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"Graffiti Research [Is] a Recognized Research Field [...], Sexuality
Research [...] Isn't, Unfortunately"
Exploring German and Austrian Critical Sexualities Studies
Scholars' Ambivalent Experiences of Working in a Contested,
Fragmented and Exceptionalized Field

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Abstract (deutsch)

Existierende Forschung zu den Arbeitsbedingungen (kritischer) Sexualitätsforschender befasst sich primär mit negativen Erfahrungen innerhalb (und außerhalb) der Akademie – (epistemische) Marginalisierung, Trivialisierung, Sexualisierung, etc. Basierend auf diesen Erkenntnissen, dem Forschungsdefizit für die Erfahrungen deutscher und österreichischer Forschenden, sowie mit dem Ziel auch die Freude in der gelebten Realität meiner Teilnehmenden in den Vordergrund zu rücken, widmet sich diese Forschung der folgenden Frage: Wie erleben und verhandeln Wissenschaftler*innen der kritischen Sexuality Studies in Deutschland und Österreich den epistemischen Status ihres (fragmentierten und exzeptionalisierten) Forschungsfeldes im Kontext der politischen Ökonomie gegenwärtiger wissenschaftlicher Praxis? Auf der Grundlage feministischer Epistemologie (Donna Haraway) und mithilfe der Theorie des ‚epistemischen Status‘ (Maria do Mar Pereira) sowie dem Konzept von ‚Ambivalenz als feministisches Projekt‘ (Coccia et al.) wurden 15 problemzentrierte Interviews (PZI) geführt und anschließend mithilfe der Reflexiven Thematischen Analyse (RTA) (Braun & Clarke) ausgewertet. Die Analyse arbeitet ein Muster der (epistemischen) Marginalisierung, Trivialisierung und Exzeptionalisierung kritischer Sexuality Studies heraus und befasst sich eingehend mit Boundary Work Strategien von Forschenden, die diesen Prozessen entgegenwirken. Dies wird kontextualisiert durch eine Analyse der Individualisierung und Fragmentierung im/des Forschungsfeldes, der paradoxen Interaktionen von Wissenschaftler*innen mit den Anforderungen der neoliberalen Universität, der Non-Performativität des moralischen Ethos der zeitgenössischen Universität, sowie der ambivalenten Gefühle der Teilnehmenden zu ihrer Arbeit im Forschungsfeld.

Abstract (english)

Existing research on the working conditions of (critical) sexualities researchers is primarily concerned with negative experiences within (and beyond) the academy – (epistemic) marginalization, trivialization, sexualization, etc. Based on these findings, the lack of research on the experiences of German and Austrian researchers, as well as with the aim of foregrounding joy and pleasure in the lived realities of my participants, this project aims to answer the following research question: How do critical sexualities studies (CSS) scholars in Germany and Austria experience and negotiate the epistemic status of their (fragmented and exceptionalized) research (field) within the broader political economy of contemporary academic practice? Underpinned by feminist epistemology (Donna Haraway) and utilizing the theory of ‘epistemic status’ (Maria do Mar Pereira) and the concept of ‘ambivalence as a feminist project’ (Coccia et al.), 15 problem-centered interviews (PZI) were conducted and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke). The analysis identifies a pattern of (epistemic) marginalization, trivialization, and exceptionalization of critical sexualities studies and engages in-depth with scholars’ boundary work aimed at subverting and counteracting these processes. This is contextualized by an analysis of individualization and fragmentation in/of the research field, the paradoxical interactions of scholars with the demands of the neoliberal university, the non-performativity of the moral ethos of the contemporary university, as well as the ambivalent feelings of my participants towards their work in the research field.

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List of Abbreviations

BRD	Federal Republic of Germany / Bundesrepublik Deutschland (informally West Germany)
CGT	Constructivist Grounded Theory
CSS	Critical Sexualities Studies
DGfS	German Society for Sexual Science / Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sexualforschung e.V.
GDR	German Democratic Republic (informally East Germany)
GeSiD	German Health and Sexuality Survey / Survey Studie zu Gesundheit und Sexualität in Deutschland
HS	University of Applied Sciences / (Fach-)Hochschule
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic/Agender plus additional subsects
ÖFOS	Austrian Fields of Science and Technology Classification / Österreichische Systematik der Wissenschaftszweige
ÖGS	Austrian Society for Sexologies / Österreichische Gesellschaft für Sexualwissenschaften
PCI	Problem-Centered Interview
PoC	Person(s) of Color
RN23	Sexuality Research Network of the European Sociological Association
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
Scholars/hip	Scholars & Scholarship
SSH	Social Sciences and Humanities
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
TA	Thematic Analysis
WGFS	Women's, Gender, and Feminist Studies
WGSS	Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

1 Introduction

While I was writing my bachelor's thesis on the feminist discourse surrounding pornography in 2021, I became interested in the lived experiences of scholars researching sexualities¹ in the humanities and social sciences. As I myself wanted to delve deeper into (critical) sexualities studies (CSS) (Fahs and McClelland 2016; Plummer 2020; Marzullo 2021), I wondered which master's degree might be most suitable for me to engage more deeply and critically with sexualities and decided to begin the master's program in gender studies² at the University of Vienna. To my surprise, however, sexualities seemed marginalized within the curriculum which led me to wonder where, if not in the gender studies, critical (usually informed by theories originating in the social sciences and humanities (SSH)) sexualities studies scholars/hip³ existed in Germany and Austria. While sexual science/research (German: 'Sexualforschung' and 'Sexualwissenschaft') appeared to be somewhat academically established and even institutionalized (at least in Germany), the critical SSH-oriented perspectives which interested me seemed largely absent within its ranks, favoring instead biomedical-clinical – largely positivist – approaches (and to a lesser extent, research from legal, as well as educational science and social work scholars).

As my own interest in CSS had not abated during my master's and I began to wonder if I might want to pursue a doctorate in the field after graduating, I developed an academic interest in (1) finding out what working within such a seemingly fragmented field might be like and (2) why critical research relating to sexualities – which I consider an immensely relevant structural category (following e.g., Santos et al.'s assessment of it being “a key battlefield for the deep political cleavages of our time” (Santos et al. 2020: 1)) – seemed marginalized in an institution, the contemporary university, which prides itself on supposedly securing academic freedom and producing knowledge(s) relevant to society (see e.g., the code of conduct of my own institution (University of Vienna 2013)).

In my exploration of existing academic literature on those topics, I found that it focuses on other geographic contexts than my own – primarily English-speaking countries – and largely seems

¹ I use 'sexualities' in the plural, a decision which will be expanded upon in section 2.1.

² I will use the term 'gender studies' when talking about the research field in the German-speaking context and the terms WGFS/WGSS when I am referencing existing research literature (e.g., Pereira 2017; Boisseau and Rellihan 2025) or when referring to geographic locations (i.e., the US or UK) in which the field has institutionalized under a variation of the label 'women's, gender, feminist and/or sexuality studies'.

³ I use the term 'scholars/hip' to indicate that that something refers both to the scholarly work, as well as the person producing said work.

to foreground experiences of (epistemic) marginalization and the dire working conditions within academia (e.g., Irvine 2014, 2015; Israel 2002; Perin 2024) through the routine framing of experiences with concepts such as ‘dirty work’ and ‘stigma’. While there exists some research which also engages with the joys and pleasures of and in researching sexualities (e.g., Fahs et al. 2018; Morris et al. 2018; Littlejohn and Stone 2025; Jones 2019a), I nevertheless cumulatively observed what has elsewhere been called a ‘joy deficit’ (Shuster and Westbrook 2024) in the existing literature. Consequently, I began to wonder firstly about the lived realities of German and Austrian CSS scholars and how they compared to the existing scholarly findings. I chose to focus on these two countries – instead of i.e., the whole German-speaking context – as I had attended university in both and felt that I was familiar enough with their academic systems to ‘do justice’ to scholars’ experiences within them. Secondly, I wanted to find out whether the scholarship I had found might be representing a skewed view of what working (critically) on sexualities may be like as, to me, it could not explain why scholars would choose to (continue to) work on CSS topics.

Therefore, after having identified these trends in the literature, I set out to investigate the situation in German and Austrian academia (also as a kind of market research for making a decision about whether to pursue a doctorate in the field) with a stronger focus on ambivalent experiences of researching sexualities – how my interviewees experienced and navigated stigma, joy, precarity, pleasure, danger and anxiety in their scholarly practice in sometimes contradictory ways.

I approached the project from a feminist epistemological standpoint (Haraway 1988) and utilized Maria do Mar Pereira’s concept of ‘epistemic status’ (Pereira 2017, 2019), which refers to “the degree to which, and terms in which, a knowledge claim, or entire field, is recognised as fulfilling the requisite criteria to be considered credible and relevant knowledge” (Pereira 2017: 47). Utilizing the latter allowed me to investigate scholars’ narratives with a focus on several aspects:

- whether and to what extent CSS scholars/hip seems to be considered ‘proper’ scientific knowledge (producers) within the academy,
- how individual scholars are negotiating their epistemic authority,
- and how scholars’ positionality in relation to axes of privilege and marginality impacts how their claims to scientificity are being received within academic communities.

Furthermore, Coccia et al.’s conceptualization of ambivalence as a ‘feminist project’ (Coccia et al. 2024) provided a valuable theoretical lens to identify the analytic value in engaging with

apparent contradictions in scholars' reported experiences and narratives as well as incongruences in my own project instead of attempting to artificially resolve them.

My analysis was guided by the following research question:

How do critical sexualities studies scholars in Germany and Austria experience and negotiate the epistemic status of their (fragmented and exceptionalized) research (field) within the broader political economy of contemporary academic practice⁴?

I conducted 15 'problem-centered' interviews (Witzel 2000; Witzel and Reiter 2022) with CSS scholars and decided to analyze the gathered data using a methodology which would allow me to systematically identify 'common denominators' in the narratives of my interviewees: thematic analysis (TA). As I needed my methodology to work hand in hand with the epistemological underpinnings of this thesis, I conducted a *reflexive* thematic analysis (RTA), a version of thematic analysis first developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. They argue that "[r]eflexive approaches [...] emphasize the inevitable subjectivity of data coding and analysis, and the researcher's active role in coding and theme generation" (Braun and Clarke 2022b: 7–8). However, this subjectivity does not only apply to my role as a researcher but also that of my participants as RTA is underpinned by a "qualitative orientation [which] usually emphasizes meaning as contextual or situated, reality or realities as multiple" (Braun et al. 2019: 848).

The thesis is structured as follows: I will begin by introducing key terms and presenting the epistemological underpinnings of this thesis and their implications for my project. I will then engage with (trends within) the existing academic literature and provide both an overview over the (external and internal) pressures higher education – and particularly critical scholarship – is currently facing as well as a historiography of (institutionalized) sexualities research in Germany and Austria. Building on this, I will map the need to specifically analyze *critical* sexualities studies, rather than attending to sexualities scholars/hip in general. Subsequently, I will introduce and discuss the theoretical concepts central to this project as well as the data collection and analysis method/ology. This will be followed by the analysis chapter in which I will present the five themes which resulted from the RTA process: *Mapping, Navigating, and Making a Fragmented Field*, *(Dis)Entanglement from/in the Neoliberal University*, *The Non-Performativity of Academia's Moral Ethos*, *(Negotiating) CSS' Exceptionalization and (Epistemic) Marginalization* and *Feeling Ambivalent in a Chilly and Charged Climate*. The analysis will be

⁴ The phrase "within the broader political economy of contemporary academic practice" is taken verbatim from Pereira's book (Pereira 2017: 10).

followed by a summary and discussion of the themes and a reflection on the research process, and I will close this thesis with my conclusion.

2 Definition of Key Terms

In the following section I will introduce my understanding and use of the key terms underpinning this analysis. Both my understanding of what sexuality/ies is/are as well as my conception of what and who is encompassed under the umbrella of (critical) sexualit/ies studies informed how I approached the data collection as well as analysis processes and must therefore be made explicit.

2.1 Sexuality/ies

An attempt at a clear and concise definition of what sexuality/ies is/are appears somewhat foolish, as I concur with Sylvia Tamale, who argues that scholars' chosen definitions reveal more about "writers' own orientations, priorisations and passions" (Tamale 2011: 2) than they do about a supposed 'essence' of sexuality. Tamale refers here to Oliver Philipps, who argues that sexuality defies clear definition in the sense that no one definition is able to exhaustively capture what sexuality/ies is/are. Rather, the plethora of definitions need to be considered together to "reflect the multiple ways that sexuality is manifest and impacts on our lives, and that above all; these definitions all consistently involve relations of power" (Phillips 2011: 285). However, not defining my understanding of sexuality/ies seems unproductive as well, as part of my role as a researcher is to make decisions about who and what to include in this project. Therefore, I will utilize a rather 'stripped down' definition posited in an anthology edited by Jodi O'Brien and Arlene Stein, which is nevertheless aligned with my own background in the gender studies: "Sexuality encompasses behaviors, attractions, and identities, and dovetails with gendered ideologies and practices. As individuals navigate intimate relationship they enter into discussions about cultural beliefs and sexual politics". (O'Brien and Stein 2018: 146)

This definition subscribes, like I do, to an understanding of the phenomenon as multi-faceted, as well as socially and culturally constructed and not simply as 'natural' or biological. However, for my own purposes, I will amend this definition in the following ways: Like Tamale, I will speak of sexualities in the plural "in recognition of the complex structures within which sexuality is constructed and in recognition of its pluralist articulations" (Tamale 2011: 2) to bring it in line with my belief that sexualities are ever-shifting, localized, non-monolithic, etc. Furthermore, while I concur with O'Brien and Stein's argument that sexualities are also inherently gendered, I want to broaden this definition to include other axes of privilege and marginality

and their intersections with one another, such as ‘race’⁵, class, (dis)ability, age, religious affiliation.

2.2 (Critical) Sexualities Studies

In their article *Is Sexuality Research ‘Dirty Work’?*, Janice Irvine (2014) contends the following about the larger field of academic inquiry into sexualities:

I suspect that there is a difference between sexology and these new sexuality studies sub-fields [...]. In particular, its critical, theoretical edge and social science/humanities academic locations have cost contemporary sexuality studies the therapeutic market enjoyed by a biomedical and behavioral sexology. Critical researchers in sexuality studies do not produce the self-help books, therapies, or pharmaceuticals to support any promise of better sex tomorrow. (Irvine 2014: 636)

That sexualities have become medicalized and commercialized by the pharmaceutical industry is also echoed by Reinhard Maß for the German-speaking context (Maß 2018), and is given further weight by the fact that – at least in Germany – biomedical-clinical sexualities research has been established and institutionalized as a distinct research field/discipline (as I will show in section 5.2), I tentatively concluded that an ‘epistemic splitting’ (see Pereira 2017: 98) has occurred within the broader field of sexualities scholarship: Certain approaches seem to have been assigned – generally, not absolutely – more epistemic value (e.g., medical and natural science, essentialist, positivist, quantitative approaches) while others appear epistemically marginalized (e.g., SSH, constructionist, poststructuralist, reflexive, qualitative approaches) (see e.g., Weller 2021: 450 for a similar assessment).

As a gender studies student, who approaches the study of sexualities from these more marginalized standpoints, I became interested specifically in examining the lived realities of the latter subsection of scholars, to whom I will subsequently refer to as CSS scholars. However, to be able to analyze how knowledge production works in the CSS field and how epistemic authority is distributed and negotiated within it, I must first define its boundaries as I view them.

Michelle Marzullo, in multiple publications (Marzullo and Leap 2024; Marzullo 2021), traces the origins of the term ‘critical sexuality studies’ and engages with different approaches all using said terminology and maps the differences between these approaches. Though Marzullo speaks of ‘sexuality’ in the singular, I will amend this by referring to CSS as ‘critical sexualities studies’ to account for sexuality’s pluralist articulations, as has been detailed in the previous section.

⁵ I will utilize quotation marks when using the term ‘race’ to indicate that it refers to a social construction of supposed difference.

Marzullo and Leap trace ‘critical sexuality studies’ as a unifying concept to German sexologist and sociologist Volkmar Sigusch⁶ and argue that this conception of a critical approach to studying sexualities was subsequently taken up by scholars in various disciplines, which now appear rather isolated from one another (Marzullo and Leap 2024: 2). These include e.g., work by sociologists, women’s, gender and feminist studies (WGFS) scholars, and critical psychology scholars (Fahs and McClelland 2016; Plummer 2020; Erel et al. 2010). Consequently, there is no one, or generally agreed upon, way of ‘doing’ CSS. Rather, existing contributions on what CSS supposedly is, are shown by Marzullo to be partial and dependent on the respective scholars’ disciplinary backgrounds (Marzullo 2021: 80). Marzullo and Leap (2024) critique that none of these publications explicitly define their understanding of the term ‘critical’, but conclude that their implicit definitions appear to vary when comparing their conceptions of CSS: “Plummer [...] seems to suggest that sexuality is a product of other formations but not a source of agency. Fahs and McClelland seem to gesture to activist and advocacy work that may inspire or be inspired by CSS scholarship. Sigusch seems to inflect a push against Western sexual traditions”. (4)

For my purposes, I will consequently utilize Marzullo’s own definition of CSS as I would argue that their understanding of the field is the most comprehensive as their definition is formulated in interaction with this variety of pre-existing understandings of CSS (Marzullo 2021: 80).

Marzullo’s definition of the ‘critical’ in CSS is based on critical theory, current strands of which, according to the author, include “feminist theory and critique, queer theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, decolonial studies, gender studies, and theories and approaches that arose with poststructuralist contributions” (Marzullo 2021: 85). The author identifies five “conceptual and analytic anchors” (85) for CSS research:

1. Queering the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality so that taken-for-granted concepts and histories considered normative are closely examined in contexts of power, known as the Foucauldian genealogical approach (Foucault, 1977);
2. Taking seriously the nonnormative alignments, or “the outer limits,” as areas to be investigated outside of epistemological ideals to understand people on their own terms (Rubin, [1984] 1999);
3. Resisting the tendency to essentialized [*sic*] identity or conflate it with a broad range of common sexual and gendered practices;
4. Broadening an understanding of power to include identity formation as well as other discursive formations and sexual acts; and
4. Treating the construction of intersectional subjectivities (e.g., thinking about a person or a group by taking seriously different social locations such as religion, age, class, race, gender and geographical

⁶ Though I would dispute Sigusch’s use of the term ‘studies’ as he worked with the terminology ‘critical sexual science’ (‘kritische Sexualwissenschaft’) (Sigusch 1998), I nevertheless concur that he was likely among the first to explicitly argue that a *critical* approach to the academic study of sexualities was needed and that collectively such approaches should be considered a distinct research field.

location) as possibly performative (Butler, [1990] 2006) as well as intentionally performed. (Marzullo 2021: 86)

Utilizing this understanding of CSS for this project (instead of i.e., drawing a boundary between scholars of the SSH and those working in medicine, psychology and the natural sciences as I had initially planned and stated when I approached my first potential interviewees) allowed me to investigate the epistemic status of scholarship from certain ontological, epistemological and theoretical positions without having to limit my interviewees to specific academic disciplines.

Marzullo's argument that their definition of CSS is neither complete nor final (as they account for the multiplicity of perspectives of what CSS means to different scholars) was particularly helpful for my own analysis as this allowed me to "keep the boundaries of my object as open as possible." (Pereira 2017: 7). For example, I decided early on that my participants did not have to self-classify as CSS scholars for me to consider them members of/contributors to the research field, nor did they have to be equally and entirely committed to all five 'anchors' of CSS as defined by Marzullo. Rather, I chose to interview scholars whose research was informed by critical theory and characterized by a rejection of biological determinism (and to a lesser extent positivism) as suitable lenses for studying sexuality/ies.

3 Epistemological Underpinnings and Their Implications

Reflexivity is at the core of my conception of scientificity, which entails – among other things – making my epistemological approach explicit. In the following I will engage with the conceptualizations of knowledge(s), truth and narratives, which are informing not just my own analysis but also my engagement with existing literature in the following chapters, which is why I have chosen to detail the epistemological underpinnings at this point in the thesis. Subsequently, I will attend to my own positionality as well as problematize the implications of such positionality statements.

3.1 Situated Knowledges

Following Donna Haraway (1988), I understand knowledges as situated and embodied, rather than neutral or separable from the individuals generating them. In their article *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, Haraway offers a reconceptualization of objectivity. Instead of simply critiquing objectivity as a masculinist concept developed within an androcentric scientific system, Haraway argues that the epistemological underpinnings oftentimes used by feminist scholars (i.e., radical social constructionism, feminist empiricism and standpoint theories) are also insufficient, as these approaches also remain caught in the binary opposition between reality and construction. (575–589)

Rather, Haraway argues that there is a need to “have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency [...] and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world” (579). To achieve this, Haraway does not fully move away from objectivity as an organizing concept of science. Rather, they offer their concept of a feminist objectivity which views objectivity not as transcendence of the situated, partial and embodied perspective but rather as intrinsically tied to it:

I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positionality, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. [...] I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. (589)

Most notably, however, for my project, Haraway also foregrounds the political implications of their new epistemology – which demands of scholars to reflect on their own power over which and whose ‘truth’ they present as rational knowledge (587) and recognize that “politics and ethics ground struggles for and contests over what may count as rational knowledge. That is, admitted or not, politics and ethics ground struggles over knowledge projects in the exact, natural, social, and human sciences.” (580). This means that scholars are in a position of social and political responsibility and must interrogate their own knowledge claims as to who, what is heard/silenced and what the consequences of that may be.

3.2 Scholarship as Storytelling

As Haraway argues that “struggles over what will count as rational accounts of the world are struggles over *how* to see” (587), I found it productive to conceive of this thesis, the accounts of my interviewees, as well as the existing research literature as narratives of sorts that I must interrogate as to their social and political implications.

In Clare Hemmings’ book *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011), the authors asks us to question “what might be at stake in feminist storytelling” (1). Through an analysis of three distinct, though entangled, dominant narratives of Western feminist storytelling being invoked in scholarly “journal communities⁷” (21) (not by individual authors!) – of progress, loss and return – Hemmings argues that such narratives are not neutral accounts of what has happened, is happening or will happen in feminist scholarship. Rather, they are always partial and motivated to “displace one another as the primary account of what has happened in feminist theory’s recent past, as well as what needs to happen next” (132). It is not Hemmings’ goal to evaluate which narrative is most true but rather to critically examine

⁷ Defined by Hemmings as “editors, boards, peer reviewers, and responses to publishing conventions and expectations” (Hemmings 2011: 21).

how constructions past, present and future work to re(produce) supposed truth and how “we might tell stories differently rather than telling different stories” (16).

The goal of my thesis is not to identify, analyze and deconstruct such grand narratives in the collective stories of my participants⁸. However, I would argue that Hemmings’ focus on what stands *behind* – rather than what is being communicated *in* – scholars’ narratives is nevertheless a very fruitful perspective for me. It allows me, firstly, to engage with the stories my participants tell not as simply neutral accounts of their experiences but rather conceive of scholars as story-tellers who are also involved in (field) historiography. Secondly, by attending to scholar’s accounts as narratives instead of accurate accounts, I am able to investigate whose narratives are more likely to be believed and even which narratives are silenced entirely. Finally, by conceiving of scholarship as storytelling, I am able to attend to my role as the narrator of *this* story: My interpretation of scholars’ stories is also a narrative through which I am attempting to achieve my own ends, in the sense that I am engaged in practices which are supposedly underlining the truthfulness (or at least persuasiveness) of my own analysis. This thesis is consequently also a story about what *I* believe to be true and how I want to present myself as a researcher – though I am also attempting to mitigate this through the utilization of a methodology which requires reflexivity.

My goal is consequently to engage reflexively both with the knowledges produced in existing academic literature and those produced by participants in the interview situations as situated and embodied and implicated in existing power relations. I also aim to interrogate my own story in a similar vein to acknowledge that the knowledge produced in this thesis is contingent – and should be critically examined by others – without, however, fully abandoning the concept of this representing *a* truth, just not *the* truth about CSS’ epistemic status.

3.3 Reflecting on (the Impact of) My Positionality

This epistemological standpoint also requires me to attend to which and how characteristics of mine did (and still do) influence this research project, from the initial idea to this write-up. However, such positionality statements are not uncontested as their usefulness and appropriateness has come somewhat under scrutiny, not just within research communities who subscribe to the idea of the ‘impartial scientist’ but rather also among scholars who content that one’s positionality has a significant impact on one’s research.

⁸ Indeed, the complexity of Hemmings’ work is staggering and was at times incomprehensible to me.

It has been pointed out that rather than providing a one-time static ‘shopping list’ (Folkes 2023) of visible characteristics, researchers should keep in mind that invisible characteristics are just as relevant, that reflexivity is an ongoing process, and that scholars need to take care to consider the context in which their research takes place, as positions of privilege and marginality are context-specific and therefore never static (for example, a female* wheelchair user might be marginalized in a group of able-bodied male* researchers at a conference but in a more privileged position than them to conduct interviews about step-free access options in public buildings) (see e.g., Folkes 2023; Boveda and Annamma 2023; Trundle et al. 2025). Another criticism made in this context refers to the colonial roots of positionality statements: Gani and Khan (2024) trace the history of reflexivity to the enlightenment and contend that it is a white, Western research practice with colonial roots that can “subtly reinforce and cement those hegemonic structures” (5) if not done carefully. They argue not against positionality statements in general but against those that have a mere performative purpose, such as those that are “used as a preface and disclaimer before the researcher proceeds with their (problematic) research agenda anyway, despite the acknowledged caveats” (8).

Other researchers have more generally called into question the usefulness of such positionality statements – even if iterative, fluid, and contextualized. For example, Davis and Khonach (2020) discuss what they call ‘the paradox of positionality’ in feminist standpoint theory – which refers to their contention that there is no ideal way of handling positionality (statements). They argue that one can either avoid positionality altogether – i.e., pretending that positionality and subjectivity are irrelevant – which is, however, in direct opposition of feminist standpoint theory’s postulation that objective, value-free research does not exist. Secondly, they argue, one can embrace positionality by acknowledging it in a positionality statement – the route I ultimately decided to take in this thesis. The possible issue with this strategy is that one potentially exposes oneself to accusations of ‘me-search’ (see e.g., Meral et al. 2025) when stating too many commonalities with participants or too much personal involvement in the research project. On the other hand, if no or just a few connections are made, the research might be valued more highly just because of that (which is, again, in direct opposition to feminist standpoint theory). The third – and, as Davis and Khonach (2020) tentatively conclude, perhaps the best – way they suggest handling positionality is by resisting it – i.e., acknowledging the fact that subject positions influence research and knowledge production but refuse to write a positionality statement detailing personal characteristics regarding that. However, they acknowledge that this might not be possible for visible marginalizations, for example, due to ‘race’ or body size.

I have chosen to embrace positionality in this thesis because I realized, especially when gathering participants for, and later, during my interviews, certain characteristics of mine (which I will discuss later in this section) and commonalities between me and my interview partners turned out to be highly influential in shaping the interactions. I feel like transparency outweighs the risk of me being accused of doing ‘me-search’, especially in a qualifying research project such as a master’s thesis.

In the spirit of its fluidity and iterativity, I have tried to weave in reflections on my research throughout this thesis (instead of writing one ‘Reflection’ chapter). I will also try my best to write these reflections in a way that situates my positionality in the context of my research, while being aware that simply writing a positionality statement also functions as a way for me to absolve myself of the privilege of my perspective, which makes it, at least in part, non-performative (Gani and Khan 2024). However, I do feel that I owe it to both my participants as well as readers of this thesis that I specifically attend to the impact of my own privileges on this project, as a significant part of my analysis revolves around me analyzing, and even critiquing, the (sometimes unacknowledged) impact of my interview partners’ positionalities on e.g., their boundary work.

I was (and still am) able to write this thesis (and complete my whole master’s program) over a much longer time span than is allotted by my university, which allows me to be very thorough and re-write/work several parts of this text as well as other elements during the research process. This working style was made possible by me being able to spend my financial, emotional, and temporal resources in that way: I am white and do not visibly belong to a religious minority – meaning I do not have to face (systemic) discrimination as a consequence of that (in, for example, the university setting or elsewhere in everyday life). Additionally, my everyday life is made easier by the fact that I can use my first language (German) most of the time. This makes communication (in my day-to-day life as well as in more high-stakes situations like interacting with government actors) and evaluating my environment usually rather effortless which, in turn, provides me with a sense of security and belonging. These three, to other people noticeable, markers of privilege – ‘race’, religion, and language –, also mean that I usually do not feel pressured to ‘integrate better into society’ despite me being an immigrant in the country I currently live and work in. While I do have a part-time job, I am not dependent on its income to secure my basic needs – a financial security and stability that frees up mental resources to work on this thesis, and having, quite literally, more hours in any given day to work on this project. I was raised in an (depending on the exact moment in time, upper-) middle class family that

valued education highly, meaning I was and am supported in my academic endeavors, financially as well as emotionally. I do not have to worry about taking longer than the average study time for my bachelor's and my master's and I am encouraged in taking the path that feels right for me (for example in thinking about pursuing a doctorate after graduating). This support means, again, that I can afford to spend more time (re-)thinking ideas for as well as concepts, theories, and methodologies used in this thesis, enabling me to work thoroughly on every part of it.

Moreover, the privileges presented above had an additional advantage while conducting the interviews: As all of my interview partners were also white, did not visibly (to me) belong to a religious minority, spoke in fluent and accent-free German, and were (as was the prerequisite for their participation), like me, members of the academy and situated in a similar research area, they were likely more inclined to share their experiences with and have trust in me precisely because of these commonalities – a phenomenon known as homophily:

Homophily is the tendency for there to be higher rates of contact between similar people than between dissimilar people. [...] [I]t affects who people interact with, how interactions are structured, the process of group formation, and the course of interactions between groups. [...] Stated another way, homophily means that similarity breeds connection. Similarity in the case of homophily refers to ascribed characteristics, such as gender, race, and age, and achieved characteristics, such as education, social class, and occupation. (Levine and Hogg 2010: 404)

Structural factors – which, in turn, partly stem from my personal privileges, such as having the financial and emotional resources to move to another country, knowing I would not be immediately identifiable as an immigrant – have also most likely positively influenced the chances of my interviewees responding to my emails or calls in mailing lists. For example, my institutional affiliation with the University of Vienna (a Western university, equipped with certain quantitative markers of prestige, i.e., being ranked in position 95 of the world's best universities by the Times Higher Education Ranking 2026 (Times Higher Education 2026)) as well as having Sabine Grenz as my supervisor, most likely provided me and my research with 'prestige by association'. For example, two of my interview partners even explicitly stated that they responded to my call precisely *because* of who my supervisor was.

However, some of my characteristics probably had an ambivalent effect: My queer*ness and my gender (as a cisgender woman*), while marginalizing me and being a possible cause of discrimination in broader society, might have helped, based on the theory of homophily, to foster connection and openness with those interview partners that shared the same characteristics. For example, many of my interview partners identified as queer* and I usually also disclosed my own queer*ness in return.

While my gender and my queer*ness are one possible source of marginalization and/or discrimination, living with an invisible disability – which I usually do not disclose as I worry about experiencing discrimination or being met with disbelief – is another. Without wanting to disclose too many details, I am being disabled⁹ on a regular basis, meaning I have to use resources – emotional, financial, and temporal – to attempt to prevent / cope with such experiences.

While these are some general considerations about how my own positionality affected the research process, I will also include further reflections on this in other parts of this thesis, whenever I felt that it was necessary to expand on this (i.e., in the methodology chapter or in the ‘Looking Back and Moving Forward’ chapter).

4 Literature Review

Now that I have defined my understanding of sexualities, mapped the research field of CSS as I view it and presented the epistemological underpinnings of this thesis (including mapping the impact of my positionality on the entirety of the research process), I will introduce and contextualize some of the existing academic literature which has examined the working conditions of CSS scholars (or sometimes more broadly sexualities scholars working in the SSH) in locations other than Germany and Austria. In the following I will therefore use the terms ‘sexualities scholars’ and ‘sexualities research’ to infer that the literature does not relate exclusively to CSS scholars. I contend that this literature cumulatively points towards the field’s (epistemic) marginalization, sexualization and trivialization in various locations while also detailing scholars’ personal accounts of working within and against these trends. However, it largely does not attend to the reasons why scholars would nevertheless choose to be and remain sexualities scholars. Both what is said in the literature as well as what is omitted guided me in both the data gathering and analysis process.

4.1 Accounts of Stigma, Marginalization, Sexualization, and Trivialization

Two articles, one co-authored by a criminologist and sociologist from the UK (Hammond and Kingston 2014) and another by a US-American sociologist (Irvine 2014), both published in the journal *Sexualities* in the same year, seem to have initiated a trend of broader academic inquiry into the working conditions of critical/SSH sexualities scholars, though they are by no means the first publications to engage with this topic (see e.g., Israel 2002; Attwood 2010).

⁹ I use the term ‘being disabled’ in line with the social model of disability, which –in contrast to the medical model of disability – focuses on how structural barriers and society disables humans, instead of the disability itself. (see e.g., Hogan 2019)

Kingston and Hammond approach the topic using Erving Goffman's concept of the 'spoiled identity' (Goffman 1968), arguing that sexualities researchers are stigmatized by association (Hammond and Kingston 2014: 330), though the authors contend that their experiences as sex work researchers cannot be equated to those of sex workers: "We did not experience extreme hostility or abuse as sex workers and those assumed to be sex workers may" (341). They recount their experiences of being constructed as supposedly too vulnerable and defenseless against potential violence by male* participants, perceptions which framed their research as inherently risky and made the process of gaining ethical approval for their projects (via institutional review boards) more challenging (333–335). The authors, both female* academics, furthermore, reflect on their experiences of being sexualized within the research setting, as well as being questioned as to the reasons behind their research interest (i.e. supposed hidden depravity) (335–337). The authors also observe that "some people [...] viewed our topic and our jobs as researchers as a 'joke' and 'unworthy' of academic research" (339), indicating a pattern of both trivialization and discreditation of sexualities scholars/hip within and beyond the academy. Finally, Hammond and Kingston engage with closeting strategies intended to manage their 'spoiled identity', like being careful about when, to whom and to what extent they disclosed their research topics and performing a certain identity through physical appearance (i.e. veiling feminine characteristics). (341–342)

Irvine's (2014) contribution seems to have been somewhat more widely received, which can likely be traced back to the fact that it was based, in part, on survey data from 169 US sociologists and may therefore have been seen as more generalizable than Hammond and Kingston's account of their personal experiences. The article was also given its own section within an issue of *Sexualities* in which scholars from other geographical locations responded to Irvine's article and examined the viability of their conceptualization of sexualities research as 'dirty work' for their own locations (Ho 2014; Dowsett 2014; Msibi 2014; Epprecht 2014; Štulhofer 2014; McCormack 2014).

In their article, Irvine engages with the ways sexualities scholars/hip in the US has been subject to institutional stigma within the academy and argues that it is particularly critical researchers, most of whom are working from within the SSH, who are marginalized. Irvine connects this to the fact that they "do not produce the self-help books, therapies, or pharmaceuticals to support any promise of better sex tomorrow. [...] Contemporary social science and humanities scholars [consequently] work without the advantages of a therapeutic market, but [...] under conditions of persistent vulnerability to workplace stigma." (Irvine 2014: 636). Drawing on Everett C. Hughes' concept of 'dirty work' (Hughes 1962) – which refers to types of work which are

paradoxically both socially stigmatized as well as seen as a necessity –, Irvine argues that sexualities scholars/hip are constructed as dirty work(ers) “by systematic practices of the university system, and further suggest[s] that these practices impose stigma effects that are not simply individual but constitute persistent patterns of institutional inequality.” (Irvine 2014: 633–634)¹⁰.

Irvine draws on the following institutional barriers to sexualities research to substantiate their claim: The author points to the lack of formal graduate training and mentorship opportunities, as well as a chilly/hostile workplace climate in which colleagues and superiors frame their research as inferior or beyond legitimate science (639–644). Furthermore, Irvine argues that sexualities research is usually published in specialty journals, rather than more general discipline-specific journals. This disadvantages sexualities scholars within a neoliberalized institution as these journals have a lower impact factor than e.g., top-tier sociology journals, which consequently negatively affects scholars’ career chances/progression (644–645). This is exacerbated by the fact that securing funding for sexualities research is difficult as topics are oftentimes considered controversial (648–650). According to Irvine, institutional review boards are also oftentimes a barrier to the production of knowledge on sexualities: Guidelines which have been put in place to protect vulnerable populations can and have been misapplied to block ‘undesirable’ scholarship on communities which may not have required such intervention on supposedly moral grounds. (645–646)

While I do not want to imply that there exists a simple causal link between Hammond and Kingston’s and Irvine’s articles and the pervasiveness of framing sexualities research through the lens of stigma, marginalization and devaluation, it is notable that this framing of sexualities research via the concepts of ‘dirty work’ (Hughes 1962) and ‘stigma’ (Goffman 1968) has since been adopted by many other researchers in various geographic locations. However, at least as far as I can tell, nothing has been published which is specifically and exclusively focused on the experiences of scholars working in German and/or Austrian academia (though sometimes fleeting references are made to (critical) sexualities scholars/hip being subject to a particular brand of hostility and skepticism (e.g., Hark and Villa 2015: 25; Weller 2021: 450)).

There exists some further research which is based on larger datasets, which, for example, includes another article by Irvine based on the same data as their 2014 article (Irvine 2015), as

¹⁰ Irvine was not the first to frame sexualities research as ‘dirty work’ but the first to explicitly use Hughes’ concept. In fact, British scholar Feona Attwood already described sexualities research as dirty work in 2010 (Attwood 2010).

well as research collecting and analyzing the experiences of European scholars working on LGBTQIA+ topics in times of increasing public hostility to such research (Darakchi and Valkovičová 2025), Lynn Comella's study on porn studies scholars' navigation of increasing controversy surrounding their teaching about sex media (Comella 2024) and Le Cui's analysis of the experiences of queer scholars working on queer topics in Chinese academia (Cui 2023). Most of the academic literature, however, seems to be (like Hammond and Kingston's article) focused on personal and individual accounts of scholars' experiences and management of stigma and their dirty work status and span a variety of disciplines and countries. Notably, most of the accounts are also published in specialty journals like *Sexualities* and are by feminist* scholars, largely presenting outwardly as female* (or passing as such), whose research is related to commercial sexualities (e.g. pornography, prostitution, stripping, etc.), though some focus on other topics such as online communities (Perin 2024), sexualized violence (Javaid 2020), and bisexualities (Mathers and Sumerau 2024), respectively. De Craene (2017) hypothesizes that these experiences may, in part, relate to stigma also being dependent on which bodies are researching which topics: "[D]ifferent subjects will be affected by stigma in different ways. For young women, it seems to be more legitimate to work on issues of paedophilia than for their older and male counterparts, while research on sex work will also affect the male and female researcher differently." (460). This may, consequently, help explain why female* researchers doing work on commercial sexuality may face particular challenges in the academy (which may incline them to write about them more) but it is notable that I could not find similar accounts by male* scholars studying topics such as pedophilia or necrophilia.

