sexuality operate in society (Gupta, 2015).

Compulsory Sexuality

Within the slowly increasing literature on how normative ideas of sexuality operate within society, the concept of compulsory sexuality has emerged. Drawing on Gupta (2015), who provides the most comprehensive definition, this article's conceptualisation of compulsory sexuality is

two-fold. Firstly, compulsory sexuality describes the general assumption that all people are sexual beings and experience sexual attraction and desires. Secondly, it describes the social norms, practices, and structures arising from this assumption that position the experience of sexual desire and attraction as normative. This a) compels people to engage in sexual activity and take up sexual identities and b) marginalises different forms of non-sexuality, including asexuality.

In most Western societies, sexuality is compelled in various ways. In the public sphere, sex and sexuality are attributed increasing importance, for instance, in advertising (Reichert and Carpenter, 2004), music videos and lyrics (Aubrey and Frisby, 2011), and product design (Goodin *et al*., 2011). In the private sphere, the frequency of sexual activity is being policed, and the pressure to engage in sexual activity is enacted both onto sexual minority communities, such as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as majority communities, such as heterosexual men and women (Chasin, 2013; Marshall 2002; Tiefer 2004). Especially for members of the LGBTQIA+ community, the desire to engage in sexual activity is seen as a key deciding factor in defining one's sexual identity. This can range as far as requirements to engage in sexual activity to 'prove' one's sexual identity before official institutions of the state when seeking asylum due to homophobic persecution (Lewis, 2014). Additionally, sexuality, especially when positioned as an essential part of the human experience, is compelled in a way that penalises behaviour and identities that do not subscribe to it, illustrated through the excessive stigmatisation and pathologisation of asexuals (Gupta, 2013). The definition of what counts as 'normal', and even as human, is tied to the sexual. Consequently, engaging in sexual activity and taking up sexual identities does not simply become the norm but becomes necessary to avoid marginalisation or stigmatisation (Przybylo, 2019). In short, if one wishes to be seen as a 'normal', healthy human, sexuality becomes compulsory.

Theoretical Framework

While the meaning of compulsory sexuality as a concept has been explored, the structural mechanisms through which it operates and creates real-life consequences have yet to be analysed systematically. My article positions compulsory sexuality at the centre of its theoretical framework. Based on the previous conceptualisation and existing

scholarship on asexual experiences of inequality, compulsory sexuality is operationalised into smaller, more measurable components, which provide the themes for the data analysis. I argue that these components a) arise directly as consequences of a culture of compulsory sexuality, b) create inequalities in the everyday lives of asexuals, and c) can therefore be seen as mechanisms through which compulsory sexuality creates inequalities for the asexual community.

I have developed seven components of compulsory sexuality that are useful analytical tools. First, the belief that sexuality is a necessary component of a *healthy* human life results in a **pathologisation** of asexuality, which denotes it as unnatural, unhealthy, or as a trauma response and positions asexuals as unhealthy or mentally ill (Deutsch, 2018; Foster and Scherrer, 2014). Second, the same belief that sexuality is a necessary component of a healthy *human* life and that to be human necessitates being sexual results in the **dehumanisation** of asexuality, denoting asexuals as somewhat less than human or as 'robots' (Deutsch, 2018). Third, the assumption that everyone is sexual and the resulting pressure to adopt a sexual identity results in an **invalidation** of asexuality, which denotes the experiences, feelings, and identification of asexuals as neither valid nor real and positions asexuality as not a real sexual identity (Foster, 2017; Gazzola and Morrison, 2011). Fourth, the assumption that everyone is sexual and that these are the only experiences worth depicting results in the **invisibility** of asexuality in public discourses and the media, which erases the experiences of asexuals (Decker, 2015). Fifth, the assumptions and pressures of compulsory sexuality often lead to **alienation,** isolation, and rejection of asexuals from mainstream society and their social communities, self-imposed or enforced by others (Deutsch, 2018; Gupta, 2013). Sixth, the importance ascribed to sexual activity in the determination of a sexual identity leads to a **denial of epistemic authority** for asexuals, who are denied the possibility, ability, and even the capacity to name and identify themselves (Gazzola and Morrison, 2011; Gupta, 2015). Seventh, the expectation that everyone experiences sexual desires and wants to engage in sexual activity can lead to **sexual pressure** for asexuals to engage in sexual activity with the possibility of coercion, threats, and even violence (Deutsch, 2018; Foster, 2017; Przybylo, 2019). As these seven components all arise from the same structural phenomena, naturally, they may overlap and reinforce one another.

