

Cotlow Award Application Form 2009

Department of Anthropology

The George Washington University

Washington, DC 20052

1. Personal Information

Applicant's name: Mark Alan Smith

Degree sought: B.A. Anthropology

Field of study/major/minor/concentration: Medical/Psychological Anthropology

Expected date of graduation: May 2009

Faculty Advisor(s) (who have served as your mentor or mentors for this proposal): Dr. Barbara Miller, Dr. Patty Kelly

2. Language Skills

Does the proposed project involve the use of a "field language"? yes or (no) No

3. Title of the Project and Abstract

Project Title: Human Asexual Marginality: Online Communities, Discourse, and the Shaping of Daily Life in America. (Or: Is There a Name for How I Feel? Are There Any Others Like Me?)

Abstract of the Project (provide a summary description of the project's goals, location, methods, and relevance to anthropology) [80 word maximum]:

Human asexuality is a "sexual" orientation that is relatively unknown and understudied within American culture. Even people who *feel* asexual may not necessarily know how to describe their asexuality because a vocabulary to describe this orientation is lacking. This project will contribute to filling the gap in knowledge about asexuals and their identities. I will collect and analyze online "discovery narratives" written by asexuals to gain an understanding of how asexuals discover themselves and shape asexual discourse. I will also conduct participant observation in New York City in order to gain insights about "real life" asexual discourse and then compare asexual discourse online to the actual.

4. Description of the Project (describe your overall research goals, what the project is generally about, and where you will conduct the research and why) [250 word maximum]:

In humans, the term “asexual” has been ascribed to handicapped and castrated persons who are incapable of engaging in sexual behaviors. Most recently, however, a new definition of the “asexual” has emerged. In large part, due to online communities, the term asexual now applies to human sexual orientation (or lack thereof).

Still in an emerging state, the concept and possibility of asexuality is still unknown to many potential asexuals. To counteract this lack of awareness, online contributors meticulously describe how they “discovered” asexuality and how they define this very term. Thousands of online postings (from several countries and all regions of the United States) immediately reveal the complexities of asexuality, an overarching term that houses multiple definitions and categories still under construction. I will collect and analyze online narratives, searching for word patterns and sub-categories of asexuality that are distinct to this community. I argue that the most prevalent linguistic features within these narratives will lead the heart of the new and emerging asexual ethos.

I will also attend asexual group meetings in New York City, informing members of my project and seeking their informal consent. In this part of the project, I will learn about “real life” groups that sprouted up from online connections, and I will ultimately be able to compare discourse in the two contexts. I have selected this fieldwork location because of its preexisting asexual community as well as its close proximity to my residence in Washington, DC, which lacks such groups at this time.

I will carry out data collection and analysis throughout the summer and into the fall. I am requesting Cotlow funding only for the fieldwork trips to New York City.

5. Significance of the Project to Anthropology (in this literature review describe how the proposed research relates to other anthropological research on the topic, and/or region as relevant; use social science style citation--no footnotes) [400 word maximum]:

Research of the anthropological literature on asexuality reveals no relevant published studies. A keyword search (for “asexuality” or “asexual”) in Anthropology Plus produced four inapplicable articles, and AnthroSource produced only one semi-related article on performative theory of gender (Robertson 1992). The journal, *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, has included no article on asexuality. Several articles in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* address sexuality from various perspectives (Weston 1993, Morris 1995, Parker 2001, Boellstorf 2007). However, none includes mention of asexuality. Although anthropologists have paid little to no attention to the specific topic of asexuality, the anthropology of gender and sexuality provides a strong foundation of theoretical and descriptive literature to which my proposed study will contribute.

The Anthropology of Gender and Sexuality

Theory in the anthropology of gender and sexuality consists of a struggle between social construction theory and the “cultural influence model” (Vance 1993:878). In the cultural influence model, sexuality is rooted in evolution and biological determinism (Worthman 1995). Therefore, many anthropologists accept that “sexual acts carry stable and universal significance in terms of identity and subjective meaning” (Vance 1993:879). However, cross-cultural research on homosexuality has illustrated that conceptions of homosexuality vary significantly (Davis and Whitten 1987:80). On the other hand, social construction theory rejects this overemphasis on biology. Instead, social constructionists attempt to reshape sexuality by complicating universal definitions of sexuality (Weston 1993:341).

In America, early studies conducted by Masters and Johnson (1966, 1970, 1979) measured “universal” physiological responses to various mental and physical stimuli. In addition, statistics in the Kinsey reports (1948, 1953) first illustrated the prevalence (or normalcy) of American sexual practices. Likewise, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1976) describes how Western scientific descriptions of “normal” sexual practices can be traced back to eighteenth century church confessions about “immoral” sexual behaviors. Some anthropological studies mentioning sexuality predate the above publications (Malinowski 1927, Mead 1928). However, a majority of sexuality studies, from many disciplines, are rooted in this mid-twentieth century research (Vance 1993).

