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## Sara McClelland



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Sara I. McClelland, Ph.D. (b. 1970) is a feminist psychologist who uses critical theories and methods to interrogate the role of policy and law in sexuality education and sexual development, evaluations, and expectations. McClelland earned her Ph.D. in Social/Personality Psychology at the City University of New York in 2009, where she was trained in the Lewinian lineage of Michelle Fine, Susan Opatow, and Morton Deutsch. She is currently an Associate Professor in the departments of Women's and Gender Studies and Psychology at the University of Michigan. McClelland has received the Emerging Leadership Award from the American Psychological Association's (APA) Committee on Women and Psychology and the Distinguished Early Career Contributions in Qualitative Inquiry Award from the APA Division on Qualitative and Quantitative Methods (Division 5). She has published research in the broad areas of Education (e.g., *Harvard Educational Review*, *The Palgrave Handbook of Sexuality Education*), Health (e.g., *Women's Reproductive Health*, *Handbook of Health Psychology*), Public Policy and Law (e.g., *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, *Emory Law Journal*), and Psychology (e.g., *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *Social and Personality Psychology*

*Compass*). McClelland's critical perspective came into clarity with her early collaborative work on sexuality education policy with Michelle Fine, and she later expanded her work into research on sexual satisfaction, sexual quality of life, stigma and discrimination, and reproductive justice research. Across all lines of research, McClelland prioritizes the translation of theories, methods, and empirical findings to a wide variety of audiences, including policymakers, healthcare providers, and educational leadership. Across domains, she is committed to understanding how social and political landscapes shape what individuals see as possible, hoped for, and deserved. In this entry, we trace McClelland's intellectual development and her contribution to critical theories and methods.

## Early Work

### Thick Desire

Fine and McClelland (2006, 2007), in their review and critique of abstinence-only until marriage (AOUM) education policies, argued that these policies perpetuated a dominant public discourse that young people's sexuality is inherently dangerous, risky, and should be discouraged. They drew connections between AOUM discourses and other public policies implemented to control or surveil young people's sexuality (e.g., emergency contraception regulation, requirement of parental consent for abortion). Fine and McClelland

argued that AOUM policies restricted young people from receiving education about sexual development, sexual exploration and desire, and the knowledge and resources that make intimacy safe and healthy (e.g., contraception). They emphasized that AOUM policies were especially harmful to girls and low income, Black and Latinx, queer, and disabled youth because AOUM educational practices ignored social and political inequalities that contributed to negative experiences in intimate relationships (e.g., unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, violence) and communicated that healthy and safe sex was reserved for (heterosexual) married couples.

Fine and McClelland further argued that erasing young people's sexual development and desire from sexuality education spaces aligned with the predominant political and cultural framework of sexuality, which treated it as something that originates, develops, and is experienced within a person, unaffected by the social and political environment (i.e., a "thin" interpretation of desire). In contrast to this framework, Fine and McClelland proposed a theory of thick desire that argued sexual desire is intrinsically related to and shaped by "political acts of wanting": desiring access to structural support for economic, educational, reproductive, psychological, and physical success. For example, they argued that young women deserve education spaces within which they are encouraged to imagine themselves as sexual beings who feel entitled to sexual desire and pleasure, and taught skills that enable development of healthy expectations for intimacy. Thick desire enabled theorizing about young women's sexuality "from a perspective that sees them as entitled to desire in all of its forms" (Fine & McClelland, 2006, p. 325).

*Thick desire* highlighted three aspects of McClelland's early intellectual contribution: (a) She resituated previously individualized and apolitical concepts, such as sexual desire, as socially and structurally embedded; (b) She emphasized how policies and practices land on young people differently due to political and social marginalization; and (c) She examined the consequences for young women's experiences of

sexuality and their sense of entitlement and deservingness when they are discouraged from *wanting* – wanting pleasure, but also wanting material resources, support, and autonomy. For McClelland, the possibilities that young women see for their lives are bound by access to state structures and institutions, such as public education, health care, and a supportive social safety net. However, dominant narratives of sexuality may obscure these needs by framing sexuality as private and apolitical. A significant aim of McClelland's work, then, has been to create, adapt, and reimagine methods for interrogating narrow sexuality discourses and their impact on research, sexual appraisals, and experiences of intimacy.