To build this framework, I have conducted a novel synthesis of empirical evidence established by previous research on asexual experiences of inequality and compulsory sexuality. The framework is then refined by the data I have collected, which may highlight overlaps, reciprocities, additional components, or more specific mechanisms. When fully refined, these components build a novel conceptual framework to assess compulsory sexuality and other social sexual norms and constitute a massive contribution to (A)sexuality Studies and Equality Studies.

Methodology

The data was collected from a 'confession' blog on the social media platform Tumblr. These blogs are centred around a common theme, such as films or identities, related to which people can anonymously submit their confessions, experiences, fears, or struggles. The narratives are then published anonymously. A typical post on an ‘asexual-confession’ blog looks as follows:

Figure 1 *Illustrative example of an ‘asexual-confession’ blogpost on Tumblr.*

Between ten and fifteen narratives are published daily, amounting to 350 to 450 monthly posts. I followed an exhaustive approach where I stopped coding the data once information saturation was achieved. This was achieved after analysing 280 narratives, all varying in length between one sentence and multiple paragraphs.

In terms of the data analysis method, a thematic analysis is the most appropriate for this case, as it allows for analysing collective and shared meanings, experiences, and patterns across a larger dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Preliminary codes, such as the seven components of compulsory sexuality, sources of inequality, and psychological consequences, are established based on the existing literature and revised as the data is analysed.

Analysis

a. Pathologisation

Many contributors narrate how they feel pathologised by their communities or healthcare providers. The main ways in which this takes place is through the medicalisation of asexuality, where the possibility of mental and physiological causes for asexuality is being highlighted, the positioning of asexuality as something to be fixed, and the treatment of (parts of) the asexual community as mentally ill.

Many contributors describe how their close social contacts, as well as medical professionals, often react to the disclosure of their asexual identity by trying to find alternative causes for their experiences. They often assume psychological causes for asexuality, such as trauma or other mental health issues, or physiological causes, such as hormonal imbalances, of which asexuality would be a symptom or side effect. In general, asexuality is being explained as a side effect of or caused by an actual medical issue. Contributors describe that especially (mental) healthcare providers often unnecessarily focus on their asexuality. This often prevents them from receiving other mental health treatments, such as antidepressants, because healthcare providers may view asexuality as a possible side effect.

Additionally, contributors also recount being told to simply 'fix' their asexuality with sex therapy or exposure therapy. Close contacts such as friends or (potential) romantic partners often jokingly (or seriously) state that they can 'fix' contributors' asexuality through sex therapy or sexual intercourse, a practice that is also referred to as corrective rape (Decker, 2015). This positions asexuality as something to be fixed with medical or psycho-therapeutic treatment.

These instances of pathologisation result in contributors describing feeling broken and abnormal. Some contributors describe how, due to external pathologisation, they begin agreeing with the assumption that they are unhealthy or mentally ill and, driven by their internalised pathologisation, seek corrective treatment for their asexuality.

b. Dehumanisation

Many contributors describe instances of dehumanisation where they are treated as abnormal and broken, heartless or malicious, and inferior to non-asexuals. Most often, this dehumanisation of asexuality is expressed through the notion that love, which humanises people, is tied to sexual activity. The argument goes that because they do not experience a desire to engage in sexual activity, asexuals must not experience love and emotions like 'normal' people do. Therefore, since experiencing love (and, by extension, sexual desires) is a critical part of the human experience, asexuals must be abnormal and somewhat 'less than human'. Contributors describe being treated as heartless, emotionless, and even robotic for not experiencing sexual desires. In addition, many describe how their close social contacts express that it is challenging to love contributors and relate to their experiences because of their asexuality. The following sentiment is illustrative of how contributors express this experience of dehumanisation:

> Apparently, I must not know human emotions and love because I don't experience sexual attraction. My life experiences and relationships with others are treated like they're dull, colourless, and incomplete.

