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## **Coming to an Asexual Identity: Negotiating Identity, Negotiating Desire**

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*Sexualities* 2008; 11; 621

DOI: 10.1177/1363460708094269

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**Abstract** Sexuality is generally considered an important aspect of selfhood. Therefore, individuals who do not experience sexual attraction, and who embrace an asexual identity, are in a unique position to inform the social construction of sexuality. This study explores the experiences of asexual individuals utilizing open ended internet survey data from 102 self-identified asexual people. In this article I describe several distinct aspects of asexual identities: the meanings of sexual, and therefore, asexual behaviors, essentialist characterizations of asexuality, and lastly, interest in romance as a distinct dimension of sexuality. These findings have implications not only for asexual identities, but also for the connections of asexuality with other marginalized sexualities.

**Keywords** asexuality, lack of desire, LGBTQ identities and communities, romantic identity, sexual identity

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## Coming to an Asexual Identity: Negotiating Identity, Negotiating Desire

### Introduction

One of the most pervasive social assumptions is that all humans possess sexual desire (Cole, 1993). A related assumption about sexuality is that sexuality is not only something one *does*, but an identity, or something one *is*, usually biologically (Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 1986). While scholars of sexuality have theorized the social constructions of sexuality and sexual identity, there remains a relative paucity of academic literature exploring the identities and experiences of people who do not experience sexual attraction or desire.<sup>1</sup> Individuals who identify as asexual challenge these notions of the pervasiveness of sexuality and present a unique opportunity

*Sexualities* <http://sex.sagepub.com> Copyright © 2008 SAGE Publications  
(London, Thousand Oaks, CA, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington DC)  
Vol 11(5): 621–641 DOI: 10.1177/1363460708094269

to explore the negotiation of identity and desire. Asexuality, a relatively recent emergent sexual identity, has been developed with the aid of internet technologies which have allowed for the formation of community by otherwise geographically isolated individuals.

Social scientists conceptualize their interests in sexuality in three common ways: behavior, desire and identity (Laumann et al., 1994). In this project I have chosen to focus on asexual identities. Inquiry into asexual identity is important as those researchers who have explored asexuality have primarily approached it as either a behavior (lack of sexual acts) or a desire (lack of desire for sexual acts). Much of the research on a lack of sexual desire or behavior examines it as either a bodily dysfunction that requires health intervention (i.e. through hormone therapy) or as a psychological diagnosis that should be treated through therapeutic means (such as Sexual Aversion Disorder and Hyposexual Desire Disorder [APA, 2000]). A focus on asexual *identity* is largely missing from the scholarly literature.

Research on identity is important since, as sexuality researcher Paula Rust argues, 'While the production of identity is a social-psychological process, the consequences of identity are both social and political' (Rust, 1992: 366). Identity is not only an introspective process, but is given meaning by the broader cultural understandings of that identity and connects one's self with others. As Rust (1992: 367) says, 'lesbian and gay identities are examples of communities based on shared identity'. Rust theorizes that coming to an LGBTQ identity connects an individual to a social experience of that identity, which for sexual minorities is often marked by discrimination. For both LGBTQ and asexual people, one of the locations of discrimination is its historical and contemporary connection to institutions of mental and physical health (Conrad and Schneider, 1994). Asexual identity not only reflects an introspective process, but also connects the internal experience of coming to an asexual identity to others, which may in turn motivate social and political action similar to other marginalized sexualities.

## Literature review

There has been relatively little attention to asexuality in academic literature<sup>2</sup> however the few exceptions are worth further description. Perhaps the first contemporary source to explore the concept of asexuality is Rothblum and Brehony (1993) in their book, *Boston Marriages: Romantic But Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians*. This book explores lesbian relationships in particular, questioning the privileging of sexuality and sex in forming and maintaining intimate partnerships. Rothblum and Brehony suggest the term 'Boston Marriage' as potentially

useful language for describing intimate relationships that do not involve sex. Lesbians are not the only demographic group targeted for asexuality research. Milligan and Neufeldt (2001) have problematized the relationship between asexuality and people with disabilities, theorizing that asexuality is incorrectly ascribed to disabled populations. While Milligan and Neufeldt argue, appropriately, that it is problematic to ascribe asexuality to people with disabilities, this argument is largely based on the presumption that asexuality is negative.

A more recent article that brought international attention to the issue of asexuality is Bogaert's (2004) 'Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample'. In this article Bogaert used pre-existing demographic data to describe characteristics associated with asexuality, such as gender, education, social class, race, height and religiosity amongst others. He operationalizes asexuality as individuals who say that 'they have never felt sexual attraction to anyone at all' (Bogaert, 2004: 279). In this paper Bogaert is explicitly focusing not on behavior, or identity, but on desire – as such, he is able to conclude little about what may be associated with taking on an asexual identity. In his 2006 article, 'Toward a Conceptual Understanding of Asexuality', Bogaert evaluates the claim that asexuality is a unique sexual orientation. He concludes that asexuality is a useful category of sexual identification, and argues that its relationship with pathologies, such as hypoactive sexual desire disorder or sexual aversion disorder, should be explored further. This highlights one of the parallels between queer and asexual sexualities, as both have a history intertwined with medical institutions. Asexuality, homosexuality, and gender identities have all been medicalized as problems and have been historically included in the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (DSM).

