

EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION AMONG SEXUAL MINORITY WOMEN:
AN EXPLORATION OF MICROAGGRESSION AND EMOTIONAL DIFFERENTIATION

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between Differentiation of Self (DOS), Microaggressions (MA) and Sexual Victimization (SV) among Sexual Orientation Minority Women (SMW). SMW are sexually victimized, and revictimized at higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts. Relationships among variables were analyzed via regression analysis to determine if a significant relationship existed between DOS, and SV. Data was also generated to understand the effects of MA on both DOS and SV. Data was collected via a cross-sectional Qualtrics Survey. Out of 66 survey responses, 48 completed all required components of the survey. Participants completed a demographics questionnaire, the Sex and Gender Microaggressions Scale, The Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised, and the Sexual Experiences Survey Short Form-Victimization. Results indicated that DOS, and its subcategories had moderately strong regression relationships with SV. Implications for findings are discussed in theoretical and clinical applications.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Experiences of sexual victimization are prevalent among people of all sexual orientations (Walker et al., 2019). Sexual minorities are subjugated to sexual victimization at higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts (Semprevivo, 2021). Negative mental health outcomes of sexual victimization have been well documented by researchers (Krahe & Berger, 2017; Hassija & Turchik, 2016). The current study aims to understand the relationship between Bowen's concept of differentiation of self, as it pertains to sexual victimization.

Current understandings of queer sexual consent processes are rooted in heteronormative performances of sexual scripts (Beres, 2021). Not only are queer people subjugated to overt discrimination, but they are also left out of societal narratives and behavioral expectations around sex (Morgan, 2013). A Bowenian perspective on relationships and the role of differentiation allows us to investigate what makes a person consent to sex they may otherwise pass up on. Understanding consent from a relational perspective rather than a criminal perspective can allow us to further understand how anxiety and emotional reactivity play a role in sexual behavior. Additionally, by focusing specifically on queer populations (specifically lesbians, bisexual, pansexual and non-heterosexual women), we can better understand the unique minority and systemic stressors effects on socialized consent processes, as well as relational differentiation. The purpose of this study is to gain better a understanding of how Differentiation of Self (DOS), Microaggressions (MA), and Sexual Victimization (SV) impact Sexual Minority Women (SMW).

Need for Study

Presently, most sexual victimization research conducted focuses on heterosexual relationships, and foundational heterosexual sexual scripts (Edwards et al., 2023) While queer relationships can compulsively model their heterosexual counterparts (Allen & Mendez, 2018), SMW are left out of the large majority of research targeting sexual consent processes and less is known about SMW's sexual scripts. Even though the perpetuated heterosexual sexual scripts are harmful for straight people, the non-conformity to socially constructed heteronormativity leave queer people at an even greater risk for oppression and ostracization (Meyer, 2003; Sue, 2010; Dank et al., 2013, Blaney et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2023).

Additionally, the presence of microaggressions further subjugates the lived experiences of queer people and heightens feelings of isolation and "otherness." Little research exists on lesbian and bisexual women's experiences of microaggressions specifically. Current research shows that SMW are more susceptible to coercive sexual assault (McGraw et al., 2020; Blaney et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2023). Additionally, continual othering of sexual minority women (SMW) has negative consequences for health and puts SMW at elevated risk for suicide (Huebner & Davis, 2007). Another critical component of the sexual development of SMW is the presence of consistent objectification from heterosexual men (Chmielewski, 2017). Specifically, the lack of social acceptance around minoritized sexual identity leaves SMW vulnerable to predatory behavior and isolates them from protective social and environmental supports (Beres, 2021; Sue, 2010).

Purpose of Study

The aim of this study is to understand the experience of rural SMW as it pertains to sexual consent through a differentiation of self-lens. To conceptualize the lived experience of SMW, it is critical to understand how systemic context (e.g., societal forces, victimization, and

differentiation) of SMW impact levels of differentiation. No other study currently exists that has measured these factors in tandem. Previous research has acknowledged differentiation as it pertains to relationship and sexual satisfaction (Burri et al., 2014; Somantico et al., 2021). Other research has studied the victimization of sexual orientation minorities in tandem with heterosexual control groups (Nappa et al., 2022). There is also research that discusses the linear relationship between microaggressions and sexual harassment and/or assault (Nadal et al., 2019; Vaccaro & Koob, 2019). Previous research leaves a gap in the literature about the interaction between microaggressions, differentiation, and sexual victimization. Hopefully this study can illuminate how sexual experiences of victimization could be related to microaggressions and level of differentiation.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Sexual minority women (SMW) have a unique sexual socialization process that differs from their heterosexual counterparts (Lewis, 2009). Not aligning with heteronormative sexual scripts and gender roles creates internal anxiety, otherwise understood as internalized homophobia (Ramierz-Valles et al., 2013). In this study, examining this anxiety is crucial. From a Bowenian perspective this anxiety could negatively impact a person's level of differentiation. Differentiation is the process by which we maintain secure connections with ourselves and others (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). Without a well-established differentiated self, there could be increased risk of non-consensual sexual experiences.

Research corroborates the idea that SMW face disproportionate amounts of sexual victimization and re-victimization as compared to their heterosexual counter parts (Lopez & Yeater, 2018). Balsam et al. (2005) surveyed SMW and heterosexual women and found that 7.7% of heterosexual women reported experiencing a completed rape, whereas 17% of SMW reported experiencing a completed rape. Additionally, a separate survey by Balsam et al. (2011) found that 17%-85% of SMW have been sexually assaulted at some point in their life, as compared to 11%-17% of heterosexual women being sexually assaulted in their lifetime. Literature has clearly displayed the negative mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual consequences victims of sexual assault deal with, such as substance use, anxiety and depression, as well as post-traumatic stress (Klump, 2006; Meyerson et al, 2002; MacGregor, 2019).

An additional focus on microaggressions will further allow for understanding as how systemic oppression and lack of acceptance impact a SWM's sense of self, and therefore her sexual consent attitudes. Microaggressions have been defined as subtle forms of discrimination

that invalidate sexual identities of the queer community (Sue, 2010). This study aims to conceptualize the interaction of the development of the self, paired with sexual consent attitudes.

Bowen's Concept of Self-Differentiation

The theoretical orientation for exploring sexual scripts within the queer community is Dr. Murray Bowen's process of self-differentiation (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). Differentiation refers to the ability of an individual to maintain a sense of self in intimate relationships. It is a balance between valuing the needs of others, while honoring our own sense of self. What allows one to have this balance between valuing the self and being able to independently act to nurture close emotional relationships is being able to distinguish between thoughts and feelings. Those with low levels of differentiation are unable to distinguish between thoughts and feelings, thus acting based on emotional reactions. This leads to poor self-development and an inability to distinguish one's own needs and desires. It is acutely critical to recognize how the ability to differentiate between an emotional reaction and a logical reaction determines the development of the self. Knowing our emotional reaction patterns is far different from knowing how we got to those feelings and then acting in a way that aligns with our idea of who we are. A person at a higher level of differentiation can distinguish their emotional reaction from their thoughts. Reacting out of emotion leads to lower relationship satisfaction (Bowen & Kerr, 1988).

Couples and Differentiation

Couples with low differentiation levels are less able to feel secure in their relationships. This heightened anxiety in the system creates the emotional reactivity that comes with low differentiation. When we act out of an undifferentiated anxious state, our higher self is not allowed to intervene, leading us to make decisions that otherwise may not have been made.

When it comes to sexual consent, it is important to understand the role of differentiation as it pertains to how anxiety is managing sexual consent.

Differentiation has long been associated with marital or relational satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. Across heterosexual and queer couples, higher levels of differentiation results in higher levels of relational satisfaction (Somantico et al., 2021). Differentiation has also been considered a moderating variable in the sexual communication process (Telli & Guillier, 2023), which has been directly linked to higher sexual satisfaction. Integrating the concept of differentiation into research allows researchers to understand how emotional reactivity and development of the self, interacts with sexual processes. This allows us to understand what the driving force behind consent could be and assess how to make sexual experiences more positive for both partners. If a partner is consenting to sex because of low differentiation and high emotional reactivity, is the consent coming from a reliable place within the person?

Queer Theory

The systemic reliance on rigid gender identities and roles marginalizes those who do not fit into those roles (Jagose, 1996). Queer Theory demonstrates the spectrums of sexuality and gender and breaks away from heteronormative roles and social guidelines; breaking away from the assumption that assigned sex at birth influences gender identity and sexual preferences (Jagose, 1996). Queer theorists take a postmodern approach to the epistemology around gender and sex: our science and understanding of what makes a man and a woman is just as socially constructed as the roles assigned to them (Sedgwick, 1990; Lewis, 2009; Szymanski et al., 2016). When individuals do not fit into a heteronormative sex or gender role, minority stress and oppression occurs (Szymanski et al., 2016). Seeing gender and sex as a spectrum rather than a

fixed position is critical. With this lens, a critical view of the structure and power of our systems is needed to understand how heteronormativity influences our systems.