This external dehumanisation is, once again, often internalised. Many contributors describe feeling "broken", and abnormal, and that "something wrong with [them]". Some even express that because others make them feel like they are not allowed to or should not exist, they internalise that notion, which is illustrated in the following sentiment: "Love is how people are humanised after all. I'm less than that. I am nothing".

c. Invalidation

In the contributors' experience, invalidation of asexuality takes three forms: first, asexuality as a whole is denoted as not real, second asexuality is seen as real but not as a valid sexual orientation, and third,

asexuality is accepted as a 'real' sexual orientation, but the asexual experience of the contributor specifically is being invalidated.

First, asexuality as a whole is denoted as not real. People argue that asexuality itself does not exist and attempt to explain asexuals' experiences in other ways, most often through pathologisation and medicalisation. Second, some argue that, even though asexuality is real and certain people do not experience sexual attraction, it nevertheless should not be seen as a sexual orientation. Contributors describe how other members of the LGBTQIA+ community argue that a lack of sexual attraction does not constitute a sexual orientation and should not be included within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Third, while it is acknowledged that asexuality exists and is a valid sexual orientation, it is specifically the asexual identity of the contributor that is invalidated, not the concept of asexuality. Contributors explain how, upon disclosing their asexuality, others would try to find alternative explanations for the contributors' experiences, argue that the contributor has not met the right person yet, or deny their asexuality altogether. Additionally, contributors narrate how, even if their social circles seem to tolerate their identity, they still experience invalidation in those circles. This can, for instance, take the form of family and friends trying to 'set them up', making sexual jokes, or outright pressuring them into sexual activity.

While the first and second forms of invalidation are directed at the concept of asexuality, with the second one also being directed at the asexual community as a whole, the third one is directed at specific people individually.

d. Invisibility

Many contributors describe how they feel asexuality as an orientation and asexual experiences are invisible, both in their personal and social lives and in the media and public discourse. Regarding their personal lives, contributors explain that they rarely see positive asexual role models and that asexual experiences are almost entirely invisible in their social circles. Sentiments such as "I just want to know people like me so we can talk about our experiences" are often expressed. Regarding the public sphere, contributors describe that asexuality and asexual characters are rarely represented in film and television and that romance and sexuality are assumed by default. If asexuality is represented at all, this representation

is often inaccurate to the actual experiences of asexuals and follows common stereotypes of asexuals as prudish, sexually repressed, or going through a phase.

The contributors also report that asexuality is not visible or present in LGBTQIA+ spaces and discourses. Asexual experiences are belittled by other members of the LGBTQIA+ community and are often overshadowed by other issues and experiences deemed more pressing or important. One contributor states they are "tired of asexual identities and problems constantly being pushed to the side and treated as lesser even by other LGBTQIA+ people". The contributors acknowledge that the LGBTQIA+ community is built around shared experiences of and with sexuality. However, they argue that the asexual experience is an essential contribution to this discourse and should not be left out, intentionally or accidentally, and should not be deliberately made invisible.