Building on this work, Prause and Graham (2007) deal more specifically with the relationship between a lack of sexual desire and medical diagnoses. This article is also the only one I am aware of that explores asexuality using information from self-identified asexual individuals. Prause and Graham (2007: 341) describe findings that assess the 'sexual history, sexual inhibition and excitation [and] sexual desire' of both asexual and sexual samples. While their discussion largely focuses on the differences and similarities in levels of sexual desire, inhibition and excitation, they also describe some initial descriptions of asexual identities as they are reported by self-identified asexual individuals. Notably, Prause and Graham find that distinguishing between the sexual and the non-sexual is a central aspect of creating a coherent asexual identity. Their discussion is somewhat limited, however as their analyses are more focused on the similarities and differences between asexual- and sexual-identified individuals than with how asexual identities have meaning in people's lives, and what these meanings may be.

Our attention as researchers is often drawn to academic sources. However, it is important to note that in relation to asexual identity, the interests of the academic community reflect popular culture's attention to asexuality (CNN, 2004; Pagan Westfall, 2004), which has been given momentum with the aid of internet technologies. David Jay, publisher of the website Asexuality.org, or Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), has contributed to building asexual community and has used this website to educate the public on issues of asexuality. His 2003 paper 'A Look at Online Collective Identity Formation' provides insight into the role of the internet in facilitating asexual identities, as well as the importance of community building for a marginalized population such as asexual individuals. In this study I ask: *What are asexual identities? How do individuals come to identify as asexual? How is asexuality relevant to LGBTQ identities and communities?*

## Methods

To undertake the objectives, I recruited participants from asexuality.org, also known as the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), a website based around asexual identity. In her book on internet and identity, Turkle (1995) argued that the internet has made virtual space available for highly stigmatized, marginalized groups to find community and support for their identity. Similarly, McKenna and Bargh (1998) argue that the internet has been helpful for constructing marginalized identities:

For the first time [members of marginalized identities] can reap the benefits of joining a group of similar others: feeling less isolated and different, disclosing a long secret part of oneself, sharing one's own experiences and learning from those of others, and gaining emotional and motivational support. (McKenna and Bargh, 1998: 682)

Similar to LGBTQ sexualities, the privacy provided by the internet is beneficial to the formation of asexual identities. Individuals can practice their narratives of asexuality in a safe space, as well as find community and support.

AVEN appears to be the 'main hub' of asexual community as most media sources refer back to AVEN for more information. According to AVEN's home page, 'AVEN hosts the world's largest on-line asexual community as well as a large archive of resources on asexuality. AVEN strives to create open, honest discussion about asexuality among sexual and asexual people alike' (AVEN, 2007). To this end AVEN offers viewers Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about asexuality, community building space, and encourages discussions of identity and associated politics.

After obtaining permission from the webmaster of [asexuality.org](http://asexuality.org), I posted recruitment materials in the announcement section inviting viewers to participate in an online survey regarding their asexual identity. In particular the recruitment materials asked for participants who 1) identified as asexual and, 2) were willing to talk about how it related to the rest of their lives. The survey was hosted by [surveymonkey.com](http://surveymonkey.com) and utilized primarily open-ended questions. Using this technology, I was able to restrict individuals from completing the survey multiple times, and also, enable individuals to take breaks and return later to complete the survey. I collected information about four broad areas: demographics, asexual identity, relationship status and health/mental health interactions. In this article I focus on coming to an asexual identity and how asexuality is relevant to other sexual identity-based communities.

A total of 160 people responded to the survey. Two selected out immediately by responding negatively to the informed consent page and an additional 48 people responded that they would like to participate in the survey, however, they filled out no responses in the survey. Eight participants did not fulfill age-related eligibility requirements. The remaining 102 provided substantial open-ended responses.

Of these 102 participants, one identified as Latino, one identified as Native American, three identified as Asian or Asian American, nine identified as multi-racial, 84 identified as white or Caucasian and four were not easily categorized based on the information they provided. Of these who were not easily categorized, three of these reported their racial identity as human and the fourth as Canadian. In terms of gender, 18 identified as male, 75 identified as female, two identified as transgender, and another seven of these were not easily categorized based on the information provided. An example of gender identity being not easily categorized is participant number 108 whose gender was identified as 'Asexual'. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 66, with the average age of the respondents at 27.4, and the median was 21. This sample was also relatively international, with one participant each from France, Israel, Moldova, Russia, Scotland, Hungary, Sweden, Italy, New Zealand, European Union, two from Turkey, four from Germany, six from Australia, seven were not easily categorized, 10 from Canada, 11 from England, and the remaining 52 from the USA.

The survey was composed of open-ended questions. While it was my estimate that this process would take about 30 minutes, it is clear from follow-up emails from participants, as well as the detail in responses, that many participants took in excess of two hours to fill out this survey. This illustrates the dedication and interest participants had in making their voices heard about an asexual experience. To analyze this data, I used open and focused coding as described by Emerson et al. (1995). I selected a

handful of concepts from the literature, namely experiences of community and the meaning of identity. These themes were refined as themes emerged and the final iteration of the most prominent themes were included. All participants who are quoted here were given pseudonyms to personalize, as well as clarify the data. The quotes that are included were edited only as necessary for readability.