While some of the publications are written by scholars who are seemingly approaching their research with a 'civilian gaze'¹¹ or are – at least in these specific contributions – concealing their proximity to their research topics (Hammond and Kingston 2014; Irvine 2014; Southgate and Shying 2014; Pilcher 2017; Ryan and Huschke 2017; Fahs et al. 2018; Keene 2022; Perin 2024; Meehan 2025), others include reflexive accounts of scholars who have made their own involvement in the communities and practices they study public (Israel 2002; Bruckert 2014; Ahearne 2015; Jones 2019b; Armstrong 2024; Morgillo and Slater-Parry 2025). Unveiling one's proximity to one's topic and reflexively engaging with the implications of this proximity

¹¹ I adopted this term from Morgillo and Slater-Parry (2025) who use it to describe scholarship by individuals with no direct experience of the sex trade. I would argue that this also applies to other scholarship which is conducted without scholars' having a personal connection or ties to the practices and communities they study. Such scholars must therefore "carefully assess the limitations and impact of their civilian gaze, starting from the ways in which their (ongoing and previous) research and connections with the community are shaped by their positionality in relation to" their research subjects (13).

seems to exacerbate scholars' experiences of (epistemic) marginalization, trivialization, and sexualization, both within academic settings and in their private lives. This led to some of the scholars waiting to be tenured before revealing their status as (former) sex workers (Israel 2002; Bruckert 2014), while others focus more on the toll that hiding their personal stake in the research had taken on their emotional wellbeing (Armstrong 2024) or are championing the importance of lived experience (regardless of career progression) and encourage scholars to engage reflexively with the implications of their own involvement (or lack thereof) for their research (Morgillo and Slater-Parry 2025).

Experiences in the classroom seem to be underrepresented in this literature, which has also been critiqued by McCormack in their response to Irvine (2014). They reflect, among other things, on the potential dangers awaiting sexualities scholars in the classroom: "what if a student misconstrues an argument, or repeats an argument without the theoretical nuance or broader sociological context? Lecturing is always to some extent a risk, as learning is a 'troublesome' endeavour [...]; yet these risks are exacerbated when one is lecturing about topics frequently deemed sensitive and sometimes taboo." (McCormack 2014: 675). This is echoed by Fahs et al. who engage with the dangers (and pleasures) in teaching about sexualities "as we place our bodies and minds in front of classes, becoming inadvertent objects of analysis or putting us at risk of exploitation or humiliation." (Fahs et al. 2018: 507) Lynn Comella, in their recent research on US pornography scholars' experiences of teaching in times of increasing authoritarian backlash, argues that the risk of teaching sexualities seems to be mounting in US academia which contributes to increased anxiety, fear and self-censorship among pornography scholars. Comella concludes that:

Faculty members who conduct research on and teach about the history and politics of pornography are on the frontlines of the new higher education culture wars [...]. As such, their experiences have a great deal to teach us about institutional power, academic freedom, and campus free speech ecosystems at a moment when higher education is facing new and especially pernicious attacks. (Comella 2024: 29–30)

That sexualities scholars working in Europe may also be increasingly met with hostility as more countries see right-wing parties rise to power, is also detailed, e.g., by Darakchi and Valkovičová whose study based on the experiences of 49 LGBTQIA+ studies scholars indicates that the increasing public and political hostility towards LGBTQIA+ studies and the subjects they study have "intensified and strengthened the[ir] "dirty work" status" (Darakchi and Valkovičová 2025: 1947) while simultaneously providing scholars with new research topics and increasing their motivation to stay in the field to counteract hostile political narratives.

Another strain of research engages specifically with the epistemological implications of working within what Valerie de Craene (2024) has coined the ‘erotophobic academy’ and the consequences both of providing and withholding reflexive accounts, which do not just mention a scholars’ membership or (past) engagement in certain communities or practices, but rather explicitly foreground the impact of researchers’ erotic subjectivities. De Craene argues that researchers’ desires, identities and embodied experiences are integral to their research – and their implications *should* therefore be explicitly addressed – but oftentimes remain unacknowledged: “A researcher putting the self centrally in [...] the realm of sexuality and intimacy, even when it is carefully embedded in the usual justification techniques, seems to be pushing too hard on the fundamentals of our scientific apparatus.” (De Craene 2024: 10). By aligning with an ideal of the detached and objective researcher one may be better able to do “sex (research) without incorporating the stigma and having all the ‘dirt’ on the body of the researcher.” (De Craene 2017: 454) Omitting one’s erotic subjectivity can consequently be seen as a strategy aiming to position one’s research within the realm of proper academic knowledge.

However, De Craene acknowledges that reflexivity can also be a taxing and dangerous endeavor, and reflects on the implications of requiring researchers to lay themselves bare in the name of “epistemologically, ethically and methodologically sound research” (De Craene 2017: 460). For example, that scholars admitting to and reflecting on vulnerabilities in erotic(ized) or sexual(ized) research interactions might provoke a backlash among other academics and even have career repercussions is illustrated in another article, co-written with Katrien De Graeve (De Graeve and De Craene 2019): In it, the authors describe a situation that occurred when they were chairing a panel on the moral dilemmas associated with sexual(ized) interactions in the field. When a male*, white and tenured scholar related having had a sexual encounter with a young, female* (and by all accounts vulnerable) participant, angry reactions ensued, while a similar situation recounted by a young queer* Latino male* researcher was not met with the same level of animosity (590). The authors reflect on how this situation exemplifies “the risks involved [in such vulnerability], and how these risks are complexly intertwined with issues of positionality as well as accountability.” (595) and conclude that risk is consequently something that does not only afflict scholars writing from marginalized positionalities but can – as this case shows – even be exacerbated by an individual occupying a highly privileged position (596). This may help explain why many of the reflexive accounts I found about erotic(ized) or sexual(ized) interactions between researcher and researched were written by queer researchers

(e.g., Adjepong 2022; Lauder 2023; Richardson 2024). Though revealing their erotic subjectivities from marginalized positionalities may pose dangers, this may nevertheless be considered less contentious than a more privileged individual making a similar choice.

4.2 Attending to the Joy/Pleasure Deficit

Cumulatively, the academic literature about the experiences of sexualities scholars seems to focus largely on the personal and professional challenges of working on topics and in a field which are exceptionalized both within and beyond the academy. The literature also, though implicitly, points to sexualities researchers' epistemic authority being routinely questioned and discounted and engages with scholars' strategies of countering these processes. What remains under-analyzed are the joyful and pleasurable experiences of doing research on sexualities. Such experiences are oftentimes only mentioned fleetingly, as is exemplified in the following quote: "Despite the stigma we feel we have faced, it has in no way deterred us from researching this area. We both continue to enjoy researching sex work and sexuality more broadly" (Hammond and Kingston 2014: 343).

That is not to say that pleasure and joy of and in research are entirely erased but these emotions appear, with a few exceptions (Fahs et al. 2018; Morris et al. 2018; Jones 2019a, 2020), somewhat sidelined within the discourse. I would argue that being a sexualities scholar must also be a uniquely joyful and pleasurable experience, even if it is done under challenging circumstances: Why else would people choose to enter and remain in the research field?

Shuster and Westbrook (2024) offer a potential explanation for these omissions in scholars' narratives by engaging with what they observe to be a 'joy deficit' in sociology. The authors argue that, as in any academic discipline, certain narratives become normalized and acceptable and epistemic foreclosures are being produced as it becomes (un)acceptable to ask certain questions and specific epistemes become dominant (791–792), which in turn shape (the perception of) reality:

[M]arginalized groups are often only depicted as suffering negative life experiences, including discrimination, stigma, and bias. In these canon-building storytelling practices, sociologists have (unintentionally) left out a core component of the lives of marginalized people. That is, sociologists do not know much about the joyful aspects of being a member of a marginalized group, which has created what we term a *joy deficit* in sociology. (Shuster and Westbrook 2024: 792)

As sexualities scholars are largely self-reporting their experiences, their accounts cannot simply be explained through this framework as they themselves appear to be instrumental in marginalizing the joyful and pleasurable aspects in their work at the margins of acceptability and academic legitimacy. However, the pervasiveness of framing scholarly experiences through the concepts of 'dirty work' and 'stigma' does seem to indicate that this has become the acceptable

and dominant way of engaging with the topic, which in turn may serve to marginalize divergent perspectives (and thereby produce epistemic foreclosures). I would argue that these omissions may also serve an additional strategic purpose. As Shuster and Westbrook speculate: “sociologists may fear that focusing on joy will take attention away from social problems” (Shuster and Westbrook 2024: 794), which may help explain this focus on negative experiences. As scholars’ goal is to denounce systemic problems, engage with their consequences and offer strategies for resistance, they may fear that focusing more on joy and pleasure may mean that their indictment of structural barriers to sexualities scholars/hip may be taken less seriously.

Consequently, I want to supplement these narratives in my own analysis by foregrounding the ambivalence inherent in scholars’ experiences of working within the field of CSS: I will explicitly attend to – sometimes paradox – experiences of joy and pleasure while simultaneously also engaging with experiences of danger, anxiety, stigma, trivialization, and (epistemic) marginalization.

5 Contextualizing the Research

Now that I have presented the existing literature and how I plan to build on it in this project, I will contextualize my research within broader trends facing contemporary academia. I will also present a historiography of the institutionalization processes of sexualities research and show how CSS research has been largely been sidelined (and stifled) in those locations in which it may have found an academic ‘home’.

5.1 Universities Under Pressure

In this section, I will engage with two types of pressure that contemporary academia and universities, and therefore the scholars working within it, are confronted with: The internal pressures rooted in the neoliberal restructuring of higher education after Bologna, which has completely transformed the processes of knowledge production and dissemination, and the threat stemming from authoritarian tendencies and increasing right-wing anti-intellectual sentiments both within higher education and from external actors, which seemingly have become more pressing in recent years (see e.g., Geisler et al. 2026a). Both significantly affect CSS scholars as they labor critically on sexualities in contemporary German and Austrian academia.

5.1.1 The Neoliberalization of Higher Education

Much academic literature has been published in the past few decades about what has been called the neoliberalization of academia (Taylor and Lahad 2018), the performative (Pereira 2017) or entrepreneurial (Hark and Hofbauer 2018) university and dark academia (Fleming 2021) as well

as on strategies to resist and subvert the consequences of this neoliberal turn (e.g., Acker and Wagner 2017; Kaltefleiter 2020; Boisseau and Rellihan 2025).

In the German-speaking context, these developments are oftentimes subsumed under the umbrella term ‘Bologna’, which refers to the process through which higher education was standardized between European states to ensure compatibility and comparability of higher education systems between nations (Gutjahr 2024: 140). Originally a non-binding statement of intent signed by 29 ministers of education (or their deputies) at the University of Bologna (Italy) in 1999, the following sweeping educational reform was made possible by the rise of the idea that education and economic policy are intrinsically connected (142): Education was no longer seen as something that primarily benefitted the individual but as something that would increase the growth of entire economies. The argument that Europe(an states) might not be able to economically compete on a globalized market – due to the region’s lack of natural resources – led to the rise of the idea that innovation and education could become the region’s marketable resource. This led to calls to reform higher education and was simultaneously used to justify these changes (146–148, 151).

This connection between economic prosperity and education has significantly changed higher education systems: The term ‘neoliberalization of academia’ is often used to describe the introduction and permeation of mechanisms which increase competition between individuals and institutions under market-like conditions (Geisler et al. 2026a: 23–24). This state-induced system of competition over students, research funding, and academic careers creates a constant pressure to compete and publish and marginalizes not only critical scholarship but undermines the quality of academic research more generally (24): For example, the quantity of scholars’ publications is routinely prioritized over quality, which has contributed to increasing instances of (organized) scientific fraud (e.g., Richardson et al. 2025; Aibar 2025). Furthermore, the self-presentation of the neoliberal university as a meritocratic institution has been critically examined by e.g. Pereira (2017). They argue that the ideal of the proper academic worker is deeply gendered as it purports that success and status are unrelated to individual’s subject positions but depend fully on one’s adherence to the demands of the neoliberal academy (207). This idea of the perfect academic worker assumes that they are unburdened by caring responsibilities (for others or even themselves) and is therefore deeply gendered as it is oftentimes primarily female* academics who are performing care work within the workplace and the home. While Pereira focuses mainly on how this ideal is gendered, I would argue that it is also racialized as well as equally related to class, ethnicity, sexualities, etc. (see e.g., Mkhize and Idahosa 2025).

Pereira (2017) describes, in their analysis of the WGFS, that the neoliberalization of higher education has also created openings for some critical scholarship. As WGFS scholars are productive, well-funded and the courses they offer are attractive to potential students, university administrations have recognized the value of WGFS and advanced its institutionalization. Though the WGFS are consequently not necessarily openly denigrated within academia – though this may be regressing in times of increasing right-wing hostility –, its status is *partial* (the transformation from open hostility to begrudging acceptance is superficial and not indicative of “an actual transformation of academics’ views of epistemic hierarchies” (Pereira 2017: 87)) *conditional* (as scholars must over-comply with demands of competitive productivity to justify their right to take up space in the academy), and *contingent* on being able to secure funding and attract students (87).

Consequently, such openings should be considered a ‘double-edged sword’: For example, Peter Ullrich concludes that the economic precarity which most mid-level researchers are confronted with (over 90% of scholars under 45 have short-term contracts) may increasingly produce closures for critique and critical scholarship through self-censorship: When one’s (future) employment is not secured, one might be less inclined to critique systems of power (operating within one’s own institution and beyond) in fear that this might have adverse consequences for one’s career (Ullrich 2026: 69–70).

My own experiences as a student within the neoliberal university and of a largely underfunded and precariously institutionalized discipline have indicated how demands for intense productivity, which in turn fosters individualization, seem to have permeated spaces like the gender studies, in which care, collegiality and collective action have historically been considered central organizing principles (see e.g., Pereira 2017: 213). During my studies I have often felt that teachers and potential mentors were stretched too thin to have time or emotional resources left to invest in academic care work towards students. While such dynamics are surely not exclusive to the gender studies, they may have more dire consequences in fields with low levels of institutionalization as academic careers are even harder to secure and maintain.

However, that does not mean that the dynamics I have described in this section operate uninterrupted and unimpeded, though it would be beyond the scope of this thesis to engage in depth with the many ways through which they are resisted. Broadly speaking, university personnel and students have worked against increasing austerity measures both through political action such as protests and strikes (Stepan 2022; NDR 2026; Lang 2021) and through the production of critical scholars/hip on neoliberalism and its consequences for knowledge production and

dissemination. Regarding the latter, Pereira (2017), for example, argues that those with permanent contracts must take the helm in resisting the demands of the neoliberal university as their immediate survival is not as dependent on their productivity. Pereira calls for collective political action which resists individualized subscription to neoliberal demands by publicly and collectively questioning the normalization of unattainable expectations of productivity. (Pereira 2017: 211–218) Other scholars engage explicitly with resistance strategies such as ‘slow scholarship’, which “foreground[s] [...] the contention that good scholarship requires time” (Mountz et al. 2015: 1236) (though this strategy is largely open to scholars who are already in privileged employment positions), and care, both for oneself and others, as a political practice:

[N]eoliberal conditions can be challenged by calling attention to collective solutions to injustices by acknowledging and using one’s own position of power and connecting with others [...]. Such work calls into question the notion of “self-responsibility” by championing collectivity and solidarity through co-mentorships, co-authored work, and consciousness-raising groups to discuss the temporalities of accelerated culture and slow scholarship (Kaltfleiter 2020: 190)

5.1.2 Right-Wing Anti-Intellectualism and Targeted Attacks on Critical Scholars/hip

However, these internal pressures stemming from the neoliberal turn in higher education are supplemented by internal and external attacks from the political right, which have been increasing over the last decade. Geisler et al. argue that these pressures are destabilizing an institution already in crisis as the commodification of science and increasing austerity measures have already significantly impeded it in functioning properly (Geisler et al. 2026b: 13).

Haker et al. contend that higher education and science are strategic targets of (extreme) right wing attacks because of their function as spaces for knowledge production and dissemination. Such attacks occur both externally by opposing established science but also from within as right-wing academics are attempting to gain support for their ideologies *within* academia (Haker et al. 2023: 1). Haker and Otterspeer (2025) highlight the contradictions of right-wing populist and extremist rhetoric within academia. The authors observe the simultaneity of both a reclamation of scientificity and anti-science sentiments: Persons aligned with right-wing ideologies are members of universities, actively participating in the academic discourse and are claiming objectivity for their own positions while simultaneously discrediting views which do not fit into their worldview as supposedly subjective. The authors further contend that the attendance of right-wing actors at public events is indicative of such actors claiming space for themselves as members of the institution, while simultaneously stifling open discourse by fostering a climate of fear. Targeted attacks against specific persons or disciplines are furthermore classified as inherently anti-science but are accompanied by a rhetoric of a supposed reclamation of proper science and ‘saving’ the institution from its left-wing ideologization. (75–76) Another trend observed by the authors is one of ‘victim blaming’, which operates through right-wing actors

critiquing that their positions are silenced in the academic discourse via the invocation of the concepts of ‘cancel culture’ and ‘political correctness’. Finally, the authors engage with what they consider a paradox of tolerance, which relates to the difficulty of gauging when to ‘draw a line in the sand’ and confront intolerance with institutional sanctions.

Those individuals who are subjected to such right-wing disruptions and attacks are oftentimes left to their own devices as to how to respond and manage such situations as broader institutional and collegial responses fail to materialize (Haker and Otterspeer 2025: 80). Such dynamics are compounded through institutional adherence to the principle of neutrality and precarious working conditions within academia (91–94). That scholars are individualized in confronting such dynamics also becomes visible through the dissemination of guides – which are produced not by universities but (collectives of) scholars – with the aim of informing researchers on how to respond to (potentially) threatening right-wing and far-right hostility against their scholarship and their persons (e.g., Forschungsverbund GERDEA 2025).

Some research fields and disciplines are particularly virulently targeted, among them the gender studies, climate research but also post-, decolonial and anti-racist approaches, with the gender studies seemingly taking the brunt of public attempts at discreditation, likely also because of its status as a – though precariously – established discipline. Birgit Sauer (2026) engages with the right-wing attacks on the field of gender studies in Germany and Austria and argues that the reasons for the focus on this specific field are threefold: First, the activist tradition of the field, which aims both at a critique and transformation of an androcentric and white scientific system, directly opposes right-wing ideology. Secondly, attacks on gender studies can be considered a kind of proxy war against critical scholarship more generally and finally, the English name of the discipline can be used to point out its supposed disconnect from the majority of the German-speaking population (58–59).

Relating specifically to CSS scholarship, indication for it being increasingly targeted by right-wing actors is presented, e.g., by the descriptions of the biannual conferences of the Sexuality Research Network of the European Sociological Association (RN23), one of the few larger conferences in Europe which revolve specifically and primarily around sexualities scholarship from an SSH perspective. The introductory texts for the past two conferences seem to indicate a sense of an encroaching threat of authoritarian interference into academia. For example, the call for submissions for the most recent conference in 2025 included the following statement: “[N]ew times of trouble now loom large on our horizon, with conservative and authoritarian movements and governments challenging and interfering into progressive work that takes account of gender and sexual diversity.” (RN23 n.d.)

Individual (critical) sexualities scholars have been subjected to targeted intimidation tactics by actors affiliated with right-wing politics. For example, Ferdinand Backöfer – a German scholar –, who published a critical examination of an anti-feminist sexual education book (Backöfer 2020), was sued by its author in cooperation with a German law firm known for, e.g., threatening journalists reporting on their clients (Stiftung Warentest 2017; CORRECTIV 2025). Examples such as this seem to indicate an organized approach to silencing CSS scholars/hip via the threat of financial ruin: Scholars who are precariously employed (which is most of them, as shown in the previous section) may be less inclined to publish such research for fear of being sued while unable to pay for damages or legal costs should they be found liable.

However, these trends, similar to the neoliberalization of higher education, also do not just work to marginalize critical scholars/hip further. Rather, (research) communities also seem to be energized through collective mobilization against right-wing attacks. For example, Boisseau and Rellihaan argue for the future of women’s, gender and sexuality studies in the US that “direct illiberal political attacks [...] may end up, as they seem to have elsewhere around the world, securing only the most pyrrhic of victories over us, ultimately having the opposite effect of reminding WGSS practitioners of the political stakes of our work and serving to inspire us to recommit ourselves to this work.” (Boisseau and Rellihaan 2025: 73). I could imagine a similar ‘backlash to the backlash’ brewing in Germany and Austria as critical scholars organize to collectively resist right-wing attacks und ‘double down’ on the activist implications of their research for a liberal, democratic society.

5.2 A Historiography of (Institutionalized) Sexualities Research in Germany and Austria

It is necessary to engage with the history of sexualities research in Austria and Germany to be able to contextualize my interviewee’s narratives in relation to this history, which differs between the two countries as well as from developments of academic inquiry into sexualities in other geographic contexts. Building on Clare Hemmings¹² (2011), I will engage with historical accounts not as factual reports but as narratives, which function to position some scholars/hip as legitimate, while sidelining others. The historiography that I am presenting in this section is by no means meant to be comprehensive but rather illustrative of the historicity of the current dynamic within the broader field of sexualities research. It should also be noted that these developments *within* academia occur(ed) within broader societal developments regarding (sexual) morality, which – as the scope of this thesis is limited – cannot be discussed in detail but have,

¹² See section 3.2.

for example, been detailed in an anthology by Bänziger et al. (2015). In it, Austrian historian Franz X. Eder (2015), for example, traces the slow-progressing processes of commercialization, normalization, politicization, medialization and medicalization of sex(ualities) in Germany – which they argue started to manifest beginning in the late 1940s and are rooted in developments in the Weimar Republic and Third Reich (25) – and contend that these dynamics are somewhat mirrored in the Austrian context (26).

When I was researching the history of sexualities research more broadly, a common narrative seemed to emerge, which positioned Germany and Austria as a sort of ‘truth spot’ (Pereira 2017: 156) or ‘cradle’ for academic inquiry into sexualities, which, according to this narrative, began in the 19th century. Notably, this is not just a claim made by scholars themselves located in Germany and Austria (e.g., Sigusch 2008: 19). Rather, English-language publications also position – though not exclusively so – German and Austrian scholars and theorists, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Sigmund Freud, Iwan Bloch and Magnus Hirschfeld (among others), as laying a significant part the groundwork for the development of sexology as an academic discipline (and thereby setting a precedent for academic inquiry into sexualities on the whole). This narrative appears similarly pervasive in texts authored by medical scholars (Coleman and Ford 2024: 835) as it is in contributions by scholars from other disciplines, e.g., social psychology (Cornell et al. 2023: 1844), comparative literature (Tobin 2015: 248–249), and science and technology studies (Drucker 2020: 144).

However, I find it important to disrupt this narrative: Two anthologies (Bauer 2015; Fuechtner et al. 2018) problematize these claims by engaging with sexual science as a global formation which consequently did not simply emerge in Western Europe but rather in various locations and in various shapes. Other authors such as Leng and Sutton (2021) stage “historiographical interventions by challenging the tendency within sexological history to focus on the medical, the homosexual, the human, and the Western European at the expense of other disciplines, diagnoses, non-human subjects, and geographical locations” (7). This is also echoed by Agnieszka Kościańska, who notes:

“Until very recently, this was how researchers of the history of sexology described its beginnings: as scientific, linked to studies on nonnormative sexuality and, because of its Western orientation, placed in the context of German-speaking Europe, mostly in Vienna and Berlin, as well as in Great Britain [...], with people like Krafft-Ebing, Hirschfeld, or Ellis as the pioneers.” (Kościańska 2020: 24)

In the following I will therefore both present a narrative that somewhat aligns with these exclusionary patterns by recounting the history of (institutionalized) sexualities research as the prerogative of male* physicians (as this perspective remains dominant in much of the literature),

while also taking care to disrupt it, e.g. by presenting (exclusionary) processes in another discipline – the gender studies – as well as focusing on critiques of androcentrism and misogyny in the spaces in which sexualities research has been able to establish as a separate and distinct research field.

5.2.1 Germany

Magnus Hirschfeld is highlighted especially in historical narratives about sexual science as a discipline as they founded (along with two other physicians, Arthur Kronfeld and Friedrich Wertheim) the first institute for sexual science in Berlin in 1919. The institute was not just a place for research but also a hub for education and consultation, as well as a refuge for sexual minorities, as Volkmar Sigusch describes it. It was Hirschfeld's goal to advocate for justice and social change via scientific inquiry (Sigusch 2008: 347). Hirschfeld, themselves Jewish, a social democrat and disparaged as a propagandist of sexual perversions, left Germany in 1930, the institute was plundered by the National Socialists in 1933 and closed the same year. (364)

After WWII, German sexual science had consequently been dismantled but was taken up again by different actors in a newly divided Germany, which was now home to two nations, the GDR¹³ and BRD¹⁴. As developments differed significantly between the two countries, they will be touched upon separately in the following.

In the BRD, sexual science was revived by Hans Giese, a physician and philologist, who founded the first institute for sex research in post-Nazi Germany, which also became the first institute for sexual science officially affiliated with a university in 1959. Giese also initiated the most prominent professional association for West German sexual scientists, the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sexualforschung* (DGfS) and the – until today – only sexual science journal not dedicated exclusively to medical perspectives in the German speaking context, the *Zeitschrift für Sexualforschung*. (Briken 2025: 253–256) Peer Briken argues that this approach to establishing the field bears strong resemblance to Magnus Hirschfeld's during the Weimar Republic and can therefore be read as an indicator that Giese's strategies to revive academic inquiry into sexualities were based on and inspired by Hirschfeld (Briken 2025: 253). After their death in 1970, Giese was intellectually succeeded by two physicians, Volkmar Sigusch and Eberhard Schorsch, and one psychologist, Gunter Schmidt (Herzog 2016). Historian Dagmar Herzog (2016) describes the trio of young West-German sex researchers as politically aligned with the

¹³ German Democratic Republic.

¹⁴ Federal Republic of Germany.

New Left and in pursuit of political goals such as the liberalization of sexual morality and criminal law (though selectively, as I will show later in this section). To achieve this, they combined large-scale empirical social research, consultation work and a constant media presence as public intellectuals (Herzog 2016: 45). Herzog concludes that this sexual revolutionary commitment of the 1960s and 70s was characterized by a rediscovery of – many, though not entirely Jewish – authors’ contributions of the 1910s and 20s, e.g. certain versions of psychoanalysis. This, according to Herzog, led to the West-German critical sexology becoming strongly affiliated with a psychoanalyst tradition (46).

With Sigusch’s habilitation as the first in sexual science in 1972, the field was further established as a separate and distinct research field (Sigusch 2008: 119). Schorsch became Giese’s successor as director of the Institute for Sex Research at the University of Hamburg (Briken 2025: 261), while Sigusch was appointed professor of sexual science and director of the Institute for Sexual Science at the University of Frankfurt (am Main), the first professorship in the field which was not affiliated with any other discipline (Sigusch 2008: 119). Wolfgang Berner concludes that the two institutes diverged significantly in their approaches to sexualities research: The Hamburg institute seemed to have taken a more biomedical-clinically oriented approach to the study of sexualities and is affiliated with the teaching hospital of the University of Hamburg, the University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf. The Frankfurt institute, however, could, according to Berner, be described almost as a humanities institute (Berner and Jückstock 2025: 866) which was assigned both to the medical faculty as well as the social science department (Berner 2025: 706). Sigusch, who was also appointed to a professorship of sociology in 1974 (Briken 2023: 115), developed a critical, interdisciplinary approach to sexualities research beginning in the 1980s (Sigusch 2008: 527), which was informed by critical theory, distanced itself from positivism and essentialist generalizations while simultaneously constructing the sexual subject as a social being to be defended against biological determinism and neoliberalism (Berner 2025: 706). Consequently, though Sigusch was (also) a physician, they took into account the shift from conceiving of sexuality as a biological reality to viewing it as being produced through discourse, an idea popularized by Michel Foucault (see e.g., Foucault 1978) and taken up subsequently by most SSH and critical scholars investigating sexuality.

The institute in Frankfurt was dismantled in 2006 after Sigusch’s retirement, which Berner also connects to a lack of alignment with the demands of the neoliberal university: While the Hamburg institute was successfully acquiring (private) funding, Sigusch seems to have been largely unimpressed by the need for the institute to be financially viable (Berner and Jückstock 2025:

866–868). With the closing of the Frankfurt institute, the places where sexualities research is academically established are now largely situated within and dominated by biomedical-clinical structures (Weller 2021: 453) where, as Berner argues, abstract theoretical contributions are being somewhat neglected (Berner and Jückstock 2025: 686). Though today there are social scientists employed at the Hamburg institute, they largely seem to focus on large-scale quantitative demographic projects such as the GeSiD¹⁵ or the longitudinal study on student sexualities (Dekker and Matthiesen 2015), whose importance I do not want to diminish but which seem to align more with positivist notions of science rather than my conception of CSS. It should also be noted that critical inquiry into sexualities did not simply stop with the dismantlement of the Frankfurt institute (had that been the case I would not have found anyone to interview), but rather that it seemingly lost a designated, institutionalized location and with it, some of its claim to legitimacy.

As stated before, one must differentiate between the sexualities research in the BRD versus the GDR. The latter's history is traced by Harald Stumpe (2021), who argues that the research landscape in the GDR differed significantly from that of the BRD. While the latter was and is – according to the author – severely fragmented, the GDR sexualities research was characterized by more cohesion but less pluralism of opinion (301). Generally speaking, the author seems to suggest that sexualities research (or 'sexuology' ('Sexuologie') as it was known in the GDR) might have developed more as a multi- and interdisciplinary project, with a stronger focus on pedagogical aspects than its BRD counterpart (303). This tradition – though many scholars lost their jobs after the reunification (310) – seems to have been taken up again at the Hochschule (HS) Merseburg, a university of applied science in Saxony-Anhalt, one of the "new" (meaning former GDR) federal states. There, a focus was put on employing East German scholars and the institution fostered the establishment of a multidisciplinary study program with a strong pedagogical focus (311-313). To date, the master's degree program 'Angewandte Sexualwissenschaft' ('Applied Sexual Science') remains the only degree program related to sexualities research in both Germany and Austria which is not situated within or adjacent to a clinical/medical institution. The HS Merseburg consequently seems to have taken the place which was vacated by the dismantlement of the Frankfurt institute and now appears to be the only location in Germany in which CSS has been able to institutionalize (though with said strong focus on pedagogy).

¹⁵ A nationwide scientific survey on health and sexuality in Germany (GeSiD n.d.)

5.2.2 Austria

Josef Christian Aigner (2021) traces the history of the (lack of) institutionalization of sexualities research in the Austrian context. The author concludes that Austria should be considered a ‘special case’ as efforts to establish an academic sexualities research – despite having the Freudian tradition to build on – have failed in a manner that the author believes distinguishes it from other European countries (229). Today, there is no professorship which explicitly relates to sexualities (239). This lack of scholarly engagement is traced back to the Austrian sexual morality, which Aigner describes as being characterized by a mixture of fear, rejection, and helplessness of sexuality-related topics (229). Though the 1970s seemed to have brought some establishment through the formation of the *Österreichische Gesellschaft für Sexualforschung* (ÖGS) in 1979, in which largely early career researchers were working on sexualities under the tutelage of Ernest Borneman, Aigner recounts the struggles to secure (public) funding for sexualities research. As research proposals were routinely rejected by ministries, the research activity within the ÖGS decreased. Ultimately, this lack of research activity, according to the author, culminated in the re-naming of the ÖGS into *Österreichische Gesellschaft für Sexualwissenschaften* (*Austrian Society for Sexologies*) (235–238). Aigner notes that, while today there are some scholars who are researching sexualities in the Austrian context, their contributions are something they do in addition to other research foci as none of them have been employed specifically for their sexualities research. The author further reflects on their own efforts to consolidate sexualities research courses at their university before their retirement: This was summarily rejected, leading to a discontinuation of these courses after Aigner’s exit from the institution. The author concludes that these dynamics, coupled with a lack of external and internal (self)classification as sexuality scholars/hip, mean that collective action in political and academic discourses is largely made impossible. (239–242)

5.2.3 Disrupting the Narratives

While the historical narrative I presented in the previous section is largely descriptively focused on institutionalization processes and their (dis)continuities in various locations, I now want to supplement this with research which engages with exclusionary and violent dynamics within specifically the West-German sexualities research scholarly community. I am choosing to focus on this location not because I am of the opinion that it is the only location in which such dynamics occurred, but rather because its organizations have been the subject of critical appraisal in recent years. For example, scholarship is now attending to the role (members of) the research

community had in i.e. attempts to legitimize pedosexuality (e.g., Kämpf 2025), the pathologization of trans* and nonbinary persons (e.g., Nieder 2021), as well as its founding member's implication in National-Socialism (e.g., Becker 2025).

Other scholarship is focusing more on struggles over epistemic authority within the research community. For example, Stina Meier (2025) traces the history of the DGfS as a patriarchal institution. Meier analyzes how, in the first two decades of its existence, its members were almost entirely male* with its topics also focusing primarily on male* sexualities and bodies (559). Though the organization was increasingly criticized in the 1980s both by feminist scholars and the press for its misogyny and androcentrism, feminist scholars/hip remained largely sidelined within the organization. Only under mounting public pressures, Margret Hauch and Barbara Zeh became the first female* members of the organization's board in 1985. Meier argues that any inclusion of feminist* scholars/hip was largely politically, not morally, motivated as the central battlefield of the organization – the legalization of homosexuality – was slowly becoming obsolete and their reputation as a left-wing liberal organization threatened by accusations of systemic misogyny (587–588). Nevertheless, feminist scholars/hip remained marginalized and the key concerns of feminist members (i.e. contraception and abortion) oftentimes sidelined, pigeonholed or ignored by the organization at large. Meier argues that this refusal to align with the women*'s movement stems from some male* scholars' aspirations (key among them Volkmar Sigusch) to further the institutionalization of sexual science and increasing its epistemic authority (which they feared may be threatened by too close of an alignment with an activist movement and low-prestige, young feminist and female* scholars who were considered unequipped to further this agenda) as well as their failure to recognize gendered dynamics within their own organization (586). Consequently, while some critical perspectives thrived in the DGfS, others were sidelined within the organization and the broader field of sexualities research.

However, this is supplemented by another notable dynamic in another research field, through which certain strands of critical sexualities research have been further marginalized within the academy: Unlike in the Anglo-American setting sexualities *studies* has seemingly not been established as a distinct research area or subdiscipline in the German and Austrian contexts. While it is common in the US and UK that departments and study programs are named a variation of 'Women's, Gender, Feminist, and *Sexuality Studies*', the naming conventions in Germany and Austria tend to exclusively focus on 'gender' (i.e., gender studies).

This amalgamation into one discipline/research field in the Anglo-American context has also been critically examined by scholars. For example, Fahs, in 2013, concluded that the implications of departmental naming were being virulently discussed within scholarly communities:

If we call a department “Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies,” does that fuse identity groups together with a *subject*, or is sexuality also (solely?) an identity? Why prioritize sexuality over other obvious identities that link with women’s studies? Are we further watering down women’s studies or creating new spaces for intersectional identities? [...] [N]aming these links invites different stories and risks into the mix. (Fahs 2013: 498–499)

I would argue that the inclusion of sexualities under the umbrella of women’s and gender studies (which has since become mainstream) might indeed be fraught with risks of e.g. isolating critical perspectives instead of their inclusion in all disciplines. Nevertheless, this explicit representation means that a CSS is somewhat academically established beyond biomedical-clinical structures within these geographic locations. Inhabiting an ‘official’ space (i.e., through professorships, institutes or study programs) is associated with a certain degree of legitimacy, though this legitimacy is of course routinely contested and (re)negotiated within academic discourses. Sabine Hark (2005) argues that in the German-speaking context, academic feminism has proved to be a gatekeeper to (hetero)sexuality-critical research perspectives (320). While gender has been placed under the jurisdiction of the SSH, Hark argues that the responsibility for sexualities largely remains with medicine and sexology/sexual science. This, the author concludes, impacts which are considered legitimate spaces in which gender and sexualities can be examined as well as what can be examined within them. Gender is equated with the public sphere, while sexualities are located within the private sphere. Additionally, gender is situated within the realm of social relations, cultural meanings, historical development, legal and other institutions. Sexualities, in contrast, are conceived as something that individuals have somewhat independently of sociality. (325) Hark contends that, though sexualities have found a place within curricula of academic feminism, this space is limited to the analysis of sexual orientation (328).

While Hark’s book was published over 20 years ago, I would argue that broadly speaking the dynamics they describe remain accurate when examining the situation within Germany and Austria: The medicalization and psychologization of sexualities, as well as the topic’s marginalization within the gender studies seem to largely still operate in a similar manner. My own experiences as a gender studies’ student with an interest in CSS, though specific to the Viennese context, seem to indicate that sexualities remain sidelined within the discipline: While sexual orientation was part of the curriculum of my study program, other aspects seem to have remained sidelined – I was, for example, only able to attend one course which engaged with a broader spectrum of (critical) sexualities studies topics. In terms of medicalization and psychologization of sexualities, academic literature from the past few years seems to indicate that this

also remains the status quo. For example, in 2021, Konrad Weller concluded that the master's program 'Applied Sexual Science' at the HS Merseburg routinely elicits incomprehension and suggestive comments even among fellow academics. Weller connects this irritation the degree program seems to cause to its interdisciplinary approach and the fact that it does not define or legitimize itself in clinical or forensic terms. Though it is focused on pedagogy, Weller argues that the fact that it frames education and consultation as things that can – among other things be – hedonistically self-serving, means that it is not just considered tax-funded uselessness (like other types of critical scholars/hip) but also smut. (Weller 2021: 450) However, while the HS Merseburg seems to be one place in which the medicalization and psychologization of sexualities research seem to be resisted and subverted, its (as a university of applied sciences) focus on pedagogy also means that it is exclusive in other ways. CSS scholars from other disciplines with e.g. more theory-based approaches to inquiry, are largely isolated in reference disciplines which seem to have ceded much of the responsibility of sexualities to the biomedical-clinical scholarly community (at least in the sense that there seem to be few efforts in SSH disciplines to establish the study of sexualities as a subdiscipline).

I could imagine that the construction of the German-speaking context as a kind of pioneering 'truth spot' for sexological knowledge (as I described in the beginning of this section) may have contributed in securing this divide between the biomedical-clinical community and other disciplines as the latter could point to, critically interact with and legitimize their own scholarship with these early sexologist's work. I do not mean to suggest that this means that the biomedical-clinical research community is therefore impervious to stigma or hostile responses. In fact, Fuß and Köhl (2025) conclude that the current sociopolitical debates surrounding sexualities and gender are indicative of a hostile climate for academic inquiry into these topics on the whole (16). However, Elisabeth Tüder (2021) argues that critical and queer approaches with the goal of analyzing power relations – though the author contends that such perspectives have gained entry into the sexual science discourse – are currently specifically under siege (187), a dynamic I have previously engaged with in section 5.1.2.

