**THE ROMANTIC AND SEXUAL EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE**

**WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN ONTARIO, CANADA**

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**Objectives:**

The intersection of disability and sexuality remains a taboo topic. Along with this taboo, a limited body of literature specifically addresses the sexual desires and interests of people with intellectual disabilities (henceforth, ID) as well as how they make sense of and reflect on their own position as sexual actors. This paper examines the sexual and intimate lives of people with ID in Ontario, Canada, to understand the information, supports, and barriers that they encounter when learning about and participating in their romantic and sexual lives. The goal of this project is to make space for this group to share their perspectives, challenges, potential subversions and triumphs on sex, sexuality, and romance.

**Method:**

Drawing on in-depth interviews with adults with ID, I use a sexual fields analytic framework (Green 2014; Martin and George 2006) to investigate the particular sexual fields/spaces that people with ID navigate (or aspire to navigate) in their pursuit of love, intimacy, and sex, as well as their strategies and choices for sexual partners, and sexual practices. While I acknowledge that parents and support workers are important decision-makers, gatekeepers, and educators in the lives of people with disabilities, this research concentrates on interviewing adults with ID in order to gain greater insight from this important and frequently unconsulted stakeholder group.

**Results:**

Preliminary findings suggest that social isolation, restrictions, and lack of knowledge and tools for building romantic and intimate relationships restrict participants’ access to and participation in a significant array of sexual fields/spaces. Results also point to how a lack of access to opportunities for sexual exploration, experimentation, and relationships, accompanied by the devaluation and invisibility of their sexuality, has an impact on the self-esteem of adults with ID as sexual actors, including their willingness and ability to auspiciously "play the field."

**Discussion/Conclusions:**

This project makes a significant contribution by expanding our understanding on the expectations and experiences of adults with ID concerning their sexuality and sexual rights, as well as on the structural forces that shape those experiences. This study is of primary importance to individuals with ID, their families, agencies that provide human services, and the broader community, by offering recommendations about how to improve training and programming on sexuality for people with ID, their families and peers, and for the agencies and workers who serve them. This should help raise awareness among parents and care workers that people who have disabilities have agency, have sexual desires, and make decisions based on their own understanding of the world.