## Findings

Three main themes emerged in my analysis: the meaning of the sexual, essentially asexual, and the romantic dimension. The first section describes how asexual individuals give meaning to their identities and behaviors, often drawing on a penetrative conception of sex. The second theme explores how asexual individuals experience their asexuality as an innate aspect of themselves, engaging social constructivist and essentialist debates about sexuality. The last section describes how asexual identities illuminate another dimension of sexuality: interest in romantic partnerships. While each of these sections explore unique aspects of asexuality, they all focus on what asexual identities are, how individuals come to identify as asexual, and what this identity means to them.

### *The meaning of the sexual*

As with other sexual identities, the meaning of an asexual identity varies. The most common description of an asexual identity closely mirrors the definition given on AVEN's website, of asexuality as 'a person who does not experience sexual attraction' (AVEN, 2007). Of the 89 participants who responded to the question 'what does this identity mean to you?', 39 (44 %) of participants said that their asexual identity means that they do not experience sexual attraction or sexual desire. AVEN's role in providing one possible meaning of an asexual identity is evidenced by Natalie, a 26-year-old white woman who describes what her asexuality means to her by saying, 'I follow AVEN's description of asexuality'. For Natalie, her internalized meaning of asexuality is hard to separate from AVEN's own conception of asexuality. Another participant, Jenn, an 18-year-old white woman, elaborates on this lack of sexual attraction:

I just don't feel sexual attraction to people. I love the human form and can regard individuals as works of art and find people aesthetically pleasing, but I don't ever want to come into sexual contact with even the most beautiful of people.

While lack of sexual attraction and desire was a highly common feature of participants' descriptions of their asexuality, it was by no means a universally shared definition of asexuality.

The most common description of asexuality used the same language as the AVEN website, however the remaining 50 participants put forth alternative understandings of their asexual identity. Of these 50, 13 participants offered definitions of their asexuality that contained relatively limited information about the meaning of their asexual identity. For instance, Barry, a 29-year-old white male characterized his asexuality: 'It's just who I am, romantically and sexually speaking'. Of the remaining 37 participants, the most common definition of asexuality centered on a lack of interest in sexual behavior that was described as not necessarily associated with sexual attraction. For instance, Jodi, a 32-year-old Asian woman describes her asexuality: 'I am sexually attracted to men but have no desire or need to engage in sexual or even non-sexual activity (cuddling, hand-holding, etc.) with them'. Similarly, Sarah, a 22-year-old white woman, says that for her asexuality means that 'I don't have sex and don't understand why people would want to have sex'. For both Jodi and Sarah, an asexual identity is *not* about attraction, but rather intent to participate in sexual behaviors. In addition to the wide variation in the definition of an asexual identity, there was also variation as to what behaviors 'count' as sexual.

Despite describing themselves as not experiencing sexual desire or attraction, 13 participants described interest in some sort of physical intimacy with another or others when describing an 'ideal relationship'. For Mark, a 36-year-old multi-racial male who identifies as a romantic hetero-asexual, 'I'm romantically attracted to the opposite sex, but don't desire sexual contact. I enjoy cuddling, and kissing and even pleasing my wife, but I don't desire sexual intercourse.' Callie, a 28-year-old white woman, said physical affection is fine, 'so long as the physical contact does not become sexual in nature'. This is similar to Dan, a 21-year-old white male, a self-identified hetero-romantic asexual, who says, 'certain things that might be considered sexual behavior – hugging, cuddling, kissing – I would be interested in, but nothing explicitly sexual.' As these participants illustrate, defining the boundaries between physical affection and sexual interactions is important to an asexual identity.

These accounts demonstrate that the boundaries between sexual and not sexual are largely based on an androcentric understanding of sex, where behaviors other than penile-vaginal intercourse are generally delineated as not sexual. According to Maines (1999: 5) an androcentric conception of sex involves 'preparation for penetration ("foreplay"), penetration and male orgasm'. A prime example of this is Mark, who describes himself as a romantic hetero-asexual and his wife as a sexual person. Recall that Mark says that he enjoys 'pleasing his wife' but does not desire sexual intercourse. While we can only guess what was meant by Mark's interest in pleasing his wife, if we assume that 'pleasing his wife' is widely considered

a sexual act, then Mark is working to separate what is commonly understood as sexual from what is understood as non-sexual. Yet Mark's interpretation is similar to androcentric understandings of this participant's actions, as both characterize it as non-sexual because of the lack of penile penetration and (presumably) male orgasm.

This negotiation between the sexual and the non-sexual is especially relevant when considering the issue of masturbation. While I did not explicitly ask about masturbation in this survey, 10 of the participants mentioned it while describing their asexual identity. For Farina, a 25-year-old white woman who described herself as a bi-curious asexual, asexuality means, 'I don't need, want, or like sex, including any activities that seem to be leading to sex. For me this includes masturbation. [I experience] no desire for sex with another person or with myself.' Farina and others make the distinction between sex in relation to others and the sexual encounter with the self, or masturbation. Yet despite this distinction, Farina still considers masturbation to be an expression of sexual desire that she is not interested in.