6 Relevance of the Project

I draw the need for (1) a detailed exploration of the conditions under which (critical) knowledges about sexualities are produced and (2) the negotiations over which/whose knowledge counts as 'proper' knowledge in part from the following statement by Gayle Rubin. Though originally published in 1984, Rubin's assessment about the importance of attending to sexualities still rings true today:

The time has come to think about sex. To some, sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic, a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems of poverty, war, disease, racism, famine, or nuclear annihilation. But it is precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality. Contemporary conflicts over sexual values and erotic conduct have much in common with the religious disputes of earlier centuries. They acquire immense symbolic weight. Disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity. Consequently, sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress. (Rubin 2011: 137–138)

If sexualities are such an important structural category in contemporary societies, one would expect scholarly engagement with it to be prioritized in a plethora of academic disciplines and even culminate in the establishment and institutionalization of a separate, truly interdisciplinary research field. However, in the previous chapter, I have mapped how, in Germany and Austria, sexualities appear to have been medicalized, which, in turn, has contributed to scholars/hip from other disciplines – particularly when approaching the topics from critical standpoints – being marginalized in the academic discourse. This academic marginalization is further exacerbated by increasingly precarious working conditions in higher education and increased anti-science hostility stoked by far-right actors, both of which affect academia as a whole but appear to disproportionately affect critical scholars (particularly those engaging with topics which are at the forefront of right-wing hostility such as gender, ‘race’ or ‘sexualities’). In the literature review I have engaged with research detailing the lived realities of sexualities scholars – all working either in the SSH or utilizing critical approaches – in other geographic locations, which seems to indicate a pattern of (epistemic) marginalization, trivialization and sexualization.

To me, this disconnect between sexualities as a seemingly immensely relevant social structural category (as Rubin contends) and the curtailment of its academic study from certain perspectives (largely SSH and/or critical scholarship) is deserving of academic attention: How do these exclusions happen? How are they justified and resisted?

Consequently, it seemed most fruitful to engage with the marginalized side of the ‘epistemic split’ in sexualities research (see also section 2.2), exclude biomedical-clinical scholars/hip, and attend to the perspectives which are sidelined in the broader academic discourse surrounding sexualities. I have decided to focus on CSS (scholars) to account for a variety of disciplinary backgrounds as well as allow a focus on scholars/hip in the tradition of critical theory, in which I, as a gender studies student, also position myself. However, that is not to say that I am advocating for separate disciplines/research fields along the lines of this epistemic split. Rather, I do contend that scholars of all disciplines *should* work interdisciplinarily on studying sexualities but as this is not the case, I believe it is important to analyze the implications of this imbalance.

I draw the relevance of focusing on German and Austrian scholars from the fact that I could not find academic literature which has systematically and specifically explored scholars' lived experiences of working (critically) on sexualities in either of the two countries. However, the choice to focus on specifically these two countries instead of the whole of the German-speaking context is not meant to insinuate that one should necessarily differentiate the dynamics within them from those in i.e., Switzerland. Rather, as I attended university in both locations, the choice to attend to Germany and Austria was purely pragmatic. As I am therefore (somewhat) familiar with the inner workings of the countries' academic systems I felt able to properly contextualize the experiences of the scholars I interviewed.

I am also drawing the relevance for this project from the possibility that it could be used as a tool for advocacy: The scholars I interviewed were largely individualized in their reference disciplines and seemed – though to varying degrees – somewhat unsure as to how their individual experiences related to more collective dynamics of exclusion. By collecting a variety of experiences and fashioning them into an analysis of broader dynamics surrounding (negotiations of) epistemic authority, I hope that my project contributes to increasing the visibility of routine exclusions, thereby making them easier to (collectively) resist. Second, while the exceptionalization of sexualities (research) distinguishes CSS from other critical scholarship (e.g., gender studies and postcolonial studies) (see e.g., Weller 2021: 450), I would nevertheless argue that many of the dynamics I map in this thesis are affecting critical inquiry more holistically. Consequently, I hope that my project is a resource to support scholars in their resistance against collective patterns of epistemic marginalization across disciplines and failing that, that they find it interesting and/or worthwhile in other ways.

7 Core Theoretical Concepts

In the following, I will present those concepts which were of overarching importance for the whole project as they guided the entirety of my data collection (e.g., designing the interview guide) and analysis processes. However, I also want to note that the separation between the theory and analysis chapters which I am introducing here is somewhat artificial. When needed, I supplemented the concepts detailed below with other theoretical lenses within the analysis chapter to be able to 'make sense' of the specific themes. These will be introduced and expanded upon in the respective sub-chapters of the analysis.

7.1 Ambivalence as a Feminist Project

As has been detailed in the literature review, existing academic research seems to disproportionately focus on the negative experiences made by sexualities scholars in various geographical locations. Building on this, it became my express goal to foreground my participants' ambivalent emotions, both to attend to the 'joy/pleasure deficit' in the literature and to be able to attend to the reasons behind scholars' decisions to *remain* sexualities scholars, which, I argue, cannot be explained by simply focusing on precarity, stigma and (epistemic) marginalization.

However, as I do not want to fall into the trap of producing an undue focus on positivity instead, I utilized Coccia et al's (2024) conceptualization of ambivalence as an analytic tool capable of capturing seemingly contradictory experiences in a more holistic manner, while at the same time attending to the complex systems of power underlying such experiences (780). The authors contend that ambivalence works as a 'traveling concept' (795) which is therefore adaptable depending on the object of inquiry and, based on this, offer up the following definition:

We define ambivalence as a concept, a mode, and a theoretical and methodological practice that encompasses several capacities. These include the capacity to hold seemingly incompatible emotions, views, and values simultaneously (a both/and model); the capacity to interpret two apparently opposed entities as equivalent in value, as equally important or reasonable (a tension of opposites model); and the ability to imagine holding opposed emotions, views, and values over time (a durational model). (Coccia et al. 2024: 779)

Ambivalence is constructed by the authors – I would argue – as supplementing commonly used feminist theories such as intersectionality (see e.g., Crenshaw 1989): “Part of what makes this project feminist is the choice of whose voices and experiences to elevate and how these voices are described. Like other feminist analytics, ambivalence surfaces phenomena that are otherwise subtle, embedded, imperceptible, or intentionally hidden.” (795)

Central to this analytic practice is the act of noticing, which allows scholars to recognize how “events, people, themes, and time periods” (784) relate to one another, sometimes in seemingly contradictory and ambiguous ways as well as how these experiences are permeated by existing systems of power. It consequently allows us both to recognize existing inequalities, while simultaneously allowing us to challenge and imagine transformations to this status quo (785). The authors formulate three core principles of an ambivalence-oriented analysis: it is a tool to (1) challenge the subjection/liberation binary to consider social realities within a logic of simultaneity instead of opposition (786), (2) embrace uncertainty and use it as an analytic tool instead of attempting to artificially resolve it (789), (3) invite researchers to acknowledge, embrace and work with their own ambivalences towards their data, method(ologies) and the subjects they study (793-794).

As will become apparent in the analysis, the stories of my interviewees were littered with (supposed) contradictions, utilizing ambivalence helped me to harness these accounts productively by investigating what stood *behind* these divergent accounts instead of attempting to resolve them. In that sense, ambivalence was a helpful tool in investigating epistemic status not as something that exists in one way but rather is being negotiated in sometimes contradictory ways, and closely tied to *who* is speaking and from what positionality. Attending to ambivalence in my own scholarly practice also allowed me to work more reflexively as it required me to interrogate my feelings and insecurities about my research project and the power it gave me over interpreting other people's experiences (this will be further investigated in the methodology chapter).

7.2 Epistemic Status

The second core concept utilized in and structuring this project is Maria do Mar Pereira's theory of epistemic status, which the author develops in the book *Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship* (Pereira 2017) and uses to analyze their own research field: the WGFS.

Pereira defines epistemic status as "the degree to which, and terms in which, a knowledge claim, or entire field, is recognised as fulfilling the requisite criteria to be considered credible and relevant knowledge, however those criteria are defined in specific spaces, communities and moments" (47). According to Pereira, much literature has been produced with the aim of demarcating between the scientific and the non-scientific, however with differing perspectives of what said scientificity 'is': Something to be enacted and discursively produced within a specific location and time or a trait that a knowledge claim inherently possesses or lacks (45–47).

Pereira subscribes to the former perspective and building on the observation that the epistemic status of the field of WGFS is much discussed but rarely clearly defined or operationalized (47), they weave together three theoretical perspectives into one theory of epistemic status:

[A] feminist analysis of structures of uneven distribution of epistemic authority [Lorraine Code, Note], an STS-inspired engagement with professional hierarchies [Thomas F. Gieryn, Note], and a Foucauldian commitment to foregrounding the fluid, productive and generative dimensions of power – and turns them on each other (58).

In the following, I will summarize how Pereira weaves together these three theoretical strands to produce their theory of epistemic status. This means that I will be working with second-hand accounts of these three theoreticians' works (as my perception of their work is already filtered through Pereira's). Consequently, the goal of this section will not be to 'accurately' represent Code, Foucault or Gieryn's theoretical contributions but rather show how Pereira utilizes them to formulate their own theory.

Pereira draws on Michel Foucault's later work, in which the latter conceives of discourses (including scientific discourses) not as true or false in and of themselves but rather as producing truth *effects*: A knowledge claim might consequently appear to be true or false, without said claim actually inherently possessing epistemic properties that make it so. Pereira finds Foucault to be a productive resource for their own theorization due to the latter's interest in examining which knowledges are being minimized or positioned outside the bounds of scientific discourses. This makes it possible to focus more on the power effects of scientific statements, rather than on the content or structure of said claims. Pereira also foregrounds how the framework allows for the examination not just of the statements which are successful in their attempt to be viewed as scientific, but rather also those who do not manage to clear this hurdle. Pereira finds this productive for their examination of the WGFS as power-effects are produced both by successful and failed attempts at being recognized as scientific. While the knowledges produced by WGFS scholars/hip often fall in the latter category, this does not mean that it is always considered as non-scientific and also allows for an examination of the "power-effects of WGFS scholars' own claims to scientificity" (49). However, Pereira finds Foucault's framework lacking in the following respect: According to Pereira, Foucault does not engage with the ways in which the chances of being seen as producing valid scientific knowledge depends on the characteristics of the people making these knowledge claims. Who can be considered a credible knower is therefore also dependent on a subjects' positionalities – white, male* middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied individuals have a higher likelihood of being perceived as imbued with epistemic authority. (Pereira 2017: 48–50)

To counteract this perceived oversight in Foucault's theorization, Pereira employs Lorraine Code's feminist epistemology. Pereira selectively adopts two insights of Code's. Firstly, their epistemology of everyday life, which argues that it is necessary to study how specific locations shape the creation, negotiation and circulation of knowledge and secondly Code's focus on the impact of social hierarchies on how knowledge claims are structured and which claims are made (im-)possible. Pereira furthermore utilizes Code's concept of rhetorical spaces, which refers to the analysis of locations of knowledge production with a focus on which statements can(not) be made within its boundaries. However, what statements can be made and heard within a rhetorical space has, according to Code, little to do with the statement itself and more so with the speaker. Code, according to Pereira, posits that credibility is unevenly distributed, as not all individuals are considered equally credible as knowers. Rhetorical spaces are consequently hierarchically organized with some individuals being awarded the position of epistemic authority while others are denied this privilege. Pereira slightly adapts and expands upon Code's work

by focusing not exclusively on the social identity of the *knowledge producer* – whereas Code engages specifically with women*’s knowledge claims. Rather, Pereira argues that the WGFS as an entire field can be seen as feminized, tainting all scholars working in the field, even those whose social identity usually provides them with many privileges (e.g., white heterosexual men*). Pereira argues, furthermore, that a more intersectional approach than Code’s is needed which can account for different axes of privilege and marginality intersecting in ways which might provide a white, Western woman* in STEM with more credibility than a Black, male* WGFS scholar. (Pereira 2017: 50–52)

Most notably for my thesis, it is in this section that Pereira argues that the feminization of the entire WGFS field is also replicated in different ways for other research fields: “[E]ntire academic fields – not just WGFS, but also scholarship on ‘race’ and ethnicity, disability studies, LGBTQ studies or research on/from non-western regions or countries, for example – can become in themselves racialised, sexualised and othered, in epistemically disqualifying ways” (52). Following this logic, I chose to engage with CSS as a sexualized field as it will allow me to engage with the work in the field itself as a type of epistemic disqualification somewhat – though not entirely – separate from individual scholars’ position in relation to axes of privilege and marginality (though these will also be engaged with in detail).

The third and final theoretical perspective contributing to Pereira’s theory of epistemic status is Thomas F. Gieryn’s boundary work theory which, at its core, examines how boundaries between the scientific and the unscientific are being drawn to secure epistemic authority and resources. In Pereira’s view, Gieryn’s theory supplements Code and Foucault’s theorizations by attending to the daily practice of announcing, displaying, performing and accomplishing a field’s epistemic status by employing various rhetorical and institutional tools (e.g. the textual erasure of the author within a paper). (Pereira 2017: 52–55)

As with Foucault, Pereira utilizes Gieryn’s later work, produced in the 1990s, in which Gieryn, according to Pereira, “theorise[s] a ‘cartographical’ approach to the study of the production of science’s and scientists’ credibility” (53) In this later work, according to Pereira, Gieryn adopted a rather discursive and fluid approach – in line with Pereira’s use of Foucault – and argued that the boundaries of science need to be viewed as provisional, local, and of-the-moment: What is considered scientific in a given time and place might be considered beyond the boundaries of science in a different locality and temporality. Following this, Gieryn, according to Pereira, views epistemic status and standards of scientificity not as something pre-existing scientific boundary work but rather as being continually (re-)constructed by and within the production of the boundaries of the scientific (53–54). Therefore, the goal of inquiry is to reveal

how “traits of scientificity are selectively invoked and used in contingent struggles over authority and resources” (53). Being a part of a scientific community consequently also means learning where the borders of scientificity lie and, if one wants to retain credibility, not transgressing them.

However, as with Foucault and Code, Pereira also expands on Gieryn’s theory as they consider it lacking in the following regard: As the subjects in Gieryn’s study are largely white men*, their theory does not engage with the ways in which social and political inequalities (such as racism, classism, misogyny, eurocentrism) shape epistemic authority. Consequently, while the boundaries of science might be fluid in some ways, Pereira argues that Gieryn’s “notion of boundary-work is, therefore, one that lacks engagement with the gendered, racialised, eurocentric or classed nature of epistemic authority” (55).

Pereira furthermore engages with the relationship between epistemic status and power and how the three different theoretical strands provide valuable insights into how this relationship is to be conceived of and furthermore provides an analysis of the relationship between power and epistemic status from varying angles (Pereira 2017: 55–59). They argue that it can work “through obstacles and oppression, being used by some to silence and/or constrain others and to obtain, protect or deny valued professional resources.” (57). In an article published two years after *Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship*, Pereira refines this further through the use of Sara Ahmed’s theory of non-performativity and concludes that boundary-work scholars must attend to “the relationship between the “success” of boundary-work, broader social inequalities, and the embodied positionality of boundary-workers” (Pereira 2019: 358)

However, they are conceptualizing power not just as something that works top-down but also something that is inherent in any claim to scientificity, whether or not it succeeds at being recognized as such. Consequently, Pereira argues that attending to WGFS scholars’ claims to scientificity and the power and truth-effects they produce is imperative as well (Pereira 2017: 57). Citing Foucault, Pereira argues that simply focusing on power as repressive is insufficient as one must attend to power as also inherently productive. For Pereira, this means that negotiations of epistemic status are not just externally superimposed on WGFS scholarship but that one must attend to the potential pleasures to be found in epistemic marginality. (58)

Following this exploration of the relationship between power and epistemic status, Pereira further elucidates their conceptualization of epistemic status as “simultaneously, structurally ossified (in gendered, racialised, sexualised ways), institutionally shaped, and open to contingent negotiation. I see the relations of power shaping epistemic status and resulting from it as both

fluid and attached to specific knowledge producers; both systematically constraining and continuously productive.” (59)

Pereira closes their theorization chapter by introducing their commonly used metaphors which I have also adopted in my analysis. These include maps (as they represent boundaries, are navigational tools, and are powerful tools for naturalizing what they depict), climates (in the sense that they can have different ‘temperatures’ and can be analyzed by attending to temporal changes as well as specific locations, such as microclimates), and negotiations (which allows us to view “epistemic status as something that allows ‘no rest’ [and] helps to underscore the fact that its production is continuous and never complete, and also that it demands active (boundary-)work” (61)).

8 Methodological Approach

8.1 Data Collection: The Problem-Centered Interview

8.1.1 Gathering Participants

I began collecting the names of potential interview partners while I was familiarizing myself with the broader field of sexualities research in Germany and Austria. While immersing myself in the academic literature I began a document in which I wrote down the names and contact details of scholars who worked on sexualities, including primarily those who were working within the SSH. This was later amended to include scholars from other disciplines, as long as they – implicitly or explicitly – aligned with my conception of the CSS (see section 2.2), which I gauged primarily by looking at scholars’ research output.

For my first ‘wave’ of contact requests (see appendix) – in which I limited myself to 12 out of the 60 names I had collected through the above mentioned method as to not overwhelm myself in case everyone consented to speaking to me – I used the following selection criteria for my decision on who to contact as to ensure as diverse a group of scholars as I could manage:

- diverse positions in the academic hierarchy (from the beginning of their PhDs to tenured professors);
- diverse disciplines, as I thought it prudent to include experiences from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds to be able to examine patterns which transcend the boundaries of specific disciplines;
- diverse methodological approaches to studying sexualities, as I wanted to examine whether this impacted scholars’ likelihood to be considered credible knowledge producers;

- diverse positionalities in relation to various axes of visible privilege and marginality. I specifically attended to this criterium as one of the goals of my project is to examine the ways in which boundary work – and the chances of it being successful – relates to individuals' positionalities (Pereira 2019);
- differing levels of 'social acceptability' of the specific research topics as not all research which relates to sexualities is equally associated with e.g., stigma or marginality (see e.g., Rubin 2011);
- different institutional affiliation, such as public and private universities, as well as universities of applied sciences.

As my first round of interview requests only yielded three confirmations, I decided on a second wave of 10 further requests. For this wave, I amended and refined my selection criteria to include CSS scholars beyond the SSH and excluding scholars working within the SSH who were more aligned with positivist notions of science and utilized primarily or exclusively quantitative methods. Through these two 'waves' of approaching individual scholars directly, I gathered 8 participants.

I supplemented this approach with a second method through which I gained 7 further participants, whom I chose using the same selection criteria as detailed above. I took this step both because I wanted to interview more scholars, as well as reach individuals who I might have missed in my own search for potential partners. I opted for disseminating a call for participants through two mailing lists (one German, one Austrian), intended as spaces for fostering discussion and connection between feminist and gender researchers of various disciplines. I selected these mailing lists for the following reasons: First, though not all feminist and gender scholarship is also critical scholarship, the likelihood of scholars approaching their research from feminist epistemological standpoints that met my criteria for being considered '*critical sexualities studies*' (see section 2.2) seemed particularly high compared to other (i.e. discipline specific) mailing lists. Second, I gauged the chances of scholars working in the queer, trans studies or on other sexualities topics being recipients of the mailing list as being rather high: While scholars who are working critically on sexualities are rarely self-classifying as CSS scholars (which will be explored further in section 9.1.1), many of them did seem to identify (also) as members of the gender studies. Third, I hoped that disseminating my call via an interdisciplinary mailing list would increase the chances of reaching scholars working in a variety of disciplines.

As I chose to include all scholars who fit my criteria and wanted to contribute, I was ultimately left with 15 participants. This group, whose insights form the basis of my analysis, consists

entirely of white scholars of various genders, academic disciplines, ages, and career stages, with about half identifying as working class or referencing being the first to attend university in their family. Most utilized (primarily) qualitative method(ologies) in their sexualities research.

8.1.2 Outlining the Data Collection Method – The Problem-Centered Interview

My data was gathered through one-on-one interviews as this seemed the best tool for gaining access to individual scholars' subjective experiences of working as CSS scholars, though this choice also had implications for my analysis of CSS' epistemic status, which will be detailed further in section 8.2.1.

I decided on conducting problem-centered interviews – PCI – (Witzel 2000; Witzel and Reiter 2022), as the goal of the method – to examine participants' subjective views and constructions of meaning regarding a specific, socially relevant topic or 'problem' – aligned well with my research goal of investigating CSS' epistemic status and individual scholar's negotiation of it.

This specific interview method seemed most suitable for this project for the following reason(s): The technique allows for an interplay between deduction and induction as the interviewer's prior theoretical knowledge is explicitly included in the planning and conducting stages of the interviews. The method also provides researchers with tools to make sure that this knowledge does not overlay any new knowledges emerging, which might amend or contradict said pre-existing knowledge. This means that I could enter the interview situation without having to attempt to leave aside everything that I had already read (and theorized myself) about CSS' epistemic status but rather explicitly include it into the interviews, while at the same time making sure – through active listening and reflexivity as to potential divergences between our perspectives (Witzel and Reiter 2022: 174) – that I did not let it overshadow any insights gained from my interviewees which might not fit my pre-existing 'narrative'. The method also allowed me to remain flexible in my approach and to include knowledges being produced in early interviews into the guide for subsequent interviews. The interviews themselves are designed to be flexible, open and dialogic: While there is an interview guide, this guide is not necessarily to be fully 'worked through' but rather serves as a point of orientation for the interviewer. (Witzel 2000: 4)

While the method usually centers on theory generation using grounded theory approaches, I found it just as productive for my project as I would argue that its core tenets (which will be explained in detail in the following) work just as well for my project even though it is not

concerned with producing theory. Witzel describes three core tenets of a PCI: Its problem-centered orientation, object orientation, and process orientation. (Witzel 2000; Witzel and Reiter 2022), which I will present in more detail in the following.

The problem-centered orientation means that the starting off point for the research is a scientific research question that relates to a socially relevant problem identified by the researcher (Witzel and Reiter 2022: 65). This ‘problem’ must be of practical, every-day relevance to interviewees, with the interviews being an arena in which the researcher’s prior knowledges (context, research and everyday) (77) and the interviewees’ knowledge gained from everyday experience are colliding productively, with the interviewer’s prior knowledge making it possible for them to comprehensively trace the interviewees’ explanations, as well as pose problem-focused follow-up questions (Witzel 2000: 2). This means that the interviewer does not only generate a wide and diverse set of material, but simultaneously already works to interpret participant’s subjective perspectives, while progressively steering the conversation more directly toward the research question. (2–3) Prior knowledge is used in a sensitizing way, meaning that it provides the direction in all phases of preparation, execution and analysis of PCIs without pre-determining the content. (Witzel and Reiter 2022: 70). This is achieved through thorough examination, reflection and self-critique regarding said prior knowledge on the part of the researcher (70, 105).

Second, object orientation refers to the PCI’s methodological flexibility. Depending on the research question/goal different and additional approaches (such as conducting a group discussion in preparation) might produce the densest and most insightful material. The interview, however, remains the most important instrument of the PCI (Witzel 2000: 2). More importantly in my case – as an additional data collection method was not viable for pragmatic reasons – the object orientation allowed me to tailor my approach depending on, for example, how talkative/reserved an interview partner was by prioritizing narrative impulses or employing a more dialog-oriented approach.

Finally, process orientation is related to every stage of the research but is especially important when it comes to the transference of prior knowledge into the interview guide. It is the interviewer’s task to design the guide in such a way that the communication process is focused sensitively and considerately on the reconstruction of individual orientations and actions (Witzel 2000: 3) and thereby promote trust and an inclination to vulnerability/openness on the part of the interviewees. This, in turn, grants both participants the ability to cooperatively develop the interviewee’s subjective view of the problem in all its incongruences and allows continual revision, amendment, etc. over the course of the interview. Witzel singles out narrative impulses as particularly fruitful for systematically eliciting the respondent’s perspective of the problem

(3). This process orientation is also important when it comes to the amendment of the interview guide over the course of data collection. As new material leads to new insights, the guide is continually amended for further interviews to take said new knowledge into account. (Misoch 2019: 75)

As a relative newcomer to interviewing, I also appreciated the explicit toolkit Witzel provides in his 2000 article, which helped me tremendously as a guardrail for my first larger empirical research project. They name four instruments which enable and support conducting a PCI: a short questionnaire, the interview guide, recordings and transcripts of the interview and a post-script. (Witzel 2000: 4)

The short questionnaire (see appendix) serves the purpose of gaining access to certain social characteristics which may be valuable for the analysis. However, as the interviews are focused on subjective experience, and are therefore ideally narration-based, asking for this information during the interviews would disrupt their focus. Additionally, the information gathered thus is helpful in tailoring the interview guide to the specific interviewee. In my case, the questionnaire provided valuable information as to my interviewee's relative (economic) precarity and their sense of (dis-)belonging in a variety of disciplines and research fields, information I could then use to e.g., probe them on their non-identification with established research fields.

The recording/transcript is necessary as a full transcription allows the researcher to authentically and precisely capture the communication process, while at the same time being fully present in the interviews to guide the conversation and collect information, which cannot be captured on tape (e.g. observations about non-verbal communication or the social situation).

The interview guide (see appendix) serves as a memory aid as well as frame for orientation to the interviewer. It includes a narrative prompt for the beginning and ideas for questions categorized under multiple themes. Its function is to ensure comparability of the data gathered via different interviews and gives the interviewer the ability to thematically steer and ensure the 'problem focus' during the communication process. My questionnaire was therefore not a prescriptive set of questions and prompts but rather a tool with which to – when needed – steer my conversation partners in the direction of my research interest, while simultaneously providing room for them to focus on what interested them most regarding the short summary outlining my research interest.

Finally, postscripts (see appendix) are created immediately after the interviews. These include a short, written sketch/outline of the communication situation, the mood, possible verbal or

nonverbal particularities, and the thematic focus of the interviewees. Additionally, distinctive features regarding content as well as initial interpretation ideas are noted down.

8.1.3 Conducting the Interviews

I gathered my data through 15 interviews, which were conducted between June and August of 2025 and lasted from just over 60 minutes to 100 minutes, with an average of about 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in German and the vast majority of took place via Zoom due to my participant's working and living all over Germany and Austria, which made in-person meetings largely impractical as well as financially prohibitive. However, when possible, and requested by my participants, I interviewed them in person. I will refrain from stating exactly how many interviews took place in person, as I want to avoid interviewees being identified – or speculated to be so – simply because my identity and location are known. For this reason, I will also not reveal the percentage of scholars located in Germany or Austria, as the Austrian academic community in particular is quite small, with the number of persons researching sexualities being even smaller – which might again threaten the anonymity of my participants. In the consent form, I provided the interviewees with the option of opting out of being anonymized in this write-up of my research. I offered this choice based on De Craene's argument that the use of one's real name can be freeing and empowering, while pseudonymization/anonymization can also operate like a 'second closet' (De Craene 2024: 12). Therefore, I decided to let my interviewees decide for themselves how they wanted to appear in this write-up of my research. One of my interview partners chose to appear in this thesis with their full name, Cornelia Möser. In preparation for the interviews, I sent participants the consent form and the short questionnaire, usually about a week before we had scheduled to meet. Before the actual interviews commenced, I thanked my interviewees for taking part in my research project. This was of particular importance to me as part of my project relates to experiences of precarity and associated time pressures and I did not want to take it for granted that scholars had made the time to participate in something that did nothing to advance their own projects. I then reiterated that they could end the interview at any time and could decide freely which questions they wanted (not) to answer. I also repeated that, as it was my intention to gain access to their subjective experiences of being a CSS scholar, there were no wrong or right answers to my questions (Witzel 2000: 5). Following this, I succinctly summarized the goal of my research (see appendix) and paused for potential questions or statements regarding this short introduction.

Generally speaking, the interviews were segmented into four phases, though these phases were not always entirely separate from one another, particularly in the early interviews. The first phase consisted of a narrative beginning in which scholars – after having been primed as to my

research interest via my short introductory statement – were invited to talk freely about their individual path as CSS scholars and their thoughts relating my project. Following this, I usually asked immanent questions which related to statements made in these narrations. In the third stage, I introduced external questions/prompts, which related to topics which were relevant to my research but had not been mentioned by the interviewees. I always wound down the interviews by asking scholars about their perception of the future of (their) CSS research and closed the conversation by asking whether they had anything to add to the topic which I had failed to mention/ask.

I was lucky that most scholars seemed very interested in my project (and its results) and were therefore usually very communicative in the interview setting. After the initial few interviews, I decided to share more information about myself and my interest in the project as I noticed that including more dialogic elements better suited the project. This way I could more easily build rapport with my participants who, in turn, seemed to trust me more and seemed more willing to talk about more intimate topics – such as self-esteem or other vulnerabilities – when I was prepared to do the same. Some of the interviews consequently had more of the characteristics of a conversation than an interview in the sense that I was an active participant within them and shared my own experiences of some of the topics which were discussed. I thought much about whether this was inappropriate in a research setting but came to the conclusion that, as the individuals I am interviewing were themselves familiar with inhabiting the role of the interviewer and were all higher up in the professional hierarchy of academia than me, this would not put undue pressure on them to be vulnerable with me should they not want to.

When the interview was finished, I stopped recording, thanked scholars again for contributing to the project and, occasionally, talked with them ‘off the record’ some more about my topic and their respective research. Especially in the early interviews I sometimes asked for feedback on the way in which I had phrased some of my questions and prompts and sometimes I also received unsolicited feedback regarding this. As soon as I was alone, I filled out the postscript, which turned out to be very valuable for later data analysis.

8.1.4 Reflecting on the Data Collection Process

I found the PCI a very productive tool for data collection, but it was also a challenging method for my first larger-scale interview-based research project – though I went into this project knowing this would be a demanding approach (Misoch 2019: 77). However, I would say that my technique improved vastly over the course of the 15 interviews and I was much better equipped at keeping the distinct phases (narration, immanent then external prompts/questions and finally ‘winding down’) separate in the later interviews. In the early interviews I also struggled with

adhering to the principle of active listening and not letting my assumptions and previous knowledge overshadow the knowledge of my interview partners. However, feedback by my early participants was very valuable to ‘put me on the right track’ with regard to being better equipped to deal with perspectives which were unexpected to me.

The fact that my interviewees were experts in qualitative inquiry themselves (or I perceived them as such) also made the interviews challenging, both psychologically as well as practically. As I was interviewing mostly scholars who were experienced interviewers themselves, I sometimes struggled to project confidence in my own ability as I was very aware that they would be able to spot flaws in my approach or insecurities on my part. Sometimes scholars even commented on my interviewing style, some by calling attention to supposed deviations from ‘proper’ interviewing technique, while others praised my supposedly professional approach. Whether positive or negative, such feedback usually unbalanced me a bit as it drew attention to the fact that they had observed – and evaluated me – as a researcher.

As a master’s student ‘studying up’ (Schwoerer 2025: 502) I sometimes felt at an epistemic disadvantage, particularly when interviewing senior scholars. This can in part be attributed to my own insecurities as to my position as a ‘proper’ knower as well as what I perceived as some instances in which I felt externally positioned as almost incapable of speaking with epistemic authority about CSS’ epistemic status. Other times, especially in encounters with scholars who were closer to me in age and career stage (i.e. scholars currently working on their PhD) I felt on a more even footing and the encounters were less formal and more conversational. Sometimes a more formal setting was also required by my participants – for example multiple, mostly senior, scholars – preferred to use honorifics during the interviews (I let my participants decide whether to address each other formally or informally), which also created a sense of distance which was less present in other interviews.

It is important to me to attend to these factors shaping the interview process as they also impacted which questions I might (not) have felt comfortable to ask some of my interviewees while feeling no qualms asking others (i.e. about their position in relation to various axes of privilege and marginality) or how (much) I pushed back when answers seemed incongruent to me. However, that is not to suggest that I was ever disempowered during any of the interviews that I conducted with more senior scholars. Though I sometimes struggled more to assert myself as a ‘proper’ knower in their presence, the fact that I was nevertheless the one guiding the interviews and choosing how to use the gathered material for further analysis – which will necessarily be filtered through my perception of the world – my position is a powerful one

indeed: In my view, epistemic authority was consequently ambivalently distributed between the various interviews but also within individual interviews.

8.2 Data Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

8.2.1 Deciding on a Methodology

An ethnographic approach – as conducted by Pereira – would have been the best fit to apply their theory of epistemic status to another research field. However, this is a master’s thesis with a limited scope and I do not have the resources (time and financial) to also observe the continual (re)negotiation of CSS’ epistemic status in classrooms, at conferences or PhD vivas, nor could I necessarily gain access to all of these spaces (as I am not a professional academic as Pereira was when they conducted their fieldwork).

Therefore, I decided to limit myself to exclusively analyzing interview material, aware that this means that my analysis cannot capture (re)negotiations of epistemic status in a variety of spaces and is limited to scholars’ accounts of their boundary work, rather than also observing these processes myself. My research is consequently less of a comprehensive analysis of the “ongoing-ness and everyday-ness” (Pereira 2017: 8) of epistemic status’ (re-)negotiations in a variety of rhetorical spaces but provides more of a snapshot of scholars’ perception and reports of negotiating CSS’ epistemic status in one specific situation (the interviews). While our methodological differences consequently meant that my project does not ‘work’ with Pereira’s conceptualization of epistemic status in some respects, I would nevertheless argue that my analysis provides a valuable first step in capturing CSS’ epistemic status, though the full extent of its negotiation might remain obscured.

I ultimately settled on conducting a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), a version of thematic analysis (TA), as I felt that using a methodology which allowed me to “identify patterns within and *across* data in relation to participants’ lived experiences, views and perspectives, and behaviour and practices” (Clarke and Braun 2017: 297) was best suited to my research aims. Using this approach, I could both structure themes around my core theoretical concepts – ambivalence and epistemic status – while simultaneously attending to patterns of meaning which emerged during the data analysis process itself. However, Pereira’s ethnographic approach nevertheless supplemented this approach as an additional analytic blueprint which guided me in identifying and analyzing statements which relate to epistemic authority and status.

The RTA methodology, developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, aligns with the epistemological underpinnings of this project as “[r]eflexive approaches [...] [to TA] emphasize the inevitable subjectivity of data coding and analysis, and the researcher’s active role in coding

and theme generation” (Braun and Clarke 2022b: 7–8). However, this subjectivity does not only apply to my role as a researcher but also that of my participants as RTA is underpinned by a “qualitative orientation [which] usually emphasizes meaning as contextual or situated, reality or *realities* as multiple” (Braun et al. 2019: 848). This means that conducting a RTA is very much in line with my use of Haraway’s (Haraway 1988) concept of ‘situated knowledges’ which assumes that knowledge is always dependent on (the bodies of) the people producing it. I also considered other methodologies such as constructivist grounded theory (CGT) (e.g., Charmaz 2006) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (e.g., Smith et al. 2022) as they are also aligned/aligneable with my epistemological orientations. However, I ultimately decided in favor of RTA as it was the most flexible approach and therefore most adaptable to my dataset, which had turned out to be quite large, and my research aims. Smith et al. recommend a sample of no more than five for an IPA master’s level project (Smith et al. 2022: 46) which consequently made the methodology unsuitable for my project. While CGT may have been applicable with my sample of 15 interviews, one of its aims is producing a theory, which was never my goal with this research. Additionally, I felt that choosing this methodology, which aims at producing theory *grounded in* data would have been a tad hypocritical of me as one of the goals of my research was to check the applicability of theoretical concepts used for other geographic locations and academic disciplines for Austrian and German CSS scholars/hip.

8.2.2 Planning and Conducting the Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke detail the different orientations with which an RTA can be approached. These orientations are not mutually exclusive and can be combined (Braun and Clarke 2022a: 55–58). I chose to approach my analysis with an abductive (as code and theme construction were directed both by the content of the data, as well as external theories and concepts) and primarily latent (as my focus was largely on what was underpinning the overt content of the data) orientations, though I also semantically coded (particularly in the early stages of coding). Furthermore, I would describe my approach as a critical approach “focusing on interrogating and unpacking meaning around the topic” (Braun and Clarke 2022a: 10) and situated (as I assume that realities are dependent on speakers’ positionalities and are produced within the narratives and through my analysis).

Braun et al. (2019) identify six stages to conducting a RTA, which cumulatively generate themes in relation to the dataset and the research question guiding the analysis: (1) familiarization, (2) coding, (3) initial theme generation, (4) theme development and review, (5) refining, defining, and naming themes, and (6) writing-up. However, they argue that the RTA process is

not strictly linear but reflexive and recursive, meaning that in practice the six stages often overlap (Braun et al. 2019: 852). Trainor and Bundon's (2021) detailed account of their RTA process served as inspiration for the following presentation of my own approach to RTA.

In the first stage, I familiarized myself with the data by (re-)listening to my recordings, (re-)reading the postscripts I had produced immediately after concluding each interview and through the transcription process. The postscripts turned out to be a particularly helpful tool as I sometimes conducted four interviews per week and only found time to transcribe them after several weeks. The postscripts consequently served as a kind of 'window' into my immediate feelings and observations about the interviews which thus remained accessible to me even after some time had lapsed. I utilized the software noScribe¹⁶ for the initial transcription as I decided I would rather use the time I would have spent manually transcribing the interviews on other aspects of my thesis. However, I was aware that automatically transcribing interviews would mean that I needed to work harder on familiarizing myself with and immersing myself in the transcripts. I decided to attempt to mitigate this by doing two rounds of corrections of each interview in which I amended the transcripts (as the results are good but not perfect) while (re-)listening to the recordings. Because there was so much recording material which needed to be transcribed and the quotes used in the final write-up would need to be translated, I focused on content and meaning rather than linguistic nuance. In line with Jen Ross, I subscribe to the view "that transcription represents a key moment of choice and the exercise of power in the research process" (Ross 2010: 2). I am aware that the transcription filters the narratives of my participants through the lens of my own understanding, a process which is always fraught with misunderstanding and misrepresentation. I made decisions such as excluding silences, stumbles, repetitions and hesitations from, and including (though clearly marked) clarifications in, the transcripts to increase coherence and make the quotes translatable. These decisions, though made in 'good faith' in the sense that I always attempted to retain as much nuance as possible, are still filtered through my conception of what was said and meant, which is why I consider them interpretative acts.

Simultaneously, I started an 'ideas' document in which I noted down quotes which seemed particularly relevant in the moment, began cross-referencing between the transcripts when I observed similarities (or differences) in scholars' narratives, and reflected on my own reactions to the participants, their statements and the interview situation as well as when I sensed confu-

¹⁶ noScribe is an open-source software in compliance with the EU's data protection regulations (Steinhardt 2023).

sion, irritation etc. on their side. During this phase I also began collecting some basic information about my interviewees gained from the questionnaires and interviews, which I felt would be helpful for the subsequent analysis (i.e. whether they are a junior or senior researcher or which discipline(s) they felt at home in).