Interdisciplinary sexuality studies, especially at the peak of the AIDS crisis, resulted in the fusion of anthropological and epidemiological studies (Lindenbaum 1993:865). These joint studies have directed anthropology back to a biomedical paradigm based on the “universal functioning of the body” (Vance 1993:880). In turn, this paradigm has prevented anthropology from recognizing “marginal sexual subcultures” such as asexuality (Vance 1993:880).

Anthropological Studies of Online Activism

According to one study, “The Anthropology of Online Communities,” the Internet is a grey area where boundaries between real and imagined communities become blurred (Wilson and Peterson 2002:456). Due to the omnipresence of the Internet, individuals are increasingly part of multiple communities and cultures, both offline and online. However, online “identities are negotiated, reproduced, and indexed in a variety of ways” where oftentimes offline context is necessary to understand online identities (Wilson and Peterson 2002:457). Although researchers have explored online communities, there is a deficit of information comparing online communities to their offline context (Wilson and Peterson 2002:457). One study, for example, describes Western online newsgroups where gay men post messages concerning the exchange of HIV/AIDS as if it were a gift to be given and received (Graydon 2007). Graydon describes and analyzes the layers of detail within messages from this “carnavalesque” online space (2007:1). However, he concludes that his strictly online based research is not sufficient to draw comparisons to the offline context (Graydon 2007:290).

My project is likely to be the first anthropological study of asexuality and could potentially create a new topic of study within the anthropology of sexuality and gender. It will also add to the anthropological literature on comparative studies of online and offline communities.

6. Methods (clearly outline or list your research questions; describe the data you will collect and how you will collect it; discuss your analytical methods; and show how the data will address the research questions) [300 word maximum]:

In contrast to the existing psychological studies that focus on definitions of asexuality, I will direct attention to the opinions that self-proclaimed asexuals express. This project will use two avenues of data collection: online narrative analysis and participant observation.

Data Collection:

1. Online research: I will first collect online “discovery narratives” (i.e. how asexuals discovered asexuality). I will focus primarily on the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)

Web site forums. Here, I can post questions pertinent to my research, notifying posters of how their comments will be used. I will also inform members that they are not under any circumstances required to answer questions that they may find uncomfortable. Questions will focus on: basic background information (age, ethnicity, education, gender), how individuals found out about asexuality, how members define asexuality, and how individuals categorize their asexuality (i.e. panromantic asexual, asexual-asexual, single hetero-asexual, etc). All Web site members maintain anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and by controlling the amount of information disclosed about them (e.g. location, gender, occupation, age). All information on the site is available to the public; members are aware that any of their comments can be viewed but cannot be traced back to their public identity.

2. Participant observation: I will join and attend three asexual group meetings in New York City. In order to obtain “informed consent,” I will explain my project and seek their informal, oral approval as a group. For any individuals with whom I may have more extended conversations, I will seek their oral statement that they understand the goals of my project and are willing to provide data for the study. In all cases, I will maintain complete anonymity of the group and individuals. Due to the sensitive nature of this project, I will refrain from recording any of the meetings and will instead resort to taking extensive notes after the meetings.

In addition to gathering data on how the members talk about their asexuality, I will also pay attention to who are the members in terms of age, ethnicity, education, and other social variables that I can either pick up indirectly or learn about through more in-depth conversations (if such can occur without offending members’ privacy).

Data Analysis:

1. Online narratives: I will ask the following questions in my analysis of the narratives: What themes are the most apparent in these narratives? What word choices and concepts are exclusive to these narratives? How do individual asexuals define asexuality? What sub-categories within asexuality do certain individuals use for themselves (i.e. hetero-romantic asexual, bi-aromantic asexual, etc.)?

All of these questions relate to asexual online discourse and can be coded with quantitative analysis software programs, such as Atlas.ti, which can be found at the GWU Anthropology Department Discourse Lab. After coding the narratives, salient words or phrases can be entered into the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). This database will indicate frequency of word usage within the entire American English registry. In addition, with a sufficient data set, I will diagram the most frequently stated sub-categories of asexuality. This method of mapping out sub-categories could potentially highlight variation in word selection and would likely result in multiple (yet still related) definitions of the meaning of asexuality.

2. Participant observation: I will ask the following questions in my analysis of the asexual group meetings: What is the purpose of the meeting (i.e. for support, for friendship, for activism, etc)? What topics or themes of conversation are most apparent? Is asexuality a primary topic of conversation, or is it even necessary to discuss this commonality? Do the members have a collective definition for asexuality, or, are there several definitions? Are there similarities in demographics and social variables?

This qualitative portion of the project will illustrate how asexual communities function outside of the cyber world. Since the majority of asexual communities are online, this research will highlight to what extent “real life” asexual communities parallel their online counterpart.