While Farina described masturbation as 'sexual' and something she was not interested in, others describe masturbation as congruent with their asexual identity. For Gloria, a 20-year-old white female who self identifies as asexual,

I do not have any desire to have sex with another person. I masturbate at times but I don't connect it with anything sexual. I know it sounds like a contradiction but it's just something I do every now and then and it seems to help me relax when I am stressed.

For this person, masturbation was a bodily activity, unconnected with sex. Another participant, Carlos, a 21-year-old, self-identified Hispanic and Northern European male, who describes himself as an aromantic asexual, 'occasionally gets the urge to masturbate (which I will occasionally do), but I still do not experience attraction and have no real desire to engage in sexual activity with anyone'. This disconnection between masturbation and sexuality is an interesting divorce, especially given masturbation's historical connection to sex (Laqueur, 2003). These descriptions reinforce findings by Prause and Graham (2007), who found that two of the four self-identified asexual people in their sample did engage in masturbation while defining it as nonsexual. According to Prause and Graham, 'The interviews also suggested that asexual individuals interpret fewer behaviors as sexual, as compared to non-asexual individuals, possibly due to the lack of pleasure associated with them' (2007: 6). While lack of pleasure may be one explanation for this, it is also important to consider how social and cultural factors, in addition to individualistic factors, may be important for delineating appropriate behavior understanding.

According to an androcentric conception of sex (Maines, 1999) many of the behaviors described by these participants would not be considered sexual, which parallels their interpretations of these behaviors. This interpretation of fewer behaviors as sexual (Prause and Graham, 2007) may be related to these androcentric definitions of sex, which are relatively rigid and specific. This conception of sex may be useful for asexual individuals who are interested in creating a coherent narrative of their identity that incorporates their lack of interest in sex.

The construction of asexual identities problematizes the boundaries between the sexual and the non-sexual. As these narratives illustrate, behaviors that do not fall under androcentric definitions of sex are particularly likely to fall into a gray area of sexuality. Redefining traditionally 'sexual' behaviors as non-sexual challenges the sexual/non-sexual binary as it explicitly questions how and why certain behaviors are designated as sexual and others as non-sexual. Asexual definitions of sexuality reveal the construction of such 'sexual' acts as masturbation, cuddling and kissing as unattached from the sexual meanings that are often attributed to these behaviors. In this way an exploration of asexual identities contributes to a larger social constructivist project as the discourses of sex, sexuality and physical intimacy are challenged and re-written during the construction of asexual identities.

### 'Essentially' asexual

Asexual identities have a complicated relationship with essentialist notions of sexuality. On one hand, essentialist notions of sexual orientation may help to legitimize asexuality. As a relatively new sexual identity, asexuality still lacks legitimization and acceptance from family members, community members and medical institutions (Prause and Graham, 2007). For lesbian and gay identities, ethnic models of sexual identity, which are minoritizing and essentialist (Sedgwick, 1990), have been the most useful strategy for legitimating their status in society (Duggan and Hunter, 1995). An essentialist notion of asexuality, then, may be strategically useful to individuals who wish to be recognized as legitimately asexual. As Rubin (1984 [1993]) describes, sexual essentialism is a widespread assumption of modern society, where sexual essentialism is 'the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions' (1984 [1993]: 275). This idea that the desire for sex (or lack thereof) is a natural and essential characteristic is present in many of the participants' descriptions of their asexuality.

Many of the participants describe themselves as being *naturally* asexual, or as they refer to it, 'this way'. Christine, a 24-year-old white female said,

Well, I've always been this way. Even my friends knew I was different – they even avoided topics about how 'cute' someone is with me because they were aware I couldn't understand. Though, I've heard the term 'asexual' used in this way, somewhere around a year ago and it fit well with me.

Jeanine, a multi-racial woman in her 40s, says 'I have always felt this way. I just did not know there was a name for it, until a few years ago. Also, I did not realize there were so many others like me.' While participants describe coming to an asexual identity as a revelation of an essential aspect of themselves, as Jeanine indicates, part of the difficulty in coming to an asexual identity is finding the appropriate language.

For many, the internet, specifically the AVEN website, has facilitated this discovery of language. As Mollie, a 22-year-old white female who identifies as asexual and aromantic said,

I've been able to call myself asexual since I first read the AVEN FAQs [at] age 20. I didn't call myself asexual for several months because I needed to have a good long think about the whole matter. I concluded that I'd always been asexual, even if I didn't have a handy label to stick on.

For Sarah, a 22-year-old white female, 'I realized there were others that called themselves asexual through the internet. I've known that I don't date and don't consider others as anything more than "friends" for about four years.' While the internet facilitates the discovery of the language, it is interesting that this identity revolves around the *lack* of sexuality. As Jessica, a 21-year-old white woman who self-identifies as a bi- or panromantic asexual describes,

Outside of AVEN or conversations specifically about sexuality, I don't really consciously think of myself as asexual. Like being an atheist or non-Hispanic or a non-driver (all apply), asexuality is something I'm not and never was, rather than something I am. The label is mostly a useful marker. So, my asexual identity is important in certain contexts, and I can't imagine my life if I weren't asexual, but it's not specifically important to me.