A critical component of Queer theory is understanding the inherent heteronormativity within our systems. Heteronormativity is the assumption that people align with their assigned sex at birth and are sexually attracted to the opposite sex. Historically, much of western society has benefitted from heteronormative gender roles engrained in our work and family lives (Marcus, 2005). Expecting men to provide income and resources, while women care for the home and children has influenced our workforce and overall economic systems for hundreds of years (Marcus, 2005). Gaining new understanding of sexual processes among queer people will better allow for improved practices for sexual consent to be adopted across populations by breaking away from traditional gender roles and scripts.

Sexual Scripts

Sexual script theory is a social theory based on the implicit scripts around sexual behavior. First developed in the 1970s by Gagnon and Simon, sexual communication and processes between men and women were described. By socializing women with stereotypical feminine traits and men with stereotypical masculine traits we reinforce society scripts around acceptable sexual behavior. Men are socialized to be pursuers of sex, while women are the gatekeepers of sex. Culturally, it is expected that men are driven by their need for sex whereas women are expected to suppress their sexuality.

Early research indicated that sexual scripts for homosexual couples are similar to heterosexual scripts (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). Main differences include in lesbian relationships there is no set initiator of sex, and in male gay relationships, there is no gatekeeper of sex. However, similarly to heterosexual scripts, gay men are more likely to engage in sex

sooner, and lesbians are more likely to hold off on sex until they form a deeper emotional connection (Byers & Heinlen, 1989; Byers & Lewis, 1988). Verbal and nonverbal sexual consent processes in homosexual relationships also reflect similar results to heterosexual relationships. Homosexual partners are equally as likely to both initiate and consent to sex with non-verbal cues (Beres et al., 2004; Scappini, 2022).

Scales

Currently in research there are many sexual scales that have been developed to measure sexual consent. Examples include the Sexual Assertiveness Scale (Morkoff, 1997) was established to measure physical initiation of sex. This scale is commonly used in literature to notate the overtness of sexual negotiation processes. Humphrey and Herold (2007) employed the Sexual Consent Scale, a thirty-five-question survey that measured participants attitudes toward consent. This has since been revised to the Sexual Consent Scale Revised, with an additional five questions, utilizes a seven-point Likert type measure to conceptualize consent (Humphreys & Brossneau, 2010). Beres et al. (2004) utilized the first Same-Sex Sexual consent scale for their study on same sex consent processes.

Implications

Research has suggested these heteronormative sexual scripts may have dangerous implications for both straight and queer communities (Scappini & Fiorivanti, 2022). The average age for the beginning of sexual activity in the United States is 17.8 years old for heterosexual adolescents, and about 15.4 for queer adolescents (Glick et al., 2013). Beginning sexual activity is socially considered a marker for entering adulthood (Sprecher et al., 2019). Onset age of sexual activity occurring at a younger age is correlated with higher rates of sexual violence within one's lifespan (Magnusson et al., 2019). Allowing men to aggressively pursue sex while

teaching women to suppress their sexuality leads to a messy understanding of what sexual consent means (Willis & Smith, 2021). Additionally, leaving queer communities out of the sexual script dialogue altogether leaves them at elevated risk for sexual violence due to compulsory heterosexuality (Tolkeson, 2012). Compulsory heterosexuality is a common pull felt by those identifying as queer (Tolkeson, 2012; Donovan et al., 2023). Pressure to fit into a heteronormative system may make queer people adopt heteronormative scripts to feel included in society (Donovan et al., 2023).

Some of sexual script theory has been applicable to queer communities. Messaging around men being the pursuers of sex could be a part of the reason that gay men are more likely to engage in sexual relationships with other men, even when married or in a committed relationship (LaSala, 2004). Additionally, monogamy was not a predictor for relational satisfaction among gay men, though it is for lesbians and heterosexual couples (LaSala, 2004; Whitton et al., 2015). Lesbian couples tending to be more sexually exclusive has implications from sexual script theory, with women being the safe guarders of sex.

Concerning sexual identity, now that our culture has shifted to be more accepting of pre-marital sex and cohabitating, more exploration of sexual preferences is expected among emerging adults (Dank et al., 2014). Part of legitimacy in a queer identity such as homosexuality, or bisexuality, is having intercourse with someone who is the same sex as you (Beres et al., 2014). Dank et al (2014) considers this legitimacy a type of social pressure to legitimize one's identity through sex. However, researchers have also compared heterosexual college students to sexual minority college students, and their sexual victimization as it pertains to gendered sexual scripts (Fournier et al., 2023). While researchers found that there was a small positive correlation

between endorsement of gender scripts and perpetrated intimate partner violence, sexual orientation was not a moderating factor (Fournier et al., 2023).

Challenges of Sexual Minority Women in Rural Areas

This study will focus on the contextual pressures surrounding sexual consent in lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and non-heterosexual cisgender women in Eastern North Carolina. Having referenced the prevalence of heteronormative culture present in the United States, I will now further explain the effects of this culture on lesbian and bisexual women. One of the earliest systematic reviews on lesbians and depression (Rothblum, 1990) found that lesbian women suffer from depression at higher rates than their straight counterparts. Rothblum explored how alienation from the dominant culture isolates those in the queer community and found this isolation to be particularly challenging for lesbian women. Gartrell (1984) focused their study on the lack of ability for lesbian women to come out and found that due to legal and social discrimination many lesbian women lived double lives, causing significant social strain and isolation.

More recent literature on bisexual women suggests unique and parallel stressors to lesbian women. While bisexual women face similar isolation from mainstream society as lesbian women do, they face extenuated isolation from the LGBT+ community as well (Mereish et al., 2017). The lack of belonging among bisexual individuals from both sexual majority and minority groups puts them at the highest risk of suicide. Isolation among all sexual minorities from the dominant heteronormative culture creates proximal and internalized stressors which lead to suicidality among both lesbians and bisexual women (Mereish et al., 2017; Rothblum, 1990).

Rural Populations

In rural populations, stigmatization of queer identities is intensified (Bell & Valentine, 1995; McCarthy, 2000;). Lack of accessibility and exposure to ‘queerness’ leads lesbians living in rural populations feeling isolated and ostracized (McCarthy, 2000). This gives context to the current study. Magnified stressors come with being queer in a rural community. Focusing on Eastern North Carolina means taking this lived experience into account. Most counties across the state are rural (70) as compared to urban (30) (NC Health and Human Services, 2019). To ethically serve the lesbian and bisexual female population of North Carolina, recognizing the context in which the identified population is living is essential.

Risky Sexual Experiences

Societal scripts of acceptable sexual interactions largely dictate how individuals have sex (Simon & Gangon, 1970; Hickman & Muelenhard, 1999). Not fitting into the dominant heteronormative culture causes isolation and negative psychological outcomes for sexual minorities (Salvatore & Daftary-Kapur, 2020). The role of self-hate has been explored as a modifier in sexual risky behavior across sexual populations. Nappa et al. (2021) found that risky sexual behavior is increased in sexual minority populations. For heterosexual populations, self-hate is not correlated with sexual behavior. For sexual minority populations, gay men experience the strongest correlation of self-hate and risky sexual behavior, followed by gay women (Nappa et al., 2021). Conceptualizing self-hate as a motivator for higher risk sexual behavior discounts the affect that heteronormative sexual scripts have on female sexual minorities. Because women are considered the gatekeepers of sex, while being less interested in sex, it is less socially acceptable for women to seek out sex.

As previously stated in this paper, sexual scripting has impacts for all sexual populations, not just straight people. These scripts internalized by sexual minorities are both isolating and indicative of how they will behave with their sexual partners. (Hickman & Muelenhard, 1999; Nappa et al., 2021).

Sexual Victimization

Risky Sexual Experiences are not always experiences of Sexual Victimization, though they are closely related (Hill et al., 2019). Understanding Risky Sexual experiences as it pertains to SMW allows us to conceptualize the systemic challenges that SMW face when navigating sexual encounters. However, the aim of this study is to understand the experiences of Sexual Victimization (SV) among SMW. Again, SMW are victimized at higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts (McGraw et al., 2020; Blaney et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2023). Koss et al (1987) defines sexual victimization as, “being the recipient of a sexually aggressive act, including unwanted or forced sexual contact (e.g., touching kissing), verbally coerced intercourse, and attempted or completed rape (Koss, et al., 1987).