The second stage, coding, began with uploading the transcripts into the software MAXQDA and highlighting passages in each of the transcripts which appeared most analytically fruitful. I chose to use MAXQDA as I had previously used it for my bachelor's thesis and being somewhat familiar with the software helped to make beginning the coding process seem a bit more accessible to me. I did three rounds of coding on each of the transcripts, blocking out previous codes for each of the rounds to be able to approach the data with a fresh eye every time. The first round was mostly a way to get a feel for coding again and allowing myself to start and get familiar with the coding process without putting pressure on myself that codes needed to be (analytically) valuable in the first round. The subsequent two stages were focused on producing codes which "capture[d] the essence of what it is about that bit of data that interests you. Codes should 'work' when separated from the data [...] [and are] informative enough to capture what was in the data, and your analytic take on it" (Braun and Clarke 2013: 211). My coding was largely abductive as I was both checking for implicit references to the concepts underpinning my own analysis as well as the previous research on the topic for other geographical locations (e.g., 'dirty work' and 'epistemic status') as well as coding elements which emerged from the data itself (e.g., 'subtle dismissals'). During the coding stage I also noticed that familiarizing myself properly with the data seemed to have worked as I rarely coded semantically after the first round of coding. Rather, my codes were usually focused on the latent meaning behind statements. I used the memo function in MAXQDA to transfer some of the thoughts from the 'ideas' document which I had started during the first stage into the software and supplemented these ideas with further speculations, potentially helpful theoretical concepts, differences and commonalities, things I felt unsure about or even reminders for a need for further research. I (tentatively) finished this phase (I returned to the coding process even during subsequent stages whenever I noticed that a given segment of text may also apply to a particular code) by cumulatively looking at all three coding rounds, checking for divergences, deleting ones I felt were unnecessary, condensing similar codes into one larger one and further differentiating others if I felt they were too broad. I also checked whether all the coded segments 'fit' a given code, which was made easy with the software as I was able to (re)view all coded passages easily.

I procrastinated somewhat on the jump between coding and theme generation as this felt more high stakes than the previous parts of the data analysis process. To counteract this, I began

reading academic literature on the characteristics of ‘good’ themes (e.g., Polat 2025; Braun and Clarke 2022a: 84, 94), which helped me feel (more) confident in starting the third stage of the process: Generating initial themes. Another thing that very much motivated me (though I really wish I functioned differently) was the pressure put upon me by my looming – though self-imposed – deadline, which really motivated me to get started with this stage. I began by clustering similar codes through the drag-and-drop function in MAXQDA, a process which was guided by my epistemological and theoretical approaches and my research question. This also entailed starting to tentatively hierarchize them, sometimes generating new, more overarching, codes and further culling codes which I felt were interesting but did not relate enough to my research question. I also started another document in which I wrote down theme ideas whenever I thought I may have had a creative idea about how codes may fit together into a larger picture, transferring meaningful (to me) data segments and code names into the document and beginning to map out a line of argumentations as to how codes and their respective data segments fit together and built upon one another. Through this two-pronged approach (using both MAXQDA and Microsoft Word) I produced 11 initial themes: *Mapping, Navigating, Making the Field; Future Visions; Indicators & Management of Epistemic Marginality; Joy/Pleasure; Suffering Under and Managing Neoliberalization; Disclosure vs. Secrecy; Positionality/ies; Fascinated Interest & Subtle Dismissals; Ambivalence Towards (Inter)Disciplinarity; Pragmatism vs. Idealism; Laboring Critically; and Sex(uality/ies) as a Special Subject*. I used the coding function in MAXQDA to create a code for each of the themes under which I subsumed all codes which fit in the respective themes and reviewed the coded data to check for fidelity. I was not particularly concerned with producing ‘good’ themes in this stage as I felt that this would put a lot of pressure on me as a novice researcher. Rather, I allowed myself to create many themes, with varying levels of scope and conceptual underpinning, knowing I would be able to further refine the themes in the following stage(s).

In the subsequent stage, I reviewed the themes to check whether they told a coherent story of the data. However, this coherence does not relate to the narratives *within* the data needing to perfectly align with each other without disruption. Rather, a narrative must make sense as a whole, though it may include diverse, and sometimes contradictory experiences (see e.g., Polat 2025). Through mind-mapping with pen and paper I mapped out both the relationships between the themes, as well the story of each theme in more detail. Through this process I discovered that many of the twelve themes were better suited to being subsumed under a more general theme (e.g., *Joy/Pleasure* and *Future Visions* were later subsumed (and amended) under the theme *Feeling Ambivalent in a Chilly and Charged Climate*), while another was dissolved as a

separate theme as I realized that it was relevant to the whole of the analysis and therefore needed to be integrated into all of the final themes (*Positionality/ies*). I also changed some of the theme titles (though they remained working titles until the write-up stage) like replacing *Suffering Under and Managing Neoliberalization* with *(Dis)Entanglement from/in the Neoliberal University*. This allowed me to better capture scholars' ambivalence towards the demands of the neoliberal academy and further foreground them as active managers rather than passive victims of these demands and their implications for (their) scholarship. Another theme turned out to be less relevant in answering my research question (*Laboring Critically*) and was therefore omitted from the analysis. This task oftentimes felt insurmountable to me as I worried that I would not be able to produce good quality themes and/or not be able to recognize whether a theme made 'sense'. However, Braun and Clarke's 'practical guide' to doing a RTA (2022a) helped me feel more confident in approaching the process. During this stage, I found it very helpful to talk about my themes with my partner. If I could not properly present a theme and its significance to them in a way that they could (more or less) easily grasp, I went back to the drawing board. Through this process I generated the final five themes, again making sure that they were internally coherent, made sense with the data and were (somewhat) distinct from one another by (re-)writing descriptions of each theme, creating a mind map of the relationships between the themes, and once again reviewing the coded segments for each theme. The final themes are: (1) *Mapping, Navigating and Making a Fragmented Field*, (2) *(Dis)Entanglement from/in the Neoliberal University*, (3) *The Non-Performativity of Academia's Moral Ethos*, (4) *(Negotiating) CSS' Exceptionalization and (Epistemic) Marginalization*, and (5) *Feeling Ambivalent in a Chilly and Charged Climate*.

After concluding this process, I decided to jump ahead in the RTA process and begin the write-up stage, which meant that, in my case, the final two stages of my RTA (refining, defining, and naming themes and writing-up the results) largely overlapped. Through past experiences, I have realized that I am not a person who maps out an analysis before starting the writing process but rather that I gain analytical insights *through* this process. Therefore, I made the executive decision to allow myself to begin writing up my themes before having fully refined them, knowing this would mean that a significant portion of what I had written may end up in the metaphorical bin. While I had mapped out broadly my line of argumentation within each theme, I noticed during the writing process when things did not fit as I had planned, where I was lacking clarity, or which elements may be more or less (or not at all) relevant than I had anticipated. By writing through these struggles, I was able to refine the themes in a way that I could not have managed without allowing myself to write rough drafts of the analysis. However, this approach also had

drawbacks as I became attached to the text which I had produced and sometimes struggled to let go of passages or quotes from the data which I had spent much time on and with. For this process it helped to have people proofread what I had written and give me their unvarnished opinion as to what might be unnecessary or could be shortened. It was also during this stage that doubts about the analysis began to creep in, particularly because my approach largely focused on the implicit meaning behind individual statements and the broader narratives of my participants. I began to worry about their responses to my analysis, if they would feel that I had misrepresented them or be hurt or angry about what I had written. I grew anxious that I was overreaching and felt overwhelmed by what I perceived as having a lot of power over how I presented other people's stories and realities. This worry was also exacerbated by the fact that I would like to do a PhD in the field myself and it seemed very feasible that I might meet my participants again or may even be dependent on their good will, should I decide to attempt to pursue a career in academia. Reminding myself that I was doing my best to do justice to their accounts and that my role in this process was to present my own subjective, though (hopefully) plausible, narrative which "reveal[s] the intertwined understandings of both participants and researchers" (Polat 2025: 5) helped me to feel more confident in my analysis.

It was at this stage that another aspect became relevant, namely the (implications of) translating¹⁷ the quotes, which I held off on until this stage as to not limit my analysis by working with translated quotes. This turned out harder than I had anticipated because I oftentimes felt that I was altering my participants' statements almost beyond recognition and worried that this would lead to my perspective and understanding becoming even more omnipresent than it already had through the transcription process. However, as I had no choice but to translate the quotes (as most of this project had already been written in English and I would like to make this project accessible to people who do not speak German) I want to attend to the fact that translation, similar to transcription, is also akin to an initial analysis of the data. (Van Nes et al. 2010) Particularly when translating idioms¹⁸ or unfinished sentences, it was sometimes necessary to translate the meaning rather than the content or 'close gaps' to make a sentence work in English, which felt like a very interpretative act. As I could not afford a professional translator as Van Nes et al. recommend (316), I can only hope that I did justice to my participants' statements in the translations process and clearly indicate to those reading this chapter, that the translation process is fraught with the risk of misunderstanding and -interpretation.

¹⁷ I used the u:ai translation tool provided by the University of Vienna for an initial translation, amending and correcting each quote several times to retain as much of the nuance as possible.

¹⁸ E.g., translating the German term 'gefundenes Fressen' into 'goldmine'.

To ensure my participants' anonymity, I borrowed Pereira's (2017) approach and used the career stage of the respective researchers to attribute quotes to my interview partners. This ensures that – if multiple quotes are used from the same interview – they are not attributed to said specific interview but rather to a group of individuals. Pereira uses the following categories to sort participants into two groups: senior and junior researchers. The former of which “refer[s] to scholars who at the time of fieldwork held full-time, paid academic positions and had completed their PhDs at least five years previously”, the latter of which “refer[s] to scholars who did not hold full-time, paid academic positions and/or did not have PhDs or had completed a PhD within the preceding 5 years.” (xvii)

As the refinement and write-up stages overlapped, this doubled phase was quite extensive and time intensive. Through writing and multiple re-writes, I gained much clarity about my themes, by making sure that I had properly connected them to a ‘central organizing concept’ (i.e., non-performativity or epistemic status) (Braun and Clarke 2022a: 77) and attempted to mitigate common pitfalls in the write-up of thematic analyses, as formulated by Ayşe Polat:

Themes [...] are not mere summaries of interview questions or generic subtitles; nor do they derive their significance from frequency or proportional representation. Rather, themes are analytical constructs carefully crafted by researchers to bridge participants' lived experiences with scholarly interpretation. They offer a holistic re-reading of participants' accounts, moving beyond isolated responses and drawing from a range of data sources to capture shared meanings as well as variation (Polat 2025: 8).

While I had not struggled much with moving away from my interview questions and the overt content of my data, I did notice that I unconsciously attempted to legitimize my claims by using word such as ‘most’, ‘majority’ or ‘minority’, which I must have implicitly hoped would make my analysis more credible. Polat's article helped me to move away from using this ‘crutch’, which, in turn, also allowed me to focus more on the ambivalence and contradictions within and between my participants' accounts. However, that is not to say that I have eradicated all doubts or anxieties about my final analysis. In fact, as I am writing this, I am still wondering whether my themes are distinct enough from one another, whether my theme (*Negotiating CSS' Exceptionalization and (Epistemic) Marginalization*) fits the criteria of a theme as I had the central concept in mind before even conducting the interviews, and if the names of the themes are too boring as I could never settle on an evocative quote which could encapsulate everything I wanted the theme name to convey. However, while by no means perfect, I am proud of my first RTA based on such a large sample and am grateful for all I learned during this process.

9 Analysis

9.1 Mapping, Navigating and Making a Fragmented Field

This theme has its origins in my observation – based both on the short questionnaire and the responses to me following up on this during the interviews – that almost all of my interviewees did not identify with a research field or discipline which explicitly related to sexualities – neither with existing disciplines (like, e.g., sexology (‘Sexologie’), sexual science (‘Sexualwissenschaft’) and sex(ual) research (‘Sexualforschung’)), nor the even more diffusely defined (critical) sexualities studies.

The importance of engaging with this pattern non-identification stems from the core difference between Pereira’s analysis of the WGFS and mine of the CSS: While the WGFS are, according to Pereira, institutionalized in the sense that it “now has space (in offices and library shelves), professorships and scholarships, specialist degrees and courses, dedicated conferences and publications, physical and online networks, and professional associations” (Pereira 2017: 28), I would argue that the CSS – in contrast – remain largely uninstitutionalized as a viable, and distinct research field in Germany and Austria. In the following, I will map the fragmentation of CSS and trace its consequences for scholars’ work in and on their research field.

9.1.1 Mapping Non-Identification

Cumulatively two categories of non-identification emerged in scholars’ narratives with the first relating to academically established (or even institutionalized) sexualities research and the second to the location of CSS in both space and time.

Relating to the first strand on non-identification, a pattern emerged which consisted of many of the interviewees who were working from within the SSH arguing that scholarly engagement with sexualities was often positioned by others as outside of their ‘responsibility’:

There are automatic ways of thinking, namely ‘it’s medicine, it’s law and maybe it’s pedagogy that’s responsible for it [sexuality, note].’ (senior scholar)

The field [is] mostly ceded to medicine, not to the social sciences, not to the philosophers who engage with sexuality. (junior scholar)

This supposed non-responsibility seemingly led scholars to struggle to gain recognition for their work within those research communities who *were* deemed to be responsible for producing knowledges about sexualities: biomedical-clinical scholars/hip and, to a lesser extent, educational science, social work and law scholars/hip, etc. While not necessarily perceived as hostile to the knowledge CSS scholars produced, particularly biomedical-clinical communities were largely perceived as (politely) disinterested in fostering critical perspectives within their ranks.

For example, two scholars, who had wanted to connect and cooperate with the biomedical-clinical community, recounted their attempts at doing so as following:

They do seem to imply: ‘I’m interested in the results of the project and I would like to read it afterwards’, but these [interdisciplinary, note] entanglements aren’t being acknowledged yet. [...] The contact is still very superficial. (junior scholar)

I wanted to provide them [clinical practitioners at a conference, note] with a critical [...] social science perspective on these pathologizing aspects. And half the audience left during my lecture. (senior scholar)

However, this sense of alienation was not just produced externally through members of (what was perceived as) established and legitimized sexualities research. Rather, multiple scholars I interviewed also wanted to put distance between themselves and what they perceived as reductive approaches to studying sexualities. Their sense of alienation consequently stemmed not only from being positioned by others as beyond the boundary of (an) established discipline(s). Rather, some of my interviewees felt that the ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches within the established sexualities research were either unsuitable for capturing sexualities in their complexities or were considered boring, as the following quotes illustrate:

It was very old-fashioned and [...] sometimes I sat there [in the medical lecture, note] and almost started shaking my head. [...] Pictures were shown, like a Playboy cover, in which a woman turns her butt towards the camera and next to it is a picture of a female baboon and then it was explained that females are supposedly genetically predisposed to present themselves like this. [...] Clinical or quantitative research just doesn’t really resonate with me. (junior scholar)

I think the GeSiD [German Health and Sexuality Survey, note] study is great and I’m glad survey research like this exists. It’s just not *my* thing. (senior scholar)

Additionally, existing disciplines were viewed by some as having a violent past that they had not sufficiently reckoned with, leading some of my interviewees to not want to be associated with them: “sexuality research is based on a certain historical tradition, on a sexological tradition, which is very strongly connected to a construction of deviance and pathologization.” (senior scholar)

Now that I have analyzed the sense of alienation most of my interviewees felt towards institutionalized sexualities research, I want to investigate their conceptions of where and when the field of CSS (does not) exist(s). Scholars largely viewed the field as existent in the past, at other institutions or even in other geographic locations but largely inaccessible to them.

Many of my interviewees argued that CSS was something that had once existed in Germany (not Austria) but had since been de-institutionalized (“dismantled and dissolved into medicine” (junior scholar)) with the dismantlement of the Frankfurt Institute of Sexual Science after Volkmar Sigusch’s retirement (see section 5.2). For multiple scholars, this institute seemed to function as a place of longing:

[This dismantlement, note] has effectively led to social science approaches or institutes in Germany with a primary focus on examining sexuality, or even so-called deviant sexuality to be pushed to the brink of non-existence. [...] Had this institute remained, it might also have been a place where I could have focused on that. [...] [Volkmar Sigusch] was allowed to be creative! (junior scholar)

However, scholars not only longed for past institutionalization but also spoke about other geographic locations – especially the Anglo-American context – in idealistic terms. In the German-speaking context, the academic discipline of gender studies has institutionalized without an explicit inclusion of (critical) sexuality studies. This development diverges from institutionalization processes in the Anglo-American context, where study programs and professorships are usually named a variation of ‘women’s, gender, feminist, and sexuality studies’ (see section 5.2). It is also in these locations where most, if not all, SSH-oriented sexualities specialty journals such as *Sexualities*, *Porn Studies*, *Sex and Sexualities*, etc. are located. This had, for some of my interviewees, a significant impact on their academic work, as the following quote indicates:

It’s a bit annoying that, in the long term, I always have to teach different topics than I research. Of course, I can also include sexuality studies [...] and I do so to a lesser extent. But unfortunately, it’s different than in the US. There it’s called women’s, gender and sexuality studies. (senior scholar)

Many of my interviewees argued that, as CSS (at least at universities) had largely been subsumed under the gender studies (but without making this ‘official’ by e.g., changing the name) this had also led to marginalization of CSS scholars/hip within this established discipline. This also contributed to CSS scholars reporting that they struggled to qualify for positions within the gender studies:

[I]n the German-speaking context, all [critical, note] research that relates to sexualities has established itself under the label of ‘gender studies’. [...] But you’re lucky if they employ you despite your queer or sexuality-related research focus. [...] I’ve experienced applying for a gender studies professorship and being asked ‘how does your [sexualities related, note] focus relate to the gender studies?’ (senior scholar)

Furthermore, universities of applied sciences were generally perceived as more open to fostering CSS as a separate and distinct research field, which was explained by my interviewees by, e.g., social work or educational sciences researchers being considered to have some ‘responsibility’ for (the study of) sexualities¹⁹. However, as most of my interviewees worked at universities, this trend was largely something that most of them did not feel that they could benefit from in terms of securing or advancing their own careers. However, it is notable that it was those scholars who worked at universities of applied sciences who seemed most inclined to position their research as belonging to established research fields and disciplines (rather than

¹⁹ E.g., “As I see it, the job ads that mentioned ‘sexuality’ in the title or at least in the description are largely by universities of applied sciences, [...] because the importance of the topic is recognized there, for example, within [the] social work [scholarly community, note]. I feel that the potential for higher institutionalization is more pronounced there than it is at universities.” (senior scholar)

pushing for a separate field of CSS), seemingly in an effort to (re)claim space for critical perspectives *within* these spaces.

9.1.2 Navigating/Making a Fragmented Field

In the previous section of this theme, I have highlighted how the existence of the field of CSS in Germany and Austria remains unacknowledged – or is even disputed – by my interviewees. What I perceived as a general lack of a sense of belonging to the field and the accompanying lack of shared identity between individual scholars also means that scholarly practice is largely individualized and most scholars are not very engaged in seeking and building community structures (which will be further explored in the final section of this theme). However, this lack of community, in turn, seemingly exacerbates the need to reject a (self)classification as CSS scholars, as an association with the field – precisely because of its fragmentation – does not seem to hold many benefits, particularly to those scholars who want to advance their own academic careers:

I don't really see a use in saying 'I count myself as a member of that particular research field'. It'd be a performative move to align oneself with something that doesn't really exist in that form [as an established research field, note]. (junior scholar)

This lack of self-classifying as CSS scholars usually went hand in hand with scholars primarily identifying as members of their respective reference disciplines: "If I [conceptualize] it as a kind of center-periphery, funnel or pyramid model, it's [discipline name], body, sexuality. The base is simply different. That's why I don't feel like I have stakes in that [the field of sexualities research, note]." (senior scholar)

In the following, I will engage with the consequences of scholars' individualization, namely investigating their reports of struggling to research topics that are – according to them – inherently interdisciplinary, while largely being isolated in their respective reference disciplines, as well as how scholars are both reinforcing and resisting their individualization through field-making and institutionalization attempts.

9.1.3.1 Feeling Ambivalent Towards (Inter)Disciplinarity

One senior scholar formulates the core conundrum that many scholars appear to face in their pursuit to study sexualities: There is a need to work *interdisciplinarily* to be able to do justice to their research subject, but at the same time, scholars need to conform to *disciplinary* norms as the lack of institutionalization of an interdisciplinary CSS means that scholars must qualify for positions and access to resources within their respective reference disciplines:

Crucially, sexual science is sustained by reference disciplines – i.e. sociology, psychology, cultural studies, medicine, religious studies – and cannot simply be decoupled from them. Rather work [on sexualities, note] must be collaborative. (senior scholar)

This ambivalence of struggling both with disciplinarity as well as interdisciplinary work was very prevalent within most interviews: Scholars – junior scholars in particular – largely appeared to find it challenging to conform to disciplinary norms (of their own disciplines and others) while oftentimes working interdisciplinarily on their chosen topics.

Some of my interviewees related this explicitly to their choice of topic, while others focused more on broader struggles of power within their disciplines. One particularly evocative example of feeling constrained within one's discipline was formulated by a researcher who has since exited the field, partially because they felt suffocated by the disciplinary norms – particularly about what constitutes good scientific practice – placed upon their CSS research:

[The] corset [...] within my discipline... I'm not sure... Sometimes I thought about maybe whether I'd have had more freedom if I'd studied educational science. I think of [name of their discipline, note] as more discipline-oriented. [...] I experienced it as an extremely tight corset at the time. I actually wanted to quit. I was constantly on the verge of quitting because I didn't feel like it was my project anymore. (junior scholar)

This disciplinary corset was also perceived by another scholar working in another discipline, who talked about how they had felt pressure to frame their research project through a lens that they disagreed with to be able to engage with the topic at all:

I felt that – and I was really uncomfortable with that – I had to frame [name of topic, note] as something vulnerable and marginalized in my master's thesis to be able to justify why it needs to be researched. I really struggled to feel ethically and morally comfortable about the thesis afterwards. (junior scholar)

However, scholars did not just struggle with norms and conventions of their own disciplines but also reported finding it hard to navigate other disciplinary norms as outsiders. For example, some scholars reported how their own interdisciplinary academic socialization sometimes made it hard for them to place their articles in discipline-specific journals, in which peer-reviewers might have very clear conceptions of how, and with which literature, to formulate a specific argument: “[T]he disciplinary boundaries, which are negotiated [in journals] through the use of specific terms, [are] sometimes primarily performative [...] self-legitimation, but end up slowing the work down“ (junior scholar).

As many of the scholars critiqued the lack of opportunities to connect with other sexualities scholars, most of them had at least attempted to get into contact with scholars of other disciplines and found increased cooperation to be a generally desirable – if apparently not very likely – vision of the future. Consequently, it makes sense that fewer scholars recounted stories about actual interactions with scholars of other disciplines. However, those that did have such experiences reported how fruitful – but difficult – they found such contact:

When I talk to a clinical psychologist, a media educator and a sociologist about [name of topic, note], we speak different languages. That's interdisciplinarity and it's really exhausting. There is very little such cooperation because it's so demanding and requires a lot of commitment. The question is always whether you have the resources for that or are willing to invest them. (senior scholar)

It seems to me that scholars are faced with a conundrum in wanting more interdisciplinary exchange but lacking opportunity to do so as well as potentially lacking the capacities needed to properly do it even if given the opportunity.

Notably, senior scholars who had carved out a space for themselves within a specific reference discipline appeared generally less likely to advocate for a need of establishing a distinct and separate interdisciplinary research field (or even discipline). Rather, most seemed to advocate not for interdisciplinary institutionalization but for the establishment of sexualities-related positions within already established disciplines: “I consider myself an advocate for a certain degree of disciplinarity. I would prefer [...], without disciplinary boundaries needing to be rigid, [...] if there was a professorship in contemporary history and in political science and in sociology that relates to sexuality.” (senior researcher)

In their book, Pereira (2017) argues that openings for research fields are oftentimes produced by highly motivated senior scholars who have the power to produce conditional openings for said fields (138). What I perceived as a relatively pronounced disinterest among some of the senior scholars in creating openings for interdisciplinary institutionalization likely contributes to the (lack of) success of the field-making practices which *were* reported in the interviews.

In the following section, I will therefore investigate how the relative lack of (inter-)disciplinary institutionalization is connected to who is (not) spearheading such attempts and analyze how and where scholars are nevertheless engaged in making the field, fragmented as it may be.

9.1.3.2 Furthering/Hindering Institutionalization

In their analysis of the WGFS, Pereira (2017) argues that a research field consists of more than just the sum of the individual actions of the scholars. Indeed, a field is made primarily through “interactional, collective and collegial work” (191) such as organizing/attending conferences, managing journals or reading and peer-reviewing each other’s work. They argue that, as field-making is largely not considered a valuable task in the neoliberal university – as opposed to individual career-making effort such as publishing research – these collective practices are being increasingly neglected. This leads to a more fragmented community of researchers who are less able to support one another to the extent they might have been able to under conditions of lower precarity.

As the CSS are seemingly institutionalized (based on Pereira’s definition which I presented in the introduction to this theme) even more precariously than the gender studies, which have interdisciplinary professorships, study programs, conferences, etc. dedicated to this research in

the German-speaking context, it would follow that such “more alert, ongoing and laborious field-making” (Pereira 2017: 191–192) would indeed be required.

However, in my interviews a picture emerged of not just external constraints produced by the neoliberal university (which has been detailed in 5.1.1 and will be further explored in theme 2), which made field-making difficult in the case of CSS. Rather, scholars’ normative conceptions of where CSS scholarship *should* exist (i.e., within reference disciplines or as a separate field/discipline) seemed to be very impactful when it came to identifying barriers to increased institutionalization. In the following, I will detail processes of field-making and (failed) attempts at institutionalization within the narratives and show how the two are connected.

One junior scholar – though this position was echoed by other junior scholars – viewed senior scholars as having labored hard and having managed to carve out niche(s) for their research and consequently largely uninterested in (though not antagonistic towards) furthering the establishment of a distinct research field. Although these senior scholars were seen as the ones being in a position (both because their position in the academic hierarchy and experience might be an advantage when securing funding and – for those who were tenured – because they had to spend less time on securing their next career step) to engage in effective field-making, they were perceived largely as unwilling to do so:

In my experience, it’s difficult to establish the field here. [...] I would describe the people who are interested in doing so largely as early career researchers. The others [senior scholars, note] have, I think, already carved out niches for themselves. [...] I think it’s a bit scattered in the German-speaking context. (junior scholar)

At the same time, the interviews showed that this is not the case for all senior, tenured researchers as some of them reported trying to be very engaged in fostering discussion and discourse spaces for early career researchers as well as attempting to further institutionalization of CSS. However, it seemed notable that most of my interviewees who had been appointed to professorships opposed or did not recognize a need for a well-established CSS field. As there are simply so few senior scholars working in the field (a fact I deduced from my struggle to find one’s I could interview), it matters that the ones who do exist might be more inclined to view the establishment of an interdisciplinary CSS as unnecessary:

I don’t think it’s necessary for such an institutional address to exist. [...]. The field is populated by individualists. [...] So based on your sample, I am wondering if there is even a critical mass of people who’d say: ‘I need institutionalization in this form?’ Maybe it’s enough to know ‘who are the twelve people I am in regular contact with?’ (senior scholar)

However, most of the scholars (whether junior or senior) I interviewed did, in fact, wish for more cooperation and community. Consequently, this quote by a senior scholar is particularly revealing and indicative of the fact that individualization – for those who have managed to

successfully carve out individual niches in a reference discipline – might not always be associated with negative feelings. While the senior scholar I cited above was very focused on fostering junior researchers who worked directly with them they had, prior to our interview, not reflected on what might happen once they decided to no longer work on sexualities and how this might affect junior researchers who had flocked to them *because* of their CSS focus. However, they also stated that our conversation had made them think about their legacy and what they wanted to ‘leave behind’ should they choose to move away from a focus in studying sexualities.

As senior scholars largely seemed disinterested in furthering interdisciplinary institutionalization, it makes sense that many of the attempts to actively further the recognition of CSS research were being done by junior scholar (or senior scholars back when they had been junior scholars). For example, one scholar talked about how they attempted to advocate for an inclusion of the category ‘sexuality research’ into the ÖFOS – the Austrian Fields of Science and Technology Classification – by Statistik Austria (n.d.), which is regularly used to classify, e.g., research proposals:

I can’t specify that a project is sexuality research. I tried to change that and found out that [...] Statistik Austria is in charge of such adjustments [...]. There is a committee which regularly, once per decade, updates these codes. [...]. People would have to advocate for such a rigid institution as Statistik Austria to be inclined to consider such a change. But there aren’t. That means that graffiti research [is] a recognized field of research [...], sexuality research [...] unfortunately isn’t. (junior scholar)

Another scholar’s experience shows that even smaller-scale attempts at inclusion failed rather spectacularly. In their attempt at re-naming a section within their discipline’s local research association, their suggestion to include ‘sexuality’ in the name was outright rejected due to its supposed specificity, though the name had previously included another, just as specific, term: “There was a meeting in which it was discussed and they said, ‘sexuality is too specific. Bodies and emotions, those are major topics, but sexuality, nah!’ And I thought to myself that they must be joking, right?” (senior scholar)

While it would be pure speculation to argue that more senior or collective attempts would definitely have changed the outcome of these attempts at increased institutionalization, support from tenured faculty would likely have improved their chances in furthering such bureaucratic change.

9.1.3.3 (Where) Is the Field Still Being Made?

While the previous section has largely focused on scholars’ lack of desire or ability to further the establishment/institutionalization of an interdisciplinary CSS, in the following, I will investigate the locations in which field-making nevertheless occurs and even flourishes. As no German-speaking journal has been founded which focuses on publishing primarily SSH or critical

scholarship²⁰ and there are few conferences or research networks with a sexualities focus²¹, scholars had limited opportunity to engage in field-making. This seemed to make the spaces which did exist all the more precious to my interviewees.

One of the most notable spaces for scholarly exchange and community building seemed to be the RN23: Sexuality Research Network of the European Sociological Association – and specifically its biennial conferences. Scholars of multiple disciplines (not just sociology) talked about the conference as one of the few places in which, specifically critical, sexualities scholars could come together, network and experience a collegial togetherness. This underlines the perceived need for such spaces in which the relevance of CSS is assumed and does not need to be continually (re)negotiated.

The importance of networking events – especially those which brought scholars of the SSH together with scholars from other disciplines – was further emphasized by a senior scholar, whose permanent contract allowed them to focus on field-making instead of advancing their own career. They recounted what a valuable – though foreign – experience a workshop and network initiated and organized by them (among others) had been for them and their colleagues, who had previously been rather isolated in their home disciplines:

What really surprised me was that we realized at the meet-up that all of us were isolated in our disciplines and everyone really enjoyed getting in contact with people from other disciplines. We were able to just talk and argue – we definitely didn't always agree – about [name of topic, note] without needing to have a tiresome discussion about whether [name of topic, note] should be studied or if it's good or bad. (senior scholar)

Conferences and research networks therefore provide an important space for a scholarly community to experience and negotiate productive friction between its members and schools of thought. However, my interviewees also reported how attempts by CSS scholars to connect with one another (e.g., through workshops or research platforms) were oftentimes dashed as they were unable to secure the necessary funding for such endeavors. This is exemplified in the following quote by a junior researcher speculating about why a colleague of theirs had not managed to secure the necessary funding for a CSS research network:

I actually found the lines of reasoning quite interesting [...]. We're too hands-on and activist for the classic humanities who argue that they don't want to engage in anything too normative. People who are involved in the communities [are also saying] 'we don't want any part of that!' We're too theoretical for the clinicians and the most important organizations which fund research, i.e. the VolkswagenStiftung, they don't want to fund sex either. So maybe the real problem is that we're somehow stuck in the

²⁰ The *Zeitschrift für Sexualforschung* was largely perceived as biomedical-clinically oriented by my interviewees as it is published by the 'Gesellschaft für Sexualforschung', which is associated with the Klinikum Hamburg Eppendorf (Hospital Hamburg Eppendorf).

²¹ Such as the *Gesellschaft für Sexarbeits- und Prostitutionsforschung* ('Society for Sex Work and Prostitution Research'), the research network *Interdisziplinäre Pornografie-Forschung* ('Interdisciplinary Pornography Research') or the *Platform for Love, Sex, and Body-positive Research*.

middle and the private sector, which is increasingly funding research is not (yet) interested in financing sex. (junior scholar)

While Pereira (2017) focuses on collegial and collective work between peers (namely other academics) as central to field-making, I would argue that teaching, and other forms of engagement with students – is another relevant form of field-making. Through this, students are made aware that the research field exists and thus, younger generations can be funneled into it, fragmented as it is.

The relevance of students in making the CSS field was also stated by one senior scholar, who argued that topics, for which professional academics could not manage to secure funding, were still being worked on in student theses, who they consequently considered active contributors to the field: “some of these topics can be investigated quite well on a smaller qualitative scale via bachelor’s and master’s theses. That is why degree programs are so important because through them relevant contributions can be made to a research field” (senior scholar). This shows the importance of offering courses in which students are able to engage (critically) with sexualities within an academic setting and develop their interest in potentially pursuing the topic(s) professionally.

Alongside such productive cooperation with students existed accounts by some scholars that they were being hindered in their attempts to offer courses relating to sexualities. For example, one scholar recounted being refused the opportunity to teach a course on sexualities they had offered previously, which had not just been in high demand but had also been evaluated highly by students:

The students loved it! The head of the institute called me to tell me that mine was among the [...] best-rated courses of the year [...]. I re-submitted the next year [...] and all of a sudden the course wasn’t approved the second time. And I was like: What am I supposed to make of that? The best course, but we don’t need it anymore?! That demoralized me a lot because I liked doing it and the course was completely overbooked.

However, even for those scholars permanently employed at a specific institution, the fact that most were not employed *for* their research focus on sexualities but rather other topics, led to them being hindered in teaching sexualities. For example, a senior scholar recounted how they were unable to teach about the topics which constituted the majority of their research output. This rejection was explained with an imagined quota for critical research that had supposedly already been reached:

I went and asked ‘Wouldn’t it be great if I could offer [a] sexuality studies [course, note]?’ And she responded: ‘Well, we have a long list which has racism research, and this and that and participatory research on it, so we don’t really have a need for it right now.’ [...] It’s a bit annoying that, in the long term, I always have to teach different topics than I research. (senior scholar)

Consequently, the classroom and academic conferences (as well as precious few more specific research associations and networks) appear as the main sites for collective field-making in the narratives of the scholars I interviewed.

On the whole, I observed a kind of ‘catch-22’ situation: It appears to be impossible to adequately ‘make’ a field without higher levels of institutionalization, but it is also impossible to institutionalize CSS without increased levels of field-making, particularly by those scholars who are in a position to prioritize it as they no longer have to focus primarily on their career advancement. However, as there are few senior scholars working in the field – regardless of whether they would be willing to prioritize field-making – CSS seem to be stuck in their position between existence and non-existence. Scholars are individually contributing to a (growing) CSS canon – and I would argue are therefore *doing* CSS work – but a collective sense of feeling as a member of a research field or scholarly community remains absent.

9.2 (Dis)Entanglement from/in the Neoliberal University

In the ‘Context’ chapter, I have already detailed the increasing neoliberalization of academia and how this affects individual academics as well as entire research fields. I have also touched upon this trend as having not just repressive but also productive effects on certain kinds of critical scholarship, as long as scholars over-comply with the demands of the neoliberal university and the courses they offer remain attractive to students. Consequently, I set out to investigate how CSS scholars experienced and navigated the constraints put upon them by the increasing commodification of science and whether I could identify paradoxical openings/closures similar to those observed by Pereira for the WGFS.

9.2.1 Ambivalent Embodiments of the ‘Perfect Academic’

A common thread in the narratives of my interviewees related to the austerity measures (see also section 5.1.1) which affect academics of all disciplines but perhaps felt more threatening to scholars/hip already epistemically marginalized. Among the interviewees who were in the process of qualifying for a permanent position (or considering whether attempting to do so was even feasible for them) the worry seemed pervasive that critical scholarship such as theirs might be more vulnerable to being defunded as competition between research fields increased:

Here [...] science has been subject to a lot of funding cuts [...] and somehow ten percent of the budget of [name of the university, note] has to be cut. [...] That’s not a targeted attack on the gender studies or anything like that, but the question is who will be cut off first when money is tight? (junior scholar)

However, scholars’ interactions with these trends seemed largely informed by a willingness to brave ever-increasing precarity, a pattern which aligns with Gill’s argumentation, that academ-

ics have become implicated in their own exploitation: “The new laboring subject is “individualised, responsabilised, selfmanaging and monitoring”. (Gill 2013: 13) Academics are consequently not just passive victims of the neoliberal university but are themselves implicated in upholding neoliberal norms (e.g., through their willingness to suffer the “injuries of the neoliberal university” (Gill 2010: 241)) while simultaneously critiquing them, as is exemplified in the following quote:

My PhD supervisor argued that one of her postdoc positions would become vacant [...]. That plan no longer exists because of funding cuts. Because of money and politics, which I can't influence. [...] Fact is, I am a [name of discipline, note]. [...] At a certain point it's no longer just something you do, but also something you've become [...]. This way of existing in the world. And I honestly can't imagine stopping. I think I wouldn't survive a life without observing, thinking and writing. So I expect that my future will hold a precarious life without children and doing odd jobs. (junior scholar)

One core motif through which scholars' (dis)entanglement with the demands of the neoliberal university became visible was that of the ‘perfect academic’. How different scholars invoked and resisted this ideal (in its contradictory variations) seems indicative of a larger struggle about what science is and should be: economically viable or oriented towards moral ideals. In the following, I will consequently detail the – sometimes paradox – ways in which my participants interacted with these two ideals of science.

According to Gaiaschi et al., the perfect neoliberal academic “is expected to be permanently available, passionately engaged, strategically emotive but also rational and always resilient: an embodiment of the entrepreneurial self [...] who internalises institutional demands as personal ambitions and governs [...] [their] academic life through continuous self-optimization.” (Gaiaschi et al. 2025: 113). These requirements have clearly been taken up by some of my interviewees – though somewhat reluctantly – as can be illustrated by the following examples:

It's a huge market in which you have to offer an amazing colorful product that is suitable for everyday life but also for hiking and cooking. That's how research works and you can't fool yourself. (senior scholar)

I didn't go on vacation once. I just always worked and worked and worked, in addition to my other job, mind you. (junior scholar)

I submitted another paper right before giving birth. (senior scholar)

Opposing this neoliberal ideal (though there is also some overlap e.g., when it comes to scholars' devotion to their work) is a more idealized conception of what science – and those producing it – should be. A notable example of such an idealized set of norms was formulated by sociologist Robert K. Merton in 1942: They identified universalism (i.e., a universal truth exists and should be pursued), communism (i.e., a rejection of the commodification of science in order to foster collaboration), disinterestedness (i.e., striving for the truth for truth's sake), and organized skepticism (i.e., a critical appraisal of knowledge claims to check their validity) as the core values of science's moral ethos (Merton 1974). Merton's norms continue to reverberate in

the academy and have been analyzed as to their continued viability in the face of the increased commodification of science. For example, Macfarlane (2024) – in a critique of their supposed erosion – reformulates the norms to account for their increased alignment with a neoliberal ideal. Based on Macfarlane’s explications – though the author is critical of this trend –, I would argue that, in contemporary scholarly practice, the moral and neoliberal ideals of science are in constant interaction with one another and may even be blending with one another.