This quote eloquently compares an asexual identity as a lack, rather than the presence of a characteristic, as many salient identities are. This self-identified white female interestingly compares her identity to atheism or non-Hispanic identities, each of which lack the quality on which the identity is based, religious beliefs or a Hispanic identity, respectively. As this participant describes, the marker of asexual is mostly useful as it helps others understand her, rather than represent something important about herself. It is also interesting as this participant describes her identity as unimportant while not in asexual spaces, and important while engaged with asexual communities or in conversations about sexuality.

Asexual identities are also defined in opposition to celibacy and celibate identities, which are described as a choice. According to the AVEN website, 'Unlike celibacy, which is a choice, asexuality is a sexual orientation' (AVEN, 2007).<sup>3</sup> This distinction was described as important for several participants in their description of their asexuality. Barry, a 29-year-old white male, said:

I was exploring the internet looking for celibate people to relate to (as that's the only word I had with which to describe my sexual status at the time) and stumbled across a link to [www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org). After a few hours of reading the website, I was pretty sure that 'asexual' was a label that suited me.

Another participant, Callie said, 'I don't desire sex, so I am asexual. I am not celibate, as this implies a desire for sex that is repressed.' Again, asexuality is contrasted with a celibate identity which implies the presence of sexual desire that is not acted on.

This sense of the *essentialness* of an asexual identity is strongly confirmed by those who describe themselves as inventors of the 'asexual' language. For these inventors, they describe themselves as making up the language to describe their true sense of self. Charles, a 26-year-old white male who identifies as asexual and queer, says, 'I invented it of my own accord'. For Mollie,

I came to realize it by myself or in communication with my family. Though none of us knew about this we strained some logical thinking to get us to the point that something like asexuality must exist. Then I made this term up to explain myself to my surroundings and future partners.

As these excerpts illustrate, many of the participants discuss the naturalness of their asexuality as an important aspect of how they see their identity.

The role of the internet in coming to an asexual identity is evidence of the influence of social context on identity. As many of these narratives described, it was only after encountering the language of asexuality and an asexual community that these participants took on the identity. The AVEN website facilitates not only asexual identities, but also conveys the importance of 'legitimizing' asexuality as a biological or innate characteristic, not as a choice like celibacy. For many asexual individuals the internet has facilitated the discovery, not only of a language by which to describe themselves and a community that offers support and acceptance, but also a way of thinking about their asexuality as an essential characteristic of themselves.

While many sexuality scholars understand sexuality as largely socially constructed (Seidman, 2003), essentialist conceptions of sexuality have left their mark on popular understandings of sexuality as biological, innate and fixed. This is telling in these narratives of asexual identity, as asexuality is understood as a revelation of a 'true' sense of self. While feelings of the

essential characteristic of identity are real, this does not deny that they are also profoundly socially and historically constructed (Foucault, 1978; Rust, 1996; Seidman, 2003).

Yet as mentioned previously, asexuality has a complicated relationship with essentialist notions of sexuality. While essentialist notions of sexuality may be useful for legitimizing asexual identities, asexuality simultaneously challenges essentialist understandings of sexuality as naturally being part of a human experience. Sexual essentialism is often invoked in reference to gender object choice (Freud, 1962; Kitzinger, 1995; Seidman, 2003). However, unspoken in these discussions about the gendered direction of sexual desire is the assumption that one necessarily possesses sexual desire. Asexuality draws attention to this relatively unchallenged assumption.

Coming to identify as asexual requires that individuals reject a widely held cultural ideology of sexuality as biologically based and ubiquitous. While the participants in this study have largely rejected an essential nature of sexual desire, they draw attention to an oft-overlooked social assumption – that all humans possess sexual desire. Yet despite challenging this, asexual individuals still draw from notions of essential sexuality in describing their sexual identity.

### *The romantic dimension*

One of the expressed missions of AVEN is to promote discussion about asexual identity. As described by Dora, a 23-year-old white woman, asexuality can be complicated: ‘[I identify as] aromantic asexual, possibly shading to hypo-hetero-romantic hypo-sexual (it’s a confusing issue)’. The complications of defining sexuality or a sexual identity is apparent in the work of Newton and Walton (1982) as they delineate several concepts that describe sexuality: sexual preference, erotic identity, erotic role and erotic acts. Each of these delineate particular aspects of sexuality, such as butch-ness, top-ness, or interest in leather, which are generally not specified in discourses about sexuality. According to Sedgwick (1995), incorporating dimensions other than gender is important for understanding the complexity of sexuality:

If we may be forgiven a leap from two-dimensional into  $n$ -dimensional space, I think it would be interesting, by the way, to hypothesize that not only masculinity and femininity, but in addition effeminacy, butchness, femmeness, and probably some other superficially related terms [should be described] . . . Why not throw in some other terms, too, such as top and bottom? (Sedgwick, 1995: 16)

While Sedgwick describes  $n$  possibilities for dimensions of sexuality, delineating some of these  $n$  dimensions as they are made apparent across

different identities gives us richer concepts of the dimensions of sexuality that are overshadowed in the construction of sexuality as merely about gendered object of choice.