### Methods for Studying Young Women's Sexuality

As sexuality is often framed and reflected by participants as something that occurs only in the self, McClelland designed methodological frameworks for studying young people's sexuality that align with the theory of thick desire. In this section, we discuss two frameworks for researchers whose sexuality research is bound by institutional structures, political ideologies, and moral discourses: *embedded science* and *cellophane*.

McClelland and Fine (2008a, b) developed the methodological framework of *embedded science* to refer to scientific research that is aligned with a political, social, or economic agenda or conducted from within an institution that has a vested interest in the outcome. For example, they argued that the scientific practices undertaken by the federal government to evaluate the success of AOUM sexuality education programs were methodologically troubling and reflected the government's ideological and financial investment in the programs. The government invited a research firm to survey students about whether AOUM programming had successfully changed their knowledge, attitudes, and intentions to engage in sexual activity before marriage and whether the programs were associated with reduced rates of youth sexual activity, pregnancy, and STDs (McClelland & Fine, 2008a, b). In their review of the government's evaluation measures, McClelland and Fine found that the survey

language, framing, and imagery linked married sex with safety and morality and linked premarital sex with danger and risk, effectively replicating the ideological binaries promoted in AOUM programming. They argued that these designs implicitly instructed students to respond consistent with AOUM goals, taught students incorrect information about HIV transmission and pregnancy, and restricted them from disagreeing with AOUM curricula or sharing experiences that fell outside of premarital, heterosexual relationships. In addition to instructive content, they found gaps in the surveys related to young people's sexual activities, with no attempt to examine students' experiences of pleasure, masturbation, non-heterosexual activities, or sexual violence. McClelland and Fine's (2008a, b) concept of *embedded science* provided a methodological critique of scientific research designs that justified, rather than interrogated or challenged, existing ideologies and public policies regarding sexuality.

McClelland argued that researchers face difficulties when studying young women's sexuality because young women learn how to speak about their own sexual bodies, experiences, and desires from dominant public discourses like those promoted by AOUM programming. McClelland and Fine (2008a, b) introduced the metaphor of *cellophane* to help researchers recognize and contend with the phenomenon that when asked to speak about their own sexual desires, young women often speak through discourses of shame, prevention, and protection. To provide an example, they shared findings from focus groups with high school students in which participants were asked to co-design a hypothetical research project on young people's experiences with sexuality. McClelland and Fine found that early in the focus groups, young women spoke about the importance of asking questions about virginity and about the consequences of having sex too young. Connecting participants' initial ideas to AOUM ideals and similarly narrow discourses about the mental and emotional damage caused by sex, they demonstrated how these discourses acted as layers of cellophane that were invisible yet directly influenced what girls felt they could or

should prioritize in sexuality research among young people.

After participants had "dutifully narrated" discourses of shame and prevention, McClelland and Fine noted that participants began to diverge from these discourses, asking each other questions and collaboratively discussing ideas about desire, pleasure, and issues of entitlement. The authors found that the peer focus group provided a sense of safety and shared understanding for girls to be vulnerable and speak aloud ideas about orgasm or sexual pain that would have been otherwise challenging for young people to discuss in a one-on-one interview context with an adult. They suggested methodological practices that can help researchers recognize the cellophane as it is shaping women's sexual imaginary and offer young women "release points" to share information with researchers without having to speak what feels difficult, impossible, or "unsayable." McClelland and Fine (2008a, b) recommended researchers design studies that open up possibilities to hear the unsayable, such as performative methods that do not require direct interaction with a researcher; focus groups that allow for collaborative dialogue; asking naive questions that allow young women to speak to what appears obvious or normalized; problematizing facts by considering the processes and stories behind data, rather than naturalizing them; and participatory action methods that prioritize the questions young people have and want answered.

McClelland's early contributions of *thick desire*, *embedded science*, and *cellophane* connected young people's sexual well-being to the policies, supports, and political interests of the state and emphasized the responsibility of researchers to attend to social and political structures as central to young people's sexual lives. These early theoretical and methodological frames served as intellectual stepping stones to McClelland's development of *intimate justice theory* and the interdisciplinary subfield of *critical sexuality studies*.