Additionally, SMW in particular are more likely to experience sexual victimization (Beres, 2021). Johnson et al (2016) examined the relationship between sexual orientation and sexual victimization across colleges and university in the United States. Researchers found that bisexual men and women, gay men, transgender people, and people questioning their gender and sexual orientation were the most likely to report multiple victimizations. Interestingly, the same research showed that lesbian students showed no increased risk for sexual victimization (Johnson, 2016). This could mean that within the lesbian community there is added safety within their community. This is a contraindication towards other research that asserts lesbian women face increased sexual victimization (Beres, 2021; Blaney et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2023)).

Sexual Consent

To understand what sexual victimization is, it is important to understand sexual consent. Sexual consent has been defined by the literature as, “one’s voluntary, sober, and conscious willingness to engage in a particular sexual behavior with a particular person within a particular context.” (Willis & Jozkowski, 2019 p. 1723). Consent is a scientific and social concept that routinely gets left out of empirical research (Fenner, 2017). Fenner (2017) conducted a review of the literature as it pertains to sexual consent to demonstrate the congruencies and incongruities of how we define sexual consent. Some of these incongruencies include that research participants have stated that the absence of a “no” indicates sexual consent, while other participants state a verbal “yes” is needed to obtain consent (Fenner, 2017).

Additionally, research has corroborated that consent is a complex social negotiation that is often misunderstood by those negotiating, and researchers (Willis et al., 2021; Beres, 2014; Fenner, 2017). Willis et al (2021) specifically studied how internal and external sexual consent fluctuated over 28 days and impacted their sexual events. Results of the study indicated that more than 50% and up to 80% of variance of sexual consent scores could potentially be due to within-person variability (Willis et al., 2017). This indicates that what consent means to an individual can vary greatly, making it more difficult to conceptualize what consent means in an empirical sense.

Differentiation

This is of particular interest as it pertains to differentiation. Our own sense of connection to ourselves informs how we connect with others (Bowen, 1978). Understanding how within-person variability from a consent perspective could allow us to conceptualize how differentiation then plays a role in how we conceptualize consent. As it pertains to this study, understanding that

sexual consent is an ambiguous necessity for consensual sexual experiences allows us to understand how a person's level of differentiation can cue them to consent or not to sex.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are classified as deceptively innocuous statements and actions performed on minoritized groups by a member of the dominant group. While microaggressions were originally presented as a type of oppression against black people (Sue, 2010) the term has since been applied to members of the LGBT+ community as well. Microaggression demonstrates the societal drift away from overt hate to a more socially acceptable inadvertent hate, which can be downplayed and rejected by the offender. This allows the individual using the microaggression the opportunity to defend their statement (Sue, 2010). This is done by the perpetrator asserting their liberal ideologies, gaslighting the victim, and complaining of an overly woke society (Nadal et al., 2016). Ultimately, this leaves the victim being further ostracized and oppressed while stripping away the ability for the victim to effectively call the offender out.

As originally proposed by Nadal et al. in 2010, six kinds of microaggression towards LGBT+ people exists: (1) Use of heterosexist terminology, (2) Endorsement of heteronormative or gender conforming culture and behaviors, (3) Discomfort/disapproval of LGBT+Q experience, (4) Denial of reality of heterosexism, (5) Assumption of sexual pathology or deviance, and (6) Environmental macroaggressions (Nadal et al., 2010). Each of the above listed categories of microaggressions demonstrates the ability of a member of the dominant culture (heterosexuals) to further ostracize members of the non-dominant culture (LGBT+ folk). In congruence with the listed categories of microaggression for LGBT+ persons, Sue (2010) originally demonstrated three primary functions of microaggressions as follows: (1) microassaults, (2) microinsults, (3)

microinvalidations (Sue, 2010). This further exemplifies how microaggressions serve to devalue the lived experiences of minoritized persons.

Microaggressions and Differentiation of Self

Limited research has examined the relationship between differentiation of self and microaggressions among SMW. However, mental health outcomes and overall adjustment has been documented by the literature as it relates to microaggressions (Beres, 2021; Nadal et al., 2016; Meyer, 2003). Lui and Quezada (2019) conducted a meta-analysis investigating 72 independent study samples to analyze the associations between microaggressions and adjustment outcomes. The study stated that statistically significant were found between microaggressions and adjustment, with an r score of 0.2 (Lui and Quezada, 2019). This same review also found that microaggressions were most strongly correlated with internalizing problems.

Similar research has been conducted around psychological resources for queer people as it pertains to chronic microaggression exposure (Bartels & Tseung-Wong, 2025). This research sought to understand how perceived discrimination via microaggressions impacted queer people based on whether they were connected to a community they identified with and found that microaggressions resulted in more harmful outcomes (e.g., depression and lower life satisfaction) (Bartels and Tseung-Wong, 2025).

Additionally, Nadal et al.'s (2016) review of the literature surrounding lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and genderqueer people examined how different sexual orientations effected experiences of microaggression. Researcher done with focus groups found that microaggressions experienced by lesbians, bisexual men, gay men, bisexual women, etc, were in fact different from one another (Nadal et al., 2016). Microaggressions targeted towards lesbian

women were rooted in misogyny while microaggressions targeted towards gay men were rooted in de-masculinization (Nadal et al., 2016).

This is congruent with how sexual scripts dictate societal perceptions of heterosexual relationships, which are the dominant cultural model of romantic or sexual interaction (Ramierz-Valles et al., 2013). Understanding these factors allows us to theoretically understand how the presence of microaggressions exists due to extensive sexual scripting, resulting in internal and external homophobia. This systemic anxiety impacts SMW by limiting their sexual and romantic socialization to heterosexist examples (Ramierz-Valles et al., 2013; Lewis, 2009). This potentially leaves SMW with a harmful and ill-fitting internal model of sexual and romantic engagement, and less of a chance to develop a secure sense of self, resulting in lowered differentiation.

Conclusion

This study aims to illustrate the relationship between differentiation, microaggressions, and sexual victimization, based on the lack of literature pertaining to the topic. Understanding how social behavior and socialization process is critical to how this study will utilize results in application to theoretical and clinical settings. In particular, the socialization process, and continued experiences of marginalization through microaggressions creates internal distress (Sue, 2010, Lewis, 2009) that in this study will be conceptualized as differentiation of self. Each of these factors is hypothesized in this study to play a role in the increased rate of sexual victimization among SMW. Illuminating relationships among variables will aid our understanding of why sexual victimization is experienced at higher rates among SMW.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

Utilizing theoretical concepts and reviewing the literature allows us to conceptualize how to measure potential relationships between participant's differentiation of self and sexual consent attitudes. Research has shown that lower levels of differentiation are often correlated with lower sexual and relational satisfaction (Somantico et al., 2021; Burri et al., 2017). Sexual consent attitudes have also been associated with compliance toward unwanted sexual advances (Kennett et al., 2013). The majority of research on sexual consent processes have been conducted with heterosexual female participants (Dank et al., 2013). Sexual script theory tells us that people tend to negotiate sexual exchanges through gendered expectations of sexual behavior (Simon & Gangon, 2005; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999).

The purpose of this research is to demonstrate the relationship between DOS and sexual consent attitudes among SMW. By using microaggressions as a moderating variable between DOS and sexual consent attitudes, we can better conceptualize the psychosocial development of sexual consent attitudes in SMW. SMW undergo a different sexual socialization process as compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Nappa et al., 2012; Lewis, 2009). SMW are at greater risk of sexual violence and are more likely to experience repeated events of sexual violence (Lopez & Yeater, 2018). Microaggressions are used to reinforce harmful messages of otherness and devalue those on the receiving end (Sue, 2010).

Research Hypothesis

The aim of this present study is to evaluate the relationship between DOS, microaggression, and victimized sexual experiences among SMW in the southeastern United

States. Based upon previous research on sexual consent attitudes and differentiation, the following hypotheses are guiding this research:

H(1) DOS is negatively associated with sexual victimization

H(2) Microaggressions are negatively associated with DOS and positively associated with sexual victimization.

H(3) Microaggressions moderate the association between DOS and sexual victimization.

Procedure and Participants

The sample population for this study includes sexual minority cisgender women living in North Carolina. Research considers lesbians, bisexuals, pansexuals, and “non-heterosexual women to be considered sexual minority women (Meads et al., 2019). Essentially, cisgender women who fall outside of heterosexual relationships will be included in this study. Participants were contacted via survey flyer through community resources, with a snowballing effect by asking participants who have completed the survey to share it amongst their community. All participants must adhere to the following criteria: (i) participants must be born as female at birth, (ii) participants must identify as cis women, (iii) participants must live in the Southeastern United States, (iiii) participants must be over the age of 18, and must identify as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or as not heterosexual (Meads et al., 2019).

Data collection occurred through internet-based surveys. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and procedure and asked to consent to participate in the study on the first page of the survey. Next participants filled out a demographics section which included information such as race, age, socio-economic status, level of education, and sexual identity.