The complications of asexual identity were illustrated when participants were asked how they describe their sexuality – 13 people abstained from this question and the remaining 88 described themselves as asexual. However, as illustrated by Dora, most participants used additional language to describe their asexuality. Two main categories emerged that further describe asexual identity: romantic identity and aromantic identity.

In this sample, 11 participants described themselves as aromantic while 25 described themselves as romantically oriented. As with the issue of masturbation, I did not know to include questions regarding romantic identity, however, as this data suggests, this theme emerged as important for many participants. For Mark, his romantic identity ‘means I separate the romance feeling from the sexual aspect’. Mark, as well as other participants, describes a difference between sexual and romantic identities. Alice, a 22-year-old white woman, describes her identity as ‘Asexual. (And aromantic, i.e. no “romance drive”, no desire to find a partner).’ For Alice, as well as others, claiming a romantic identity is descriptive of a person’s interest in being in a partnership.

This distinction between romantic and aromantic orientation is most obvious when participants are describing their ideal relationships. Self-identified aromantic asexual individuals tend to describe their ideal relationships as primarily friendship-like. Kisha, a 20-year-old white woman said ‘I like having a few close friends that I feel comfortable around’. Another self-identified aromantic asexual, Susan, a 19-year-old white female, describes her ideal relationship as similar to a current friendship:

I’ve already got a friendship that feels a lot like my ideal relationship. We have a ton of common interests, so we don’t need to plan out what we do. I just go and hang out at her house for the day and everyday activities (like watching TV) are about five times as fun as they would be if I was doing them myself. We laugh, we think the same way, we never fight or cause any burdens to each other . . . That’s all I want, just great friendships. I don’t need attraction or anything physical.

As Susan’s statement illustrates, another common feature of ideal relationships for aromantic asexual individuals is the lack of interest in ‘anything physical’. Alex, a 19-year-old white male and self-identified aromantic asexual, comments ‘an ideal relationship for me is a close friendship, where we can be accountable to each other. No kissing, hugging, or anything else. Just a mental and emotional relationship.’

While aromantic ideal relationships are characterized by friendship and lack of physical contact, this is different from the ways that self-identified

romantic asexual individuals describe their ideal relationships. One romantic asexual, Maria, a white woman in her 30s, says that her ideal relationship is

Pretty much the one I have. We are very compatible mentally; he challenges me constantly and encourages me to be a better person. And in return, I do the same. Physically, we are probably more affectionate than most couples we know, however I'm sure we have less sex.

This is similar to Rita, a 28-year-old white female who describes herself as a romantic asexual, and says that her ideal relationship is

The same as a 'normal' relationship, without the sex. We would be best friends, companions, biggest fans of each other, partners in financial, work, and social areas of our lives. I am very physical. I would like to be able to tackle my lover (as in, 'I love him', not as in 'person I am currently having sex with') to the ground, roll around until I pin him, then plant a kiss on his nose, snuggle into the crook of his arm, and talk about some random topic . . . without him getting an erection or entertaining hopes that this will lead to the removal of clothing or a march to the bedroom.

In contrast to the aromantic asexual individuals, both of these examples indicate an interest in physical intimacy. Also unlike the ideal relationships of aromantic asexual individuals, romantic asexual individuals describe primarily monogamous, dyadic relationships similar to many sexual relationships.

While a romantic dimension might be a relatively unique axis of sexuality, asexual individuals in this survey also described their sexual identity in relation to the gender of their partner(s). Some type of queer<sup>4</sup> identity was indicated by 23 participants and 28 indicated a heterosexual or straight gender identity. None of the self-identified aromantic asexual individuals indicated gender as important in relationships, in contrast to those who identify as romantic, where all but one described the gender of their partner(s) as important to their sexual identity. Lydia, a 22-year-old white woman, describes her sexuality: 'I am asexual. I am also queer but that isn't about my sexuality. Just thought I'd mention that.' For Christine:

I am asexual and I am not attracted by either males or females. Also, I've always identified myself as straight, but considering I do not really have any desire to enter a sexual or a touchy/feely relationship it is a bit of a moot point in my opinion.

For these participants, amongst others, describing their sexual identity using gender does not conflict with their asexuality.

Even though only 23 of the 90 (25 %) participants who responded to this question indicated an LGBTQ identity, this nonetheless represents a relatively substantial subset of participants who describe their romantic

orientation incorporating same-sex attachments as either possible or preferred. For instance, Hannah, a 24-year-old white woman emphasized that for her ‘In asexual circles, I tend to identify as asexual or asexual lesbian. In the (sexual) queer community, I tend to identify first as queer, then lesbian, then asexual lesbian.’ As Hannah’s description highlights, while adopting an LGBTQ identity is not at odds with an asexual identity, neither are these identities uncomplicatedly related. Hannah invokes the sexual identity that both fits her sense of self, and fits the community she is actively engaged with. This is not dissimilar from other findings that individuals may invoke particular aspects of one’s sexual identity as they are relevant (or less stigmatized) in a given situation (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2001; Horowitz and Newcomb, 2001; Rust, 1992, 1996).