## Intimate Justice

McClelland's (2010) *intimate justice theory* guided researchers to consider how social and political inequities influence people's evaluations of and expectations for their intimate lives. McClelland developed intimate justice theory in direct response to arguments by life and sexual satisfaction researchers about the nature of satisfaction. For example, McClelland critiqued claims that life satisfaction is individually determined, and therefore not related to social norms or expectations, and assertions that sexual satisfaction is universal, and therefore experienced similarly by all people. Intimate justice theory highlighted social and political forces that influence individuals' sexual experiences and theorized that universal definitions for sexual satisfaction would (and do) reflect the experiences of people whose sexuality is socially and politically valued, legally upheld, heavily represented in media, and seen as "normal."

Intimate justice linked and extended several major theories including thick desire, sexual stigma (a theory regarding how heterocentric policies affect sexually marginalized people; Herek, 2007), relative deprivation (a theory regarding the normalization of inequity; Crosby, 1982), and social comparison (a theory regarding people's evaluation of their own experiences in relation to others; Major et al., 1984; McClelland, 2014). Intimate justice theory was thus McClelland's effort to contend with satisfaction research that (a) broadly and uncritically characterized marginalized groups as being equally or even *more* satisfied with their lives than privileged groups, (b) strictly operationalized sexual satisfaction as physical and physiological experiences during sex, and (c) failed to consider that social and political forces shape people's appraisal of their sexual experiences. Intimate justice shed light on "the role of sociopolitical antecedents and anticipated consequences of satisfaction ratings, the development of expectations for well-being, and lastly, how expectations affect an individual's evaluation of the quality of [their] life" (McClelland, 2014a, p. 1012). In establishing

intimate justice theory, McClelland (2010, 2014) prioritized the need for questions and methods that grapple with participants' and scholars' normalization and internalization of ciscentric, heterocentric, ableist, racist, and sexist norms and expectations around intimacy.

### Methods for Studying Intimate Justice

Intimate justice theory introduced complexity into psychological concepts that are often assumed to have universal definitions and meaning, such as sexual satisfaction. McClelland has utilized several methodological techniques that pair with the theoretical frame of intimate justice and to invite researchers to pursue critical questions when studying sexuality, sex, and intimacy. She has encouraged scholars to adopt intimate justice theory and its associated methodologies to further elucidate the intricacies of intimacy. Her own research in this area spans various topics, samples, and contexts, including the meaning of sexual satisfaction for college-aged people, the impacts of sexuality education across adulthood, and experiences and normalization of discrimination among young bisexual women. In this section, we review two examples of McClelland's methodological approaches for better understanding how people evaluate their intimate lives and develop expectations for intimacy.

McClelland (2014b) asked young adults to define sexual satisfaction and to speak to the challenges and difficulties of prioritizing different aspects, for example, orgasm and liking sex with a particular partner. Using Q Methodology, participants were given a set of statement prompts written on cards and were asked to sort the cards from low to high according to level of importance or agreement. After participants sorted the cards in a way that reflected their own definition of sexual satisfaction, they were invited to describe and expand upon their sorting choices in a semi-structured interview. By pairing these methods, McClelland (2014b) identified four distinct interpretations of sexual satisfaction (emotional and masculine, relational and feminine, partner focused, and orgasm focused) that were influenced by gender enactment, self/partner focal points, and self/partner emotional and

relational elements. McClelland illustrated with this study the need for scholars to interrupt common assumptions that there is a single, shared experience of sexual satisfaction (e.g., having an orgasm).

McClelland (2017a) developed a version of the *self-anchored ladder* to further elucidate factors that shape young people's sexual satisfaction. Based on Cantril's (1965) ladder, McClelland's self-anchored ladder captured quantitative and qualitative appraisals of sexual satisfaction. First, participants indicated their sexual satisfaction along a horizontal line with 10 vertical lines intersecting it, similar to a visual analog scale. Participants then wrote their own definitions for the "low," "middle," and "high" ends of the scale. The quantitative data can be compared among participants, but the methodological vigor and potential of the self-anchored ladder are hinged upon analysis of participants' scale anchor descriptions. McClelland (2017a) found that women and men reported similar numerical levels of sexual satisfaction. However, when asked to define their "low end" of sexual satisfaction – their baseline for sexual satisfaction – women's responses included pain, violence, and humiliation. In contrast, violence did not appear in men's appraisals of their satisfaction. These findings buttressed McClelland's (2010) earlier critiques of life and sexual satisfaction research. Specifically, that reliance on methods that do not account for social and political inequities – such as the experience and threat of violence against women – makes invisible the process by which people appraise their experiences. McClelland's concerns regarding the field of sexuality research have propelled her involvement in developing the field of critical sexuality studies.