The erasure and inaccurate representation of asexuality and the hypervisibility of romance and sexual activity as the default make asexual experiences invisible and the option of asexuality virtually impossible. This results in loneliness and exclusion from important community spaces, such as online communities and the LGBTQIA+ community. Additionally, due to the little information on and inaccurate depiction of asexuality, contributors start exploring their asexual identity very late, since it is never presented as a viable option.

e. Alienation

Many contributors feel isolated, alienated, and rejected from broader society and their social communities. Most commonly, they feel alienated from their friend groups due to their disinterest in or discomfort with the high frequency of conversations surrounding sex and sexuality. Furthermore, they feel alienated through their social circles misunderstanding asexuality, invalidating their identity, or being the only asexual person in the group. As a result, they feel isolated from their social networks or self-isolate. The following is an illustrative example of a sentiment that is expressed multiple times:

> It's so lonely being friends with people who turn every single conversation into a chance to talk about crushes, recent hook-ups or whatever. I feel like I'm being forced out of my friend group. It's so exhausting and honestly isolating, it's been ages since I spoke to

> someone about my hobbies or favourite movie. Does nobody want to talk about anything that isn't about sex?

Regarding wider society, contributors often feel alienated within other important social communities such as workspaces, religious groups, or online spaces. This often leads to the loss of critical social networks and support systems and can even hinder professional advancements if they are deemed to not 'fit in' with the workplace community. Furthermore, contributors also express feeling alienated within the LGBTQIA+ community due to the high prevalence of sexual topics and prevalent prejudice towards asexual people. Some feel alienated even within the asexual community due to some members' rigid definition of asexuality and tensions between sex-averse[4] and sex-favourable asexuals. For instance, one contributor describes how they "feel like [they are] not asexual enough for the asexual community but also too asexual for non-asexuals" and feel "alienated in both communities". Therefore, even within supposedly accepting communities, some asexuals still feel alienated.

f. Denial of Epistemic Authority

Many narratives address how the contributors experience an appropriation of the ability and capacity to define their sexual identity. This denial of epistemic authority is often enacted by social ties, such as family members and friends, healthcare providers, workplace relations, or religious communities. They find different reasons to deny the contributors the right to identify themselves as asexual and try to explain their experiences in other ways. One of the most prominent arguments is that contributors are "going through a phase" or that they will change their minds once they find the right person. Another common theme is arguing that they cannot know whether or not they are asexual if they have not experienced sex yet. However, if they have experienced sex, this is also used to discredit their identity and override their ability to name themselves.

> My friends cannot let it go that I've had one-night stands before I had figured out that I'm asexual, and now they use it to discount me

[4] Sex-averse/repulsed asexuals have an adverse or distressed reaction to the thought of engaging in sexual activity, sex-favourable asexuals are willing and open to engaging in sexual activity, often to compromise with their partners (AVEN, 2023).

being asexual, even though I've been out to them for a while. It's so frustrating.

Contributors also experience a denial of epistemic authority at the hands of other members of the asexual community. A small minority pushes a specific and somewhat narrow definition of asexuality and discredits those who do not fit that ideal. One contributor describes how some of the discourse pushed by sex-repulsed asexuals essentialises the asexual experience as one where all asexuals are averse to sexual topics and activity. If one is not, one does not count as a 'real' asexual. As a result, the contributor does not feel comfortable publicly identifying with the label asexual even though they would otherwise do so.

All in all, the narratives describe how close social contacts do not believe contributors' self-identification as asexual and put themselves on higher authority in explaining the contributors' experiences. Sentiments such as "Why do non-asexual people insist on explaining my own feelings to me" and "They act as if they understand my emotions more than I do, and I've questioned my sexuality for months" are often expressed. Through this, contributors are denied the ability to put a name to their experiences and identify themselves as asexual. Consequently, they second-guess their identity and feel invalidated, alienated, and like an imposter in the asexual community.

g. Sexual Pressure

Many contributors feel external pressure to engage in sexual activity or define themselves in relation to sexuality. This ranges between pressure they receive from their close social circles, more general pressure from the hypervisibility of sexuality, and pressure from their (potential) partners.