Of the 23 queer individuals in this sample, 11 (48 %) identified as bi, bisexual or bi-curious. This is a relatively high percentage of bi-identified individuals as in most studies that include bisexuals and lesbians or gay males find much lower percentages of bi-identified people (Rodriguez-Rust, 2000; Rust, 1992). While I am not making a claim about the demographics of asexual communities, this concentration of bi-identities does illuminate the construction of asexual identities.

In their narratives, many of these bi-identified asexual individuals described how their bisexuality was important to their asexual identity. Nora, a 20-year-old white woman, said that her bisexual identity arose out of her asexuality:

Since sexual attraction is not a factor, then it doesn’t make sense that gender would play that much of a role in who I am attracted to. I am attracted to personality, and when I am attracted to someone, I want to be around them, spend time with them.

Similarly, Mona, a 30-year-old white woman, said that she identifies as, ‘Bi-asexual. The things I find attractive, I find attractive in both sexes.’ For these participants, an asexual identity that conveys a lack of sexual attraction opens the door to not using gender as a screening mechanism for romantic partners. While bisexuality can be romanticized as a gender-blind approach to romantic, intimate and sexual relationships, each of these identities (lesbian, heterosexual, gay, queer or bisexual) accomplish the goal of placing gender as central to one’s sexual identity. The centrality of gender to sexual identities, even for these participants who are using their bi-identity to specify the non-importance of gender, illustrates the deeply entrenched centrality of gender as *the* important aspect of sexuality.

It is noticeable that even when sex is explicitly out of the equation, identity still revolves around the gendered object choice. According to Sedgwick (1990: 35), our ‘now unquestioned reading of the phrase

“sexual orientation” to mean “gender of object choice,” is at the very least damagingly skewed by the specificity of its historical placement.’ As Sedgwick highlights, despite the many meanings that sexuality could have, as an interest in romance, as an interest in bondage, or as a preference for being a bottom, sexuality and sexual identity has come to be synonymous with gender of object choice. While gender remains an aspect of many asexual individuals’ identities (n = 51), some do away with the need to specify gender object choice at all (n = 39).<sup>5</sup> Even for those who do retain a gender object choice aspect of their sexuality identity, coupling this identity with other aspects of sexuality (i.e. asexuality, or romantic identity) detracts from gender object choice as *the* axis for describing one’s sexuality. In this way, asexual identity may be similar to other marginalized sexualities, such as BDSM (bondage/discipline, domination/submission, sadism/masochism) or polyamorous identities, which include other dimensions of one’s sexuality that may be equally (or more) important than gender of object choice.

There are many significant factors at play in coming to an asexual identity. The discovery of an asexual identity involves accurately identifying and articulating desire. This may involve (re)defining culturally agreed on ‘sexual acts’ such as masturbation or cuddling as non-sexual. Asexuality also has a unique relationship to discourses of essential sexualities, as asexual individuals are simultaneously rejecting the naturalness of sexuality, yet embracing the essentialness of their own asexuality. Lastly, asexual identities make explicit a romantic dimension of sexuality as distinct from a sexual identity based on lack of sexual attraction. This article makes unique contributions to the nuanced understanding not only of asexual identities, but to understanding various dimensions of sexuality.

## Conclusions

As suggested throughout, there are myriad connections between asexuality and other sexual minorities.<sup>6</sup> First, asexuality shares an association both historically and presently to medical institutions with other marginalized sexual desires and behaviors. Yet, while activists and scholars have challenged the connections between medical discourses and same-sex desire (Conrad and Schneider, 1994; Kraft-Ebbing, 1886 [1959]; Rubin, 1984), diagnoses associated with asexuality (such as Sexual Aversion Disorder and Hyposexual Desire Disorder) are relatively unexplored. These similarities motivate collaboration in political strategy, as both asexual people and other sexual minorities who are in conversation with medical discourses might collaborate for a more complete transformation of these discourses. The lack of visibility and awareness of asexuality is a barrier to its inclusion in other sexuality-based political action groups.

While a historical and contemporary relationship with discourses of medicine are shared, LGBTQ identities also have a historical relationship with legal institutions as gender presentation and same-sex behaviors have been prosecuted by legal institutions (D'Emilio, 1983; Rubin, 1984). Asexuality, on the other hand, has been largely unnoticed by legal institutions, perhaps in part because of its *lack* of behavior and desire. In some ways, because asexuality is defined as a *lack* of behavior or desire, it has escaped attention, which is a clear departure from the experiences of other marginalized sexualities.