Measures

DOS Scale

While there have been many iterations of scales that measure differentiation of self, this study will use the DSI-R (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). This scale is a revised version of Bowen's original measure of differentiation of self (Skowran & Friedlander, 1998). The reduced length is theorized to produce more reliable responses from participants, because they can more easily complete the scale (Drake et al., 2015). The construct validity is set at $\alpha=.92$, a .04 increase from the unrevised DSI scale (Drake et al., 2015). The DSI-R measures four tenets of differentiation: (1) Emotional reactivity, (2) I position, (3) Emotional cutoff, and (4) Fusion with others. This is a Likert-type scale with answers ranging from 1 to 6, where 1 is low, and 6 is high. Questions include, "I often agree with others just to appease them," "I am overly sensitive to criticism," and "if someone is upset with me, I can't seem to let it go easily." Higher scores on the DSI-R scale indicate higher levels of differentiation, lower scores indicate lower levels of differentiation.

Sexual Orientations Microaggressions Scale

To measure lesbian and bisexual women's experiences of oppression through microaggressions, the Sexual Orientations Microaggressions scale (SOM) will be utilized. This scale utilized five subscales to capture the experiences of sexual orientation minorities, and in this case will be applied to lesbians and bisexual women: (1) Microinvalidations, (2) Assumption of deviance, (3) Heterosexist language, (4) Endorsement of gender conformity, and (5) Environmental microaggressions. The 24-item scale has well-established construct validity as shown by Cronbach's alpha score of .93 (Nadal et al., 2015). This is a dichotomous questions survey participants answer yes and no to. Question examples include, "I have been told I was being paranoid when I thought someone was being heterosexist," and "Someone has tried to keep their children from coming into physical contact with me because of my sexual orientation."

Sexual Experiences Survey Short Form Victimization

The Sexual Experiences Scale with Victimization (SES-V) measures participants' victimized experiences in sexual engagement (Koss et al., 2024, Koss et al., 2007). The goal of the SES-SSV is to understand the frequency and severity of sexual experiences in which participants have been victimized (Koss et al., 2024). The Cronbach's alpha score for this measure is typically not reported due to low validity scores (Koss et al., 2024). The calculated Cronbach's alpha score for this survey was $\alpha=0.732$, which indicates acceptable levels of validity.

Statistical Methods

To quantify the data and answer research hypotheses: H(1) Differentiation of Self (DOS) is negatively associated with sexual victimization (SV). H(2) Microaggressions (MA) are negatively associated with DOS and positively associated with sexual victimization. H(3) Microaggressions moderate the association between DOS and sexual victimization, regressions, and multivariate coefficient regressions will be utilized. Using correlation for H(1) will determine the significance of a correlation between DOS and sexual victimization. Independent regressions will be calculated with MA as the dependent variable in its correlation to DOS and SV. Finally, regressions will be utilized to determine the strength of the relationship among variables.

CHAPTER 4: PUBLISHABLE MANUSCRIPT

Introduction

The present study aims to examine the relationship between Differentiation of self (DOS), Microaggressions (MA), and Sexual Victimization (SV), in hopes to shed light on the lived experiences of SMW. SMW are sexually victimized at higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts and report higher incidents of mental illness both related and unrelated to sexual trauma (Meyer, 2003; Sue, 2021, Dank et al., 2013, Edwards et al., 2023). Although SMW's rate and experiences of sexual victimization have been studied, there has not been literature to contextualize intrapersonal reasons that may effectuate the victimization process. Although researchers have increasingly focused on sexual and gender minorities' lived experiences, most sexual victimization research focuses on heterosexual relationships, and foundational heterosexual sexual scripts (Edwards et al., 2023). Though this research has applications to the queer community, as queer relationships can compulsively model their heterosexual counterparts (Mendez, 2018), SMW are left out of the majority of research targeting sexual consent processes and less is known about SMW's sexual scripts. This lack of specific research and understanding could further the divide in victimization of SMW (Meyer, 2003; Sue, 2010; Dank et al., 2013, Blaney et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2023).

Additional focus will be emphasized on the presence of microaggressions. Doing so allows us to understand how SMW's experiences of oppression and subjugation impact differentiation of self, and ultimately, sexual victimization. Little research exists on lesbian and bisexual women's experiences of microaggressions specifically. The aim of this study is to understand the experience of rural SMW as it pertains to sexual consent through a Differentiation of self lens, utilizing microaggressions. To aide in promoting equitable mental health care for

SMW as it pertains to sexual victimization, it is crucial to understand the role of DOS, MA, and SV.

Literature Review

The theoretical method of exploring the lived experiences of SMW as it pertains to sexual victimization is Dr. Murray Bowen's process of self-differentiation (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). Differentiation refers to the ability of an individual to maintain a sense of self in intimate relationships. Differentiation is a balancing act between honoring the needs of others, while valuing our own sense of self. What distinguishes this ability to both maintain a sense of self, and enjoy deep intimacy with others is the ability to distinguish between emotions and thoughts, and choose to use our logical brain rather than our emotional one (Bowen, 1978). Individuals with low levels of differentiation struggle to distinguish between thoughts and feelings, often acting based on emotional reactions. This results in a poor sense of self and difficulty distinguishing one's will from another's. A person at a higher level of differentiation is able to effectively separate their emotions from their thoughts. Therefore, theoretically if a sexual partner is consenting to sex because of low differentiation and high emotional reactivity, it could be true that the sexual experience felt like sexual victimization for one or both members (Bowen, 19).

Queer Theory

Queer Theory illustrates the spectrums of sexuality and gender and breaks away from heteronormative roles and social guidelines; breaking away from the assumption that assigned sex at birth influences gender identity and sexual preferences (Jagose, 1996). Queer theorists take a postmodern approach to our binary understanding of gender and sex. To queer theorists, our science and understanding of what makes a man and a woman is just as socially constructed

as the roles assigned to them (Sedgwick, 1990; Lewis, 2009; Rich, 2023). As aforementioned, when individuals do not fit into a heteronormative sex or gender role, minority stress and oppression occur (Rich, 2023). Seeing gender and sex as a spectrum, as opposed to fixed positions, is crucial to dismantling heteronormative standards. Within the context of this research, microaggressions will be utilized to better understand how SMW can experience minority stress related to their sexual orientation.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are defined by the literature as deceptively innocuous statements and actions performed towards minoritized groups by a member of the dominant group (Sue et al., 2010; Nadal et al., 2010). While microaggressions were originally presented as a type of oppression against black people (Sue 2010) the term has since been applied to members of the LGBT+ community as well (Nadal et al., 2010, Beres et al., 2014). Microaggression demonstrates the societal drift away from overt hate to a more socially acceptable inadvertent hate, which can be downplayed and rejected by the offender. This allows the individual using the microaggression the opportunity to defend their statement (Sue, 2010a, 2010b). This is done by the perpetrator asserting their liberal ideologies, gaslighting the victim, and complaining of an overly woke society (Nadal et al., 2016). Ultimately, this leaves the victim being further ostracized and oppressed while stripping away the ability for the victim to effectively call the offender out.

Nadal et al. in 2010 proposed types of microaggressions to aide in public awareness and voicing the lived experiences of queer people. The literature acknowledges six kinds of microaggression towards LGBT+ people: (1) Use of heterosexist terminology, (2) Endorsement of heteronormative or gender conforming culture and behaviors, (3) Discomfort/disapproval of

LGBT+Q experience, (4) Denial of reality of heterosexism, (5) Assumption of sexual pathology or deviance, and (6) Environmental macroaggressions (Nadal et al., 2010). Importantly, each example displays the ability of a member of the dominant culture (heterosexuals) to further ostracize members of the non-dominant culture (LGBT+ folk). In congruence with the listed categories of microaggression for LGBT+ persons, Sue (2010) originally demonstrated three primary functions of microaggressions as follows: (1) microassaults, (2) microinsults, (3) microinvalidations (Sue, 2010). This further exemplifies how microaggressions serve to devalue, and subjugate the lived experiences of minoritized persons

Differentiation and Microaggressions

Mental health outcomes and overall adjustment has been documented by the literature as it relates to microaggressions (Beres et al 2021; Nadal et al 2016; Meyer, 2003). A meta-analysis investigating 72 independent studies analyzed the relationship between microaggressions and adjustment outcomes, finding that microaggressions were statistically significantly related to adjustment outcomes for participants with $r=0.2$ (Lui & Quezada, 2019). This has relevant implications for this study's use of differentiation. Adjustment refers to one's ability to adapt and change to something new (Lui & Quezada, 2019). Individuals with higher levels of differentiation are more adaptable and can adjust to change better than those with lower levels of differentiation (Bowen, 1978).