Sexual activity is pushed onto asexuals by their friends and family especially. This often takes the form of comments that may appear harmless, such as "You need to get laid" or "When are we getting grandchildren?" but cumulate to create a general sense of pressure to engage in sexual activity and enter romantic relationships. They also often experience more general pressure from social expectations surrounding sexual activity and the close social construction of sexual activity as the ultimate expression of romantic love.

Additionally, many contributors feel anxious and pressured by the prospect of engaging in sexual activity with their partner. They experience feelings of inadequacy or anxiety about being unable to live up to their partner's sexual expectations. Some experience direct pressure from partners, coercing them into engaging in sexual activity against their will. This can lead to what Gupta (2015) calls 'consensual unwanted sex' (p.135), sexual activity that is unwanted by one party but is or appears to be consensual. In more extreme situations, this can also lead to the rape of the unwilling partner by coercion, force, or with the intention of 'fixing' them (corrective rape).

Discussion

This section briefly outlines the primary sources of inequality and the relationships between the seven components. Two significant sources of inequality can be identified within my data. First, through seemingly innocent comments, passive and active pressure, and (in)direct attacks and invalidations of asexuality, asexuals experience inequality through their close social contacts. Second, the hypervisibility of sexuality in society provides general conditions where asexuality is not perceived as a valid option, where contributors are made to feel that being sexual is the only possible option for them and that, at least in the eyes of society, it is compulsory. Therefore, compulsory sexuality is indeed present and evident in causing inequalities in a more specific, individualised way and as part of wider social expectations and norms.

The following flowchart illustrates the relationships between the seven components.

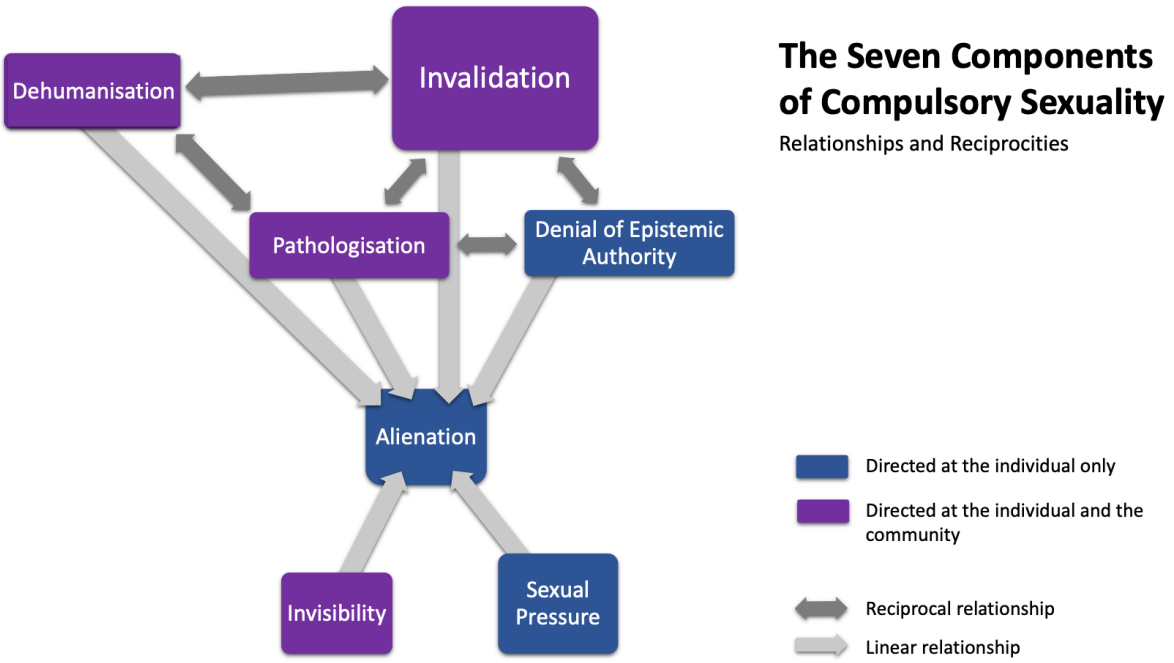

Figure 2 *The seven components of compulsory sexuality: relationships and reciprocities.*