## Critical Sexuality Studies

McClelland's critical theories and methods encouraged several new directions for *critical sexuality studies*. Critical sexuality studies is an interdisciplinary subfield of researchers invested in bringing to sexuality research an explicit focus on power and privilege, epistemological

paradigms, and the development of novel empirical methodologies. The subfield emerged in response to restrictive and narrow practices in sexuality research, such as measures that assume universal comprehension and meaning across groups, locations, and time (e.g., "having sex"); samples that imply that sexuality is only experienced by those who are young and conventionally attractive; and questions that exclude queer, solo, consensually non-monogamous, and other marginalized experiences of sex.

Fahs and McClelland (2016) articulated three focal points for critical sexuality researchers: (a) conceptual complexity; (b) bodies that are overlooked, stereotyped, and/or stigmatized; and (c) heteronormativity and its influence on sexuality research. They called for researchers to examine how concepts related to sexuality travel across disciplinary and theoretical boundaries. Drawing on examples of widely studied concepts like *consent* and *sexually active*, Fahs and McClelland argued for researchers to attend to definitions and meanings across time and samples. Second, they called for researchers to focus on groups and experiences that have not been visible or appropriately recognized within sexuality research, such as older people and those who experience sexual pain. Lastly, Fahs and McClelland (2016) outlined concerns about heterosexist ideas regarding "what 'counts' as sex" (p. 405). They argued for the importance of not only decentering heterosex in theories, methods, and interpretations in sexuality research, but to also critically study and challenge the dominance of heterosexual norms in sexuality research. McClelland has utilized several methodological techniques to be used in tandem with surveys and interviews and that can help researchers with critically oriented research on sexuality and intimacy.

## Methods for Critical Sexuality Studies

For McClelland, taking a critical approach to sexuality research begins with a review of researchers' methods and methodological assumptions, including ideas about what "counts" as data and whose experiences contain relevant insights. McClelland has argued for researchers to contend with marginalia, or the comments and

markings participants write in the margins of paper and pencil surveys, rather than ignore it. In a study conducted with women diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer, McClelland and Holland (2016) noted that several participants completing the Female Sexual Function Index did not provide responses but left comments on their surveys. The authors analyzed the marginalia and categorized it into three distinct forms: clarifications to survey responses, corrections to the items or their own responses, and indications that the item was “not applicable.” Rather than excluding these participants for having “missing data,” McClelland and Holland (2016) argued for reading the marginalia and making analytic decisions about how participants fit into the quantitative scale. As a result of this work, McClelland encourages marginalia in her studies by inviting participants to provide feedback on survey items, which shed light on the assumptions communicated through survey prompts, item responses, and language choices, as well as participants’ resistance to or rejection of researchers’ biases.

Studying sexuality is often imagined to be vulnerable for research participants, but rarely discussed as vulnerable for researchers and interviewers. McClelland (2017b) wrote that as listening is often considered to be an easy or “natural” act, and researchers do not often receive training in the method of listening. She developed the methodological practice of *vulnerable listening* to offer several techniques for sexuality and gender researchers who routinely listen to the difficult, traumatic, and painful experiences of people’s lives. Vulnerable listening included seeing oneself not as a “passive subject” or “receptacle for a participant’s words,” but rather as physically and meaningfully present in the interaction and attentive to one’s own reactions to participants’ stories. Drawing upon her experience interviewing women diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, McClelland relied on vulnerable listening when she heard stories of pain that affected her emotionally; experienced intrusive thoughts about her body, sexuality, and future; and felt outrage on behalf of participants who, despite nearing the end of life, still endured narrow expectations for physical attractiveness.