Sexual Victimization

Sexual victimization has been defined as, being the recipient of a sexually aggressive act, including unwanted or forced sexual contact (e.g., touching kissing), verbally coerced intercourse, and attempted or completed rape (Koss et al., 1987). SMW are more likely to experience this sexual victimization and report more incidents of revictimization than

heterosexual women. Johnson et al (2016) analyzed the relationship between sexual orientation and sexual victimization across colleges and university in the United States. Johnson (2016) found that bisexual women and men, gay men, transgender people, and people questioning their gender and sexual orientation were the most likely to report multiple victimizations.

Interestingly, the same research showed that lesbian students showed no increased risk for sexual victimization (Johnson et al., 2016). This contradicts literature that states lesbian women are the most likely to be subjugated out of all sexual orientation minority groups (McGraw et al., 2020; Blaney et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2023). This contraindication could exist due to sampling of college students, who often find community in queer spaces where they may have more protective factors.

Sexual Consent

To understand what sexual victimization is, it is necessary to understand sexual consent as defined by researchers. Sexual consent has been defined by the literature as, “one’s voluntary, sober, and conscious willingness to engage in a particular sexual behavior with a particular person within a particular context (Willis & Jozkowski, 2019 p.1723). Consent is a scientific and social concept that routinely gets left out of empirical research due to its interpretability (Fenner, 2017). This results in difficulties in applying empirical findings to clinical settings. Fenner (2017) conducted a review of the literature as it pertains to sexual consent to demonstrate the congruencies and incongruities of how we define sexual consent. Some of these incongruencies include that research participants have stated that the absence of a “no” indicates sexual consent, while other participants state a verbal “yes” is needed to obtain consent (Fenner, 2017).

Additionally, research has corroborated that consent is a complex social negotiation that is often misunderstood by those negotiating, and researchers (Willis et al., 2021; Beres, 2014;

Fenner, 2017). Willis et al. (2021) specifically studied how internal and external sexual consent fluctuated over 28 days and impacted their sexual events. Results of the study indicated that more than 50% and up to 80% of variance of sexual consent scores could potentially be due to within-person variability (Willis et al., 2017).

Differentiation

This is of particular interest as it pertains to differentiation. Our own sense of connection to ourselves informs how we connect with others (Bowen, 1988). Understanding how within-person variability from a consent perspective could allow us to conceptualize how differentiation then plays a role in how we chose to consent or have non-consensual sex willingly. As it pertains to this study, understanding that sexual consent is an ambiguous necessity for consensual sexual experiences allows us to understand how a person's level of differentiation can cue them to consent or not to sex.

Research Hypothesis

The aim of this present study is to evaluate the relationship between DOS, microaggression, and victimized sexual experiences SMW in the southeastern United States. Based upon previous research on sexual consent attitudes and differentiation, the following hypotheses are guiding this research:

H(1) DOS is negatively associated with sexual victimization.

H(2) Microaggressions are negatively associated with DOS and positively associated with sexual victimization.

H(3) Microaggressions impact the association between DOS and sexual consent attitudes.

Methods

Design

This study took a cross-sectional approach to understand the relationship between variables, namely the relationship between DOS, SV, and MA. The cross-sectional nature of the study allows for the analysis of multiple variables, providing additional insight to the gap in the literature pertaining to SMW's experiences of SV. Survey data was collected via Qualtrics, and analyzed via SPSS as regression, and multivariate regression data. Benefits of analyzing data via regressions includes the ability to create and test predictive models (Braun & Oswalk., 2011). Regression analysis allows us to understand how much of the variance among variables can be explained by the relationship between the independent and dependent variables (Braun & Oswalk, 2011). Other studies examining sexual victimization in tandem with personality factors, such as sexual assertiveness, have utilized regressions to analyze the predictive validity of models created by their datasets (Kelley & Orchowski, 2016).

Procedure and Participants

The sample population for this study includes 48 sexual minority cisgender women living in North Carolina. Research considers lesbians, bisexuals, pansexuals, and non-heterosexual women to be considered sexual minority women (APA, 2021; Meads et al., 2019). Samples were contacted via survey flyer through community resources, with a snowballing effect by asking participants who have completed the survey to share it amongst their community. All participants adhered to the following criteria: (i) all participants were born as female at birth, (ii) all participants identified as cis women, (iii) participants lived in the Southeastern United States, (iiii) participants were over the age of 18, and identified as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or as not

heterosexual (APA, 2021; Meads et al., 2019). Criteria iii was included in this study to gain a conceptualization of what the specific community population in this sample represented.

Data collection occurred through internet-based surveys. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and procedure and asked to consent to participate in the study on the first page of the survey. Next participants filled out a demographics section which included demographic information including race, age, socio-economic status, level of education, and sexual identity.

Measures

DOS Scale

This study utilized the DSI-R (Skowron and Schmitt, 2003). This is a revised version of Dr. Murray Bowen's original scale measure of differentiation of self, known as the DSI (Skowran & Friedlander, 1998). The DSI-R is a shortened version of the DSI. The reduced length is theorized to get more reliable responses from participants, due to its shortened form (Drake et al., 2015). The construct validity is set at $\alpha=.92$, a .04 increase from the unrevised DSI scale (Drake et al., 2015). This sample produces a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.91 indicating high reliability. The DSI-R measures four tenets of differentiation: (1) Emotional reactivity, (2) I position, (3) Emotional cutoff, and (4) Fusion with others.

Sexual Orientations Microaggressions Scale

The Sexual Orientations Microaggressions Scale (SOM) was utilized to measure participants' experiences of oppression through microaggressions. This scale included five subscales to capture the experiences of sexual orientation minorities, and in this case will be applied to lesbians and bisexual women: (1) Microinvalidations, (2) Assumption of deviance, (3)

Heterosexist language, (4) Endorsement of gender conformity, and (5) Environmental microaggressions. The 24-item scale has well-established construct validity as shown by Cronbach's alpha score of .93 (Nadal et al., 2016). The Cronbach's alpha score for this sample was 0.755, indicating less than acceptable levels of reliability.

Sexual Experiences Survey Short Form Victimization

The Sexual Experiences Scale with Victimization (SES-V) includes 10 questions and measures participants' victimized experiences in sexual engagement (Koss et al., 2024). The SES-V is a part of a larger collection of surveys that aim to understand the role of sexual victimization, as well as sexual perpetration (Koss et al., 2024). This measure focuses solely on experiences of victimization. The goal of the SES-SSV is to understand the frequency and severity of sexual experiences in which participants have been victimized (Koss et al., 2024). The Cronbach's alpha score for this sample was $\alpha = 0.73$, indicating acceptable levels of validity.

Statistical Methods

To quantify the data and answer research hypotheses: H(1) Differentiation of Self (DOS) is negatively associated with sexual victimization (SV). H(2) Microaggressions (MA) are negatively associated with both DOS and negatively associated with sexual victimization. H(3) Microaggressions moderate the association between DOS and sexual victimization, regressions, and multivariate coefficient regressions will be utilized. Using correlation for H(1) will determine the significance of a correlation between DOS and sexual victimization. Independent regressions will be calculated with MA as the dependent variable in its correlation to DOS and SV. Finally, multivariate coefficient regressions will be utilized to determine the strength of the correlation coefficient of MA in the relationship between DOS and SV. Relationships can compulsively model their heterosexual counterparts (Mendez, 2018), SMW are left out of the

large majority of research targeting sexual consent processes and less is known about SMW's sexual scripts. Even though the perpetuated heterosexual sexual scripts are harmful for straight people, the non-conformity to socially constructed heteronormativity leave queer people at an even greater risk for oppression and ostracization (Meyer, 2003; Sue, 2010; Dank et al., 2013, Blaney et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2023).

Statistical Analysis

SPSS was the software utilized for data analysis (SPSS 20.02.0, 2023). Basic demographic information was utilized to perform descriptive statistics. DOS was identified as the independent variable. Victimized sexual experiences (SV) were identified as the dependent variable. Microaggressions were identified as another independent variable. To establish a relationship between differentiation of self, and sexual experiences, bivariate correlations were calculated via SPSS software. Statistical analysis was also run on the relationship between microaggressions and sexual experiences. Results yielded no significant relationship between Differentiation of self, and sexual experiences.