Asexual and LGBTQ groups also share similarities as both have created identity-based communities. As research documents, gay, lesbian, transgender and BDSM individuals use sexual identity communities to find support, relationships and to engage politically (D'Emilio, 1998; Rust, 1992). This is similar to how asexual individuals describe the functions of asexual communities. These communities not only serve similar functions, but both asexual and LGBTQ people are using internet technologies to form community (Jay, 2003; McKenna and Bargh, 1998; Turkle, 1995). While both utilize the networking possibilities of the internet, queer communities have additional visibility in physical spaces such as bars, bookstores and social service organizations that cater to LGBTQ identities. Furthermore, there are cultural symbols that represent the desires, identities and behaviors of LGBTQ identities and subcultures (such as rainbows or pink triangles), whereas symbols of asexual identities and subcultures are not yet generally recognizable.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while both asexual and LGBTQ identities have identity-based communities, the forms and functions of these communities are distinct.

While the aforementioned aspects are more social-structural, asexuality shares a similar social-psychological process of coming to an identity as other marginalized sexual identities. As Paula Rust says, sexual identity is 'a description of the location of the self in relation to other individuals, groups and institutions' (Rust, 1996: 78). Given this understanding of sexual identity, bisexual, asexual, gay and pan-sexual individuals all draw on existing language, their current social situation and the social and cultural meanings associated with these identities to place themselves in relation to other individuals and institutions and to accurately describe their internal sense of self. Additionally, asexual individuals, as well as gay, bisexual or queer individuals, often share a sense of their sexuality as biological and innate, despite descriptions of coming to these identities that reveal profoundly social experiences.

In this article, I have described a few of the intersections between asexuality and other marginalized sexualities. This analysis is far from exhaustive, but it highlights the similarities between these sexualities and creates a need for further exploration of the overlapping social and

political agendas of these marginalized sexualities. Not only are asexual identities interesting in their own right, but they contribute to a broader understanding of the construction of sexualities.

As a relatively unexplored field, I have several suggestions for future research regarding asexuality. First, these findings have important implications for asexuality in relationship with others. Future efforts should investigate the role of asexual identity in negotiating relationships: family, friendship, intimate and otherwise. Future research should explore other possibilities for thinking about categorizing relationships, perhaps taking asexuality as an example of a group actively constructing new language for describing relationships. Second, while this study primarily examined asexual identities, future research should explore the relationship of asexual identity to health and mental health experiences. As classic sexological arguments highlight, medical and mental health institutions have a long-standing link with sexuality as these are the main institutions that correct 'inappropriate' sexual desire (i.e. homosexuality, sex addicts, lack of interest in sex, etc.) (Conrad, 1992; Foucault, 1978). Third, while I have not discussed it at length in this article, there are a number of interesting theoretical intersections between asexuality with other social identities such as gender, class background, size, ability status and age. A clear understanding of how these various social identities are co-constructed is a clear void in previous research about asexuality. Lastly, in this article I did not ask about how particular sexual behaviors may be relevant to the construction of an asexual identity. As this proved to be an important aspect of this study, future research should explore how particular behaviors are laden with social meanings that may or may not be sexual. While there are a number of exciting opportunities for future research, this study has made a unique contribution to the understanding of asexuality as an identity.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am deeply grateful to the many people who participated in this survey by contributing hours of their time and energy to this project. This article has also benefited greatly from valuable feedback on earlier drafts from an anonymous *Sexualities* reviewer, Alexandra S. Atkins, Laura Hirshfield, David Hutson, David Jay, Emily Kazyak, Eunjung Kim, Katherine P. Luke, Zakiya Luna, Jennifer Mann, Karin Martin, Carla Pfeffer, and the University of Michigan 2007 Community of Scholars Cohort. I would like to thank the Center for the Education of Women, the Institute for Research on Women and Gender, and the National Institute of Aging (AG00117) for their financial support of this project. Any shortcomings of this article are entirely my own.

### **Notes**

1. Notable exceptions include Bogaert, 2004 and 2006; Prause and Graham, 2007 and Rothblum and Brehony, 1993.

2. While there has been little attention to asexual identities, historically there has been attention to a lack of desire for sex in medical and mental health literatures (APA, 2000; Ellis, 1908; Kraft-Ebbing, 1886).
3. The AVEN website also instructs its viewers:

There is no litmus test to determine if someone is asexual. Asexuality is like any other identity – at its core, it’s just a word that people use to help figure themselves out. If at any point someone finds the word asexual useful to describe themselves, we encourage them to use it for as long as it makes sense to do so.

While this quote may be interpreted as promoting more essentialist understandings of asexuality, it illustrates that this is not the only option offered to AVEN’s visitors.

4. In this analysis all responses of queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, bi, bi-curious and pansexual identities were grouped together as queer. I chose queer as the umbrella term partly because many of my participants used the word queer as an umbrella term for non-heterosexual identities and communities, and partly because of my discomfort with using the term homosexual as an umbrella term given its historical association with the medicalization of same-sex desires and behaviors.
5. The remaining 12 participants did not respond to this question.
6. While I am speaking broadly about sexual minorities and marginalized sexualities, I by no means wish to minimize the differences between these sexualities. Yet in order to make generalizations, for the purposes of this article I am collapsing differences to draw attention to the broader similarities and differences associated with asexuality. Future research may wish to explore distinctions between asexuality and other marginalized sexualities.
7. For symbols of asexuality I invite you to explore the AVEN website at [www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org).

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