McClelland (2017b) offered several strategies for researchers to engage in vulnerable listening, including: (a) build in the appropriate training, resources, and time needed to successfully carry out listening-based research; (b) develop a community of informants who are not participants in the study but share relevant experiences and can provide expertise and guidance; (c) write down interviewer or field notes to trace the unspoken and intangible parts of interviews that are not captured with a voice recorder; (d) recognize and keep track of researchers’ own emotional and physiological reactions to listening to participants; and (e) develop self-care strategies for researchers and interviewers, including taking time away from the interview and transcript material.

Together, efforts to attend to marginalia and engage in vulnerable listening serve as two methodological practices researchers can employ to support critical studies in sexuality research. Sexuality education researchers can use these methods creatively and fruitfully; for example, marginalia could be collected in the form of students’ notes, questions, or doodles on worksheets, handouts, or pamphlets received in educational spaces. Sexuality education scholars who hear from sexuality educators, community leaders, parents, and students are likely to benefit from vulnerable listening strategies such as recruiting informants and engaging in self-care and reflexive practices.

McClelland’s career developed as the state “narrowed the full range of education and health care available; access to comprehensive sex education, contraception, health care insurance, and abortions [was] severely curtailed” (Fine & McClelland, 2006, p. 1027). McClelland’s scholarship on thick desire, intimate justice, and critical sexuality studies has offered theories and methods to interrogate and address the consequences of the state’s actions in the lives of people who are often most dependent on state support. As she moves into the second decade of her career, McClelland is building on the core tenets of her prior work to examine abortion attitudes in the USA.

## Research on Abortion Attitudes

McClelland's research on abortion attitudes focuses on how public opinion research methods reflect and normalize restrictive policies, stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes (e.g., racism, sexism), and harmful political and social discourses around abortion. Specifically, she has investigated how studies of public opinion about abortion in the USA have largely overlooked that public perception of the accessibility and acceptability of abortion is inextricably linked to public perception of women, women's sexual and reproductive decision-making, and public supports.

Conceptually similar to her embedded science methodology for interrogating bias in evaluations of AOUM curricula, McClelland et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of the materials researchers used to measure attitudes toward abortion in the USA. The authors collected unique survey items on abortion, administered by public opinion and social science researchers over the past decade (2008–2018), and analyzed patterns across the items with an emphasis on item design choices like language, framing, and imagery. McClelland and colleagues documented the repetition of language and imagery that depicted pregnant women seeking abortion as sexually promiscuous, immoral, and financially irresponsible (e.g., "the pregnant woman is single and does not want to marry the man"). They emphasized that these depictions are not accidental, but rather are linked to historical stereotypes of Black and poor mothers that have guided legislation and policy around family, reproduction, and state support. McClelland et al. (2020) argued that when stereotypes are written into the survey materials used to assess attitudes toward abortion, researchers instruct and teach respondents to link their attitudes toward abortion with evaluations of pregnant women, unmarried mothers, and financial insecurity.

Reflective of her early commitments to understanding the impact of policy on minoritized youth, McClelland's research program on abortion attitudes includes the study of prejudicial attitudes toward socially and politically

marginalized groups. Abortion attitudes have long been studied in relation to religious attitudes, and less attention has been paid to examining whether attitudes toward abortion are linked to sexist and anti-Black racist attitudes. Across several ongoing studies that utilize critical theories and methods, McClelland is examining (a) the role of racism and sexism in people's appraisals of "acceptable" abortion conditions (Baker, McClelland, et al., *in press*), (b) who people imagine when asked to think about abortion patients, (c) how participants interpret survey questions about abortion attitudes, and (d) the consequences people think should apply to individuals who seek and provide abortion care (Baker, Papp, et al., *in press*). Her reproductive justice research highlights the links between attitudes toward abortion and sexist and anti-Black racist attitudes about who is deserving of supportive public policies. From policies on sexuality education to public support for reproductive health care, McClelland's work makes clear the importance of developing study designs and research materials that assess, rather than overlook, these connections.