Descriptive Statistics

Participants gave demographic information such as age, race, sexual orientation, education level, and marital status. In total, 66 participants responded to survey measures, of those participants 48 completed the survey. Overall racial demographics consisted of 42 white, 1 black, 2 American Indian/Native American, 1 Asian, and 3 other. Additionally, participants were broken up into age ranges of 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, and 55-64. 52% of participants fell within the 25-34 age range, followed by 35% aged 18-24, then 8% were between 35-44, leaving 5% between the final two age categories. Additionally, 50% of participants had never been married or were single, 30% were currently married, 12% were living with their partner, and 5%

were separated or divorced. For sexual orientation, 45.8% of participants identified as lesbian, 37.5% identified as bisexual, 16.5% identified as pansexual, and 20.1% identified as other non-heterosexual female. 37.5% of participants were in or had completed a graduate degree, 35% had a bachelor's degree, 16.7% had an associate's degree, 12% had completed some college without obtaining a degree.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variables	N	Percentage
Race		
White	42	87.5%
Black or African American	1	2.1%
American Indian or Native American	2	4.1%
Asian	1	621%
Other	3	6.2%
Age Range		
18-24	15	35.0%
25-34	25	52.0%
35-44	5	8.0%
45-54	1	3.0%
55+	2	4.1%
Marital Status		
Single/Never Married	24	50.0%
Currently Married	15	30.0%
Living with Partner	5	12.0%
Separated/Divorced	4	5.0%
Sexual Orientation		
Lesbian	22	45.8%
Bisexual	18	37.5%
Pansexual	8	16.7%
Other Non-Heterosexual Female	10	20.1%
Education Level		
Graduate degree	18	37.5%
Bachelor's Degree	15	35.0%

Associate's Degree	8	16.7%
Some college (no degree)	5	12.0%
High School Diploma	2	0.0%

Regressions

Pearson's correlations were calculated via SPSS between all three variables, Differentiation of Self (DSI), victimization in sexual experiences, and microaggressions. Results yielded a moderate negative correlation between DOS and Sexual Victimization (SV) of $r = -0.525$, where $p = 0.091$. This indicates an inverse relationship. As DOS begins to increase, SV tends to decrease, and vice versa. The results yielded a weaker inverse relationship between microaggressions (MA) and DOS at $r = -0.276$ and a p value of 0.422 indicating no statistical significance. This suggests that as MA increases, DOS decreases, though this relationship is not strong. This holds little statistical significance, though it does imply a slight negative relationship between MA and DOS. Finally, a moderately positive relationship was found for the relationship between MA and SV with $r = 0.411$, where $p = .014$ indicating statistical significance. This means that as microaggressions increase, so does SV.

Table 2

Regression Data

Dependent variable	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
Differentiation I Position	.7788	.6065	54.1656	3.0827	4.000	8.000	.0821
Emotional Cutoff	.4211	.1773	61.5243	1.6703	4.000	31.000	.1820
Emotional Reactivity	.4927	.2428	56.6285	2.4847	4.000	31.000	.0640
Fusion with Others	.6666	.4444	59.5315	2.9994	4.000	15.000	.0528
	.6340	.4020	61.6363	2.3527	4.000	14.000	.1043

Regressions

SPSS's Matrix procedure was utilized to calculate the role of MA as a moderating factor in the relationship between DSI and SV. Model summary scores were computed and yielded a correlation coefficient score of $R=.7899$ which indicates a moderate to strong positive linear relationship between DOS and SV. However, the p-value was calculated at .1038 indicating the model is not statistically significant. The R value indicates there is a correlation between the data sets, but that predictors in the variable set do not justify the R score. This means that we fail to reject the null hypothesis.

Subscale Regressions

Subscale multivariate regression analysis was conducted for each sub section of the DSI-SF. These subsections include components that contribute to scoring differentiation of self and include the I-Position (IP), Emotional Reactivity (ER), Emotional Fusion (EF), and Emotional Cutoff (EC).

I Position

The I-Position (IP) refers to one's ability to conceptualize themselves in relation to other people. Questions regarding the IP in the DSI-SF are as follows: I tend to remain pretty calm under stress, No matter what happens in my life, I know that I'll never lost my sense of who I am, There's no point in getting upset about things I cannot change, I'm fairly self-accepting, My self-esteem really depends on how others think of me, and I tend to feel pretty stable in times of distress. Utilizing IP as X revealed an R score of 0.4211 indicating a moderate positive relationship between independent variables, which consists of IP and MA, and the dependent variable SV. The R^2 score of .1773 indicates that approximately 17.73% of variance in the

dependent variable, SV, can be explained by IP and MA. However, this leaves 82.27% of variance between variables unexplained. The lack of significance is corroborated by the p value of 0.1820 which is greater than .05 and indicates a lack of statistical significance. The F score of 1.6703 demonstrates the model is not strong in its explanation of variance in SV.

Emotional Reactivity

Emotional Reactivity (ER) refers to immediate reactionary responses to emotional stimuli (Bowen, 1978). Questions regarding ER in the DSI-SF are as follows: At times my feelings get the best of me and I have trouble thinking clearly, at times, I feel as if I'm riding an emotional roller-coaster, I'm overly sensitive to criticism, If I have had an argument with my spouse/partner, I tend to think about it all day, If someone is upset with me, I can't seem to let it go easily, and I'm very sensitive to being hurt by others. Utilizing ER and MA the dependent variables revealed an R score of .666, indicating a moderately strong positive relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The R-square score of .4444 indicates that 44% of variance in SV can be explained by ER and MA. This offers a moderate explanation of variance between variables. The p value for this model was 0.05828 which is marginally above the standard cutoff score of 0.05. The F score of 2.9994 also shows that this model is an okay fit, but not a statistically sound fit to explain the relationship between variables.

Emotional Cutoff

Emotional Cutoff (EC) refers to one's disengagement in emotional intimacy (Bowen, 1978). EC typically occurs when anxiety in the system, whether it's a system of dyads, internally, or societally, is heightened. Utilizing EC and MA as independent variables, where EC is X and MA is the moderator, $R = 0.4927$ indicating a moderate positive correlation. There were similar findings as with a p value of 0.0640, indicating there was not statistically significant. The

R² score of .2428 shows that 24.28% of variance in SV can be explained by EC and MA, which leaves 75.72% unexplained. The F score of 2.4847 indicates that there is some predictive value in the model for the variance in variables.

Emotional Fusion

Emotional Fusion (EF) refers to the loss of a sense of self in the presence of heightened anxiety, such as intense emotional intimacy (Bowen, 1978). Utilizing EF and MA and independent variables, $R=.6340$, meaning there is a moderate to strong positive correlation between variables. These results are similar the other DSI-SF multivariate regression analysis. The R² value was .4020 indicating that 40.20% of the variance in SV can be explained by EF and MA, leaving 59.8% of variance unexplained. The F score of 2.3527 indicates that there is some evidence that the model is explanatory, but not enough to be statistically significant. This is consistent with the p value of 0.1043, similarly indicating that the model is not statistically significant.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between DOS, SV, and MA within a sample of SMW. Further investigation of DOS was done through regressions of DOS subcategories (IP, ER, EC, and EF). Researchers have examined prevalences of SV among queer populations, with very few focusing on SMW alone. Additionally, DOS has been utilized as a marker for relationship or sexual satisfaction in queer relationships (Sommantico et al., 2021; Telli & Guler, 2023), but no other research has examined the relationship between DOS and SV within SMW. MA's were included to understand how societal forces could impact the relationship between DOS and SV.

DOS and Sexual Victimization

An inverse relationship between DOS and SV was demonstrated by the results of this study by an r score of -0.525 . No other study has linked DOS with SV. Other studies have utilized DOS in relation to variables such as relationship or sexual satisfaction, sexual difficulties, or post traumatic growth (Telli & Guillier, 2023; Somantico et al., 2021; Bowen & Kerr, 1988). Theoretically speaking, it makes sense that as differentiation of self-rises, sexual victimization decreases. Because differentiation refers to one's ability to honor their own emotions/thoughts/feelings, without reacting to them, being highly differentiated demonstrates a strong sense of self, and higher levels of agency. Having a lower level of differentiation indicates a lesser ability to distinguish between emotions/thoughts/feelings and remain non-reactive. This puts people with lower levels of differentiation at potentially higher likelihoods of experiencing SV.

While the link between DOS and SV is not statistically significant enough to not be due to chance or poor sampling, the significance of the r score (-0.525) is provocative. This is the first time that DOS has been measured in tandem with SV. Similar studies that have looked at sexual and/or relationship satisfaction within straight and queer dyads, and DOS have found that DOS is positively correlated with satisfaction (Telli & Guillier, 2023). Experiences of SV are not positive and would result in lowered sexual or relationship satisfaction. Therefore, while no specific research has been completed on DOS and SV, these results do share characteristics with previous studies done on relational and sexual satisfaction.

The contributions from these results are limited due to small sample sizing but now that a correlation has been established, our understanding of SMW's lived experience vis a vie SV and differentiation can be analyzed more deeply. Analyzed this relationship can help to lessen the disparity between heterosexual women and SMW's rate of victimization. Knowing how

differentiation and microaggressions impact or are related to sexual victimization could allow us to better serve both the SMW community, the greater queer community, and heterosexual populations as well.