Consequently, I would contend that individuals must carefully navigate their position towards both these ideals as they cannot entirely abandon a moral imperative in favor of exclusively for-profit research but can also not disregard that the contemporary university is governed by a market logic. That individual academics must take care to manage their position towards both these conceptions of what a ‘good academic’ is, is also extrapolated on by Pereira, who concludes the following:

If universities are seen to focus on profit, like any other company or business, part of their epistemic distinctiveness vis-à-vis other sectors of society is erased and academics’ epistemic authority in society is undermined. This helps explain the paradox that the financial – as a concern, criteria or goal – seems ever-present in everyday life in western universities, and yet is often absent from scholars’ and institutions’ public narratives about what drives them. (Pereira 2017: 206)

This dynamic also became visible during my interviews. For example, when I asked a senior scholar about whether they had ever attempted to employ what I called ‘legitimation strategies’ (i.e., utilize a method(ology) or theory that was associated with a high level of prestige) to better position their research within the boundaries of relevant, scholarly knowledge, they stated the following:

That would strike me as a bit too ideological. I always try to do justice, as best I can, to the subject of my research. [...] And the choice of method [...], is of course central: How do I proceed? What are my approaches? I have to think about that repeatedly. But not so much to legitimize a certain research topic to myself or others, but my goal is to get as close to the truth as possible. (senior scholar)

It is not my goal to insinuate that this scholar is lying or omitting something. I am sure that they value the integrity of their epistemic considerations very highly, which I would consider an adherence (or attempt to adhere to) Merton’s norm of disinterest. However, I would argue that, as scholars’ ‘market value’ has become increasingly relevant to their chances of securing tenure, it seems somewhat unlikely to me that this scholar was always able to set aside pragmatism regarding their scholarly decisions to the degree that this statement suggests.

Generally speaking, the statements made by my interviewees seem to indicate that it has become more acceptable to talk explicitly about the significance of non-epistemic interests on one’s scholarly work: Most of my interviewees talked about feeling highly burdened and constrained by the demands of the neoliberal university while simultaneously openly admitting to

their acquiescence to these demands. This operated, however, without them abandoning the(ir) moral ideal of what science *should* be.

Consequently, my interviewees regularly employed the two ideals (moral and neoliberal) governing their academic practice simultaneously and in sometimes contradictory ways, engaging in an intricate game of distance and proximity towards these different conceptions. For example, in the following quote a junior scholar is both advocating for a subscription to the neoliberal ideal academic (who is prepared to work 60-hour work weeks) while also casting this acquiescence as a means to an end to achieve a morally superior outcome (not ceding the field to right-wing scholars). Self-exploitation is considered a necessary condition for achieving one's political goals:

You can't change the world working a 40-hour week and you certainly can't working part-time. [...] As a predoc, that means working 40 to 50 hours a week [...] That's the only way to attain a position of influence. The people who are willing to do that are the ones not coming for the left-wing spectrum. If we want to change the world, the entire liberal, left-wing, young generation has to pay their dues. That means working 60 hours even if you disagree with how the system works. (junior scholar)

It is not my goal to argue whether this estimation is correct or false – rather, this example illustrates the ambivalent positions scholars inhabit when it comes to acquiescing, resisting and veiling their interactions with the requirements of the neoliberal university.

Notably, among the senior scholars who had ascended to the higher academic ranks, there also seemed to be a gendered divide in how scholars positioned themselves in relation to these two ideals. Scholars whom I perceived as male* seemed – at least outwardly in the interview situation – be locating themselves more in proximity to the moral ideal of the academic, while most scholars I read as female* seemed to talk more explicitly about positioning themselves near the neoliberal ideal. To me this indicates that scholars' different invocations of these ideals do not just depend on their position in the academic hierarchy but also on their relative position in relation to other axes of privilege and marginality.

This is echoed, for example, in the work of Sandra Beaufaÿs, who utilized Pierre Bourdieu's habitus concept to analyze how scientists are 'made'²². The author argues that to become a scientist, individuals must acquire a discipline-specific habitus (Beaufaÿs 2003: 71). Universities remain male*-dominated, androcentric spaces, because they are largely populated by actors who embody a habitus closely associated with that of the male* scientist (Beaufaÿs and Krais 2005: 97). While Beaufaÿs and Krais focus exclusively on the gendered nature of the scientific

²² Bourdieu defines habitus in the following manner: "the habitus could be considered as a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (Bourdieu 1972: 86).

habitus, I would extend this definition to include other positionalities and their intersections: To me, the academic habitus is additionally associated with whiteness, heterosexuality, abledness, an (upper)middle class background, etc.

Scholars who might not be able to easily embody the academic habitus, as it is not modeled on their subject positions, might consequently have found openings in an alignment with the neoliberal university. In subscribing more to the neoliberal ideal of the perfect academic, they can defend their right to exist in an institution that remains somewhat hostile to their presence. Conversely, though the neoliberal university also demands compliance from them, those individuals who are more easily able to embody the academic habitus (i.e., men*, (upper)middle-class individuals, etc.) may have less need to highlight their productivity and marketability to the same degree and are therefore able to orient themselves more towards a moral ideal of the perfect academic.

However, I also want to note that this trend I observed among my interviewees does not operate without disruption. For example, a junior scholar – whose subject position led them to routinely fear being subject to physical violence when in public – clearly distanced themselves from both conceptions of the perfect academic. They, over the course of our interview, seemed to indicate that they actively resisted acquiring an academic habitus, as this acquisition would inhibit their political ambitions:

I applied for scholarships for my current dissertation project and had to write project proposals and thought to myself: ‘I’m going to approach this strategically and I’ll present my methodology as more proper than it actually is’. I did that for a few months and it got to the point where I started internally judging the methodologies of others, [beginning to think along the lines of, note] ‘Well, that’s simply not the proper way of doing it!’ This attempt at doing things strategically had imprinted itself on me. [...] It also won’t ever be my goal to establish sexuality research as a scholarly field, because science has so much baggage that establishing myself within it seems a bit contradictory to me. Rather, there’s always a certain activist, political ambition [to my scholarship, note]. (junior scholar)

Now that I have shown the variance of my interviewees’ interactions with the two competing definitions of the perfect academic within the confines of the neoliberal university, I will show that depending on how scholars weighed pragmatic against idealistic considerations in their own scholarly practice, they were engaged differently in producing individual or collective openings for CSS scholars/hip.

9.2.2 Paradoxical Openings for CSS Scholars/hip Within the Neoliberal University?

In the introduction of this theme, I referenced Pereira’s conclusion that the commodification of science has not only produced closures, but also openings for the WGFS. Many of the (particularly senior) scholars I interviewed are – like the WGFS scholars Pereira interviewed and observed – highly productive individuals, entrenched in neoliberal norms, well-versed in securing funding and talked about the high levels of interest students seemed to have in the courses they

offered on sexualities. Following Pereira's logic, this could have led to similar openings for CSS scholars/hip, but, notably, according to my interviewees, the demands of the neoliberal university seems to have largely produced closures for CSS in Germany and Austria (the potential mechanisms behind this will be explored in the subsequent two themes). For example, one of the few locations in which a version of CSS had been able to institutionalize, namely the Frankfurt Institute for Sexual Science (see section 5.2), was dismantled –among other reasons – as it was not able to secure the funding necessary to be considered financially viable (Berner and Jückstock 2025: 866–868).

However, scholars are nevertheless producing CSS scholarship, even under conditions of relative institutional marginalization. In the following section, I consequently want to examine how, despite closures at the institutional level, scholars are nevertheless producing both individual, as well as collective openings for themselves and other CSS scholarship.

Openings for individuals – as reported by the senior scholars who had managed to secure permanent positions – were largely achieved by successfully toeing the line between epistemic and non-epistemic interests. A picture emerges of highly productive individual scholars, largely succeeding in securing positions in reference disciplines. As there exist few positions in which a CSS research focus benefits an applicant, most scholars seemed to be either supplementing their resume with another, more beneficial/'acceptable', research focus, or were framing their focus on sexualities as an interchangeable example in their quest to answer broader questions deemed relevant to the entirety of their discipline.

In addition to high levels of productivity, individual openings also seemed to be co-produced by scholars being highly connected within the scientific community (particularly in their reference disciplines). For example, one senior scholar argued that being well-connected did not just mean that they had a community of peers with whom to talk about the struggles of being an academic in the neoliberal university. Rather, this investment in building and maintaining a community had also been very instrumental in advancing their career:

I don't mean it to sound neoliberal, but it's also an investment, because you get jobs through these networks. Because if I don't know anyone and need a research associate then I think to myself: 'XY attended that conference with that exciting topic or is active there'. So, academic care work isn't just for others but also for yourself. (senior scholar)

However, most scholars who had managed to secure more senior positions argued that luck – in addition to hard work, being well-connected and successfully balancing epistemic and non-epistemic interests – had also played an important role in securing them. The importance of luck on scholarly careers is not specific to CSS scholars but rather impacts all disciplines (e.g., Davies and Pham 2023). However, I would argue that its impact might need to be weighed more

heavily when considering research fields which have low levels of institutionalization. When I asked how they managed to secure their current positions scholars acknowledged that, while they had worked very hard to get to this point, having been in the right place at the right time had been a significant factor as well:

In that sense, it [the methodology, note] perhaps also had a kind of novelty value at the time. People may have thought ‘I haven’t seen it be done like that before’. (senior scholar)

I think I was lucky quite often [...]. How did I do it? Through a lot of work and a lot of output [...] and also a lot of networking in the field. [...] And it was to my advantage that there were only a few [name of discipline, note] on my appointment committee. (senior scholar)

Consequently, openings for individual CSS scholars in the neoliberal university seem to be determined by a mixture of elements which individuals can impact (i.e. networking, and successfully balancing epistemic and non-epistemic interests), while others seem to be out of their hands (luck and circumstance).

While this section’s primary goal is to examine individual openings for CSS scholar/hip, I nevertheless want to attend to the fact that, though (some of) my interviewees managed to produce such openings for themselves and their scholarship, there are many others who did/could not achieve this. Therefore, I also want to give voice to the many scholars who did not succeed in this ‘Game of Thrones’, as one senior scholar called it. The narratives of my participants were riddled with anecdotes of colleagues who had either been forced to severely sideline or even abandon their CSS scholarship to stay in the academy:

Now he actually earns his keep mainly with [name of other topic, note]. He also says that, somehow, sex research is difficult, [...] that it’s difficult to secure funding. (junior scholar)

If you look at her publications since she became an assistant professor, there isn’t a single one on [name of CSS research topic, note] anymore. (senior scholar)

Closures also occurred even earlier in scholars’ careers, with a person’s position in relation to positions of privilege and marginality playing a significant role in whether they were willing and/or felt able to attempt to fight for individual openings with a CSS focus. Gender, ‘race’, class, (dis)ability, religious affiliation and their intersections clearly play a significant role in scholars gaining access to the academy in the first place (e.g., Gutiérrez Rodríguez et al. 2016; Laufenberg et al. 2018; Schütz et al. 2022) and impact which field one might (or feel like one can) enter. For example, all scholars that I interviewed were white²³ – a fact which I attempted to change, though admittedly unsuccessfully – is not simply a coincidence but appears indica-

²³ I am focusing here on ‘race’, as this is a marker of supposed difference, which is visible, and therefore easily accessible, to me.

tive of broader exclusionary practices. Consequently, this project is also implicated in reproducing a silence about the experiences of scholars who are not able or willing to enter the research field in the first place.

In their book, Pereria argues that, while they had previously held the belief that, cumulatively, openings for individual WGFS scholars might advance the entire field, they had since come to critically reject this causal relationship between individual and collective openings. (Pereira 2017: 183–184). Following this logic, I do not want to argue that what I am about to describe definitively creates openings for the broader field of CSS scholarship. However, I still want to shine a spotlight on how scholars in different positions are making decisions which – I would argue – work not to secure individual careers but rather advance the field of CSS more broadly. These include prioritizing epistemic interest despite neoliberal pressures and engaging in field-making. I want to focus both on the field-making practices scholars are engaged in as well as the surprising consequences epistemic marginality seems to have on individual scholars' weighing of non-epistemic against epistemic considerations.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the scholars who were most engaged in what Pereira (2017) calls 'field-making' (191), were those individuals who were in permanent positions. For example, one senior scholar, who was very involved in organizing interdisciplinary events and collective spaces for scholars researching sexualities, made it very clear that they could only do this – and keep their CSS focus – because they had a permanent contract:

It's obvious to me that I wouldn't have been able to expand my research if I'd been in the normal cycle of the postdoc phase. I wouldn't have been able to do [field-making practice, note] [...], because I would have had to find a new topic [...], I was very aware that it would have had to be completely unrelated to sexuality. [...] I think to myself, 'I have a permanent contract, they'll have to get rid of me first'. As long as I hold a permanent position and stay here, I see myself as a disseminator who's able to reach people. (senior scholar)

However, it was not just the privilege of a permanent position which allowed scholars to weigh their epistemic interests, as well as collegial and collective work more heavily. Rather, and somewhat paradoxically, their perceived unemployability also led some junior researchers to – at least partially – disentangle themselves from the demands of the neoliberal university. Multiple junior scholars had seemingly chosen their topics despite knowing full well that this choice likely meant that they would not be able to continue working in academia after finishing their PhDs. However, it was this knowledge which seemed to free them from the constraints of having to consider non-epistemic interest too much, as the following quote illustrates:

I think you need intrinsic motivation, that you think it's important and interesting. [...] I think you can't really strive for recognition in this context and maybe not even for an academic career. At least my supervisor warned me about this a little bit: 'Do you want to build a career? [...] You have to see where you can go.' There are no professorships for this. And, essentially, I am not striving for one. (junior scholar)

A senior scholar argued how important contributions by individuals not embedded (yet) in the dogma that scholarship must be profitable or status-preserving were to the field of sexualities research as a whole. They argued that those topics, which are under-researched by professional academics (oftentimes because they are unable to secure the required funding), can often be taken up by students, who are able to weigh epistemic interests more heavily than professional academics needing to secure e.g., academic employment.

Another junior scholar, when comparing their perception of gender studies scholars and scholars working in the queer and trans studies context, seemed to conclude that relative academic legitimacy within the neoliberal university came at a cost, which they seemed to find unappealing and unwilling to ‘pay’:

Sometimes I get the impression that, especially in the German-speaking context, [the] gender studies and feminist research are very dry. I think that’s just the German-speaking academic culture: Very serious, a certain methodology fetish and... There’s a wide variety of people but sometimes I think: People don’t appear to be having a lot of fun. [...] It seems to me [...] that people in the queer studies, sexuality studies, maybe even trans studies have more fun. Maybe because it’s marginalized in a different way [...]. If people aren’t taking you seriously anyway, you don’t have to be as concerned with being taken seriously. (junior scholar)

Consequently, achieving a certain status in the neoliberal university is also – as this scholar argues – accompanied by a more rigid subscription to specific conceptions of scientificity with the goal of perpetuating this status. This, in turn, can lead to suppression of knowledges that are seen as threatening to a field’s status in the (neoliberal) university (see e.g., Piepmeier 2012: 124–127; Pereira 2017: 85–86).

Conversely, scholar/hip that exists far enough outside of the bounds of what is considered legitimate, marketable science might actually be less incentivized in producing knowledges which can be monetized. Consequently, I would argue that the ambivalent relationship between academic marginalization and the production of critical scholar/hip needs to be considered. I want to be clear that I am not arguing that epistemic marginalization is to be considered a prerequisite for truly critical scholarship or indicate that such marginality is therefore desirable or an appropriate replacement for more secure employment prospects or even institutionalization. Rather, I want to focus on the fact that, even in the face of such opposition, CSS scholars have found ways to produce important, though oftentimes uncomfortably received, knowledges about sexualities. In their academic practice they are contributing to a critical discourse which will hopefully encourage following generations of CSS scholars (like myself) to perceive the field as a viable and important area of research.

9.3 The Non-Performativity of Academia's Moral Ethos

The idea for this theme emerged based on the following off-hand comment made by one of the junior scholars I interviewed:

I do feel that, especially in the humanities and social sciences, being open to this [sexualities research, note] goes hand in hand with a kind of moral ethos. It seems that their desire to be open, or their conception of morality, means that they would like to support it [sexualities research, note]. (junior scholar)

Though scholars' individualization²⁴ seemed to oftentimes veil potential commonalities between their and others' experiences, this statement nevertheless appeared to represent a more collective experience in scholars' academic work and I would interpret it in the following manner: The scholar identifies a supposed commitment to a moral ethos in the SSH but seems unsure if this commitment is accompanied by any actions to ensure said commitment in practice. While this scholar talks only about the SSH and focuses largely on individual, higher-up academic's commitment (or lack thereof), I would argue that the co-existence of a desire to be open – in accordance with broader norms of what science *should* be (see section 9.2.1) – coupled with (partial) inaction to ensure said openness is something that also operates on the institutional level.

That universities are value-laden institutions becomes abundantly clear when engaging with their mission statements or codes of conduct. Normative values of what science is and should be remain a central aspect of the narratives universities tell about their inner workings. Taking the example of my own institution's code of conduct (as comparing mission statements of multiple institutions would be beyond the scope of this project), the University of Vienna begins by summarizing its mission – and therefore implicitly its moral ethos – in the following way:

The University of Vienna is a place where knowledge for the present and future is generated, shared and critically reflected upon, under conditions of freedom of inquiry and expression. It therewith contributes to the enhancement of scholarship and to the solution of questions which are relevant to mankind [sic] and society. (University of Vienna 2013)

Through this statement, academic freedom and the social responsibility of science are identified as core values of the institution. Drawing on these institutional claims (which I would argue are representative for most universities), I will use Sara Ahmed's conceptual work on non-performativity (2004, 2012) to show that these statements operate as non-performatives in the case of the group of CSS scholars whom I interviewed.

In their book *On Being Included* (2012), Sara Ahmed argues that institutional commitments might not necessarily lead to meaningful change as such statements take the place of actual

²⁴ This individualization of scholars has been detailed in theme 1.

action to ensure equality. In fact, statements of commitment can instead bring about the contradictory effect of concealing marginalization processes in higher education institutions. Institutions can consequently be simultaneously engaged in promoting as well as resisting inclusion of marginalized scholars/hip. Drawing on the work of language philosopher J. L. Austin, Ahmed argues that statements of commitment are to be interrogated as potential “‘unhappy performatives’ ,i.e., utterances that would ‘do something’ if the right conditions had been met, but which do not do that thing, as the conditions have not been met” (Ahmed 2004: § 50). Ahmed further argues that “[o]fficial descriptions are part of an aesthetic and moral order: an appearance of valuing” (Ahmed 2012: 59). Institutions are consequently virtue-signaling through supposed commitments (i.e., fostering diversity in personnel and teaching) to be considered modern and progressive, while simultaneously (re)producing continued exclusion of marginalized scholars/hip.

While Ahmed (2012) largely focuses their work on the non-performativity of documents detailing institutional commitments to diversity, I would argue that this can be expanded to other ideals that institutions such as universities propagate in their mission statements: I contend that scholars’ academic freedom to produce knowledge relevant to society is being curtailed by both institutional factors (i.e., universities seemingly being disinterested in fostering the institutionalization of interdisciplinary CSS, despite most scholar’s adherence to the demands of the neoliberal university and student demand²⁵) as well as individual senior academics working within such institutional frameworks (i.e., potential supervisors refusing to take on certain PhD topics). I am aware that framing institutional statements relating to academic freedom as ‘unhappy performatives’ is a grand claim – especially as this was a value that many of the scholars I interviewed also identified with very strongly and were seeking to defend against recent right-wing attacks. However, building on Afifi and Elhendi (2025), I would argue that the conditions for actual academic freedom might never have been met in the first place. In their article, the authors discuss – among others – the value of “referenc[ing] [...] academic freedom when entire fields of inquiry are actively being targeted for elimination with little resistance from the university structures that are supposedly committed to its defense” (419). While the authors are not utilizing Ahmed’s theory explicitly, I would argue that they are nevertheless signaling how institutional commitments to academic freedom might always have been unhappy performa-

²⁵ That CSS scholars adherence to the demands of the neoliberal university has not produced (conditional) openings similar to the WGFS was explored in the previous theme.

tives: “The bottom line is that academic freedom does not and cannot exist as long as the possibility of eliminating a topic of study through oppression, colonial violence, or suppression remains.” (421) Consequently, institutional commitments to secure academic freedom are not only non-performatives in the case of CSS scholars/hip; it is however a research field in which this non-performativity becomes highly visible.

In the following, I will engage with three ways – all of which were routinely addressed in the interviews – through which this non-performativity of the university’s moral ethos manifests, and is masked, in the narratives by my participants. I will firstly analyze the ways in which the individualization (which was mapped in theme 1) of scholars, coupled with the opacity of decision-making processes in academia contributes to veiling topic-based exclusions; Secondly, I will focus on responses to CSS scholars/hip within academia; and investigate the subtle ways in which its epistemic marginalization works – and co-exists with fascinated interest – in various academic settings. Finally, I expand on what I perceive to be a disconnect between the resonance CSS research oftentimes creates beyond academia and the lack of institutional fostering of CSS, as well as detail university administrations’ failings in protecting CSS scholars/hip against right-wing hostility.

9.3.1 Individualization and Academia as a ‘Black Box’²⁶

Many of my interviewees seemed unsure as to the impact their choice of a CSS topic had on them or their scholarship being rejected in various academic settings. While they largely seemed aware that a CSS focus did not constitute an advantage in the tussle over academic positions, gauging the significance of their topic regarding their experiences of marginalization and rejection (e.g. in job interviews and when submitting their research to conferences and journals) seemed to largely elude scholars. For example, one senior scholar talked about how exclusions were never explicitly justified by an outright rejection of their person or their research focus, but rather the(ir) undesirability (of their research) was communicated more subtly:

I didn’t experience personal discrimination, but you don’t get invited, you’re erased, your research isn’t taken all that seriously. When you’re applying for professorships you’re asked weird questions, like ‘what does that have to do with [name of discipline, note]?’ It operates through these mechanisms: That the research is constructed as inherently illegitimate. (senior scholar)

That rejection occurred subtly and without overt reference to scholars’ CSS focus, coupled with a high degree of individualization – and consequently few opportunities to share or compare experiences with fellow sexualities scholars –, seemed to leave many of my participants unsure as to the significance of their choice of topic on their careers. This became apparent when asking

²⁶ Defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “a system or process that uses information to produce a particular set of results, but that works in a way that is secret or difficult to understand”. (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.)

scholars whether they felt that they could work on sexualities without facing barriers and discrimination within academic settings:

Not getting a predoctoral position is less dependent on the research interest itself than on the application process. Things like: Is the person a good fit for the team? Did the position have to be advertised but they already have someone in mind. (junior scholar)

It is not my intention to minimize that these dynamics are also relevant when it comes to securing a position as there are likely oftentimes multiple reasons for (not) getting a job. However, the confidence with which this scholar – as did many other scholars – assumes that their research focus is *not* contributing significantly to their struggle to find a position – especially after listening to multiple accounts of scholars struggling to find PhD positions with their CSS topics – seemed notable to me.

Another valuable resource for my argumentation that systemic exclusions may have become more veiled was provided by a senior scholar, who primarily works in France but was also academically socialized in Germany and remains well-connected with German scholars. Their recounted experiences of exclusion appeared to me much more overt and violent than the ones recounted by my interviewees working in the German and Austrian context. This contrast, which is foregrounded in their statement, led me to tentatively hypothesize the following: The creation of institutions (e.g., equality offices) designed to protect marginalized university personnel from being discriminated against because of their social identities but also their research foci (on e.g. marginalized sexualities) may have not only mitigated exclusions but also contributed to shifting said exclusions from overt to subtle:

I think that [...], all these diversity and inclusion policies, [...] they [the diversity office and its members, note] are institutionalized and have power [...]. I think that, so far, the resilience is higher [in Germany], because they can intervene if... I don't have anyone to turn to and say 'professor x told me during the feedback on my application that I shouldn't do gender research anymore'. (senior scholar: Cornelia Möser)

I want to make clear that it is not my goal to minimize the important work that equality offices do. However, their institutionalization may have (though inadvertently) also contributed to exclusions manifesting in a more veiled manner as a potential backlash – via a person involving the equality office – against overt exclusion may be anticipated. However, this also makes resistance against such exclusions more difficult. As the reasons for excluding marginalized scholars/hip become opaquer, scholars – particularly those who are less well connected – have less tangible evidence for their exclusion from an institution that is publicly committed to uphold the very ideals it is subtly circumventing.

What might also contribute to this opacity is that, specifically the commitment to academic freedom, was not simply propagated by university administrations but was also a core individual value of many of my interviewees. This might have also contributed to scholars not wanting to believe that their research topics may actually be the deciding factor in their exclusion – a possible illusion that may be easier upheld when one is not surrounded by colleagues who are experiencing similar closures. For example, when I asked scholars whether they had generally felt encouraged (or curtailed) in pursuing their CSS scholarship, many of them repeated a variation of the argument that their CSS scholarship was never openly denigrated, which mirrors Pereira’s observations for the WGFS: “[I]t is now less acceptable to openly dismiss WGFS as scientifically worthless” (Pereira 2019: 346):

“no one ever said openly ‘what kind of nonsense is this?’” (senior scholar); “it’s not like colleagues approach me and say ‘your research is worthless’” (senior scholar); “I was never questioned, not even by superiors, or told ‘you can’t do that’” (junior scholar); I wouldn’t go so far as to say that people say ‘you shouldn’t be allowed to research that’” (junior scholar)

Only one scholar – themselves an effective and avid networker – recounted having ever received tangible proof that their research focus had led to them not being offered a position:

I applied for a professorship [...] [and] was ranked number 1 but the university didn’t appoint me to the position [...]. I learned from internal sources that they did not want to offer a professorship in general [name of discipline, note] to someone with such a strong queer and gender studies focus. (senior scholar)

Receiving confirmation that a rejection was topic-based and not simply incidental is consequently seemingly reserved for those scholars well-connected enough to hear ‘through the grapevine’ why exactly they had been rejected. I contend, therefore, that scholars’ individualization plays into the hands of an institution, which might be more interested as being viewed as guaranteeing academic freedom than actually enforcing this norm.

9.3.2 Subtle Dismissals and Fascinated Interest

In the following, I will expand upon how exactly these subtle dismissals operate and show that – looking holistically at the 15 narratives – exclusions of CSS scholars/hip appear systemic rather than incidental, though they were often not recognized as such by my largely individualized group of scholars.

Rather, though most scholars initially talked about there being few barriers to their CSS scholarship, further probing by me usually revealed that scholars had nevertheless experienced exclusions which (by some more than others) they felt *may* also be related to their CSS focus. However, as these modes of exclusions were usually polite and subtle, some scholars appeared uncertain as to the significance of their topic on their experiences of rejection and marginaliza-

tion. I mapped three patterns of subtle dismissal in the narratives: polite rejection, invisibilization, and shepherding away. However, it is important to note that these dismissals are not always malicious (though they certainly can be). In fact, the final mode especially exists at the nexus of marginalization and protection.

The first mode, *polite rejection*, was mostly reported by junior scholars who recounted their struggles in securing a PhD position or their early experiences with attempting to present their research at academic conferences. Those handing down these rejections were usually presented as inhabiting (or attempting to do so) the role of a caring advisor not wanting to put a junior scholar into a position in which they might be left to their own devices without sufficient support: “The topic generated a lot of interest but, ultimately, I didn’t manage to secure a position. The reasons which were given went something like this: The theory didn’t quite fit or they weren’t familiar enough with it and wouldn’t be able to offer me the proper support.” (junior scholar)

Similarly, another scholar reported having been rejected from presenting their research at a conference for fear of the organizing team that they may not be able to sufficiently protect other scholars (all of whom are adults) from their own reactions to a divisive and challenging CSS topic: “I applied for a smaller conference in Germany, and they replied with ‘it’s an important topic but they’re worried that they may be unable to create the right environment for my presentation because my talk might elicit reactions’, this related to trigger warnings” (junior scholar).

The second mode of subtle exclusion, *invisibilization*, was one faced by scholars of all career stages as they interacted with other academics – without a (critical) sexualities research focus – in community hubs such as conferences or professional associations of their respective disciplines.

For example, one senior scholar recounted how their topics – though their relevance seemed indisputable to them – were simply not included in panels at disciplinary congresses related to pressing socio-political issues. Another scholar reported that, while they did not face significant hurdles in entering disciplinary conferences with their topic, they nevertheless oftentimes felt like they were produced as a non-member of said discipline, regardless of their own sense of identity: “I’m able to get into conferences with my topic. But nothing much comes of it. I get the impression that [...] the attributions I’m assigned position me as beyond the boundaries of the [name of discipline, note]” (junior scholar). This experience of being positioned outside of their discipline is also echoed in academic literature from other geographic locations and by scholars working in other disciplines (De Craene 2017; Keene 2022).

Another senior scholar talked about their perception that fellow academics simply turned their backs on them when they attended or presented their scholarship at conferences: “In academic circles, the conversation is sometimes just over. No one asks: ‘Oh, what exactly are you researching?’” (senior scholar) Consequently, while no one actively calls into question the relevance or scientificity of this scholar’s work, they nevertheless perceive a strong lack of interest from their colleagues. As I would argue that science thrives on a culture of debate and discourse, this individual and collective lack of interaction with their scholarship not only isolates them individually but produces them and their research as outside of the discourse, thereby invisibilizing both.

The third and final mode, *shepherding away*, relates mostly to experiences made by scholars in the early years of their career (during their doctoral studies and in postdoctoral positions) when interacting with more senior scholars such as their advisors: Scholars reported having been advised or even encouraged to marginalize their CSS focus and are thereby – sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally – shepherded into more ‘acceptable’ territories. This was the only mode, in which both sides – both individuals receiving and giving this advice – were represented in the group I interviewed. This advice is therefore often given with the intention of helping junior scholars avoid career repercussions as there are currently few, if any, positions for which a strong CSS focus is considered an advantage:

I was regularly told ‘You have to escape this thematic focus. You have to widen your net. If you want to have a chance at holding a professorship for general [name of discipline, note] you have to cover a wider range of topics.’ The advice wasn’t necessarily to abandon the topic in the sense of ‘be done with it’ but they advised me that it had to occupy a niche position in my research. (senior scholar)

The other side of this interaction is represented in the account of a senior scholar, who clearly felt the weight of this responsibility and seemed genuinely distraught over trying (and often-times failing) to balance encouragement and discouragement as to neither give their PhD students false hope nor pushing them to leave CSS (or other critical research) behind:

These hardships that make research impossible, that breaks my heart every time. [...] I have to do a balancing act between [...] just giving them the opportunity and saying ‘come on, enroll with me and risk getting your nose bloodied’. [...] I have colleagues who criticize me for that, saying ‘what you’re doing is immoral. You can’t just set them up to fail like that. You have to tell them at the outset [...] find another topic and do [...] [the other] research on the side’. (senior scholar: Cornelia Möser)

However, I want to be careful not to argue that junior scholars are incapable of making their own decisions or be sufficiently aware what their research focus might mean for their careers. Many of the junior scholars in my sample had high levels of awareness of what their choice of topic might mean for their future employment prospects within academia and still decided to stick with their topics, as the following quote shows and which has also been detailed in section 9.2.2: “I think you can’t really strive for recognition in this context and maybe not even for an

academic career. [...] There are no professorships for this. And, essentially, I am not striving for one.” (junior scholar) Junior scholars should consequently not be seen as simply passive recipients who are blindly following such advice.

However, I would also argue that the fact that I struggled to find scholars at the professorial level with a CSS focus is nevertheless a good indicator that this advice is either oftentimes taken to heart and/or scholars are pushed out of academia when they cannot secure positions. As I am only interviewing those scholars who have succeeded in (critically) researching sexualities within the academy, the leaky pipeline (see e.g., Bourabain 2021) of potential CSS scholars is likely even more pronounced were one to also look at those scholars who e.g. did not manage to find ways to finance their CSS-related PhDs.

Paradoxically, these modes of dismissal sometimes existed alongside genuine, fascinated interest from other academics. For example, one junior scholar recounted how their topic was both utilized to signal modernity, as well as serving as a sort of social glue among their peers as everyone seemed to have some personal experience, and therefore lived knowledge, about it:

It [the topic, note] offers plenty to work with, because everyone has something to contribute because everyone knows [name of topic, note] so everyone can participate. That’s the case with sex in general. Of course, the same can’t be said if you do a PhD on algorithms in search engines. [...] What I mean is that it’s an everyday thing and therefore accessible. (senior scholar)

While it is not my goal to dispute some scholars’ experiences of being welcomed with genuine interest by colleagues and superiors, it appeared to me that this interest was oftentimes somewhat conditional both on the relative social acceptability of the topics (i.e., camming vs. necrophilia), as well as on scholars’ being ready and willing not simply to talk about what *they* were interested in but specifically also what interested their conversation partners:

I observe an extremely strong desire to talk about [name of topic, note] [both within and beyond academia] and every chance to do so is simply taken – which is nice. But it’s also a bit frustrating for me as a scientist because, naturally, my research interests are much more specific and do not relate to answering general questions about [name of topic, note]. (senior scholar)

This paradox of being both routinely dismissed and subject to intense, sometimes overbearing fascination is indicative of what Thorsten Benkel has coined the ‘talkative taboo’. This refers to the co-existence of sexualities being conceived of as having always been – partly or entirely – and remaining taboo, while they are simultaneously being increasingly virulently discussed. However, *what* is ‘acceptable’ enough to be openly discussed remains subject to intense social scrutiny and regimentation (Akalin and Benkel 2010: 23–25). Notably, however, genuine, fascinated interest (by both peers and superiors) did not seem to contribute much to mitigating the exclusions scholars faced within academia.

9.3.3 Lack of Institutional Support

While some scholars talked about fellow academic's interest in their research, the primary sites of engagement with their scholarship were positioned by most as outside of academic circles. Quite a few scholars talked about receiving high levels of interest in their research from non-academic actors, e.g. non-fiction publishers, cultural institutions or the press:

Despite the lack of enthusiasm with which it's received within academia, beyond the academy [it's a different story]. I always talk about it, and people are almost always instantly interested and everyone has thoughts about it or has first-hand experiences with it. People are very open and interested in talking about the topic with me. (junior scholar)

Notably, however, this interest and perceived socio-political relevance by non-academic actors have not translated into increased institutional fostering or promotion of CSS research *within* academia (with the exception of small pockets of increased institutionalization, e.g., the HS Merseburg in Germany). Circling back to institutional commitments to the “enhancement of scholarship and to the solution of questions which are relevant to mankind [sic] and society” (University of Vienna 2013), I would argue that universities are by and large not ‘making good’ on this promise in the case of CSS scholars/hip – thereby making such statements non-performative.

Another aspect mentioned by a significant number of scholars was what they felt was a lack of or too little support from their institutions in times of increased right-wing hostility targeting critical scholars/hip relating to social categorizations such as sexualities, gender, ‘race’, class, disability, etc. While many did feel support from their immediate colleagues and superiors, most of those that had either been personally attacked or witnessed such attacks on others felt like their universities had not responded in an appropriate manner:

[It's not like] the president [of the university, note] writes me an e-mail and says, ‘[...] You're safe with us, your academic freedom is guaranteed, we have your back!’ or something similar. In other words, there's very little support even though my scientific legitimacy is so virulently attacked by the public. (senior scholar)

A real commitment to academic freedom, equality and inclusion would, in my opinion, entail university administrations' taking a public stance against targeted attacks on their members. This negligence of explicitly providing their scholars – particularly those who are working from marginalized subject positions – with the full backing of the institution, is another indicator of statements of commitment about fostering and protecting academic freedom and marginalized scholars/hip, both individual and institutional, operating as non-performatives.

In this theme I have mapped the following: Cumulatively, the opacity of exclusionary processes coupled with the subtlety of dismissals and their coexistence with genuine, fascinated interest

within academia seem to veil the non-performativity of (both institutional and individual) commitments to securing academic freedom and promoting knowledge relevant to society to CSS scholars. I got the impression that scholars' individualization contributed to obscuring the full extent of this non-performativity (particularly to junior scholars), though I do not mean to suggest that scholars are oblivious to these trends. Rather, the disconnect between the resonance many of their topics created beyond academia failing to produce increased institutional support as well as their institutions' inaction in protecting them from right-wing attacks were clearly identified by scholars as hypocritical. While this thesis only analyzes this non-performativity for one research field – CSS –, I would expect, like Afifi and Elhendi (2025) claim, that these patterns might be mirrored in other, particularly critical, disciplines and broader research areas.

9.4 (Negotiating) CSS' Exceptionalization and (Epistemic) Marginalization

In their analysis of WGFS's epistemic status²⁷ Pereira (2017), referencing Lorraine Code, argues the following: The field and its members are oftentimes discredited as not being able to produce 'proper' knowledge on the basis that it is "too subjective", "value-laden" or "merely political" (51), which has "constrain[ed] the development of WGFS research and teaching, and negatively impact[s] WGFS scholars' and students' job prospects and career progression, access to funding and publishing opportunities, self-confidence, and well-being" (Pereira 2019: 345). Consequently, there is a high need for scholars to engage in boundary work to position their research within the boundaries of legitimate science (345).

This pattern is seemingly mirrored by the experiences of the CSS scholars whom I interviewed: While scholars usually, when I asked them whether they felt as though their research was considered legitimate, academic knowledge, responded that they perceived the university as open to and supportive of their research, a divergent picture seemed to emerge in the ensuing conversations, indicative of CSS' (epistemic) marginalization and its impact on individual scholars (which I have already touched on in section 9.3.2). I do not want to negate individual experiences of also feeling welcome, which were reported by various interviewees. However, when looking holistically at all 15 interviews and based on the arguments I have made in my previous themes, I would argue that, cumulatively, CSS scholars/hip are oftentimes positioned outside the boundary of legitimate science.

²⁷ Defined as "the degree to which, and terms in which, a knowledge claim, or entire field, is recognised as fulfilling the requisite criteria to be considered credible and relevant knowledge, however those criteria are defined in specific spaces, communities and moments" (Pereira 2017: 47).

I would, however, argue that this pattern of (epistemic) marginalization of CSS also works differently to the dynamics Pereira describes for the WGFS. While CSS is seemingly also seen as “too subjective”, “value-laden” or “merely political” (Pereira 2017: 51), this is supplemented by sexualities – and scholarship concerned with them – being considered taboo and (sometimes) stigmatized. This status, in turn, contributes to CSS being received with varying levels of both (intense) discomfort and interest by others (both in the academy and beyond). I therefore concur with Pereira, who has argued that an entire field may become “sexualised and othered, in epistemically disqualifying ways” (Pereira 2017: 52) and will, in the following, engage with the implications of this sexualization on CSS (scholars/hip).

To achieve this I will focus on how this individual and collective discomfort with CSS scholars/hip manifests in the experiences of my participants and connect this to broader patterns of (epistemic) marginalization. Following this, I will investigate scholars’ boundary work aimed at resisting and subverting this marginalization and nevertheless positioning themselves and their scholars/hip within the boundaries of ‘proper’ scientific knowledge. I will also engage with scholars’ positionalities and their potential effects on the success of their boundary work.