## Legacy in Sexuality Education Research and Beyond

McClelland's articulation of thick desire with Michelle Fine has made a lasting empirical and theoretical impact. Scholars have drawn upon the concept of thick desire to design empirical studies surrounding student-identified gaps in sexuality education curricula, which have found that students request a curriculum that is inclusive of sexual and gender diversity and has greater focus on discussions of pleasure, consent, and intimate relationships (e.g., Linville & Carlson, 2010; Waling et al., 2020). Thick desire also sparked considerable theoretical discussion in the field of critical sexuality education studies pertaining to thick desire's gaps and opportunities for its expansion (see Allen et al., 2014). For example, Rasmussen (2014) argued that secular comprehensive sexuality education is moralizing toward communities for whom religion and sexuality are linked

and Sanjakdar (2014) proposed meeting Muslim students' sexuality education needs by incorporating Muslim religious traditions and scripture, while Macleod and Vincent (2014) proposed building upon thick desire's human rights framework by incorporating feminist and queer re-conceptualizations of reproductive and sexual citizenship. Seen together, the empirical studies and theoretical discussions that stemmed from thick desire demonstrate its continued influence in the field of sexuality education research.

McClelland has urged researchers to adopt critical theories and methods that attend to the role that sociopolitical inequality plays in people's intimate lives and imagination. Scholars have used intimate justice to inform studies of Black girls' and women's experiences with sex and pleasure (Thorpe et al., 2021a, b, 2022). Intimate justice theory and the questions, methods, and analytic frames useful for studying it are evident across the scholarship of Sarah Bell (Bell & McClelland, 2018), Harley Dutcher (Dutcher & McClelland, 2019), Leanna Papp (Papp & McClelland, 2021), and Jennifer Rubin (Rubin & McClelland, 2015). These researchers incorporated intimate justice theory to expand understanding of sexual satisfaction, sexual safety and labor, sexual violence, and managing sexual identity(s) in online contexts.

Fahs and McClelland (2016)'s proposed epistemological practices for critical sexuality studies bridged several areas of sex research on conceptual complexity, marginalized groups, and heteronormativity. Scholars have analyzed concepts that are assumed to be universal or well-understood in sexuality research, such as sexual desire (Thomas & Gurevich, 2021) and sexual communal strength (Tirone & Katz, 2020). In addition, researchers have studied groups that are often overlooked or stigmatized in sex scholarship, such as queer men who are survivors of sexual assault (Meyer, 2021) and women who are living with HIV (Carter et al., 2018). These projects illustrate the usefulness of Fahs and McClelland's focal points in bridging critical sexuality scholarship across disciplines.

McClelland's critical theories and methods have been translated for public and legislative audiences. McClelland's theory of *intimate justice*

has been covered by news and magazine outlets *The Washington Post* and *The Week*, which encouraged the public to consider the roles of expectation and deservingness in discussions of sexuality. In addition, Peggy Orenstein (2016) drew upon on McClelland's theory of *intimate justice* to examine girls' sexual development in her best-selling book *Girls & Sex*. McClelland has also served as an expert witness, translating findings from scientific literature to inform legal decision-making. In 2017, she served as an expert witness for the federal case *Adams & Boyle, P.C. et al. v. Slatery et al.*, challenging a mandatory 48-h waiting period for women seeking abortion in Tennessee. She testified that mandated waiting periods draw upon and reinforce stereotypes of women as irrational, overly emotional, and incapable of making decisions. Citing the social scientific literature on stigma, she testified that waiting period laws contribute to a public perception that women's personal decisions about their healthcare are insufficient and in need of state intervention. McClelland continues to lend her expertise to ongoing federal cases pertaining to the legality of abortion restrictions, arguing that "waiting period" laws exacerbate stigma and encourage the public to develop prejudicial attitudes toward women and their ability to make decisions about their own bodies, health, and futures.

Originating in her early scholarship on sexuality education policy, McClelland built her career exploring the argument that people's economic, educational, reproductive, psychological, and physical success are shaped and limited by their access to social and structural support. Her contribution of critical theories and methodological tools encourage all audiences, including scholars, policymakers, and the public, to remain attentive to what individuals see as possible, deserved, and expected for themselves and those around them.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Bias in Sex Education](#)
- ▶ [Michelle Fine](#)
- ▶ [U.S. Abortion Politics](#)



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