I-Position

Again, the I-Position (IP) refers to one's ability to conceptualize themselves in relation to other people (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). No research currently exists on the role of the IP in SMW as it pertains to MA and SV. These findings serve to add factors to analyze in aspects of differentiation in SMW that may pertain to better understandings of their lived experiences, and ways to reduce the gap in victimization rates between SMW and their heterosexual counterparts. However, Bowen posits that the ability to take the I position is critical to differentiation (Bowen, 1978). The IP refers to one's ability to take accountability of their own thoughts, desires, emotions, and actions. In the context of this research, examining the impact of sense of self, and societal oppression on sexual victimization, it becomes clear that IP is of particular interest.

Emotional Reactivity

Emotional reactivity refers to intense responses to stimuli (i.e., emotional reactions rather than rational thought and the use of our higher- self) (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). Most salient findings of the subcategories for DOS, were found with ER as the independent variable. These results were very close to statistical significance with a p value of .0528. Previous research has not looked at ER in the same way. However, previous research has investigated emotional responses in tandem with threat responses. Silver et al. (2022) found that in a sample of women who had been sexually victimized, those who displayed emotional dampening to a perceived threat were more likely to be revictimized. Researchers have likened this emotional dampening to post traumatic stress responses avoidance of stimuli and marked physiological reactions to

stimuli. This is corroborated by the findings of this study, because emotional reactivity captures both experiences of EF and EC.

However, Silver's research, and other research done on emotional reactivity and sexual victimization, does not utilize emotional reactivity measures from the lens of BFST, or DOS. Therefore, the findings of this research can offer a new perspective in the facets of differentiation that impact emotional regulation. ER was the most statistically significant subcategory of DOS. This helps us understand how SMW respond to heightened anxiety through ER, and that potential implications of this include SV.

Emotional Cutoff

EC refers to one's disengagement in emotional intimacy and typically occurs when anxiety in the system, whether it's a system of dyads, internally, or societally, is heightened (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). Again, specific research on EC as it pertains to DOS has been conducted on experiences of SV. However, researchers have studied concepts like emotional numbing and found that emotional numbing or similar emotionally dampening processes increase the likelihood of SV (Stepenbeck et al., 2016; Silver et al., 2022). Therefore, the findings of this study partially corroborate findings of previous studies that investigate emotional numbing/dampening.

Yet again, it is important to recognize that EC as it pertains to this study is unique to the emotional numbing and dampening discussed in other research (Silver et al., 2022; Steppenbeck et al., 2016). Additionally, the findings of this study were not as significant as the findings in the aforementioned studies. This could be due to several factors like the amount of time it takes to gather participants, as well as limited sampling measures. Also, when it comes to EC, less

extensive measurements were utilized to measure the degree of EC because subscale DSI-SF data was utilized.

Information gathered from this study shows us similar findings to others in this study. EC does have a moderate positive correlation SV, but not enough to be statistically significant. However, the p value of 0.0640 indicates that this lack of statistical significance is marginal, and future research with more specific measures and larger samples could prove statistical significance.

Emotional Fusion

EF refers to the loss of a sense of self in the presence of heightened anxiety, such as intense emotional intimacy (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). When emotional intensity rises, individuals can react by fusing themselves to the source of heightened anxiety (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). No other research has looked into EF as a factor in SV. EF was less statistically significant in this study as compared to ER and EC, but slightly more significant than IP. These findings help us identify which types of reactions people with lower or higher differentiation levels have in experiences of oppression (MA) or SV.

Microaggressions and Differentiation of Self

A small negative relationship was found in the correlation between MA and DOS ($r = -0.276$). This r score indicates that while there is some correlation, it is not strong enough to say with confidence that these variables are correlated due to causation or chance. However, these findings do align with research done that examines the outcomes of microaggressions on sexual orientation minorities. Research has consistently reported that the presence of microaggressions leads to higher rates of depression, lowered life satisfaction, lowered relationship satisfaction, and poor adjustment (Lui & Quezada, 2019; Beres, 2014).

The findings of this study contribute a relationship, whether significant or not, in this sample a relationship between microaggressions and differentiation of self. Theoretically, previous research findings indicating that microaggressions lead to negative mental health outcomes (Lui & Quezada, 2019; Somantico et al., 2021) corroborates Bowen's conceptualization of differentiation (Bowen, 1978; Somantico, 2021). As differentiation increases so does one's ability to maintain their higher self in times of heightened anxiety. Therefore, when we succumb to the oppressive societal forces around us and face mental illness or poor adjustment, it can mean that there is room for growth in a person's level of differentiation. Clinical implications for this finding will be further discussed later in this study.

Microaggressions and Sexual Victimization

A moderate positive relationship was found between microaggressions and sexual victimization with an r score of $r=0.4$. This means that as microaggressions increase, sexual victimization also increases. This corroborates previous research conducted on the rate of harassment and victimization is faced at higher rates by members of the queer community (Beres, 2014; Lopez & Yeater, 2018). However, no other study has specifically measured the rate of microaggressions in tandem with sexual victimization. This data further contributes to our understanding of how sexual scripting and dominant cultural narratives create a heterosexist society, resulting in further victimization for SMW.

Implications

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between DOS, MA, and SV as it pertains to sexual minority women. Further investigation of DOS was done through regressions of DOS subcategories (IP, ER, EC, and EF). The findings of this study can help contribute to clinical understanding of the treatment of SMW as it pertains to experiences of SV. Using a

Bowenian approach to further punctuate the role of DOS, clinical, theoretical and societal implications will be further discussed.

Theoretical Implications

Applying these research findings to theoretical applications allows clinicians to better conceptualize the ramifications of MA, and SV within SMW populations as it pertains to their level of differentiation. Importantly, Bowen conceptualizes that societal forces impact emotional regulation and reactivity (Bowen, 1978). The Societal Emotional Process refers to how systemic forces operate as an emotional system, and this emotional energy is absorbed by families, couples, and individuals (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). In the context of this research, and our understanding of societal stressors impacting SMW, this research allows us to understand how differentiation can be increased.

Differentiation refers to one's ability to maintain a strong sense of self in intimate emotional relationships (Bowen, 1978). From a BFST perspective, those who are more highly differentiated are able to maintain a sense of self, without compromising intimacy. Those who have lower levels of differentiation are unable to maintain a sense of self in heightened levels anxiety, and in a lot of cases that anxiety can stem from intimacy. People with lower levels of differentiation are more likely to report symptoms of mental illness, as well as lower relationship and sexual satisfaction (Somantico et al., 2021). Understanding that there is a moderate inverse relationship between differentiation of self and sexual victimization allows us to theoretically conceptualize why this might be.

This inverse relationship indicates that for participants who faced more SV, their level of differentiation was lower. It is important to acknowledge that a causal relationship has not been defined within this statistical analysis. To conceptualize these results theoretically, while it is

unclear if lowered levels of differentiation means SMW women are more likely to experience victimization, or if increased victimization lowers a person's level of differentiation, either way, damage to one's level of differentiation is connected to sexual victimization, and therefore increasing the level of differentiation of SMW can provide healing.

To speak similarly to the relationship between MA and SV, which was a positive linear relationship, theoretical components of BFST can be utilized to conceptualize this relationship as well. Bowen therapists conceptualize minority stress through the societal emotional process. The presence of microaggressions in our society, and how they are used against minorities groups illustrates society as an emotional system. In the United States and globally, sexual orientation minorities are subjected to ridicule and discrimination due to queer phobia. Society functioning as an emotional system means that it wants to maintain the internal homeostasis of heteronormativity. When this emotional system is presented with non-heterosexual orientations, it responds with emotional reactivity, which can look like hate crimes, discrimination, and microaggressions.

To return to differentiation, to have a high level of differentiation, a person needs to hold a strong sense of self in heightened anxiety (Bowen). Continual experiences of subjugation via microaggressions is representative of the societal emotional process and continually puts systemic anxiety onto sexual orientation minorities. Theoretically speaking, this continual systemic anxiety could damage a person's ability to maintain their sense of self.

Clinical Implications

Recognizing the lived experiences of clients is a critical part of the therapeutic process (Butler, 2015; Mosher et al., 2017; Yancu & Farmer, 2017; Fors, 2021). Offering empirical validation to clients facing oppression and disparities in experiences due to oppression can help

soften clients to the therapeutic experience (Yancu & Farmner, 2017). Research highlights the importance of incorporating frameworks such as minority stress, intersectionality, and family therapy approaches (Alessi, 2014; Burton et al., 2019; McGeough & Cohen, 2022; Doyle, 2018; Butler, 2009). This is of particular importance because sexual orientation minorities have reported experiences of microaggressions from their therapist in the forms of heteronormative statements, disregard for the sexual identity, and the therapist's assumptions that their presenting problem was due to their sexual identity (Spengler et al., 2019; Meyer, 2003).