9.4.1 Mapping Discomfort, Trivialization, Marginalization, and Exceptionalization

In the narratives of my participants, the taboo status of sexualities – and consequently scholars/hip relating to them – manifested in said scholars/hip oftentimes being constructed as undesired, as one of my interviewees concluded rather diplomatically: “My impression is that [...] sexuality is a topic that we don’t necessarily want to research in the German-speaking context.” (junior scholar).

This desire not to have to ‘deal’ with sexualities emerged in a variety of ways in scholars’ narratives about their experiences. For example, one scholar – who was researching a topic which related to sexualities but was not entirely concerned with it – talked about how other academics routinely attempted to divorce their topic from having anything to do with sexualities and connected this to what they perceived as a collective aversion to sexualities topics in their discipline: “I always get the impression [...] that people are trying to position my topic in a way that implies that it has *nothing* to do with sex. [...] I think that in [name of discipline, note] [...] [everything] that relates to the body, sex and sensuality [...] are thorny topics”. (junior scholar) This can be read as an attempt to supposedly sanitize scholars/hip which is situated (also) within the CSS by attempting to “clean the association, to distance the proximity between them and ‘other’” as Gemma Ahearne describes it (Ahearne 2015: 31).

These dynamics were supplemented by scholars' perception that they and their scholarship oftentimes provoked discomfort – which in turn produced uncomfortable, and sometimes inappropriate reactions – in other academics²⁸. Most scholars did not talk about specific interactions they had had but noted that they had to routinely manage reactions from other academics which transcended customary professional interactions. For example, one scholar talked about how their research was trivialized (they were reflexively engaging with their own involvement in the sexual practice they were researching) and the labor involved in doing it devalued, a pattern which matches the accounts of scholars working in other contexts (e.g., Keene 2022; Perin 2024): “Every once in a while, there was a fleeting moment at a conference when someone kind of changed the pitch of their voice and [said]: ‘isn’t it kind of funny that [...] you’ll get a PhD for that?’” (senior scholar).

Responses like this also contributed to scholars' employment of what Janice Irvine calls ‘closeting practices’ (Irvine 2018: 5), a concept which has since also been taken up by other scholars (Keene 2022; Perin 2024; Ryan and Huschke 2017). Many of my interviewees reported that they tended to selectively obscure their research focus (both within and beyond academia) in an attempt to avoid uncomfortable interactions and or discreditation:

In academia you often have to introduce yourself briefly and [...] I always choose my words very carefully, depending on who I’m speaking to [...], how much I go into detail: If I say that I’m working on [name of topic, note] or if I say that I’m, I don’t know, working on [changing] sex norms [...] or something. But that also applies to my private life.” (junior scholar)

Cumulatively, I contend that my participants' experiences are indicative of what Valerie de Craene (2024) has coined the ‘erotophobic academy’. By focusing on the institution rather than individuals, de Craene contends that the processes which sideline sexualities scholars/hip are systemic in nature. This erotophobia, for example, manifests through the routine dismissal of “a radically reflexive stance that is bound up with responsibility and accountability and [...] refuses to fully acknowledge the researcher’s role in shaping knowledge, also when this includes sexual/ sexualized interactions.”²⁹ (De Craene 2024: 8).

Now that I have mapped how the individual and collective discomfort surrounding CSS (and sexualities in general) manifested in my participants' narratives and connected this to what I consider institutional erotophobia, I want to investigate whether this also means that a conceptualization of sexualities scholars/hip as ‘dirty work(ers)’ – as much of the academic literature

²⁸ Scholars also reported similar experiences in non-academic settings.

²⁹ This will be further explored in the next theme.

contends (e.g., Irvine 2014; Darakchi and Valkovičová 2025; Meehan 2025) – ‘works’ with the experiences of my German and Austrian participants.

I hesitate to conform entirely to this view, as I find it somewhat reductive in the face of such complex and multitudinous experiences of the CSS scholars I interviewed. In the spirit of accounting for these complexities, I will conclude that – in the German and Austrian context – CSS scholars/hip *can* be dirty work(ers) as the topics are sometimes associated with stigma which can attach itself to the individuals doing such work. However, I have also shown in this section that scholars/hip are also being constructed as ‘fun work(ers)’ (see e.g., Ghaziani 2025), serving to trivialize scholarship and the labor involved in producing it. Furthermore, CSS scholars/hip has also emerged as invisibilized work in the previous theme³⁰, as scholars reported feeling ignored by their peers and observe a lack of engagement with their research.

I would argue that whether CSS scholars/hip are constructed as dirty, fun, or invisible work(ers) depends, though not exclusively, on the position of their research foci in relation to what Gayle Rubin conceptualized as the ‘charmed circle’. With this concept, Rubin illustrates how some sex acts are privileged over others, entitling them to benefits that go along with being considered “good, normal, natural, blessed” (Rubin 2011: 152) such as legal protection and social acceptance for the individuals practicing them. While there may consequently exist a taboo surrounding sexualities as a whole, it does matter *which* topics a CSS scholar is doing research on (or attempting to do so), as is exemplified by the following quote:

Detailed research isn’t being funded, and if it is, it is because it uses a buzzword such as ‘queer’. [...] As soon as the topic [of a funding program, note] is more overarching, i.e. research on the social effects of new media or on violence more generally, sexuality topics are oftentimes excluded because the review committee perceives them as too shameful, too taboo. [There are] topics that are low prestige, like BDSM. You certainly won’t be able to get funding for that [...]. [And] all topics which relate to pedophilia, pedosexuality are also difficult to research. (senior scholar)

While the ‘charmed circle’ has shifted somewhat since Rubin posited it in the 1980s (Tuider 2021: 193), certain types of sexual conduct and relationships consequently remain more stigmatized than others, among them, e.g., BDSM and criminalized sexual orientations and acts. As they are positioned beyond the ‘acceptable’ their academic study is seemingly also being curtailed.

I would consequently concur with Lynn Comella (2024) who argues that sexualities (research) are *exceptionalized* as this appears to be the common thread weaving through all of my participants’ narratives. Building on Gayle Rubin, as I am in this theme, Comella concludes that sex(ualities) are generally associated with a high degree of significance, which marks them as

³⁰ See section 9.3.2.

seemingly different, more special than other research topics and consequently in need of being “approached carefully and treated with special consideration” (22). This, I would argue, translates into research on sexualities becoming *exceptionalized work*, which can manifest, depending on a scholar’s topic – and its position in relation to the charmed circle – as dirty, fun, or invisibilized work. However, how scholars/hip are received is unlikely to be stagnant and constant but is likely context-specific and dependent on the specific audience.

Building on this exceptionalization, I find it productive to borrow Sara Ahmed’s use of the metaphor of the ‘space invader’, (Ahmed 2012: 13) for CSS scholars: While their scholarship is oftentimes not outright rejected, its special status means that CSS scholars seem to be conceived of as outsiders “invading the spaces reserved for others” (13). One scholar even explicitly mentioned this exceptionalization (and their interaction with it) during our interview: “You’re addressed differently. My strategy in countering that is to pretend like it isn’t happening and treating [research subject, note] like any other subject [...]. I just ignore it and look at people and say: ‘Huh, where did you get the idea that it’s a special subject? Sorry, but what’s wrong with *you*?’” (senior scholar)

Cumulatively the patterns of scholars/hip being received uncomfortably and subjected to (epistemic) marginalization and trivialization – which I have connected to sexualities(research)’s exceptionalized status – seem to indicate that CSS scholars/hip exist largely in a chilly and charged climate within an erotophobic institution. In the following, I will turn to how exactly exclusions of ‘space invaders’ from the realm of ‘legitimate’ knowledge are produced and justified. As discomfort itself is not considered a legitimate reason for marginalizing certain scholars/hip in an institution which touts its commitment to certain values (see theme 3), exclusions must be otherwise legitimated.

9.4.2 Justifying the Epistemic Marginalization of ‘Space Invaders’

Over the course of the interviews a pattern seemed to emerge through which the discreditation of CSS scholars/hips as legitimate knowledge (producers) operated. Firstly, the research was positioned as niche and this niche status was then utilized as an indicator for its supposed non-generalizability. This, in addition to routinely framing CSS scholars/hip as ‘me-search/ers’ (see e.g., Meral et al. 2025), seemed to serve as supposed justification for low levels of support for CSS or even its exclusion from the academy.

While many researchers did not reject the conceptions of their research as niche (and even reproduced this niche status themselves³¹), they strongly opposed the conclusions that were being drawn as to their research's generalizability and relevance: "The [other subdisciplines, note] don't even seem to realize that there might be interesting aspects to my research which I could present to or share with them. So it's being isolated a lot." (senior scholar) Implicit in such rejections is the assumption that this scholar's research cannot have produced insights which might be relevant to non-sexualities scholars, therefore reinforcing a conception of the knowledge CSS scholars produce as too specific to be applicable to other topics.

Another senior scholar indicated that – in their quest to qualify for a permanent position – their research focus on sexualities was constructed as too specific to qualify them to 'speak' for the entirety of their discipline: "Can I make my general [name of discipline, note] competency visible enough or has my publishing simply been too niche? If four out of five articles have 'sexual' or 'sex' in their title you have to justify yourself quite a lot." (senior scholar)

However, it was not only the argument of supposed non-generalizability which served to push CSS scholars/hip to the margins of their respective disciplines. Rather, the relevance of analyzing sexualities was called into question even more broadly:

Sometimes it felt like you had to make a very strong case for why you're interested in sexuality and researching sexuality, which is crazy because it's such [...] a fundamental part of being human. But the question ' [...] Why is this relevant? And what is [name of discipline, note] about it?' was asked again [and again]. (junior scholar)

Supposed irrelevance was also produced by drawing attention to researchers' (supposed) personal stake in their research – a phenomenon that is not limited to CSS research. Rather, one's personal involvement in e.g., the communities one studies has been pejoratively called 'me-search'. Scholars' (assumed) proximity to their research has, as Meral et al. (2025) argue, immense consequences on their perceived credibility: "me-searchers are stereotyped as more biased when researching bias against their ingroup, whether or not their work explicitly focuses on social justice implications" (Meral et al. 2025: 12). One scholar pointed towards a double standard as they recalled how they were oftentimes asked – with the insinuation that there must be a personal reason to their research interest – why they were researching sexualities, while their colleagues were not questioned thus: "It's always also about craving to know 'Why are you researching this?' I was always asked 'how did you come up with the topic?'. My colleague, who [did his doctorate] on search engines, was never asked 'how did you come up with this topic?'" (senior scholar)

³¹ E.g., "We're talking about a niche in a niche in a niche." (junior scholar)

Cumulatively, these dynamics seemed to result in CSS scholars/hip facing routine dismissals. Though they are usually not openly denigrated, CSS scholars/hip is curtailed both at the institutional and individual level, a dynamic which I have already detailed in section 9.3.2 (see also Irvine 2015: 120).

9.4.3 The Boundary Work of CSS Scholars

Now that I have mapped the external constructions of CSS research as exceptionalized work and argued that CSS scholars' are treated as 'space invaders' whose work is routinely positioned outside of the boundaries of 'proper' scientific knowledge, I will investigate the boundary work of CSS scholars through which they are nevertheless positioning (or attempting to do so) their research within the boundaries of legitimate science. Scholars' boundary work is – as they are largely individualized and most do not understand themselves as members or stakeholders in a CSS research field – largely focused on legitimizing scholars' individual knowledge claims and not on positioning the entire research field within the boundaries of legitimate scientific knowledge.

9.4.2.1 Evoking Scientificity

In their book, Pereira (2017) identifies five maps which illustrate the different ways in which WGFS scholars speak about the value of their scholarship in different settings by locating WGFS, proper science, and mainstream science in various positions to one another. Looking for these maps in the narratives of my participants – though not all were (equally) represented – was very productive as it allowed me to identify and represent the multiple ways in which my interviewees invoked scientificity to position their research, and themselves, as 'proper' knowledge (producers) (Pereira 2017: 121) in one specific situation: the interviews. According to Pereira, all maps are committed to participating in the work of locating science. Scholars' cartographical efforts serve the purpose to relocate territories, e.g. by positioning one's scholarship in the same location as proper science or dislocating maps drawn by other scientists (131). However, Pereira makes clear that these maps are not to be considered as accurate reflections of what individuals really think, but rather as strategic interventions which are dependent on context and audience (129). Therefore, I must also attend to the situation in which the maps were drawn (the interviews) and for whose benefit (mine) and reflect critically on how this impacted scholars' cartographical efforts. Consequently, after investigating which and how maps were drawn, I will also engage with their contextuality.

Most prevalent in these accounts was the map *CSS is just like mainstream science*³². Pereira argues that this map is mostly drawn by scholars who identify with their home disciplines (Pereira 2017: 126). As has been established in theme 1, almost all scholars identified with disciplines and research fields other than CSS, which explains the frequency of this map's invocation among my interviewees.

One of the most prominent ways in which this map was drawn was by insisting on the need for distance or scientific detachment to one's research subject. Scholars creating distance between themselves and their research can – I would argue – be seen as a direct response to claims of 'me-search', which are used to devalue the academic legitimacy of their knowledge claims. For example, in the narrative of one junior scholar, the ability to detach oneself from one's personal stake in the research and the political ambitions which might also accompany said research, appeared almost as a normative value:

Research is always subjective, and apolitical positions don't actually exist. But I think keeping a certain distance to the subject is somehow also part of the process of gaining scholarly understanding. Or rather, trying to do so is partly responsible for producing something like knowledge. Consequently, while I don't make claims to objectivity or anything, I do endeavor not to meld, politically or otherwise, with my research subject. (junior scholar)

While for this scholar, distance is something that is deliberately sought out by individual scholars in their pursuit of knowledge, the narratives of other scholars implied a more ingrained sense of distance to their topics. One scholar, for example, argued how their research of sexualities was actually not that different from other members of their discipline who were simply utilizing different examples in their quest to answer similar, broader questions relevant to the discipline as a whole: "I'm a [name of discipline, note] who is interested in the processes which categorize people as well as certain forms of social order. And for whom the subject or field of sexuality is a kind of goldmine, with which I can pursue these [name of discipline, note] interests." (senior scholar) Distance is created here by casting sexualities as an example, thereby decentering the topic in favor of putting the spotlight on the relevance of their research for more mainstream – and therefore 'acceptable' – lines of inquiry within their discipline:

However, as the following example shows, scholars whose own involvement in/proximity to the communities/topics they studied might have fueled their academic interest in the first place, also struggled with this perceived need for distance. Even though a junior scholar had – at another point in our interview – stated a vision of scientificity that was quite rigid and included

³² I slightly changed Pereira's labels for these maps to fit my project. They are, however, clearly recognizable, when comparing them to Pereira's maps.

this need for distance as a prerequisite for producing ‘proper’ knowledge, the following quote indicates that adhering to this was by no means an easy feat:

It was a pleasure up to the point when I was conducting [...] [and] analyzing the interviews, when I got acquainted with so many life stories and perspectives. [...] And this compulsion to adhere to this scientificity... [...] One often brings a certain passion to the table and the crux of the matter is being able to keep a distance, which can later be taken seriously in the scientific discourse. (junior scholar)

Additionally, distance was put not just between the researchers and their topic but also to supposed ‘lesser’ types of knowledge production, which are routinely devalued in mainstream scientific discourses. For example, proximity to popular science was outright rejected by one junior researcher, who – when talking about how they had played around with creative ways of structuring their dissertation – came to the following conclusion:

If I thought at the beginning ‘no, I’m doing something completely new, something completely different to those classic chapters of research, theory, methodology, analysis, reflection’, I’ve somewhat reverted back to this approach, because I need a bit of security [...]: ‘okay, it has to be scientifically sound. It shouldn’t turn out like a popular science book, but rather I really want to gain insights from it’. Then one might revert back to [more standard ways of doing things, note], but I always felt very free in doing it how I wanted to do it. (junior scholar)

Consequently, subscribing to mainstream science norms about how a ‘proper’ academic dissertation supposedly looked, felt less like an external constraint but rather imbued this scholar with a sense of security. They are also insinuating that choosing to ‘break the mold’ might lead their work to be associated with popular science or even reduce the quality of their own scientific inquiry. That prioritizing science communication might have a detrimental effect on how scholars’ competency is perceived by other members in the academy has, for example, also been investigated by Susana Martinez-Conde (2016), who concludes the “science dissemination may be incompatible with a successful academic career, particularly if the scientist is a junior or pretenure investigator” (2081). Distancing oneself from it, as this junior scholar does, may consequently be read as an attempt to mitigate potential epistemic marginalization.

The second map – *CSS as closer to proper science* – was mostly drawn by scholars who emphasized the socio-political relevance of their research beyond academia. By arguing that their research, both in terms of what it investigates, as well as how they chose to disseminate it to the public, was more relevant than some of their peer’s work, scholars insinuated that their scholarship more closely adheres to the guiding principles of what science should be and who it should serve (norms that I have investigated in section 9.2.1): “I think to myself, ‘Sorry, but no!’ We’re state funded. I think it’s legitimate that we’re asked how this will benefit society. And yes, maybe the answer will be that the 50th paper on [mainstream topic, note] may not be so relevant.” (senior scholar) Proper science, in their opinion, consequently, investigates under-

researched issues and cannot simply serve to advance a scholar's career but must serve society somehow.

This was also echoed by another scholar who focused more on the importance of science communication. They positioned scholars who could not reduce the complexity of their research enough to be able to communicate its relevance for society to non-academics as outside of proper science:

I hold myself to the standard that, even if I'm researching and engaging with complex things, I have to be able to express that in a way that it's somewhat comprehensible to a non-scientific audience. Two years ago, [...] the then Nobel Prize laureate in mathematics couldn't explain, in two brief, simple sentences, what he actually does. I'd say: 'No, that can't be!' That's the assignment. Even a mathematics professor is publicly funded. (senior scholar)

Interestingly, this boundary was not just drawn between the scholars I interviewed and mainstream scholarship in their discipline or even science in general. Rather, one scholar also talked about how they now felt that the research they had done in the early days of their career did not meet the criteria of being proper science: "Looking back, I often asked myself 'did this contribute to anything, apart from my own academic merit and my discipline?' And the longer I'm in the business, so to speak, the more I ask myself this question of meaning." (senior scholar)

Pereria argues that these maps do not necessarily exist independently from one another but can be woven together in the same time and space to negotiate the epistemic status of a specific research field or individual scholar (Pereira 2017: 129). This is illustrated in the following quote, in which a junior scholar is both invoking a map which does not appear elsewhere in the interviews – *mainstream science is just like CSS* – as well as the *CSS is closer to proper science* map:

Of course, research interests are always very personal. But that's made me a much better scientist. On the one hand, because I took the step of admitting to myself that there's a personal interest. [...] But I get the feeling that the idea that this [having a personal interest, note] isn't allowed in science is really pervasive. And I think the moment you start pretending that it's not there, you make yourself more vulnerable and also do worse scholarship. But the consequence of this, I think, is that all of us [sexualities researchers, note] have a critical potential that others lack. Because people who do their doctorate on [name of mainstream topic, note] should also ask themselves these questions. [...] And I'd say if you're working on sexuality, [...] these topics demand something from you. And through that you gain a competency that others lack. (senior scholar)

They start by arguing that research interests are always personal, regardless of scholars' epistemological standpoints, thereby indicating that the 'neutral researcher' whose existence is oftentimes posited within positivist circles should be considered an illusion. By aligning mainstream and CSS scholarship via the argument that mainstream science is just as subjective and partial, the critique of critical scholarship's partiality is anticipated and resolved. However, they are also positioning scholars, who have had to acknowledge and investigate their own involvement in their research as better scientists (and therefore closer to proper science) as they have

become better equipped “to uphold a key principle of scientificity: critical engagement” (Pereira 2017: 122) by having been forced to interrogate their proximity to their own research.

I also identified an additional map, thereby extending Pereira’s framework. This map – *plurality as proper science* – locates all (epistemological, methodological, theoretical and substantive) approaches – as equally important for a democratic science and therefore within the territory of proper science. How this map operates is illustrated by this statement (relating to the plurality of substantive approaches), made by a senior scholar:

For people who don’t work in academia, it’s always so difficult to bear [...] that a society has to be able to endure some scientists questioning a view which most of the scholarly community has agreed upon. And that this is the great thing about a democratic science. [...]. That, even if I am convinced that climate change is happening, I won’t advocate for the banishment or dismissal of the three scientists who question it. [...] The moment we abolish polyphony in science, we’ve gone a step too far and ended up in authoritarianism. (senior scholar: Cornelia Möser)

I would consider this map a natural consequence of broader attacks on science from beyond academia, which I have detailed in section 5.1.2. Now scholars must not only position their scholarship within the boundaries of the scientific in the face of attempts to delegitimize it from actors *within* academia but also respond to a trend of anti-intellectualism *beyond* academia which questions the legitimacy of science as a whole. This seems to have led to – at least among some of my interviewees – scholars seeking to form coalitions with academics e.g., of other intellectual traditions to be able to more productively work against this trend while simultaneously positioning their own critical scholarship as imperative to the ‘health’ of the academic community.

Though I did not find invocations of the other two maps identified by Pereira (*proper science should be like CSS* and *CSS helps mainstream science to get closer to proper science*), I would argue that this – as well as the different levels of frequency between the maps that were invoked in my interviewees’ narratives – is not necessarily indicative of their general absence or low representation in scholars’ boundary work. Rather, as I am not doing a full ethnography, I could not analyze how CSS scholars drew these maps in different contexts and for different audiences.

What I found very notable was that the map *CSS is just like mainstream science* was drawn with such frequency and vigor, even though I had revealed my own epistemological standpoint and laid bare my own stake in this research project. Potentially, scholars had formed their professional identities around a more rigid adherence to mainstream conceptions of scientificity to anticipate being positioned outside of ‘proper’ knowledge. Their individualization in reference disciplines might have further reinforced this as they might be so used to routinely drawing this map to an audience of non-CSS scholars that it felt natural to reproduce it in a setting in which its invocation was not required, such as our interview.

9.4.2.2 Borrowing Legitimacy

In the previous section, I investigated how scholars aligned with different conceptions of scientificity (depending on their sense of scholarly identity and audience) by borrowing or rejecting the legitimacy of proper science and mainstream science in an attempt to position their work within the boundary of ‘proper’ knowledge.

In addition, the interviews yielded a plethora of further boundary work strategies related to borrowing legitimacy from other locations. Generally speaking, the accounts below represent intentional and unintended ways that scholars negotiated their individual epistemic status. Many – though not all – were hesitant to outright acknowledge the impact of such borrowed legitimacy on the success of their careers, likely out of a concern that focusing on non-epistemic considerations instead of epistemic ones might devalue their work and success in the eyes of other academics.

One of the ways the scholars I interviewed borrowed legitimacy was by *supplementing their CSS research with more ‘acceptable’ topics*. I usually shared with my interviewees that I was also using this project to gauge whether I wanted to attempt to do a PhD in the field. Without fail, senior scholars encouraged me to do so if I felt that a career in academia might be for me but also gave me a variation of the following (unsolicited) advice: “I would really encourage you to – all young [aspiring scientists, note] – not to put all your eggs in one basket. That you maintain a broad range [of research interests], for the sexuality focus as well.” (senior scholar) This indicated to me that scholars largely felt that one was unlikely to succeed in building an academic career by only focusing on studying sexualities (in the way(s) one wanted to). Accordingly, scholars reported connecting their sexualities-related topics with what they perceived as the current ‘key issues’ within their discipline, while others talked about the need to establish an additional research focus (largely or entirely) separate from CSS research:

She works a lot on [name of supplementary research topics, note] or such things, which are her ‘serious’ topics. I think [sexualities topic, note] interests her a lot, the topic is close to her heart. But I think she has to cover these other topics, though I’m sure she’s also very interested in them. I just think the simultaneity is very striking in her case. (senior scholar)

A second way through which scholars aimed to borrow legitimacy was by *aligning with disciplines generally associated with a high degree of prestige*. This could mean cooperating with disciplines beyond their own but also utilizing bodies of authority in their own disciplines. For example, a senior scholar highlighted the need for CSS scholars to align themselves with prestigious disciplines to be able to secure their position in the academy and position their research strategically:

[Cooperating] with legal or economics scholars, who work on [...] [things], that I find rather boring or about which I think ‘well, that’s not the most transformative approach to research’. Cooperating inter-disciplinarily, particularly with disciplines which are high prestige. That includes disciplines like law, medicine, natural sciences. (senior scholar)

To achieve a productive coalition, multiple (more senior) scholars talked about how they had consciously ‘deradicalized’ to be able to productively cooperate with scholars who might be researching similar topics but with a less activist inclination: “When you’re working in academia you have to form alliances. Also with people who aren’t ideologically aligned with doing research from a queer-feminist perspective but who might have a more moderate approach.” (senior scholar)

A junior scholar talked about how they – themselves a member of a subfield in their discipline associated with lower levels of prestige – utilized their disciplines professional association when being faced with adversity, particularly in the classroom:

When I teach, I actually [justify] [...] a lot using the [name of professional association, note]. [...] [It’s] so clear-cut that that’s undisputed knowledge or they’re such a big and un-contested player. [...] In the moments when I feel like I could be met with the most resistance, I argue along the lines of the [name of professional association, note]. (junior scholar)

Consequently, scholars seem very aware that – to secure their reputation or position as a knower, they must sometimes strategically align with high prestige disciplines or other collectives imbued with epistemic authority. However, this is not necessarily always a career securing measure but might be a necessary defensive measure (particularly for scholars inhabiting marginalized subject positions) when faced with opposition to their topics, regardless of their career ambitions.

Another way to position one’s research within the boundaries of ‘proper’ knowledge, related to the chosen *epistemological and methodological approaches*. As one might expect, some scholars stated that they had observed colleagues stealthily infiltrating the academy with sexualities knowledges through a strategic alignment with positivism and quantitative methods: “If one uses classic methods, primarily works quantitatively, not very conceptually or deconstructivist, isn’t very critical of systems of power, but rather works descriptively, quantitatively. That’s how some of the topics have gained entry into the mainstream [name of discipline, Note].” (senior scholar)

Noticeably, however, openings could also be produced through the use of other more qualitative and reflexive methodologies. For example, a senior scholar reported that they had been able to capitalize on their use of a specific qualitative methodology to further their career. They had been among the first to utilize this methodology, which had piqued the interest of multiple

luminaries in their discipline. Even years after publishing their research, the methodology remained the most received aspect of their work: “Interestingly, the most read and cited chapter of the book [...] [is] the one about the methodology and reflexivity [...] As for the substantive findings, nobody ever asks me about those.” (senior scholar) Consequently, the fact that their research was focused on sexualities has become subordinate (if not irrelevant) in the reception of their work. Notably, this scholar seemed not to have acted wholly strategically by setting out to borrow legitimacy from this approach. Rather, they had gained it somewhat incidentally, which provides more indication of luck playing an important part in academic careers³³.

Scholars also reported how their *association with specific people* – be it advisors, mentors, or peers – had lent them a kind of epistemic authority. This operated both through a supposed transferal of prestige as well as through having a community of like-minded peers leading scholars to feel more comfortable in asserting a view which might be marginalized in their location. For example, one scholar talked about how their advisor’s reputation meant that people seemed to accept their CSS topic as valuable (or at least not inherently worthy of scorn):

At the beginning people always asked ‘and where are you writing that?’ And I replied ‘I’m doing it there and with this person.’ And they always looked at me like a mooncalf and said ‘you’re able to do that there?’ [...] I think [name of advisor, note] is known for having a strict conception of what constitutes rigorous [name of discipline, note] and what doesn’t. (senior scholar)

Beyond advisors, scholars also talked about how their community of peers provided them with a sense of someone ‘having their back’, which could be invoked both as a kind of emotional support as well as harnessed for career advancement. A senior scholar talked about how the tight-knit community of like-minded scholars (they were one of the few scholars who was highly connected in the scientific community as a whole) had been a significant factor for advancing their career. For example, there existed mutual legitimization practices within the community, such as always citing one’s peers, thereby contributing to bettering their position in an institution which values quantitative indicators of impact (see e.g., Pereira 2017: 70–74):

I have to say that I’d never have gotten as far as I did without the solidarity and support of so many colleagues. Both by peers and people who had professorships who really pushed me. [...] Those networks are amazing and I think they’re necessary to legitimate one’s research. [For example] because we’re always citing each other. (senior scholar)

Another scholar talked more about the emotional aspect of knowing that there were other scholars and communities – even if those scholars worked in another geographical location – who thought similarly and valued the same things. This energized them and provided them with

³³ See section 9.2.2.

discursive tools to legitimize their e.g., epistemological positions: “Because [of my international network, note] I always had a good support system [...] that I could either invoke emotionally or even explicitly when things got dicey. [...] Without that I don’t think it would have been possible, or I wouldn’t have had the fortitude or strength.” (junior scholar)

Another resource from which to draw legitimacy was *scholars’ work in fields beyond academia* which nevertheless provided them with capital to more effectively manage their position as a knower within academic settings. One scholar talked about how their work in other settings had been a bargaining chip in creating openings for themselves and their research at their institution. They framed this with Bourdieu’s field theory, which allowed them to transfer capital they had generated in other fields to create openings for themselves in academia and assert themselves as an epistemic authority:

[When] I was negotiating my position here [...] I used my [work beyond academia, note] capital to renegotiate my academic position here. [...] I’d see that [professional experience beyond academia, note] as a capital that can be transferred into another field. [...] Sometimes I’m asked stupid questions and am just able to answer ‘well, my experience [...] working in [other field, note] indicates this and that.’ And people are just like: ‘Wow, she’s got practical experience!’ (senior scholar)

Public (in)visibility was also factoring into being able to attain legitimacy. Scholars related this both to securing their individual careers (“With that [public visibility, note] you can, of course, negotiate a position.” (senior scholar)) as well as advancing the legitimacy of the entire field. This was one of the few instances where an interviewee talked about instrumentalizing their public visibility not just for their individual career but to create openings for CSS more broadly. As the institution’s public profile was raised through their affiliation with this scholar and their media presence, it became more open to said scholar’s demands to create wider openings for CSS scholars/hip (and other approaches to the study of sexualities)³⁴.

However, it is not just visibility that was being leveraged among my interviewees but also invisibility. Various scholars recounted having selectively obscured their social identities (when they could be hidden) to outwardly be perceived as legitimate knowledge producers. Consequently, scholars’ position on the axes of privilege and marginality were seen as significant factors as to whether their boundary work actually *worked*. Therefore, I will investigate the potential (non-)performativity of scholars’ boundary work in more detail in the following section.

³⁴ I will not supplement this argument with a direct quote, as this would make this scholar either easily identifiable or would include so many omissions that the quote would no longer be legible.

9.4.2.3 Does/Whose Boundary Work Work(s)

Now that I have investigated how scholars are drawing boundaries to position their research as ‘proper’ knowledge and themselves as proper researchers (see section 9.4.2.1) and the impact of borrowed legitimacy for securing their epistemic authority (see section 9.4.2.2), I will engage with “the relation between scientific boundary-work, broader structures of sociopolitical inequality, and boundary-workers’ (embodied) positionality” (Pereira 2019: 338) as Pereira argues that simply attending to the content of scholars’ boundary work cannot reveal its chances of being successful. Utilizing Ahmed’s theory of non-performativity (which has been introduced in more detail in theme 3), Pereira argues that boundary work should be seen as always potentially performative, but that the likelihood of a statement to be performative depends significantly on *who* is drawing the boundary – and is therefore embodied. Scholars’ social identities in relation to axes of privilege and marginality is consequently a contributing factor when it comes to the (non-)performativity of their boundary work (Pereira 2019). However, Pereira also cautions against assuming that a position of marginality means that a scholar’s boundary work is doomed to be unsuccessful, as the factors which make boundary work (non-)performative are simply too diverse to assume such a simple causal relationship (Pereira 2017: 144). Clearly the boundary work strategies of some of my interviewees have at least been somewhat impactful as individual scholars have managed to secure permanent academic positions and create broader openings for CSS scholars/hip despite their (sometimes) marginalized subject positions.

Pereira argues in their book that they regretted not preemptively asking scholars about the impact of specific axes of privilege and marginality as this led to scholars mostly talking about their marginalization while only rarely attending to the impact of their privilege (on their boundary work) (Pereira 2017: 136–137). My attempts to mitigate this by asking explicitly about the impact of scholars’ privileges (see appendix) did not seem to work as intended. Besides focusing on the privilege of inhabiting certain positions in the academic hierarchy, (e.g., having a permanent position or adhering to certain theoretical, methodological, epistemological positions), scholars largely refrained from attending to their privilege. Broadly speaking, my findings consequently mirror Pereira’s in the sense that I was, as far as I could gauge, speaking to a relatively privileged group of individuals (see section 8.1.1) who nevertheless focused largely on their experiences of being at an epistemic disadvantage.

As has been shown in the previous sections, scholars inhabiting marginalized subject positions which were not outwardly visible oftentimes chose not to disclose this. For example, many of

the scholars spoke about their working-class background during the interviews (likely also because they would be anonymized) but also recounted that they oftentimes omitted this detail in professional settings: “I have a working-class background and talk about that openly with people who are also working class [...]. But I [also conceal it quite often] because I’ve experienced how violently [...] colleagues sometimes talk about working class people when they think they’re among themselves.” (senior scholar)

This scholar’s decision not to reveal their working-class background is clearly a strategy to avoid potentially violent encounters with their peers. However, I would contend that having witnessed this willingness to be violent behind closed doors may have also indicated to this scholar that revealing their class background could devalue their epistemic authority (and negatively affect the chances of their boundary work) in the eyes of their classist peers.

Many of my interviewees identified as queer* but chose different paths when it came to revealing or obscuring this (though not all queer*ness can be hidden) in their professional capacity as academics. Disclosing their queer*ness, particularly when researching queer* topics impacted their epistemic authority, as the following quote indicates: “I mean, I’m a feminist, I’m queer, I’m out. [...] In that logic you’re always doing me-search. And I think if I were a nice lady with a husband and children and was [researching] [name of topic, note] [...] from a paternalistic position it would be received differently” (senior scholar).

The accusation of doing ‘me-search’ (see section 9.4.2) was echoed by another scholar, who had taken the alternative route of secrecy. However, safeguarding their identity seemed to have also taken an emotional toll on this researcher:

I’m queer [...]. I’ve always tried to hide that because people tend to attribute this [to the research, note] and might receive my research differently as a consequence. [...] Maybe I could be a little more visibly queer. But I’m still wrestling with myself a little bit. [...] I’m not sure yet if I want to give up this invisibility that I can use strategically. But, of course, you also pay a price for that. (senior scholar)

Gender was a significant factor when it came to scholars’ boundary work. For example, multiple scholars recounted their experiences of teaching CSS and how they found this to be a laborious process, in part because they felt that, particularly students they read as male*, seemed inclined to question their status as a knower:

I think it’s also related to the fact that it’s a young woman who’s telling [them] that. At least that’s what I ask myself quite often. If it’d be different if I were a whitehaired professor with a long beard. [...] I think as it relates to authority or interpretative dominance or the concept of [who has] expertise (junior scholar).

Those scholars whom I would read as male*-presenting, tended to answer my question about the impact of their positionality in relation to various axes of privilege and marginality – though

I did not ask all of the scholars whom I read as male* this question – as following: While succinctly acknowledging that their gender was significant for securing epistemic authority for themselves they oftentimes chose to talk in much more detail about others' (epistemic) marginalization (and their apparent resilience in the face of discrimination) than they did their own privilege (though most scholars, regardless of gender, preferred to talk about the impact of (their) marginalization rather than privilege):

That Black people, Jewish people, non-binary people, that women have a harder time attaining professorships and are therefore less able to shape academia [...] But I also experience the people who are affected by racism, by sexist attributions, as having become especially resilient and as having acquired better ways of dealing with this. (senior scholar)

Meanwhile, something that was readily acknowledged by one male* scholar was that representing their gender in a hegemonic way was something that advantaged them: "I mean, now, as for my hairstyle, beard and earring, I look relatively aligned with social norms. That wasn't always the case." (junior scholar) As they had personally experienced how non-conformity had served to disadvantage them as a boundary worker, they could now recognize how performing masculinity in a hegemonic way resulted in being seen as more credible.

However, it should also be noted (as will be analyzed in more detail in the subsequent theme) that in the case of CSS research (and sexualities research more broadly), privilege and marginality can sometimes be inverted in the research setting. For example, a male* scholar felt that they would not be able to effectively position themselves as producing credible knowledge on a sexual offence which was disproportionately perpetrated by men*: "It would be really interesting to do motive research on this [necrophilia, note]. [...] [That's] one of the things that would be really interesting and is urgently needed but that you really can't do as a man." (junior scholar)

'Race' and ethnicity were mentioned much less frequently, though scholars did attend to them in passing. 'Race' was mostly talked about in the context of scholars/hip being excluded entirely from the field of CSS, as interviewees observed that it was mostly white scholars who populated the field. As all my participants were white themselves, I consequently cannot evaluate how the experiences of People of Color (PoC) in attaining and defending epistemic authority in the CSS differ from those of white scholars. However, I am certain that it does significantly affect scholars' chances of their boundary work being performative.

Notably, personality was sometimes mentioned as a privilege. Scholars who seemed to have the ability to remain 'cool and collected' when confronted e.g., with attempts to trivialize their work and boundary-pushing behavior, might make for more effective boundary workers: "[It depends on] how much this type of boundary pushing behavior, in the sense of 'too much'

sometimes, affects you as a person. I'm able to cope with it well or I've always been able to shrug it off humorously. But that's a privilege I didn't have to acquire because that's simply my personality.” (senior scholar)

I would, however, argue that personality is not to be considered as independent from other forms of privilege. Likely the ability to develop such a resilience in the face of attempted discreditation also interacts with other experiences of privilege. Though this scholar did not mention class and I do not intend the following as speculation about *their* specific class background but rather an example, I could imagine that, e.g., a bourgeois habitus making one feel more at home in an academic setting could be a significant factor in acquiring such resilience.

That intersectionality needs to be attended to was also explicitly mentioned by one scholar, who observed that their gay, male* peers seemingly had less trouble being seen as producing legitimate knowledge, while a PoC associate of theirs struggled much more with (effectively) positioning their research within the realm of ‘proper’ knowledge:

Gay, cis-male colleagues, [...] their experience differs from mine a lot. [...] They're seen as male colleagues who are doing proper science because they're able to conform to this idea of the male scientist. [...] My associate is a PoC and is researching queer topics. [...] She's faced with a whole different conglomerate of 'what you're doing isn't scientific'. (senior scholar)

9.5 Feeling Ambivalent in a Chilly and Charged Climate

In the previous themes I have focused largely on barriers to CSS scholars/hip in the contemporary academy, as well as how they are negotiated by individual scholars. Through this I have shown that CSS scholars/hip exists in a chilly climate, similar to the one described by Pereira for the WGFS (Pereira 2017: 87), which is, however exacerbated by the exceptionalization of sexualities (scholars/hip). However, how scholars *felt* about their work in what I contend is a chilly and charged climate, despite such barriers, was anything but clear cut. By attending to seemingly contradictory reports of my interviewees of joy/pleasure and anxiety/danger inherent in researching sexualities and optimism/pessimism about the future, I am, as Coccia et al. (2024) suggest, hopefully able to transcend the subjection/liberation binary (786). I will use ambivalence as an analytical tool to be able to work with seemingly contradictory feelings not as incoherent narratives but as an opportunity to “bring greater nuance, dimensionality, and exactitude to [my] feminist analys[is]” (Coccia et al. 2024: 801).