7. Research Ethics (describe how you will ensure that your research project is conducted in accordance with anthropology guidelines and the guidelines of your particular field within anthropology, and in the case of “Human Subjects Research,” according to the criteria of GW’s Institutional Review Board. For the former, consult the Web site of the American Anthropological Association (<http://www.aaanet.org>). For the latter, discuss requirements with your faculty mentor and/or with Professor Barbara Miller, the IRB rep in the Anthropology Department. Most student projects involving living humans fit in the IRB category of “excluded,” meaning that IRB forms do not need to be submitted, if they follow AAA ethical guidelines in terms of informed consent and avoidance of harm to participants, do not involve medical topics and do not identify particular individuals. In some instances, the IRB approval does need to be sought, usually in the “expedited” category.” Information on these categories is also available at <http://www.gwumc.edu/research/human/aboutus/html>) [150 word maximum]:

The project that I am proposing consists of both online and offline analysis. It is my duty to inform online asexual communities of my research and its potential impact. Online communities, like offline communities, have the right to be involved, respected, and represented accurately in my research. In the “real life” setting, I will also take the necessary and proper precautions as to protect the identities of my informants. In addition, I will seek informed oral consent from offline group members prior to conducting or reporting my research. This project fits into the IRB “excluded” category as no individuals will be identified, the topic of study is not medically related, and the research is not likely to involve any kind of harm to the participants.

8. Research Product (discuss how you will use and present your findings including, for example, a presentation at a professional meeting, a film, a museum exhibit, a publishable paper, a thesis) [150 words maximum]:

In addition to the Cotlow Conference presentation, I plan to compile my findings into the form of a publishable paper. Due to the limited quantity of scholarly articles, this paper would contribute much to this emerging topic of study. The findings of my paper will be posted online and will be distributed amongst my New York informants as a way of expressing my gratitude to the asexual community.

9. Timetable (provide a brief description of the schedule of your research activities week-by-week or as appropriate):

Now until the end of the semester:

- Register, as necessary, with various asexual communities online. (As a security precaution, some groups require two months of membership before permitting members to receive information about group activities in their area).
- Become more familiarized with the Web sites and start networking with key members of those sites.
- Post questions online for the online data analysis portion of the project.

Second week of May through first week of June:

- Gather “discovery narratives” from members who have responded to the posted questions.
- Enter narratives into Atlas.ti quantitative analysis software.

Second week of June:

- Look for word patterns and code for key concepts using Atlas.ti.

Third week of June:

- Take prevalent words from the narratives (as indicated by Atlas.ti) and enter these into the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).
- First weekend visit to New York City to attend an asexual group meeting and conduct interviews.

Fourth week of June:

- Take extensive post-meeting notes (focusing on social factors of the group, key themes, and salient topics of conversation).
- Second weekend visit to New York City.

First week of July:

- Take and organize notes from the second visit.
- Third weekend visit to New York City.

Second week of July:

- Take and organize notes from the third visit.

Third week of July:

- Compare online demographic data to the New York City group data.
- Compare key themes from the online group to the offline group.
- Compare word choice (if possible through detailed notes).

Fourth week of July:

- Conclude all software analyses.
- Map out and diagram the results from online discourse, offline discourse, and how the two relate.

Month of August through Fall:

- Incorporate findings into a paper and PowerPoint presentation in preparation for the conference.

10. Budget Amount and Projected Expenditures

Total Amount Requested: \$880.00

Projected Expenditures (list the expenditure categories for your project, for example, transportation--international, domestic, local; room and board; and research supplies).

Domestic transportation from DC to NYC (Greyhound Bus): \$40 round trip x 3 trips = \$120

Room and board (Broadway Hotel and Hostel): \$100 June 19-21 / \$100 June 26-28 / \$110 July 3-5 for a total of: \$310

Local transportation, food, and group functions in NYC: \$150 x 3 trips = \$450

11. Staff (if others are to participate in the project as researchers or research assistants, please give their name and qualifications):

12. Outside Financial Support (list any other sources of funding for the project, either obtained or applied for, with amounts and restrictions):

Self-funded room and board in Washington, DC.

13. References Cited/Select Bibliography (list the sources you have cited in the proposal and/or used as background research. Use the style defined by the American Anthropological Association [see <http://aaanet.org>]; list a minimum of 10 sources to a maximum of one page).

Works Cited

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Davis, D.L., and Whitten, R.G.

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30:163-79.
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22:339-67.
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2002 *The Anthropology of Online Communities*. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31:449-67.
- Worthman, Carol M.
1995 *Hormones, Sex, and Gender*. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24:593-616.

14. Permits (demonstrate that you have, or are seeking, any necessary permits such as a research permit, a research visa, an antiquities permit, letter of welcome from an institution, etc. Attach copies to this proposal).

15. Transcript (submit a copy of your transcript with this proposal; it can be either official or unofficial. Without a transcript, your proposal is incomplete and will not be considered)