Minority stress theory posits that sexual minorities experience unique and chronic stressors due to societal stigma around sexual orientation and gender identity (Meyer, 2003). Meyer's minority stress theory argues the reason that sexual orientation and gender minorities face higher rates of mental illnesses is due to minority stress (2003). Further research has expanded on how to incorporate minority stress theory into therapeutic practices (Frost & Meyer, 2023). Doing so allows therapists to alleviate symptoms that have been exacerbated due to minority stress. In quantitative analyses, research indicates that for SMW, a stronger therapeutic relationship leads to participants to believe they received better therapy, and had an overall better treatment outcome, than participants who had a weaker therapeutic relationship (Davis et al., 2021).

This research adds to the discussion on what it means to be a sexual minority woman. This evidence, even with its limitations, offers clinicians a window into how SMW interacts with differentiation, microaggressions and sexual victimization. This information helps aide therapists in being attuned to the minority stressors experienced by SMW.

Limitations

Several limitations exist for this study. First of which being small sample size. Due to time limitations as well as the challenge of expanding beyond the university student population, total completed participant responses were limited. Additionally, the selection criteria for participants living in the southeast was highly limiting. Efforts to reach the greater community allowed for some diversity within the dataset, however in future research, more efforts should be made to emphasize the lived experience of non-university-based community members. Due to the lack of sample size, statistical power was not achieved. However, due to the theoretical strength of this study, combined with similar findings in closely related measures, (ex, similarities between emotional cutoff and emotional dampening), more efforts should be made in future research to increase sample sizes. Clinical implications of DOS, MA, and SV are theoretically understood and conceptualized by therapists. Quantitative measures can help support this community.

Another limitation of this study includes the wide range of ages allowed to participate. DOS tends to increase as individuals age (Bowen, 1978). This means that participants who experienced SV earlier in life, and responded to this survey later in life may report higher levels of differentiation, with higher rates of SV. Younger adults who have not established a sense of self, and report victimization may yield lower levels of differentiation. Additionally, insight towards DOS, and MA, as well as SV could have impacted this study's results. DOS asks behavioral type questions such as, "I tend to need a lot of approval from those around me." Individuals may respond with inaccuracy due to low insight. Individuals may have similar tendencies when answering questions about sexual experiences, and microaggressions.

Another limitation lies in the cross-sectional nature of the study. Utilizing correlations and regression to understand the relationships between variables SV, DOS, and SV limits our understanding of what precipitates causation. Additionally, the length of the survey itself was a limiting factor of the study. Due to the length of the survey participant drop off indicated that participants were unable to finish the survey resulting in lowered overall participation, which meant less data to analyze. To strengthen data in future studies, shorter survey sections as well as response quality checks such as instructed response questions could be utilized. In future projects careful consideration should be applied to sampling community members outside of university-based populations. Additionally, future research should incorporate mixed method approaches to gain insight on participant's perspectives on how DOS, and MS impact SV.

Future Directions

There are many ways to continue examining the relationship between DOS, MA, and SV as it pertains to SMW. In the future researchers could conduct comparative studies between heterosexual women's DOS as compared to SMW's DOS to see if there is a relevant difference between groups. This would allow for better conceptualization of the societal emotional process as it relates to an individual's level of differentiation. Aforementioned points about society as an emotional system, as defined by Bowen, theoretically demonstrates how minoritized groups face systemic anxiety not faced by those part of mainstream culture. Mixed methods could be utilized to quantitatively capture levels of differentiation, while qualitative measure such as interviews and focus groups could be utilized to gain better insight into SMW's experiences of both microaggressions and sexual victimization. The qualitative approach could help to identify measure for future quantitative approaches that focus on causation factors among the variables used in this study, DOS, MA, and SV

Additionally, future research focusing solely on SMW could do similar comparative studies, controlling for level of differentiation, and seeing if experiences with MA and SV vary, and in what way. Utilizing control groups can help establish validity that significant results are not due to chance. Additional research could be done through qualitative measures where researchers could gain a better sense of participants' emotional reactivity, emotional fusion, emotional cutoff, and I-position.

Conclusion

In summation, no statistically significant relationships between variables when analyzed in simple regressions were found, when conducting regressions it was determined that no statistically significant relationship existed between the dependent and independent variables. In essence, we fail to reject the null hypothesis while recognizing there does appear to be a moderate negative correlation between DOS and SV, as well as between MA and SV. Additional statistical analysis of subcategories (IP, ER, EC, and EF) yielded similar results to multivariate coefficient regressions done between DOS and MA in correlation with SV. The most statistically significant subcategory was ER. In the case of this study, a participant's level of differentiation was correlated with negative sexual experiences.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
Willis Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Grace Anderson](#)
CC: [Damon Rappleyea](#)
Date: 11/26/2024
Re: [UMCIRB 24-001985](#)
Sexual consent attitudes of sexual minority women

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) occurred on 11/25/2024. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

As the Principal Investigator you are explicitly responsible for the conduct of all aspects of this study and must adhere to all reporting requirements for the study. Your responsibilities include but are not limited to:

1. Ensuring changes to the approved research (including the UMCIRB approved consent document) are initiated only after UMCIRB review and approval except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All changes (e.g. a change in procedure, number of participants, personnel, study locations, new recruitment materials, study instruments, etc.) must be prospectively reviewed and approved by the UMCIRB before they are implemented;
2. Where informed consent has not been waived by the UMCIRB, ensuring that only valid versions of the UMCIRB approved, date-stamped informed consent document(s) are used for obtaining informed consent (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the ePIRATE study workspace);
3. Promptly reporting to the UMCIRB all unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others;
4. Submission of a final report application to the UMCIRB prior to the expected end date provided in the IRB application in order to document human research activity has ended and to provide a timepoint in which to base document retention; and
5. Submission of an amendment to extend the expected end date if the study is not expected to be completed by that date. The amendment should be submitted 30 days prior to the UMCIRB approved expected end date or as soon as the Investigator is aware that the study will not be completed by that date.

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
consent letter.pdf	Consent Forms
Pink Red Yellow Retro Colorful Motivational Quote Poster.png	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
SMW Qualtrics survey	Surveys and Questionnaires
Thesis document	Study Protocol or Grant Application
v3Qualtrics Survey Software.pdf	Data Collection Sheet

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: IRB AMENDMENT APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
Willis Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284**
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Amendment Approval

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Grace Anderson](#)
CC: [Damon Rappleyea](#)
Date: 1/21/2025
Re: [Ame1_UMCIRB 24-001985](#)
[UMCIRB 24-001985](#)
Sexual consent attitudes of sexual minority women

Your Amendment to update this study according to the revised human research regulations (as of January 21, 2019) has been reviewed and approved using expedited review on 1/20/2025. It was the determination of the UMCIRB Chairperson (or designee) that this amendment does not impact the overall risk/benefit ratio of the study and is appropriate for the population and procedures proposed.

Please note that any further changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a Final Report application to the UMCIRB prior to the Expected End Date provided in the IRB application. If the study is not completed by this date, an Amendment will need to be submitted to extend the Expected End Date. The investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Description
Extension of End Date

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

Study ID:UMCIRB 24-001985 Date Approved: 11/25/2024 Does Not Expire.

Dear Participant,

I am a student at East Carolina University in human development and family science. I am asking you to take part in my research study entitled, *"Sexual Consent Experiences of Sexual Minority Women through the lens of Differentiation"*.

The purpose of this research is to **gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of sexual minority women as it pertains to differentiation**. By doing this research, I hope to learn **how different levels of differentiation impact the sexual consent process**. Your participation is completely voluntary. We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

You are being invited to take part in this research because you identify as a cisgendered sexual minority woman, who is over the age of 18. This invitation to participate in research is being sent to all ECU students, The amount of time it will take you to complete this study is fifteen minutes
The decision to take part in this research will not affect your course grade, class standing, or relationship with any instructor

If you agree to take part in this survey, you will be asked questions that relate to your sexual experiences as they relate to consent, your demographic information, your level of differentiation, and your experiences regarding social perceptions of your sexuality

If you agree to take part in this research, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire that includes questions about your demographics, level of differentiation, sexual history, and experiences of oppression.

This research is overseen by the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at ECU. Therefore, some of the UMCIRB members or the UMCIRB staff may need to review your research data. However, the information you provide will not be linked to you. Therefore, your responses cannot be traced back to you by anyone, including me.
Your information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future studies.

Please call Grace Anderson at 651-270-3086 for any research related questions. If you have questions about your rights when taking part in this research, call the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, call the Director of Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

You do not have to take part in this research, and you can stop at any time. If you decide you are willing to take part in this study, continue with the survey below
Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research.

Sincerely, Grace Anderson, Principal Investigator