9.5.1 Pleasure/Joy and Danger/Anxiety

Fahs et al. (2018) investigate the relationship between danger and pleasure in the experiences of feminist CSS researchers and conclude that these emotions are oftentimes inverted for such scholars: While they might derive pleasure from things usually considered dangerous (i.e. investigating taboo subjects and working against social inequalities), they experience things as

dangerous which might feel pleasurable to other academics (i.e. being in the public eye, offering courses on their research, publishing their work) (505). Taking inspiration from this approach, I focused on how my interviewees felt about navigating various academic spaces, which helped me tremendously to be able to investigate ambivalent feelings of joy, pleasure, danger and anxiety.

9.5.1.1 Investigating Joy/Pleasure

One aspect that was mentioned by most of the scholars I interviewed was the sense of purpose that they felt imbued with by producing knowledge about topics that they perceived to have a *high socio-political relevance and impact*. Focusing both on their research as well as their teaching, scholars recounted the pleasure they found in generating and disseminating CSS knowledges, most with the intention of destigmatizing (certain) sexualities and producing knowledge about under-researched – and invisibilized – practices and communities.

For example, particularly those scholars who had been working critically on sexualities for a longer time talked about the sense of purpose they drew from witnessing the impact of research such as theirs: “You can see how effective your own [scholarly, note] work is. It [sexuality, note] is being negotiated more openly in society. [This negotiation] is certainly still quite robust and partly boundary-crossing but you can really see your scientific contribution working. None of this was the case in 2009.” (senior scholar)

Two junior scholars, both engaged with shedding light on a hitherto under-researched community (one from a sex-positive angle, while the other was more concerned with violence prevention), clearly indicated that what they found fruitful about their work was to generate knowledge about previously invisibilized issues which might then be used productively – either by the communities themselves or other stakeholders – to e.g., show the need for preventative measures or to provide resource to understand one’s individual experience more collectively:

The amazing thing is [...] its everyday relevance. That it’s interesting for a lot of people [...] That’s why my main goal is to publish this book because I want people to be able to read about the topic. (junior scholar)

By disseminating this knowledge, I can contribute most to structural change. It gives you the feeling that you’re doing something meaningful. (junior scholar)

Among those scholars who were also teaching CSS, many spoke about how their work as disseminators of CSS knowledges felt worthwhile both in the sense of encouraging students to think more critically about sexualities (including their own) and – ideally – also animating them to further disseminate such critical knowledges:

It’s amazing to [...] use the knowledge you’ve produced in your research in the courses you teach. [...] I also offered courses in teacher education [...] and these 20 people [...] designed concepts [...] which 8 people are now using in schools. [...] Even if only half of them implement it, that’s 1000 to 2000

schoolchildren over the next ten years who are going to reflect on sexuality when they wouldn't have done otherwise. And that's exactly what our society needs. (junior scholar)

I can see the effects of my work. Seeing that some people feel empowered and are saying 'I'm exactly who I'm supposed to be'. (senior scholar)

Beyond interactions with students, for those scholars who were well-connected (or at least somewhat engaged in community-seeking and building) *working and debating with other sexualities scholars* constituted another joyful aspect of their work, though for most the opportunities to do so were far and few between:

I like the people who do research in the field. I think almost all my colleagues are amazing because everyone knows what they're doing and what they've gotten themselves into. So I think it's a very, very supportive, generous research field. (senior scholar)

Thinking freely in discourse with colleagues who share one's interests and want to make a difference. That's the fun part! (senior scholar)

However, it was not only interaction with other academics that brought joy and a sense of fulfillment to scholars. Rather, multiple interviewees explicitly mentioned the pleasure they found in cooperating with non-academic actors (both by conducting research on them as well as collaborating in other ways). Notably, such collaborations could even be covert in nature, with scholars finding pleasure and joy in disseminating their CSS knowledge in spaces they perceived to be somewhat hostile to it: "I really strive to infiltrate. I venture into many settings which my colleagues would never enter. They would never put up with that. But I do because that's where I want to place my stuff" (senior scholar). Consequently, joy and pleasure were not only to be found in interaction with individuals or groups who were already welcoming of CSS scholars/hip. Rather a sense of satisfaction could also be produced by stealthily positioning CSS knowledges in spaces to which they might otherwise be unable to gain entry.

Another important aspect bringing researchers joy and pleasure is what I would subsume under *curiosity and discovery*, which was associated with solving a puzzle or untangling a knot under conditions of relative autonomy. As one scholar recounts, the process of engaging with under-researched topics and the intricate work of working out patterns in their data provided them with much satisfaction: "I think it's extremely interesting to do things that have never been done before [...] I really get a kick out of having an unsolved issue that I have to tinker with" (senior scholar). Similarly, a junior scholar also focused on the opportunity afforded to them by their fully funded PhD – being able to investigate a topic to what felt like 'completion' over several years seemed to be a very pleasurable endeavor: "Its super interesting to, in my case for six years, explore an idea and to really prove or falsify a thought and pursue it for a long time until you resolve it" (junior scholar).

Only a few scholars engaged explicitly with their experiences of finding *joy and pleasure* in *their academic marginalization*, not despite of it. That speaking from a position of marginality can be appealing and even enable scholarly creativity is also argued by Maria do Mar Pereira (2017), who concludes that many WGFS scholars “have drawn attention to the potentially generative and even pleasurable effects of epistemic marginality.” (58)

For example, one junior scholar recounted how they felt that academic marginalization worked paradoxically to also create openings for some scholars. The chances of their boundary work being performative were deemed rather low, which, in turn, allowed them to focus more on the joyful aspects of their work: “It seems to me [...] that people in the queer studies, sexuality studies, maybe even trans studies have more fun. [...] If people don’t take you seriously anyway, you don’t have to be as concerned with being taken seriously.” (junior scholar)

While many scholars engaged with the exceptionalization of their topics, which manifested, among other things through it being received as both transgressive as well as titillating by others (see section 9.4.1), only one scholar focused on the pleasure that they received from this transgressiveness. For them, this work at the edge of acceptability was part of what initially drew them to study sexualities: “It always felt exciting to me. [...] I was a few years younger and was like ‘cool! I’m doing sexuality research, how exciting!’ And I was like ‘all of you bores! [...]’ There was a thrill to that”. (junior scholar) However, it was not only the topic itself that excited researchers. Rather, the complicated emotions their topics might trigger in others was also part of the transgressive appeal of researching sexualities: As the following quote indicates, feeling competent and secure in talking openly about a topic that made others simultaneously uncomfortable and fascinated clearly appealed to this researcher: “One has to admit that the attention that this [topic, note] generated is cool. [...] Of course, I was proud that I was able to answer all of that. And I was proud to [...] show how easy it was for me to just say all that.”

However, joy and pleasure were not only to be found in speaking from a position of epistemic marginality, but rather I observed that scholars whose social identities led them to not only be discriminated against but also carried a more pronounced threat of physical violence when navigating public spaces seemed the ones most focused on finding joy and pleasure in their work. However, this link is mostly speculative when it comes to the narratives of my scholars – no one *explicitly* argued that they were utilizing joy as a strategy of resistance or subversion against oppression or discrimination.

However, in recent years, much research has been published on the productive power joy has when it comes to resisting oppression and imagining social transformations (e.g., Wright and

Falek 2024; Wright and Burkholder 2025; Ingram and Jacobsen 2025). For example, Wright and Burkholder (2025) define queer joy, specifically, in the following manner:

Queer joy [...] expands our capacity to feel alive, capable, and connected to others in a way that queerly subverts hegemonic discourse and structures. [...] This queer joy empowers people's capacities to undermine oppressive ruling orders and frees up our imaginations to dream of more caring and connected, less violent and divisive worlds. (759–760)

While the link between foregrounding joy/pleasure and resistance against oppression might consequently not have been explored explicitly in any of my interviewees' narratives, I would nevertheless contend that it does constitute a relevant aspect when considering ambivalent feelings of joy, pleasure, danger and anxiety in relation to scholarly work on sexualities.

Finally, I want to attend to *silenced joys and pleasures* which appeared as absences in the narratives of my interviewees. The geographer Valerie de Craene has written extensively about what they argue is a rather systematic silence surrounding researchers' erotic subjectivities (De Craene 2024, 2017; De Graeve and De Craene 2019). While some of my participants revealed (though usually subtly) a personal involvement in the communities they studied, and others alluded to a proximity to their research subjects, none addressed or acknowledged that or how their own desires impacted their research process. However, I want to attend to the fact that this silence was not simply produced by my interviewees. Rather, I did not feel comfortable explicitly asking scholars about this topic as I did not want to cross unspoken boundaries and potentially cause discomfort. Therefore, the silence regarding this topic was (re)produced by both my interviewees and me. I myself have also chosen to omit a reflexive account of my own interest in CSS topics in this thesis as I do not feel comfortable providing this much 'access' to myself. This section is consequently not intended to be an indictment of my participants' silences – which would be highly hypocritical of me. Rather it is my attempt to nevertheless attend to the desires, and associated pleasures and joys, researchers might feel in (erotic(ized) and sexual(ized)) interactions through an engagement with the academic literature.

In their most recent publication on the topic, de Craene (2024) criticizes how the – they argue, erotophobic – academy hinders researchers from taking truly reflexive stances, particularly when knowledge is being generated in potentially sexualized interactions. In the article, de Craene reflects on – and critiques – the assumptions that sexual encounters in a research setting are always, and without exception, unethical and takes issue with the fact that research on sexualities is exceptionalized and overly scrutinized, even though other types of research (e.g. real estate research) are also engaged in power relations and carry the potential for sexual(ized) interactions (De Craene 2024: 9).

When I asked my interviewees about pleasurable and joyful aspects of their work (and sometimes how this intersected with privilege and marginality), none of the scholars explicitly related this to their own erotic subjectivities. While acknowledging one's erotic subjectivities is not necessarily (only) related to pleasurable and joyful feelings, this omission still seems notable to me: While it is likely that not every interviewee has reflected deeply on their experiences in sexual(ized) interactions and the emotions this brought out in them, I still find it notable that none of them mentioned this as a potential setting in which pleasure (not necessarily sexual) might be had. I would argue that – for those aware of such encounters and their feelings – sharing how their erotic subjectivities impacted their research might have either felt too risky (as they had no way of knowing whether this would have led to a hostile reaction from me) or they might simply have been so used to excluding this when talking about their research that the thought to talk about this might simply not have occurred to them.

9.5.1.2 Investigating Danger/Anxiety

As I have shown in the previous theme, as well as in the previous section about silenced pleasures and joys, scholars must routinely contend with processes questioning the legitimacy of their scholarly work (e.g. against arguments that it is too niche, not, generalizable, or advocacy/'me-search' instead of science; see section 9.4.2). My interviewees were very involved in managing the epistemic status of their knowledge claims – though the success of such boundary work is not always guaranteed and also depends on researchers' social identities and the (lack of) credibility associated with these identities. Invariably these processes felt dangerous and anxiety-inducing to many of my participants as this was perceived not only as a threat to their epistemic authority but also to their livelihood in a precarious workplace. As I feel that these dynamics have already been detailed sufficiently, I will not attend to scholars' sense of danger in or anxieties about their academic careers but rather focus on different settings and situations which felt, to many of my participants, imbued with these emotions.

For example, *being perceived as 'too close' to a certain topic* in the realm of CSS was seen by some of my participants as holding a more immediate danger than simply a threat to one's epistemic authority. Depending on the research topic, a position of social privilege might paradoxically even turn into a dangerous position. One scholar, when I asked which topics they thought were under-researched, answered by stating that criminalized sexual acts (i.e. acts of pedophilia or necrophilia) were particularly marginalized but that they felt that their subject position (as male*/male*-presenting) did not allow them to take on such topics. The choice not to attend to these topics was connected to a perceived danger of potentially coming under suspicion that they themselves were interested or engaged in such practices, which also carried the

threat of potential violence: “Some sex research topics just aren’t accessible to me. [...] Researching topics as a man, which are covered by the Criminal Code [...], when some political parties are calling for the ‘castration of sex offenders’” (junior researcher). Their gender – which usually privileged them in a patriarchally organized institution such as the university – actually put them in a position of danger, when attempting to research criminalized sexual acts, of which most of the perpetrators were men*.

That the stigma associated with specific topics will affect different subjects in different ways is also argued by Valerie de Craene, who concludes that for young women* it might be more acceptable to research topics such as pedophilia, while male* researchers might have an easier time working on sex work (De Craene 2017: 460). Consequently, I find it productive to also think about the, sometimes ambivalent, ways privilege and marginality operate, intersect and even invert, when it comes to feelings of anxiety or perceived danger in doing CSS scholars/hip. Multiple scholars – all of whom I would read as unable to benefit from patriarchal privilege – talked about the *dangers (and associated fears) interactions in the classroom* held for them. For example, a senior scholar reflected on the potential dangers in offering courses on sexualities when one was not equipped with the needed (among others) pedagogical tools to be able to properly manage emotionalized responses from students. This fear of being ill-equipped to handle a potential ‘powder-keg’ of emotions in the classroom even led to some of their colleagues deciding not to offer courses on sexualities in the first place:

I noticed ‘wow, that actually requires you to have a different, pedagogical, didactic, psychological competence, for which I don’t have the necessary training.’ [...] And of course, it also requires very high levels of reflexivity, both by the students and me because sex is something very personal, something very private. So I think distancing yourself from the topic, which is, of course, always important, is more difficult. Because we all have a connection to sex in some way [...]. And of course that leads to potential emotionalization during seminars. [...] Several colleagues told me that, exactly for that reason, they would never offer [such] a seminar. And I get it! (senior scholar)

Another scholar focused specifically on what they considered to be increased threats to their epistemic authority as a teacher. Their desire to create a learning space with flat hierarchies seemed to be threatened by students entering the classroom whose view on sexualities and gender was informed by the ‘manosphere’³⁵. This scholar seemed to sense danger in students’ potential hostility to their critical approach to engaging with sexualities, which was exacerbated further by their gendered notions of epistemic authority:

That [my approach to teaching about sexualities] was contradicting what this person had, I don’t know, picked up on the internet or something. And then I really started noticing how this functioning working

³⁵ Defined my UN Women as “an umbrella term for online communities that have increasingly promoted narrow and aggressive definitions of what it means to be a man – and the false narrative that feminism and gender equality have come at the cost of men’s rights.” (UN Women 2025)

relationship started to falter a bit. I think that also has something to do with a young woman [like me, note] telling them that. (junior scholar)

That marginalized scholars might be subjected to attacks by students was also mentioned by another scholar who reported that students had written degrading and derogatory comments about them in the anonymous teaching evaluations:

What has happened is [...] that people wrote things in the evaluations like ‘oh that a creature like [name of scholar, note] is teaching is an indicator for everything that’s going wrong’ [...]. Or that I was ‘trying to brainwash them and force my opinion on them’. [...] [When] I talked about it in therapy, and did a quasi supervision for the course, [I realized] that people writing things like that also means that something within them had been touched and that I don’t just have to conceive of it as an attack that I have to block. (junior scholar)

I find it important to note that this scholar is choosing to re-frame this experience in a way that seems productive for them and allows them to continue to work with students in a setting that has the potential to feel dangerous or hostile. The classroom is consequently not just a joyful space in which academics are given the (undeniably) rewarding task to become multipliers of CSS scholarship. Rather, it is simultaneously also a space fraught with potential dangers, leading scholars to approach teaching sexualities with mixed emotions: apprehension, anxiety, joy and pleasure can consequently easily coexist for those teaching about sexualities.

However, scholars did not just sense potential danger in (particularly male*) students’ reactions and their own (in)ability to properly handle them but rather also in unwittingly engaging in boundary-crossing behavior themselves, as is exemplified by this scholar feeling unsure which literature relating to sexualities was (in)appropriate to send to their students:

What concerned me the most was the question ‘what’s crossing a boundary [...] when I’m interacting with students?’ Because I think to myself ‘yes, there’s a power imbalance and I know that people exist who exploit that and who cross boundaries’. I think it’s when you interact with students that you suddenly start noticing the position of power that you inhabit. (junior scholar)

These insights for the German and Austrian context are consistent with Lynn Comella’s (2024) research, in which they investigate the situation of scholars lecturing on pornography in the US. Comella finds that teaching about sexualities is often a highly demanding enterprise as teachers need to anticipate potential conflicts, attend to students who might be overwhelmed or triggered by the contents of the course, while simultaneously anticipating that they may be caught in the crosshairs of controversy themselves (Comella 2024: 24–26).

Going public (beyond academic audiences) with their research was something that many scholars either considered or were actively doing. Such decisions were motivated by a multitude of (intersecting) reasons, among them seeking an audience who was interested in the knowledges they produced, critically educating about sexualities which might be under- or misrepresented in public discourse or even advancing the epistemic status of CSS scholars/hip. However, *seeking and/or gaining such visibility beyond the academy* seemed to feel too dangerous to some

scholars, particularly those who inhabited marginalized subject positions, while others seemed to (be able to) weigh the benefits more than the cost. Scholars talked about how assuming a public persona had led to two types of attacks (though these types are connected): Those from right-wing political parties and politicians and those made anonymously by individuals on the internet.

Attacks on scholars by political actors seemed to be targeted less at individuals and mobilized more against the existence of entire fields of research and, as one scholar argued, all research concerned with examining axes of discrimination and marginalization (see sections 5.1.2 and 9.5.2). Such attacks were therefore seen as dangerous to the continued development or even existence of critical scholar/ship and individual scholars' livelihoods but seemed to be felt as less of a threat to scholars' physical safety. The lack of institutionalization of CSS seemed to even operate as a tenuous shield against explicit attacks from right-wing parties such as the 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD) or the 'Freedom Party of Austria' (FPÖ), as they were – as of now – more concerned with attacking those academic disciplines which were more established. However, this was clearly not seen as protection but rather a deferral of targeted attacks on the CSS scholars/hip's right to exist and scholars' autonomy over the content of their research and teaching:

In my opinion it isn't just the gender studies, but all research that's critical of discrimination [which is being attacked]. Of course, the gender studies are being attacked first and in a very high-profile way, because there are already professorships and there's a certain level of institutionalization. (senior scholar)

Potential institutional consequences of the societal shift to the right (such as universities caving under the pressure of right-wing actors demanding that critical scholarship should be defunded) were a source of anxiety for most of the scholars whom I interviewed.

However, depending on the level of visibility a scholar had beyond academia, some scholars also experienced receiving anonymous threats of violence against their person, which undoubtedly left them anxious as to whether these threats may translate into actual physical harm being done to them. For example, one senior scholar reported the following:

I went public with [my research, note] in a very high-profile way and did a lot of events and subsequently received some murder and castration threats, insults and threats of violence. That means that you have to find a way to [deal] with [...] threatening situations [...] and of course, that gets to you. For me it led to me developing a strategy to deal with that [...]. Preparing one's own little strategy is something that I would recommend to everyone, while simultaneously sticking to one's topics and steadfastly demanding and implementing one's own scientificity. (senior scholar)

To me, this statement is indicative of multiple things: Firstly, as a scholar with a high public profile they have clearly (but unfortunately) been subjected to many threats of violence. Secondly, they have been able to develop a resilience to, as well as management strategies to cope

with, such threats. Finally, however, this statement also points to how their positionality (I would read this scholar as male* or male*-passing) seemingly plays into their response to potential violence. While I do not want to argue that such threats do not affect this scholar – they clearly state that they have had an (emotional) impact – they seem willing and resilient enough to continue to expose themselves to such attacks (as their strategy after receiving such threats has not been to cease their public appearances and/or to do research on different topics). They have weighed the benefits of a public persona against the risks and calculated that, for them, being visible is more beneficial than it is harmful.

When talking with scholars who I would read as female* or passing as female* (I am focusing on this as it is a visible marker of marginality), I could not help but notice that their calculations oftentimes led to a different result, thereby making it harder for them to be effective advertisers of the benefits of and need for a CSS. How personally threatened an individual scholar felt seemed to depend somewhat on their personality. However, most seemed to make sure that they ‘flew under the radar’ and did not share too many personal details on the internet:

I was always really afraid that I might be harassed or that someone might stalk me or something. At the beginning, I was really, really anxious and suppressed my place of residence. I went through all private information, all social media, so that no one would ever even get the chance to stalk me or something. I really had pretty severe fears about that. (senior scholar)

One of the key ways in which my findings differ from some of the previous research (e.g., Irvine 2015; Perin 2024) was that the narratives of my scholars were largely devoid of instances of *(sexualized) harassment or other boundary-pushing/crossing behaviors when interacting with other scholars*. However, I also want to address the fact that, just because such instances were not foregrounded in the stories of my participants, this does not mean that they are definitively not a significant part of their experience. For example, scholars sometimes seemed to allude to having, but did not expand on, negative experiences with other academics: “I was single for a time as I was doing sexuality research [...] [and] I deliberately kept my research topic a secret during that time” (senior scholar). Potentially – and especially if such experiences were associated with bad memories or even trauma –, my interviewees might just not have wanted to share them with a stranger (me).

Those scholars who did talk more in depth about boundary-crossing behaviors seemed to, though they did not condone it, have found ways of managing such interactions. This becomes visible, for example, in the following scholar’s account of their research focus sometimes being misconstrued by others as an invitation to talk about their own sexual preferences (accompanied by the assumption that this scholar would necessarily be comfortable with this), a pattern which

mirrors descriptions of scholars from other geographic contexts (see e.g., Perin 2024; Ahearne 2015):

I'd say that it [the research focus, Note] provokes more uncomfortable interactions or potentially boundary-crossing interactions along the lines of 'keep it to yourself' or 'I'm not interested in that'. You're suddenly involved in a weird conversations about [...] some trends and think to yourself 'I really don't know, how interesting that you're aware of them [...]' So where you're like [...] 'I really didn't have to know about that!'. And I think that you have a lot of conversations like that and it really depends on your personality how well you're able to deal with that. (senior scholar)

Scholars – regardless of their position in relation to various axes of privilege and marginality – largely talked about the uncomfortable or inappropriate ways in which their research was sometimes received as simply 'coming with the territory' and as non-threatening nuisances, born from their opposite's discomfort. Most scholars appeared to have acquired a rhetorical dexterity of dealing with such inappropriate comments, leading them to seemingly remain largely unbothered while simultaneously unbalancing those individuals having made the comment by countering with statements meant to irritate. For example, one junior scholar – whom I would read as female* or passing as female* – recounted the following anecdote of how they dealt with suggestive comments at academic social events:

So I'd say that it's something [...] about which people, after their second glass of wine, say something to the effect of 'ah yes, I read that you're researching [name of topic, note]!' And I usually reply 'yes, I like engaging with topics that are a bit off the beaten path' [...] There's something a bit disreputable about it which kind of invites lewd comments. [...] I don't think it's being used to hit on me but, rather, I get the impression that those are [...] displacement actions of prudishness. (junior scholar)

Cumulatively, what emerged from the narratives was that scholars oftentimes seemed annoyed, resigned or somewhat uncomfortable with inappropriate reactions to their scholarship (which sometimes transferred onto their person). Overall, however, I got the feeling that, these interactions largely did not feel dangerous or anxiety-inducing to most, though I also contend that one-on-one interviews may not have been the best method to gain access to such experiences (assuming that some participants did not feel comfortable sharing them with me).

9.5.2 Investigating Future Visions: 'Peptimism'

"Peptimism! Do you know it? Optimism of the heart and pessimism of the mind." (senior scholar: Cornelia Möser)

This statement, made by a senior scholar in response to me sharing my uncertainty whether I even wanted to attempt to find a PhD position in the current political climate, provoked me to think about and want to investigate the ambivalent ways scholars thought and felt about the future of CSS scholars/hip and critical scholarship more broadly.

Feeling besieged on multiple fronts emerged as a lived reality for many of my participants. This siege stemmed both from increasing pressures in the neoliberal university and threats to their scholarship from beyond academia, chief among them a trend of anti-intellectualism (and

more specifically attacks on critical science) propagated and stoked by right-wing political actors (see section 5.1). Notably, however, for many of my interviewees, this besiegement led them not only to feel pessimistic about the future of (their) CSS scholarship but rather, feelings of energized optimism paradoxically also seemed tied to feeling besieged. In the following, I will consequently map how these – seemingly contradictory emotions – emerged in scholars’ narratives.

Regarding feelings of pessimism, most scholars I interviewed observed the large-scale attacks on the gender studies, with increasing distress, with some, who also positioned themselves as members of this field even having come ‘under fire’ personally. Generally speaking, this trend of besiegement from the political right was positioned as indicative of a larger anti-intellectual campaign, with a focus on specifically discrediting critical scholarship – CSS among them –as a whole:

I’d strategically distance myself from this perspective that sexuality [...] is something special. Rather, I’d combine it with a gender studies or [critical] race [studies] perspective, approaching it from an isolation-critical viewpoint because I think this applies to all these [research areas, note]. [...]. I think we’d benefit from recognizing more of the parallels rather than keeping everything too separate. (senior scholar)

When speaking to scholars, I observed a mood of collective dejection and worry about what the future would bring and how/if individual scholars would be able to navigate being caught in the crossfire of rising authoritarianism (and associated anti-intellectualism). This was exacerbated by the perception that they, by and large, did not feel that they could rely on their institutions to protect them against such attacks:

The big disillusionment for me was seeing [developments, note] in the US. Before, I thought ‘ah they’re [the universities, note] all private so he [Trump, note] can’t immediately stick his fingers in there’. Everything happened so fast. Just Harvard. Harvard were the only ones who stood up a bit, right? All the others caved (senior scholar: Cornelia Möser)

Depending on how attacks on academic freedom continue. That’s what I’m noticing. I think it’s so sad and tragic that fear has started to creep in. (junior scholar)

This anxious mood was further exacerbated by scholars’ worries about the general underfunding of higher education. Ever-increasing austerity measures led scholars not only to fear that they would not be able to continue working as academics but also that critical scholarship such as theirs, already underfunded and existing in a chilly and charged climate, would come under even more strain as competition between and within research fields increased even more (see section 9.2.1). For example, one junior scholar summarized their worries as follows:

I think that the biggest danger to my research is that this kind of research traditionally eludes commodification. That it [can’t be made] into a cool app or a cool start-up. [...] I was also really sad about the budget cuts [in my location, note] which are really wild and universities now have to save an insane amount of money and they’re also protesting against that. [...] My university [...] [has] kind of entirely abandoned this humanistic ideal of education and now the university is conceived of as a factory for ideas which can then be commercially exploited.

However, the levels of felt besiegement – both in terms of neoliberal and authoritarian besiegement – also seemed to differ among my interviewees. One scholar connected these divergent experiences explicitly to individual researchers’ positionalities in relation to axes of privilege and marginality. They cautioned that one must attend to intersectionality when analyzing who may suffer first (and potentially hardest) under conditions of increasing besiegement:

I think this question of agency also has intersectional implications. Because I’m noticing that [...] primarily gay, cis-male colleagues, who are also working on questions relating to sexualities, that some positionalities still offer more protection. Their experience differs from mine a lot. Because [...] they kind of pass: ‘Yes, we’re also men’ [...] then they’re part of these [...] essentializing masculinist networks. [...] They’re seen as male colleagues who are doing proper science because they’re able to conform to this idea of the male scientist. [...] My associate is a PoC and is researching queer topics. [...] She’s faced with a whole different conglomerate of ‘what you’re doing isn’t scientific’ [...] Or class as well, that I’m the first academic in my family. And I’m noticing that established professors in the German-speaking context [...] who inhabit such a strong academic, bourgeois habitus. That they have a different standing [in the face of adversity, note] because they’re imbued with the habitus to be more resilient. (senior scholar)

Now that I have investigated the pessimism in scholars’ narratives as to the future of CSS research (and other types of critical scholarship) as a symptom of increased besiegement, I want to attend to more optimistic views of the future which, surprisingly and paradoxically, also seemed related to this sense of (increased) besiegement.

Some scholars talked about how recalling that critical scholars/hip had always been besieged helped them not to catastrophize about current trends. For example, a junior scholar talked about how this generated a sense of agency in them that they (and their research field) could face adversity head-on and find ways to subvert and resist oppressive dynamics:

There are contexts which are in much more repressive situations than we’re faced with in Austria and Germany, for now at least. And they’ve also managed to handle this. Not in the sense of ‘oh it’s no problem at all’ but to survive. That gives me a little hope that it’ll be possible. (junior scholar)

Another scholar talked about their hope that increased external besiegement would lead to more solidarity and community-building among critical scholars in times of increasing demands to prioritize individual over collective interests (see e.g., Pereira 2017: 214):

I think it’ll become more difficult. But I think that, within the community, it’ll bolster people more. I think it’s already a community that’s relatively [tight-knit] anyway – with drama of course – but I hope that it’ll bring the community closer together. (senior scholar)

Others talked about how, particularly the threat of authoritarianism, actually animated them to commit more fully to their research. This scholarship was constructed as a site for resistance in which scholars worked even more joyfully on topics that might enrage right-wing actors: “Right-wing forces and shit like that, obstacles, they animate me! I think that with all the craziness that we’re living through. [...] To fight against these reactionary forces, that would actually animate me!” (junior scholar)

Such trends have also been observed for other geographic contexts. For example, Boisseau and Rellihan argue in their analysis of US-based women's, gender and sexuality studies practitioners that "illiberal targeting of our field may, potentially and paradoxically, reconnect our field to its activist roots in ways that replenish and renew WGSS practitioners (Boisseau and Rellihan 2025: 45). I would argue that similar trends may be observed for the CSS: As attacks on the field increase, scholars might actually be spurred on by this adversity and commit more fully to producing CSS scholarship and to building and maintaining communities of solidarity.

9.5.3 Who Can Speak and Who Is Heard/Hurt?

I would contend, as I have done in the previous section, that the external besiegement of CSS is a lived reality – stemming both from structural barriers within the contemporary university and right-wing hostility. This also means that scholars must be willing and able to work with and against this besiegement and, consequently, these dynamics influence who can 'afford' to work in the field. While many of my participants contended that this produced closures for certain individuals, one junior scholar talked explicitly about how, in their opinion, this meant that valuable perspectives were being omitted from the CSS canon/discourse:

I do think that, unfortunately, it scares many people off. And I mean I think it's important –especially when you're trying to build a life for yourself – to think about what you can afford and finance and what you can't. And I do think that that leads to people not entering [the field of] sexuality research who would fit in really well and could and would produce really great contributions. (junior scholar)

When I began to think about whose perspectives and feelings I have not presented in this project, I also began to wonder how these absences also mean that my project is unable to map certain exclusionary practices *within* the field of CSS.

Consequently, while I do not want to call into question that for my interview partners, feelings of besiegement *do* function as a lived reality, I want to problematize it by drawing on Alison Piepmeier (2012), who conceptualizes besiegement as (also) a functional narrative. This concept was brought to my attention by one of my interview partners (whom I can't name for obvious reasons, but if you remember: thank you!). Based on the observation that WGFS might largely be more accepted and less marginalized than it claims to be (though they do not discount the existence of besiegement as a lived reality for some), Piepmeier investigates how narratives of external besiegement invoked by members of the WGFS community serve "as a tool for heightening marginality, intellectual and generational claim staking, and absolution" (Piepmeier 2012: 124), meaning that they are also instrumentalized e.g. to stifle internal critiques of the systems of power operating *within* the WGFS.

Generally speaking, my group of interview partners were in some ways a largely rather privileged group of individuals (except for gender, sexual orientation and class), particularly with

regard to easily observable markers of difference/conformity (i.e., ‘race’, language, (visible) ability). While it is not my intention to call into question the perception of my participants that they are externally besieged or the visions of the future they are drawing from this feeling of besiegement, I do want to attend to how the exclusion of certain perspectives and feelings in this project likely veils that narratives of feeling externally besieged may also be employed to sideline the feelings and perspectives of some scholars *within* the CSS research community.

That there was a perception that epistemic marginalization led CSS scholars (and sexualities researchers more generally) to feel a need to present a united front in the face of external adversity can, for example, be identified in the following quote by a senior scholar:

As a field of scholars, you’re quickly made to work towards a common goal. And that means that you aren’t able to argue heatedly amongst each other [...] but that you’re put in a position to defend the discipline and work to ensure that it’s sufficiently institutionalized. That means that one has to hide these conflicts and can’t hash them out. (senior scholar)

I could imagine that this requirement for cohesion may also contribute, as Piepmeier describes for the WGFS, to internal conflicts over epistemic marginalization *within* the research field being obscured as to not to jeopardize the already precarious standing of CSS research more broadly.

None of my interview partners recounted either having critiqued the systems of power relating to knowledge production within CSS, nor, as a consequence, if/how these critiques had been received by the research community at large. This absence may, however also stem from me not having been able to secure interviews with, for example, Scholars of Color, scholars who visibly belong(ed) to a religious minority, or who were (visibly to me) being disabled. As I was unable to capture and represent the experiences and feelings of scholars working from such positionalities, this may also have veiled both that such critiques do exist and how they might be received.

Therefore, I want to close the analysis chapter of my thesis by saying this: I hope that CSS scholars/hip continues to flourish in the face of adversity both within and beyond the academy. But – and this is explicitly not meant as an indictment of any of my interviewees – I also hope that this community, fragmented as it is, stays vigilant not just against external attacks but also to the system of power operating within it, which determine “who can speak and who is heard/hurt³⁶” (Arghavan et al. 2019).

³⁶ This phrase is taken from the title of a book detailing how racialized power relations within the German humanities operate and what their implications are. (Arghavan et al. 2019)

10 Looking Back and Moving Forward

10.1 Summarizing the Themes and Contextualizing the Research

Through my reflexive thematic analysis, I have mapped out the (structural) conditions under which scholars labor and negotiate the epistemic status of their knowledge claims – a fragmented research community, the neoliberal university and veiled systemic barriers to CSS research – as well as my participants' interaction with them (themes 1-3). The subjects of theme 4 are CSS' epistemic marginalization and exceptionalization as it manifests in the narratives of my participants and an analysis of their boundary work intended to (re)negotiate their epistemic authority. Finally, I engaged with scholars' ambivalent feelings about their academic work and its future under conditions of increasing austerity measures and authoritarianism, while taking care to foreground the joy, pleasure and optimism in scholars' experiences (theme 5).

Theme 1 explored scholars' narratives about feeling a sense of unbelonging to established research fields and disciplines which focus on studying sexualities. Their reports of alienation stem both from feeling excluded from (primarily) the biomedical-clinical research community as well as from wanting to distance themselves from what were perceived as approaches to and histories of studying sexualities which were seen as ranging from reductive to violent/problematic. The research field that many felt an affinity towards – (critical) sexualities studies – was largely seen as non-existent (or subsumed under and sidelined within the gender studies) in Austria and Germany. As this lack of institutionalization also means that there is no clear career path for CSS studies scholars, they tended largely to identify as members of their respective reference disciplines, while also reporting their struggles to do justice to an interdisciplinary subject while simultaneously adhering to disciplinary norms. Collectively, a pattern of individualization of CSS scholars and a fragmentation of the CSS field emerged through the narratives. Though (some) scholars also attempted to resist this by engaging in field-making practices, these were oftentimes initiated by (then) junior scholars, while the senior scholars (at least in my sample) seemed largely uninterested in establishing and cultivating a distinct and separate interdisciplinary CSS. However, some of the scholars I interviewed were nevertheless resisting this trend by engaging in community-building and knowledge dissemination practices, though they also reported barriers to this process (e.g., trouble securing funding for networking events, or being hindered in including CSS in their teaching).

The neoliberalized academy and ever-increasing austerity measures higher education faces, though impacting all academics, seemed to be felt keenly as a threat to critical research fields

(like the CSS) by my participants. However, in theme 2, I also traced my participants' ambivalent entanglement with the demands of the neoliberal university which entailed both a subscription to and critique of its organizing principles. I also mapped out how the ideal of the perfect neoliberal academic clashes and is interwoven with a moral ideal of the purpose of science and the role of scientists in society (see e.g., Merton 1974). Notably, those scholars in less privileged positions (both in terms of career stage as well as their position on various other axes of privilege and marginality) seemed – though this trend did not operate undisrupted – more inclined to openly adhere to the ideal neoliberal academic. I contend that this is likely also because such an adherence has created openings for them in an institution which still advantages individuals able to easily inhabit an academic habitus closely associated with male*ness, whiteness, heterosexuality, abledness and an (upper)middle class background. Consequently, even under conditions of increasing (economic) precarity, scholars nevertheless reported having been able to produce openings for themselves and their scholarship through an adherence to the demands of the neoliberal university (e.g., by remaining endlessly productive, flexible and well-connected). Unsurprisingly, the production of collective openings, due to the pervasiveness of scholars' individualization and the low number of permanently employed scholars, remained largely sidelined. Paradoxically, however, the lack of career options in the field also seemed to create openings for CSS scholarship: As many junior scholars did not expect to be able to maintain an academic career with a focus on sexualities, they seemingly prioritized epistemic, rather than non-epistemic, interests in their scholarly practice.

The third theme was organized around the centralizing concept of non-performativity (Ahmed 2004, 2012) as it relates to institutional commitments to securing academic freedom and producing knowledge relevant to society. Cumulatively, scholars' narratives tell a story of exclusions which are related to the discomfort CSS topics (some more than others) seem to produce. However, scholars, due to their individualization, seemed largely uncertain of the impact their topics had on their struggles to secure e.g., an academic position. Only when looking at the narratives holistically, a pattern emerged, which operated through subtly dismissing and sidelining CSS scholars/hip, rather than doing so overtly (e.g., through potential advisors rejecting a CSS topic by arguing that they would be unable to offer the doctoral candidate the proper support). This subtlety characterizing exclusionary processes, which was oftentimes coupled with fascinated interest (indicative of sexualities' status as a 'talkative taboo' (Akalin and Benkel 2010: 23–25)) seemed to further veil the significance of scholars' sexualities focus on their (lack of) career progression. Though scholars reported that their topics resonated much more beyond academia (which underlined the relevance of their topics to the broader population),

this public interest did not translate into increased institutional fostering of CSS scholars/hip or meaningful support in the face of right-wing hostility. Cumulatively, I contend that the public interest, coupled with institutional barriers and other forms of non-support for CSS scholars/hip is indicative of the non-performativity of an institutional ethos built around the values of academic freedom and the public-serving role of academic knowledge production.