There are significant overlaps and reciprocities between the seven components and some general patterns can be observed. Firstly, Invalidation, Pathologisation, and Denial of Epistemic Authority reinforce one another and overlap more frequently than the others. Secondly, Alienation is often reinforced and fostered by the other six components rather than having an active impact on them. Thirdly, while processes of Invalidation, Dehumanisation, Pathologisation, and Invisibility are directed at asexuality in general as well as at the individual identities of the contributors, processes of Alienation, Denial of Epistemic Authority, and Sexual Pressure are almost exclusively directed solely at the individual person. And finally, Invalidation has the largest overlap, frequency, and all in all, is the most prominent and explicitly thematised of the seven components.

As Invalidation is the most prominent of the seven components, the central inequality for the asexual community is an inequality of respect and recognition. This finding is in line with previous research, which stipulates that a lack of public awareness and recognition is predominant in fostering prejudice against asexuals (Deutsch, 2018; Foster and Scherrer, 2014; Foster, 2017). However, this focus on respect and recognition might be heightened by the mode of data collection. By basing

the analysis on a compilation of people's individual, yet shared, experiences, I am developing an account of inequality based on the perceptions of the asexual community *as articulated by them*. The data is articulated through the prism of this community's subjective perception and understanding of situations. Therefore, the framing of the accounts of inequality and issues addressed within this online community depends on which topics and discourses are given importance, what language and knowledge people have at their disposal, how they subjectively interpret their experiences, and what function is ascribed to these online spaces.

Nevertheless, due to the detailed operationalisation of my core concept, it is possible to extract how these shared experiences of inequality are fostered by the larger social structure of compulsory sexuality. By breaking down the concept into more measurable components, it is possible to find evidence for them in the narratives, even if the narratives themselves are not primarily concerned with wider social structures. Therefore, it is still evident how the epiphenomenon of compulsory sexuality operates in asexuals' everyday lives through the seven components causing inequalities of respect and recognition.

Conclusion

I operationalised the concept of compulsory sexuality into seven components: Pathologisation, Dehumanisation, Invalidation, Invisibility, Alienation, Denial of Epistemic Authority, and Sexual Pressure. By analysing narrative posts from three 'confession'-style blogs on Tumblr, I have analysed how compulsory sexuality functions to create inequalities in asexuals' lives through these seven components.

All seven components have been found to operate as social mechanisms that generate and sustain inequalities for asexuals. While some components are primarily directed at individuals, other components are additionally directed at the asexual community as a whole. When the seven components are put into relation to one another, it becomes clear that they overlap and reinforce one another. Nevertheless, Invalidation seems to be the component that creates inequalities most frequently and explicitly. Most contributors are concerned with invalidations of their identity and direct forms of discrimination against the asexual community rather than with structural processes. Nevertheless, I argue that these acts of oppression and discrimination enacted on asexuals and the asexual

community compile to a larger issue of inequalities of respect and recognition which are all caused by the epiphenomenon of compulsory sexuality.

This article has implications for future academic and activist efforts. Even though the central inequality for the asexual community is one of respect and recognition, and invalidation is the most prominent vehicle for creating this inequality, fostering recognition and validating different identities is not enough to achieve equality for asexuality, and indeed, all sexual minorities. As uncovered in this article, this inequality of respect and recognition is created by the underlying social structure of compulsory sexuality and its seven components. Therefore, to tackle the issue's root, we must do much more than raise awareness and educate others but rather need to deconstruct the underlying structures causing inequalities. Additionally, systems of social control rarely exist independently. They overlap, interact, and reinforce one another. Therefore, compulsory sexuality needs to be studied and deconstructed in tandem with other systems of social control in our contemporary society, such as heteronormativity, capitalism, and coloniality. Only then can we find ways to deconstruct them holistically and create a more equal society for all.

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