Theme 4 revolved around the processes through which CSS scholars/hip are produced as beyond ‘proper’ and ‘acceptable’ scientific knowledge (producers) as well as their boundary work strategies aimed at subverting and resisting this. I highlighted CSS’ ‘special’ status (compared to other critical scholarship) within an erotophobic institution (De Craene 2024), which manifests through uncomfortable interactions with other academics but also structural barriers (e.g., struggles to access funding for certain topics) both of which are linked to its taboo status. I argue that, within the narratives of my participants, sexualities and CSS emerge as exception-ized, which, in turn can lead to scholars/hip being constructed as dirty, fun, or invisibilized work(ers). Common to scholars’ narratives is their experience of epistemic marginalization, through which their research was constructed as ‘not quite proper knowledge’: This occurs via framing their research as supposedly too niche to be valuable for other areas of research and therefore non-generalizable, which, in turn, positioned it as supposedly irrelevant knowledge. However, these external ascriptions were managed, negotiated and contested by scholars through their boundary work: Scholars mapped the relationships between CSS scholarship, proper science and mainstream science in various ways with the aim to position their contributions within the boundaries of scientificity (see Pereira 2017: 120–127). Another notable dynamic I observed in my participants’ narratives were their reports of having borrowed legitimacy (both unintentionally and overtly) from prestigious locations (e.g., by cooperating with prestigious disciplines, utilizing certain method(ologie)s or the standing of their advisors in the scholarly community). I closed the theme by investigating the potential (non-)performativity of these boundary work strategies by attending to who(se body) they were employed by.

Theme 5 moved towards an investigation of my participants’ ambivalent *feelings* about their lived realities and their future visions for their work within academia. In this theme, I engaged with two axes of ambivalence, joy/pleasure and danger/anxiety in their academic work as well as optimism/pessimism about the future of (their) CSS scholars/hip. The first sub-theme related to the co-existence of joyful and pleasurable experiences (and those joys and pleasures absent in the narratives) with anxieties about and dangers in being a CSS scholar. The joyful and pleasurable aspects relate, e.g., to producing and disseminating CSS knowledges, the thrill of working from the margins/on the taboo or increasing the visibility of under-researched practices or

communities and/or contributing to their destigmatization. These feelings co-existed with anxieties about and a sense of danger in, e.g., interactions with students, accusations of ‘me-search’ when researching criminalized sexualities or (potentially) being (anonymously) harassed or subjected to violence. The second subtheme investigates the paradoxical co-existence of pessimistic and optimistic views of the future, both of which I connected to feelings of increasing besiegement stemming from the ever-increasing neoliberalization of academia and attacks on critical scholarship from right-wing actors. Scholars felt both threatened by these trends but also (re)energized to resist such opposition. However, while feeling besieged is constructed largely as a lived reality in this theme, I also attend to it as a possible narrative through which dissent within a research community might be suppressed: As scholars felt a need to present a ‘united front’ in the face of adversity, this may also lead to a perceived need to silence voices critiquing the systems of power operating *within* it.

Through this analysis I have also mapped similarities and key differences in the experiences of German and Austrian CSS scholars to those presented in much of the academic literature (see chapter 4). Epistemic marginalization and delegitimization of CSS scholars/hip seem to operate similarly to the trends described in the literature (i.e., institutional barriers to CSS knowledge production and trivialization and marginalization of scholars/hip within the respective disciplines) for other geographic locations (e.g., Irvine 2014, 2015, 2018; Hammond and Kingston 2014; Ahearne 2015; Keene 2022; Perin 2024; Armstrong 2024). A key difference seems to be that scholars in my sample reported much lower levels of sexualization and being subject to boundary-pushing/-crossing behaviors by fellow academics. While this should, of course, be positively highlighted, I hesitate to argue that this is necessarily indicative of a (relative) absence of such experiences. Rather, my participants may not have wanted to talk about or relive such experiences with/in front of me, a stranger, whose ability to sensitively handle their accounts they could not gauge.

While, cumulatively, the existing research provided a sort of roadmap for this project, my approach diverged in one significant regard from much of the academic literature. In it I perceived an omnipresence of framing sexualities scholars/hip through the lens of the concepts of ‘stigma’ and ‘dirty work’, which, in my opinion has contributed to a widespread focus on negative experiences. In contrast, I propose viewing CSS through a less value-laden lens: exceptionalization (see Comella 2024). While exceptionalization acknowledges that CSS scholars/hip are treated ‘differently’, this also allowed me to shift my analytical focus to an examination of scholars’ ambivalent experiences of and feelings towards their scholarly work. While it is not

my intention to negate the existence of systemic barriers and stigma(tization) (indeed, this project also showed that sexualities scholars/hip is *also* being constructed as dirty work), my approach intended to attend to what I perceived as a ‘joy deficit’ (Shuster and Westbrook 2024) in the academic literature.

10.2 Reflecting on the Research Process and Further Avenues of Inquiry

In lieu of the standard ‘limitations’ chapter, which, to me, suggests a certain impartiality of perspective and is therefore not aligned with the epistemological underpinnings of this thesis which contend that all knowledge is necessarily subjective and embodied (Haraway 1988), I will instead offer some reflections on the research process and the impact of my own positionality on this process. This will not be focused on accounting for the impact of my privileges and experiences of marginalization (which I have attended to in section 3.3) but rather on how my thoughts and feelings about CSS’ epistemic status and this project as a whole (which are of course not entirely divorceable from my positionality in relation to axes of privilege and marginality), as well as my own desire to be seen as producing ‘proper’ knowledge shaped this thesis.

Looking back on my (reflexive) thematic analysis I cannot help but feel that this intended redirection towards foregrounding joy and pleasure has been somewhat less successful than I had hoped, a dynamic which, I would argue, was co-produced both by me and my participants. While one of my themes is concerned with the joys and pleasures to be found in academic practice, most of the analysis is nevertheless concerned with barriers and their negotiation. Due to my status as both an in- and outsider of the field (as a student with a CSS focus who has no/limited personal experience of being an academic), I did bring preconceived notions to the table, which colored my conceptions of what (working in) the field might entail: Reflecting on my own perspective on the current academic job market and societal shift to the right, I observe myself becoming increasingly pessimistic about the future of CSS scholars/hip and wondering if I could even imagine attempting to navigate a field as fraught as this. This, of course, impacted how I approached the interviews and colored my view of my participant’s narratives. Nevertheless, I also perceived a desire in many of my interviewees to foreground their struggles rather than their ‘wins’: For example, the answers to my questions about joys and pleasures were usually short and oftentimes seemed a bit general to me, while experiences of (epistemic) marginalization were discussed at length and usually more intricately. My participants seemed, on the whole, very interested in (the results of) my research and the interviews were oftentimes the first time someone had asked them to reflect on and relate their experiences. Oftentimes

isolated and without peer support/exchange many of my interviewees (particularly junior researchers) seemed to relish the opportunity to talk to someone (particularly in the later stages of the interviewing process) who had also spoken to other CSS scholars and therefore had ‘access’ to others’ experiences of navigating precarity and (epistemic) marginalization (i.e., some seemed relieved when I said that something they struggled with had also come up in the narratives of other scholars, though I took care to protect everyone’s anonymity when making such comparisons). Consequently, based on the assumption that the version of reality presented in this thesis is a co-production between me and my participants, this reflection may help explain why joy and pleasure appear less prominently than I intended.

This desire for information about others’ experiences I perceived among many of my interviewees also indicated the relevance of this project to me: I truly hope that this project will offer individual(ized) scholars the opportunity to see their experiences contextualized in larger trends which appear somewhat systemic in nature. Ideally, as most scholars seemed to desire more scholarly exchange (though there were some exceptions), reading that they are not alone in this desire (or their struggles) may motivate some to reach out to and connect with other CSS researchers. For those less precariously employed I hope that they will (re)dedicate themselves to using the privilege of their positions to fostering those community spaces which emerged in many (particularly junior) scholars’ narratives as something that they felt would significantly improve their wellbeing and may improve their chances of being able to stay in academia without having to abandon their CSS focus.

This thought, however, leads me to another consideration I engaged with time and time again, namely, whether there is really a need for such a detailed study on one very particular group of researchers. I often wondered if there was really a value in such a detailed study on CSS scholars in times when critical scholarship as a whole is increasingly under threat. Furthermore, I questioned whether this project may (though unintentionally) be reproducing CSS’ exceptionalization, the negative effects of which I have analyzed in theme 4. However, I ultimately came to the conclusion that I do find it imperative to analyze how knowledge production works within specific scholarly communities. While there are undoubtedly many shared experiences between critical scholars of different fields, which need to be acknowledged and ideally form the basis of collective resistance against shared opposition, I would argue that the specificity of work – namely laboring under conditions of individual and institutional erotophobia – in the field of CSS does make it worthy of a ‘stand-alone’ analysis. While denying the field’s status as a special case may work to resist exceptionalization, I also contend that an analysis of said special status is of analytical value: (Epistemic) marginalization in and of the field *is* connected to very

specific dynamics such as e.g., the medicalization of sexualities which has produced an epistemic splitting of the broader field of sexualities research and impacted institutionalization processes (prioritizing biomedical-clinical and positivist approaches and sidelining more SSH-focused, critical scholarship) (see section 5.2). Furthermore, sexualities are not just dismissed as irrelevant, ideological ‘nonsense’ (as sometimes seems to be the case for other types of critical scholars/hip such as the gender studies) but seem to produce both widespread, intense interest and engagement, as well as deep discomfort or even hostility. Despite the specificity of this project, I nevertheless believe that it does not detract from the importance of collective resistance and hope that, as was the case for many of my participants, who felt that their experiences mirrored those of e.g., gender studies scholars, the specific dynamics detailed in this project will also (at least partly) resonate with scholars working in other fields of critical inquiry.

A paradox inherent in this research is writing about a field’s epistemic status and scholars’ negotiations of this status while simultaneously also attempting to position my research project about said field as ‘proper’ knowledge. This thesis is my attempt to qualify myself for a potential further career step in academia and my goal is therefore to position myself and my research firmly within the boundaries of scientificity. Navigating the simultaneity of both analyzing and being engaged in boundary work was also reflected on by Pereira, who concludes that “[t]hinking through this awkward position has been one of the most challenging and confounding aspects of the writing” (Pereira 2017: 15–16). My own desire to be seen as doing ‘proper science’ meant that I (sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously) subscribed to certain academic norms, which I might now choose to subvert given more time to re-work this thesis. For example, the structure of this write-up aligns with a standard structure of the political science publications with which I was academically socialized during my undergraduate studies, a decision I would likely not make again as it turned out to not be an ideal fit to present my research in a way that felt truly coherent to me. Similarly, the literature review might sometimes read less as an appraisal of the existing literature than a criticism of supposed gaps as I attempted to adhere to the principle of legitimizing the research by pointing out supposed blank spaces in the existing literature. Also, I now see my choice of writing this thesis in English – the lingua franca of academia – partly as an attempt to align myself with what Pereira refers to as the ‘modern foreign’ (Pereira 2017: 155–160): I am choosing to make my ‘product’ accessible to a larger number of potential ‘consumers’, thereby increasing my own market value in a globalized market of academic knowledge production: However, this also meant that I had to translate the quotes I wanted to include in this thesis, thereby subjecting the quotes to an additional layer of interpretation (Van Nes et al. 2010) which would not have been required had I simply written

this thesis in German. Additionally, describing the German and Austrian research context in English (and for readers who are potentially not from Germany or Austria) presented me with challenges regarding the vocabulary (for example, interacting with the various terms used to describe academic inquiry into sexualities such as ‘Sexualforschung’ and ‘Sexualwissenschaft’) as well as the academic system (for example, explaining the difference between ‘Universitäten’ and ‘Fachhochschulen’).

The need to produce the most reflexive and in-depth analysis that I could possibly achieve also stems from my perception of my participants as vigilant observers of the quality of my research. Their status as insiders of the dynamics of the field I am studying and the accumulation of comments stating that they felt that my research was important really ‘raised the stakes’ for this project. I oftentimes worried – and am still worried – that my participants will read the analysis and feel that it did not represent them or broader trends in the field in a way that they felt reflected (their) reality of working as CSS scholars. I also felt uncomfortable with the power and responsibility inherent in being able to selectively use participants’ stories to advance my own narrative of what I consider to be the reality of (negotiations of) the field’s epistemic status. I do not feel, however, that this tension is resolvable beyond stating that the reality I co-produced with my participants and recounted in the write-up of my research should be considered not an accurate reflection of *the* objective truth but, in line with the epistemological underpinnings of this project, situated knowledges. (Haraway 1988).

After finishing this thesis, I do not necessarily feel that I am ‘done’ with this topic as I would still be very interested in the results of a ‘full’ ethnography or even approaching the topic with another data collection method, such as survey research (which may lead scholars to feel more comfortable to disclose certain more vulnerable experiences, as they would not have to state them directly ‘to my face’). It could also be productive to supplement the sample with the experiences of those scholars working on sexualities topics from more positivist, essentialist or biomedical-clinical perspectives, to see how their experiences both diverge and overlap with those of the CSS scholars I interviewed for this project. Including CSS research(ers) from Switzerland as another (although not exclusively) German-speaking country could also provide additional insights. Finally, I think it would be fruitful to repeat this research a few years into the future to be able to gauge how changing conditions within and beyond academia will affect the lived realities of CSS scholars.

11 Conclusion

In this reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022a; Braun et al. 2019) based on data gained through 15 problem-centered interviews (Witzel and Reiter 2022; Witzel 2000) and underpinned by feminist epistemology (Haraway 1988; Coccia et al. 2024), I have mapped out German and Austrian critical sexualities studies (CSS) scholars' subjective experiences of their scholarly practice. These experiences have been contextualized within the broader structures governing contemporary academic practice, the fragmentation of the field of CSS, and the exceptionalization of sexualities (research) in academia and beyond.

Central to this exploration was Maria do Mar Pereira's concept of epistemic status (Pereira 2017, 2019), which provided the main theoretical lens through which I analyzed both scholars' experiences of (epistemic) marginalization, as well as their (boundary work) strategies to combat said marginalization. Supplementing this, the entirety of the analysis was furthermore informed by Coccia et al.'s (2024) conceptualization of ambivalence as a feminist project, which allowed me to focus not on telling one coherent story of my participant's experiences but rather enabled me to attend to and sometimes even foreground paradoxes and contradictions in scholars' narratives about their lived realities. My project was guided by the following research question:

How do critical sexualities studies scholars in Germany and Austria experience and negotiate the epistemic status of their (fragmented and exceptionalized) research (field) within the broader political economy of contemporary academic practice?

Building on existing academic literature from various geographic locations and academic disciplines/research fields – which relates implicitly to (CSS') epistemic status as well as strategies by individual scholars aimed at negotiating this status – I set out more specifically to explore the following: Firstly, if and to what extent the common conceptualization of sexualities scholar/hips as 'dirty work(ers)' and 'stigma' – which implicitly refer to scholars' routine (epistemic) marginalization were applicable to the experiences of German and Austrian academics. Secondly, I aimed to engage with what I perceived of as a notable (and somewhat undue) primary focus on negative experiences, which I understand as indicative of a broader 'joy deficit' (Shuster and Westbrook 2024) in the study of marginalized (communities of) people. While not intending to discount negative experiences, I nevertheless wanted to supplement this focus by also foregrounding the pleasurable and joyful aspects of being a CSS scholar.

Through the five themes which make up my analysis, I explored scholars' narratives as they related to what emerged as a pattern of (epistemic) marginalization in the contemporary university during the interviews. By foregrounding the significance of their individualization in reference disciplines and low levels of communication and collaboration with other scholars researching sexualities (theme 1); their (sometimes paradoxical) subscription to and rejection of the demands of the neoliberal university (theme 2); and the non-performativity of institutional commitments which should (but in reality, do not) work to foster and protect sexualities studies scholars/hip (theme 3), I 'set the scene' for the subsequent analysis of both the epistemic status of scholars' knowledge claims (and CSS more broadly), as well as scholars' negotiations of this status (theme 4): Here, I mapped out the (epistemic) marginalization of CSS scholars/hip within an erotophobic (De Craene 2024) institution, while also illustrating how my participants' accounts differed from those in the existing literature. The final theme (theme 5) attended to the joy/pleasure deficit by foregrounding these emotions which, despite their uneasy co-existence with more negative emotions such as fear and anxiety, help explain why scholars are nevertheless enjoying their work in the field and are energized to continue doing so.

My aim with this project was twofold: Investigate the conditions under which critical knowledge about sexualities is being produced and use this project as a way to gauge whether I could imagine working in the field myself. I hope I succeeded on count one and that those reading this thesis may either find it informative to see experiences similar to their own contextualized in the larger trends I identified, or may simply find it productive to engage with the implications of and resistance against the curtailment of critical scholarship on a topic which is simultaneously omnipresent and marginalized. As for my own path, I continue to feel unsure whether I could withstand the demands of the neoliberal university and an increasingly hostile climate to critical scholarship both within and beyond the academy. However, at the very least this project has given me the opportunity to make an informed decision, should I attempt to remain in academia after finishing my master's.

12 References

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13 Appendix³⁷

Sie forschen zu Sexualität(en) aus geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlicher / kritischer Perspektive?

Studie zum subjektiven Erleben der (Forschungs-)Arbeit in der zeitgenössischen Uni- versität

- Suche Interviewpartner*innen für ca. 60-90-minütige Interviews via Zoom
- Zeitraum: ab jetzt bis Ende September 2025; Tageszeit flexibel

Guten Tag,

im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit (betreut von Ass.-Prof. Dr. Sabine Grenz) an der Universität Wien bin ich derzeit auf der Suche nach Wissenschaftler*innen, die aus geistes- oder sozialwissenschaftlicher / kritischer Perspektive zu Sexualität(en) arbeiten. Meine Forschung widmet sich folgender Frage: *Wie erleben und verhandeln Forschende Diskurse, die in akademischen Kreisen bezüglich der Wissenschaftlichkeit, Relevanz und „Angemessenheit“ des von ihnen produzierten Wissens zirkulieren?*

Meinem Forschungsprojekt liegt sowohl ein wissenschaftliches als auch ein persönliches Erkenntnisinteresse zugrunde. Einerseits möchte ich existierende Forschung zur Position von Sexualitätsforschenden in der Institution „Universität“ ergänzen. Da diese bisher primär den angloamerikanischen Raum abdeckt (siehe bspw. Janice Irvine, 2014, 2015; Lynn Comella, 2024; Natalie Hammond & Sarah Kingston, 2014), analysiere ich einen bisher unzureichend beforschten geographischen Kontext (Deutschland und Österreich). Zudem fokussiert sich der Großteil der existierenden Forschungsliteratur auf Erfahrungen mit Prekarität und Stigma. Diesen Fokus möchte ich erweitern, indem ich mich dezidiert auf (Potenziale für) Ambivalenz im Erleben der Forschenden in ihren akademischen Tätigkeiten fokussiere: Wie erleben/navigieren sie das Spannungsfeld von Prekarität/Stigma einerseits, Freude/Lust an ihrer Arbeit andererseits (siehe dazu bspw. Breanne Fahs, Rebecca Plante & Sara McClelland, 2018)?

³⁷ This appendix is exclusively in German as I conducted the interviews exclusively in German.

Meine Forschung stützt sich zwar auf die Erkenntnisse bestehender Forschung, ich möchte aber betonen, dass es mir nicht darum geht, bereits bestehende Annahmen meinerseits einfach nur zu bestätigen. Ich verstehe Wissen als situiert und verkörpert und habe dementsprechend keine bestimmten Erwartungen an Ihre Erzählungen. Das Augenmerk der Arbeit liegt vielmehr auf Ihrem subjektiven Erleben.

Mein persönliches Interesse stammt daher, dass ich nach dem Masterabschluss gerne im Fachbereich promovieren würde. Während meines Studiums habe ich bereits mit großem Interesse zu sexualitätswissenschaftlichen Themen (bspw. in meiner Bachelorarbeit zum feministischen akademischen Pornographiediskurs) geforscht. Im Rahmen dieses Projekts würde ich nun gerne mehr über die Bedingungen im Forschungsfeld erfahren.

Daher bin ich auf der Suche nach Personen, die ihre Erfahrungen als Sexualitätsforschende – im Rahmen von ca. **60-90-minütigen Einzelinterviews** – mit mir teilen möchten.

Die Interviews werden voraussichtlich, aufgrund der räumlichen Distanz, online über Zoom stattfinden. Bezüglich des Interviewzeitpunktes kann ich mich grundsätzlich nach Ihnen richten, möchte die Datenerhebungsphase aber idealerweise noch bis Ende September 2025 abschließen.

Für die wissenschaftliche Analyse werden die Interviews, mit Ihrem Einverständnis, aufgezeichnet und transkribiert. Um Ihre Anonymität zu gewährleisten, werden alle Informationen, die auf Ihre Identität schließen lassen, streng vertraulich behandelt und aus der finalen Arbeit entfernt.

Bei Interesse an der Teilnahme und/oder falls Sie noch Fragen haben, freue ich mich über eine Rückmeldung per E-Mail an **axxxxxxxx@unet.univie.ac.at**! Etwaige Fragen können zudem auch gern in einem Telefonat vor dem Interview selbst besprochen werden.

Vielen Dank und viele Grüße

Universität Wien

axxxxxxxx@unet.univie.ac.at

Teilnehmer*inneninformation und Einwilligungserklärung zur Teilnahme am Forschungsprojekt zum subjektiven Erleben der (Forschungs-)Arbeit von Sexualitätsforschenden in der zeitgenössischen Universität

Sehr geehrte*r Teilnehmer*in,

hiermit lade ich Sie ein, am oben genannten Forschungsprojekt teilzunehmen.

Ihre Teilnahme erfolgt in Form eines Interviews, das persönlich oder online mittels des Video-konferenztool Zoom (unter Verwendung der Lizenz der Universität Wien) stattfindet. Das Interview führe ich im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit (betreut von Ass.-Prof. Dr. Sabine Grenz) an der Universität Wien durch. Bei Fragen jeglicher Art können Sie mich unter **axxxxxxxx@unet.univie.ac.at** oder +43 677 XXXXXXXX erreichen.

Ihre Teilnahme an diesem Forschungsprojekt – und damit an diesem Interview – erfolgt freiwillig. Sie können jederzeit, ohne Angabe von Gründen, Ihre Bereitschaft zur Teilnahme am Interview ablehnen oder zurückziehen. Dies hat keine nachteiligen Folgen für Sie. Zur Datenverarbeitung nach Abschluss des Interviews siehe Punkt 4.

1. Zweck des Forschungsprojekts

Im Rahmen dieses Forschungsprojekts möchte ich Wissenschaftler*innen interviewen, die aus geistes-, sozial- und kulturwissenschaftlicher (GSK) / kritischer Perspektive zu Sexualität(en) arbeiten. Meine Forschung widmet sich folgender Frage: Wie erleben und verhandeln Forschende Diskurse, die in akademischen Kreisen bezüglich der Wissenschaftlichkeit, Relevanz und „Angemessenheit“ des von ihnen produzierten Wissens zirkulieren?

Ziel ist es existierende Forschung zur Position von Sexualitätsforschenden in der Institution „Universität“ zu ergänzen, indem ich einen bisher unzureichend beforschten geographischen Kontext (Deutschland und Österreich) analysiere. Zudem fokussiert sich der Großteil der existierenden Forschungsliteratur auf Erfahrungen von Prekarität und Stigma. Diesen Fokus möchte ich erweitern, indem ich mich dezidiert auf (Potenziale für) Ambivalenz im Erleben der Forschenden in ihren akademischen Tätigkeiten fokussiere: Wie erleben/navigieren sie das Spannungsfeld von Prekarität/Stigma einerseits, Freude/Lust an ihrer Arbeit andererseits?

Meine Forschung stützt sich zwar auf die Erkenntnisse bestehender Forschung, ich möchte aber betonen, dass es mir nicht darum geht, bereits bestehende Annahmen meinerseits einfach nur zu bestätigen. Ich verstehe Wissen als situiert und verkörpert und habe dementsprechend keine bestimmten Erwartungen an Ihre Erzählungen. Das Augenmerk der Arbeit liegt vielmehr auf Ihrem subjektiven Erleben.

Teilnehmer*inneninformation und Einwilligungserklärung zur Teilnahme am Forschungsprojekt zum subjektiven Erleben der (Forschungs-)Arbeit von Sexualitätsforschenden in der zeitgenössischen Universität

2. Ablauf des Interviews

Ihre Teilnahme an diesem Forschungsprojekt erfolgt in Form eines Interviews mit mir, das entweder persönlich oder via Zoom stattfindet. Das Interview wird etwa 60-90 Minuten dauern. Während des Interviews läuft eine Aufzeichnung, die im Anschluss zur Transkription dient.

3. Vorzeitige Beendigung des Interviews

Sie können sich jederzeit und ohne Angabe von Gründen dazu entscheiden, das Interview zu beenden. Aus dieser Entscheidung entstehen Ihnen keinerlei Nachteile.

4. Datenaufzeichnung und -verwendung

Dieses Interview wird mit Hilfe des Zoom Aufnahmetools aufgezeichnet. Dabei wird die Zoom-Lizenz der Universität Wien genutzt, die laut Zentralem Informatikdienst „bedenkenlos für universitätsbezogene Aktivitäten“³⁸ genutzt werden kann. Die Aufzeichnung wird nicht veröffentlicht, sondern dient nur der Transkription des Interviews. Nur ich als Leiterin des Forschungsprojekts habe Zugriff auf die Aufzeichnung.

Bei der Transkription werden Ihre Daten pseudonymisiert (z. B. durch die Vergabe einer ID-Nummer, unter der die Daten gespeichert werden), außer, Sie wünschen sich explizit, dass Sie und Ihre Aussagen eindeutig identifizierbar sind – z.B. durch Nennung Ihres Namens, Ihres Titels, und Ihrer aktuellen Anstellung (siehe dazu Punkt 6). Die Möglichkeit, nicht unter einem Pseudonym in der Arbeit zu erscheinen biete ich – basierend auf Valerie De Cranes Argumentation – aus folgendem Grund an: Die Verwendung des echten Namens kann laut De Craene durchaus befreiend und ermächtigend sein, während Pseudonymisierung auch wie ein „Second Closet“, der Stigma also noch verstärkt, wirken kann.³⁹ Daher möchte ich Ihnen explizit die Option anbieten, selbst zu wählen, wie ich Ihre persönlichen Daten handhaben soll.

Pseudonymisierte Daten lassen sich einer Person mit zusätzlichen Informationen (meist einem Identifikationsschlüssel) zuordnen (Art. 4 Z 5 DSGVO) und bleiben daher personenbezogene Daten. Als solche unterliegen sie dem Datenschutz.

³⁸ <https://zid.univie.ac.at/zoom/>

³⁹ Valerie De Craene, “‘Oops, I Didn’t Know We Couldn’t Talk About Sex’: Sex Researchers Talking Back to the Erotophobic Academy Using the Researcher’s Erotic Subjectivities,” *Sexualities* 27, no. 1–2 (February 2024): 12

**Teilnehmer*inneninformation und Einwilligungserklärung zur Teilnahme am
Forschungsprojekt zum subjektiven Erleben der (Forschungs-)Arbeit von
Sexualitätsforschenden in der zeitgenössischen Universität**

Die Transkripte der Interviews werden Teil meiner Masterarbeit sein, da diese Gegenstand der Analyse sind. Die Ergebnisse der Analyse werden in meiner Masterarbeit u.a. unter Verwendung von direkten Zitaten vorgestellt und diskutiert. Um die Pseudonymisierung zu gewährleisten werden die Zitate nicht bestimmten Interviews zugeordnet und Details, die auf die Identität der Person schließen lassen, gelöscht.

Laut UG 2002 § 86 (Universitätsgesetz) müssen alle wissenschaftlichen Abschlussarbeiten im Volltext veröffentlicht werden. Die Verfasser*innen von wissenschaftlichen Arbeiten sind daher verpflichtet, die Druckfassung in der Universitätsbibliothek Wien zur Verfügung zu stellen. Nach positiver Begutachtung wird daher auch meine Masterarbeit dort öffentlich zugänglich sein. Gegebenenfalls wird der Volltext der Arbeit auch digital über u:theses zugänglich sein.

Das Einverständnis zur Verwendung der Daten (Aufzeichnung und Transkript) kann vor Abgabe der Masterarbeit zur Bewertung zurückgezogen werden. Da der Abgabetermin aktuell nicht konkret absehbar ist, garantiere ich hiermit eine Mindestfrist von 30 Tagen nach dem Interview für den Widerruf Ihres Einverständnisses. Bei einer Benachrichtigung innerhalb dieses Zeitraums ist es in jedem Fall möglich das Einverständnis zur Verwendung der Aufzeichnung und des Transkripts zu widerrufen. Nach Ablauf der 30 Tage kann ich nicht garantieren, dass der Widerruf noch möglich ist.

Die Aufzeichnung des Interviews wird in jedem Fall nach der Abgabe der Arbeit zur Bewertung unwiderruflich gelöscht.

5. Möglichkeit zur Diskussion weiterer Fragen

Falls sich im Vorhinein, während des Interviews oder im Nachhinein noch Fragen ergeben, kontaktieren Sie mich gerne:

axxxxxxxx@unet.univie.ac.at

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**Teilnehmer*inneninformation und Einwilligungserklärung zur Teilnahme am
Forschungsprojekt zum subjektiven Erleben der (Forschungs-)Arbeit von
Sexualitätsforschenden in der zeitgenössischen Universität**

6. Einwilligungserklärung

Name der teilnehmenden Person:

Ich erkläre mich bereit, am Forschungsprojekt zum subjektiven Erleben der (Forschungs-)arbeit von Sexualitätsforschenden in der zeitgenössischen Universität teilzunehmen.

Ich stimme zu, dass meine Daten in pseudonymisierter Form elektronisch gespeichert werden. Falls ich mit persönlichen Informationen in der Arbeit kenntlich gemacht werden möchte, bedarf dies meiner expliziten Zustimmung.

☐

Ich wünsche explizit, dass meine Daten **NICHT** in pseudonymisierter Form, sondern unter Verwendung meiner persönlichen Daten (wie bspw. meines Klarnamens, meiner Institutionszugehörigkeit) in der Arbeit genutzt werden.

In beiden Fällen verpflichtet sich [Name forschende Person] mit den anvertrauten Daten und Informationen sorgfältig umzugehen und sie vertraulich zu behandeln. Die Weitergabe der Daten an Dritte sowie das Speichern auf für andere Personen zugängliche Datenträger sind untersagt.

Ich bin von [Name forschende Person] ausführlich und verständlich über Zielsetzung, Bedeutung und Tragweite des Forschungsprojekts und die sich für mich daraus ergebenden Anforderungen aufgeklärt worden. Ich habe darüber hinaus den Text dieser Teilnehmer*inneninformation gelesen. Aufgetretene Fragen wurden mir verständlich und ausreichend beantwortet. Ich hatte genügend Zeit, mich zu entscheiden, ob ich an dem Forschungsprojekt teilnehmen möchte. Ich habe zurzeit keine weiteren Fragen.

Ich behalte mir das Recht vor, meine freiwillige Mitwirkung am Interview jederzeit und ohne Angabe von Gründen zu beenden, ohne, dass mir daraus Nachteile entstehen. Das Einverständnis zur Mitwirkung am Forschungsprojekt (im Sinne der Verwendung der Aufzeichnung und des Transkripts) kann in jedem Fall innerhalb von 30 Tagen nach dem Interview widerrufen

**Teilnehmer*inneninformation und Einwilligungserklärung zur Teilnahme am
Forschungsprojekt zum subjektiven Erleben der (Forschungs-)Arbeit von
Sexualitätsforschenden in der zeitgenössischen Universität**

werden. Dies kann ohne Angabe von Gründen, ohne negative Folgen und ggf. auch nach Ablauf jener Frist (sollte die Arbeit noch nicht zur Bewertung abgegeben worden sein), geschehen. Sollte ich aus dem Forschungsprojekt ausscheiden wollen, so kann ich dies schriftlich per E-Mail bei [Name forschende Person] (**axxxxxxxx@unet.univie.ac.at**) veranlassen.

Eine von beiden Parteien unterschriebene Version dieser Teilnehmer*inneninformation und Einwilligungserklärung habe ich erhalten.

.....

Datum und Unterschrift der teilnehmenden Person

.....

Datum und Unterschrift von [Name forschende Person]

Begleitender Kurzfragebogen zum Interview

Name:

Datum:

1. Wie bestreiten Sie aktuell Ihren Lebensunterhalt (Mehrfachnennungen möglich)?
 - a. Unbefristete Anstellung an einer Universität
 - b. Befristete Anstellung an einer Universität
 - c. Lehraufträge
 - d. Sonstiges (gerne ausführen, wenn Sie möchten):
2. Was ist der höchste von Ihnen erreichte akademischer Grad?
3. Welchem Fachbereich/welcher Disziplin sehen Sie sich zugehörig (Mehrfachnennungen möglich)?
4. Möchten Sie während des Interviews lieber geduzt oder gesiezt werden?
5. **Optional:** Welche Pronomen verwenden Sie (u.a. relevant für die Verschriftlichung der Ergebnisse und Ihre Ansprache im Interview selbst)

Interview Leitfaden (finale Version⁴⁰)

Kurzinformation zum Projekt	Ziel
Ich möchte gerne mehr über deine Erfahrungen als Person, die aus geistes- sozial und kulturwissenschaftlicher bzw. kritischer Perspektive zu Sexualitäten forscht, erfahren. Im Fokus steht für mich die Frage wie Forschende wie du Diskurse erleben und verhandeln, die in akademischen Kreisen bezüglich der Wissenschaftlichkeit, Relevanz und „Angemessenheit“ des von ihnen produzierten Wissens zirkulieren, und wie sich das auf die individuelle wissenschaftliche Praxis auswirkt. Besonders interessiert mich, wie du das Spannungsfeld von Prekari-tät/Stigma einerseits – wenn dich das denn betrifft –, Freude/Lust an deiner Arbeit andererseits erlebst und navi-gierst.	Thema einleiten, Informa-tionen aus dem Call/ der Einverständniserklärung wiederholen; Möglichkeit geben, Nachfragen zu stel-len
Einstiegsfrage	
Mich würde interessieren, wie du dazu gekommen bist, einen Forschungsschwerpunkt auf [...] zu legen. Erzähl doch mal!	Offene Erzählaufforderung um die Narration fördern soll und um Interviewees selbst Schwerpunkte setz-ten zu lassen hinsichtlich des Einstiegs-Inputs; Infor-mationen zum persönli-chen Werdegang sammeln
(Epistemische) Marginalisierung und Dirty Work?	
Du beforschst Themen, die für viele Menschen weiterhin tabu-behaftet sind. Hast du das Gefühl, dass du an der Universität	Besonderheit des Gegen-stands anerkennen aber durch offene Formulierung

⁴⁰ This is the final iteration of the interview guide. The guide was amended multiple times during the interviewing process as I gained insight through the interviews themselves (e.g., which questions ‘worked’ how I intended and which needed to be amended, replaced or omitted). Furthermore, there existed two version of this guide (formal and informal), which were chosen depending on how my respective interview partner wanted to be addressed. The version presented here is the informal version.

Stigma-frei und barrierearm zu Sexualitäten arbeiten konntest/kannst?	soll ein Priming auf negative Erfahrungen verhindert werden. Stattdessen fördern, dass Interviewees den Schwerpunkt selbst auf Positives/Negatives/Ambivalentes legen können
Charmed Circle / Sex als besonderer Gegenstand	
Wie reagieren Kolleg*innen wenn du erzählst, wozu du forschst? Gibt es auch Themen im Bereich der Sexualitätenforschung, die du aktuell für nicht/kaum beforschbar hältst? Erzähl mal!	Akzeptanz der Forschung innerhalb der Universität: Welche Forschungsthemen werden als legitimes/wichtiges Wissen angesehen, welches Wissen wird besonders marginalisiert?
Verkörperte Boundary Work	
Welchen Einfluss haben deine Privilegien – und wenn du das teilen möchtest auch Marginalisierungserfahrungen – im Verlauf deiner Karriere darauf gehabt, wie deine Forschung rezipiert wird (von Kolleg*innen und Vorgesetzten aber auch fachfremden Personen)?	Herausarbeiten, wie sich die Boundary Work von unterschiedlichen Subjekten unterscheidet, bzw. ob es ein acknowledgement gibt, dass die Subjektposition die Handlungsmöglichkeiten in Academia beeinflusst
Ambivalente Gefühle	
Die existierende Forschungsliteratur zu den Erfahrungen von Sexualitätsforschenden befasst sich vor allem mit Prekarität und Marginalisierung – also negativen Erfahrungen. Das erklärt für mich aber nicht, warum Leute wie du sich trotzdem dazu entschließen zu Sexualitäten zu arbeiten. Erzähl doch mal, was dich motiviert!	Dem ‚Joy/Pleasure Deficit‘ entgegenwirken und positive Gefühle und Erfahrungen in den Vordergrund rücken

Kartographie des Forschungsfelds	
Ich versuche auch, abzustecken, ob es in Deutschland/Österreich sowas wie (kritische) Sexuality Studies oder eine GSK-fokussierte Sexualitätenforschung überhaupt gibt: Fühlst du dich dort zugehörig? Warum (nicht)? Du hast im Fragebogen als Heimatdisziplin nicht die Sexualität(en)forschung genannt. Erzähl mal, warum nicht!	Herausfinden, wie sich Forschende zu bestehenden Forschungsfeldern positionieren und wo sie ihre eigene Forschung verorten.
Fragen für Professor*innen	
Du hast den Sprung in den Rang der Professor*innen geschafft. Das ist ja mit einem Forschungsschwerpunkt auf Sexualitäten eher selten. Erzähl doch mal, wie es bei dir dazu gekommen ist, dass du bei dem Thema/den Themen geblieben bist/bleiben konntest!	Herausfinden was mögliche Voraussetzungen für eine erfolgreiche wissenschaftliche Karriere trotz eines potenziell marginalisierenden Themas sind
Stimmungsbarometer	
Wenn du mit allem, was du heute weißt, nochmal entscheiden könntest: Würdest du dich wieder entscheiden zu Sexualitäten zu forschen? Warum (nicht)? Wie schätzt du die Zukunft deiner – und der allgemeinen – GSK/kritischen Sexualitätenforschung ein: Blickst du eher optimistisch oder pessimistisch in die Zukunft?	Stimmungsbild einfangen; persönliche Erfahrungen und Zukunftsvisionen, positive wie negative, abfragen
Abschlussfrage	
Gibt es etwas, das dir wichtig ist zu teilen, das aber noch keinen Raum in diesem Gespräch hatte?	Mögliche Leerstellen meinerseits im Erstellen des Leitfadens abdecken

Postskriptum

Datum des Interviews:

Name der interviewten Person:

Zustandekommen (Rückmeldung auf allgemeinen Call, direkt kontaktiert):

Rahmenbedingungen (z.B. online/offline, Tageszeit, eigene Stimmung):

Gesprächsverlauf (z.B. schleppend/flüssig, Gesprächsanteile, thematische Fokussierung):

Auswirkungen der sozialen Situation (z.B. Vertrautheit durch Duzen oder Siezen, Diskrepanz der Position in der akademischen Hierarchie):

Geschehnisse vor und nach der Aufzeichnung:

Annahmen/Thesen zum Interview: