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# There's more to life than sex? Difference and commonality within the asexual community

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## Abstract

Asexuality is becoming ever more widely known and yet it has received relatively little attention from within sociology. Research in the area poses particular challenges because of the relatively recent emergence of the asexual community, as well as the expanding array of terms and concepts through which asexuals articulate their differences and affirm their commonalities. This article presents the initial findings of a mixed-methods research project, which involved semi-structured interviews, online questionnaires and a thematic analysis of online materials produced by members of the asexual community. The aim was to understand self-identified asexuals in their own terms so as to gain understanding of the lived experience of asexuals, as well as offering a subjectively adequate grounding for future research in the area.

## Keywords

asexuality, community, difference, identity, sex, sexuality

## Overview

In 2001 the American college student David Jay, exasperated by the lack of awareness he found concerning asexuality, created the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). It started as a small page on his university account but has since grown rapidly, acting as a catalyst for a burgeoning and increasingly self-conscious asexual community which, as well as its active online message board, now includes a varied offline social life and an increasingly visible campaigning presence. AVEN members throughout the world produce pamphlets, lead workshops, arrange local meetings and speak to the media (Brotto et al., 2010). Partly as a result of these efforts, asexuality has recently begun to attract the attention of the

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popular media. Articles such as Westphal (2004), Cox (2008) and Bootle (2009), as well as a recent BBC documentary tied to the latter piece, have helped introduce asexuality to a wider audience. Yet as Scherrer (2008) notes there remains a striking shortage of academic literature exploring asexuality.

This has begun to change recently with the international attention that Bogaert (2004) brought to asexuality. In this article Bogaert engages in a secondary analysis of a large pre-existing dataset to investigate demographic characteristics associated with asexuality. This dataset included a question about sexual attraction, which offered the response of 'I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all' which Bogaert takes to be indicative of asexuality (Bogaert, 2004: 281). Through operationalizing asexuality this way, Bogaert found that 1.05 per cent of the respondents were asexual and, on this basis, developed an account of demographic predictors of asexuality. Bogaert (2006) attends to the conceptual questions implicit in his earlier article and argues for the utility of treating asexuality as a distinct sexual orientation. He also makes a case against the reduction of asexuality to clinical pathology. However both articles rest on a problematic definition which, though brought into explicit focus, remains uncorrected in the later work. While Bogaert (2004) makes an interesting case as to demographic predictors of a lack of sexual desire, this suggests little about factors associated with taking on an asexual identity because, as he recognizes himself, the categories are not co-extensive. Also this definition itself is variously stated as exhibiting 'little or no sexual attraction to males or females', 'having no sexual attraction for either sex' and 'having no attraction for males or females' (Bogaert, 2004: 279–281). The data presented in the present article suggest that 'attraction' is far from synonymous. Furthermore defining asexuals as experiencing no sexual attraction, rather than low, excludes a sizable number of those who self-identify as asexual.

Bogaert's concern with aetiology manifests itself in a desire to establish objective categories but his subject matter (sexual orientation) means these must extend beyond the narrowly physical, for example the measurement of arousal. As a means of preserving the objectivity of his operationalized category he restricts its scope to 'the subjective element of attraction – that is, a perceived eroticism/fantasy directed towards other' (Bogaert, 2006: 244). Yet in doing so he reifies sexual desire and removes it from the social and psychological context within which it occurs, particularly the meaning that that desire holds for the subject. An objective investigation of a phenomenon such as sexual orientation necessitates that we consider all its subjective aspects. In this particular context, doing so entails the investigation of self-identified asexuals.

Prause and Graham's (2007) was the first research project to explicitly recruit self-identified asexuals. It involved a small qualitative study as a preliminary to a larger online survey study, which included both sexual and asexual respondents. The survey study was primarily focused on exploring the differential characteristics which obtain between sexual and asexual individuals and, as such, falls within the same aetiological framework as Bogaert (2004, 2006). However Prause and Graham (2007: 353) suggest that 'given the rich data derived from these interviews

about self-identified asexuals, future qualitative studies might be warranted'. Similarly Brotto et al. (2010) report on another mixed-methods study of asexuality. The first part of the study involved the use of online surveys to collect data on various personal characteristics of self-identified asexuals recruited through the AVEN website. The second part of the study expanded upon these findings through in-depth telephone interviews with 15 asexuals from the first part, which were analysed through content analysis in order to generate a set of themes which could supplement the quantitative findings. This involved the use of an explicitly phenomenological approach in order to understand the 'lived experience' of participants. In doing so this element of the study generated a greater degree of subjective insight into the experience of self-defined asexuals than had previously been achieved and I engage substantively with these results later in this article. The authors suggest that qualitative methods can have an important role to play in supplementing previously purely quantitative approaches to the study of asexuality.

Scherrer (2008) represents a commendable example of the use of such methods, conducting open-ended online surveys investigating the identities and lived experience of self-defined asexuals recruited through the AVEN website. While Prause and Graham (2007) and Brotto et al. (2010) only approached the issue of identity tangentially, Scherrer (2008) does so explicitly and this concern frames the analytic focus of her article. She collects data concerning the meaning that the sexual holds for self-identified asexuals, their self-understanding as to the ontological basis of their identity, the role which romance plays in the formation of this identity and the intersections between this identity and other minority sexual identifications. Her explicit focus on identity facilitates a richness of phenomenological insight which is lacking in other research, even that which incorporates qualitative methods as part of a mixed-methods approach.

Scherrer argues that 'inquiry into asexual identity is important as those researchers who have explored asexuality have primarily approached it as either a behaviour (lack of sexual acts) or a desire (lack of desire for sexual acts)' (Scherrer, 2008: 622). This focus flows from their concern for aetiology rather than subjective insight, in other words, causal explanation rather than hermeneutic understanding. However, as Scherrer (2008) suggests, identification as asexual cannot be divorced from either the subjective meanings which that identification holds for individuals nor the processes of intersubjective negotiation through which such meanings emerged. Tacit confirmation of this claim can also be found in Prause and Graham's conclusion (2008) that distinguishing between the sexual and the non-sexual is a crucial part of coming to an asexual identity. Therefore even an explicitly aetiological inquiry must attend to the subjective dimensions of asexual experience and, it seems, this is reflected in the role played by qualitative methods in Prause and Graham (2008) and Brotto et al. (2010) and the conclusion drawn in both studies that such methods are important in understanding, as Brotto et al. put it, 'the central characteristics of this poorly understood construct [asexuality]'.

The identities and lived experience of self-identified asexuals are the specific focus of the present article because, as will hopefully become clear, a diverse

range of experiences fall under the popular AVEN (2009) definition of an asexual as 'someone who does not experience sexual attraction'. A recognition and understanding of this diversity, as well as the commonalities which facilitate it, is a necessary starting point for research that attempts to understand and/or explain asexuality and asexuals. To this end I conducted a mixed-methods qualitative study of self-identified asexuals utilizing semi-structured interviews and online questionnaires, as well as an analysis of asexual forums, websites and blogs. My approach has been informed by the critical realist methodological work of Layder (1998) and Sayer (1992, 2004) which stresses the importance of theory and conceptualization in shaping the outcomes of social research. Following the social theory of Archer (2000, 2003, 2007) I have understood the participants as embodied human subjects with properties and powers irreducible to their social contexts. Foremost among these powers is the capacity for reflexivity, which Archer (2007) defines as 'the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their social contexts and vice versa'. It follows from this that the biographical trajectory of a given subject is never set in stone but is rather a result of the reflexive choices they make in material and cultural circumstances that are not of their own choosing. However, as the emergence of the asexual community illustrates, such subjects can transform those circumstances through their collective activity.

This article presents the initial results of this study, relating particularly to the diversity within the asexual community and the underlying commonalities which facilitate that diversity. In doing so it aims to elucidate personal and communal aspects of asexual experience which, as well as being sociologically interesting in their own right, illustrate the subjective dimensions to the causal processes which aetiologically focused researchers investigate.

Although qualitative research must remain ultimately agnostic about aetiology in this domain (assuming one accepts the existence of biological and psychological processes which elude the discursive awareness of the individual) it should inform attempts to explain a phenomenon which has irreducibly subjective aspects.

## Methods

My initial interest in asexuality arose through two friends who identified as asexual. It was through conversations with them, as I attempted to understand some initially very unfamiliar ideas, that I began to plan this research. These informal conversations, which continued throughout the research process, helped me acquire a basic familiarity with the language and ideas prevalent within the asexual community. It also allowed them to offer assessments of my emerging interpretations (Ezzy, 2002: 68).

The research itself was mixed-methods, combining semi-structured interviews with an open-ended online questionnaire and a thematic analysis of a variety of asexual forums, websites and blogs. I began the thematic analysis prior to the other aspects of the research and continued it, albeit in a slightly truncated form,

throughout the collection of questionnaires and the interviewing. I explored the discussions on asexual sites,<sup>1</sup> recording pertinent phrases, labels and concepts concerning asexual self-understandings and asexual experience. In dialogue with the ongoing interviews and, later, the completed questionnaires, I developed themes which shaped my interests with regards to further data collection. These were derived inductively with the intention of understanding the terms in which asexuals think about themselves and their circumstances.

Throughout the research process there was an interchange and dialogue between the three methods. The thematic analysis was begun first, then two initial interviews were conducted before I developed the questionnaire and put it online. Although the questionnaire could obviously not be modified once it had been launched and promoted, the initial interviews and thematic analysis of online content provided the basis for the development of the questions. Likewise the responses to the questionnaire fed into my future interview guide and provided themes for future online thematic analysis. Provisional data analysis was ongoing in relation to each of the three methods, and the interdependent analytical process that this facilitated allowed me to elaborate perpetually and refine my emerging understandings of asexual identities and experiences (Ezzy, 2002: 63).

Prior to carrying out the interviews, I initially posted a thread seeking interviewees on the AVEN message board, outlining who I was and the nature of the research I planned to conduct. I was met with a very enthusiastic response and many people used the private message function to offer any help I might need with the research. In subsequent posts I emphasized that the interviews would be entirely confidential and answered a variety of questions people had about me and the planned research. I also explained how I intended to send the resulting work to anyone on AVEN who was interested. I then repeated this process on two smaller asexual sites: *apositive.org* (APositive) and *asexuality.livejournal.com* (Asexuality LiveJournal).

In total I conducted eight interviews. I made contact with half of the participants through AVEN and the other half through LGBT groups and existing friends and acquaintances. The longest of the interviews was around 3 ½ hours, while the shortest lasted 30 minutes. I used an interview guide, which I revised throughout the research process in response both to prior interviews and completed questionnaires, as new concepts and themes emerged whilst old ones were elaborated or, in some cases, discarded.

The questionnaire involved 27 open-ended questions which were spread over four pages. I promoted it through the same online channels I used to recruit interviewees. I developed the questions on the basis of the initial two interviews and the thematic analysis of online content. A total of 174 people responded to the questionnaire and, of these, 130 completed it in full. The median response time was just over 37 minutes.

Throughout, I intended to subject the data to a process of member checking (Stake, 1995: 115). I have since compiled an email list of all who expressed an interest in seeing the finished work and I shall send it out to them when completed,

as well as sending drafts to a number of participants who said they would be willing to provide feedback prior to its completion. I have anonymized all distinguishing names and details from the interviews. Where names are given, these are pseudonyms for interviewees. Where names are not given, these are questionnaire respondents.

## **Asexual identity and experience**

The front page of the AVEN website (2009) defines an asexual as ‘someone who does not experience sexual attraction’ and due to the popularity of the AVEN website this definition has been highly influential. While many identify under this definition, it is also widely seen as an umbrella term and, as such, is not taken to be an exhaustive description of the attitudes and orientations prevalent amongst asexuals. The umbrella term acts as a common point of identification rather than constituting a shared identity per se. While it undoubtedly represents a commonality in the self-understanding of many asexuals, it also conceals a significant degree of heterogeneity as to the personal reasons that individuals have for defining as asexual. In this section I will present and explain the diverse range of identifications that constitute this heterogeneity. Here is a small selection of the answers given by questionnaire respondents when asked why they identify as asexual:

I'm 25 years old and I've never had a crush on or any sexual attraction to anybody and I honestly get confused when people say they're 'horny' because I have no idea how that feels. I'm not denying there's still a chance that I may be 'a late bloomer' or just 'haven't found the right person for me yet', but constantly defining this aspect of myself in terms of 'maybe someday' just felt like I was kidding myself. As far as I'm concerned, an asexual is simply someone who doesn't feel the desire to actually have sex, and for me, it fits.

I am simply uninterested in having sex, not repulsed, and if my partner insisted on having sex I would oblige willingly. It's just not the emotional connection for me that it seems to be for most other people.

I define as asexual because it explains how I can find males attractive without wanting to have sex with them, as well how that lack of sexual desire for males does not translate to wanting to have sex with females.

I am not at all interested in sex. It doesn't disgust me or bother me... it just doesn't register.

I identify as asexual because I do not get the urge to have sex. If I do have sex, I only like it for the first minute or so, and then I am satisfied and would like to stop. Basically, sex is not necessary in my life and I could live without it. There are other things I would rather do. Being an asexual doesn't mean that one can't be attracted to

people. I'm attracted to both males and females but mostly in terms of emotional or intellectual attraction.

I find the idea of sex utterly disgusting. I honestly think I would vomit if I ever had sex.

A variety of reasons lead individuals to identify as asexual and before we can begin to understand them it is important to gain some acquaintance with the terms that asexuals use to describe themselves. As Chasin (2009) observes 'within the asexual community, there is a clear and creative generation of new words and discourses, which asexual people use to explain and shape their experiences, relationships and identities'. Figure 1 illustrates the identifications I found within the emerging asexual discourse. Many are conversational terms among asexuals but others, such as 'sex-averse' and 'a-fluid', are more rarely encountered. The illustration is intended as a typological model to understand the heterogeneity within the asexual community in a manner that adequately represents the subjective realities which the specific terms attempt to express (Layder, 1998: 73).

A central distinction is made between romance and sex, which may be counter-intuitive from the perspective of a mainstream sexual culture that regards the latter as the culmination of the former. As Scherrer (2008: 636) puts it 'asexual identities make explicit a romantic dimension of asexuality as distinct from an asexual identity based on lack of sexual attraction'. Many asexuals feel attraction but without any sexual component to it, instead regarding it as romantic and/or emotional. Others feel attraction that is distinctly aesthetic. As one questionnaire respondent wrote,

Sex	Sex-positive	Asexual
	Sex-neutral	Demisexual
	Sex-averse	Grey-A
	Anti-sex	A-fluid
Romance	Aromantic	Heteroromantic
	Romantic	Homoromantic
		Biromantic
		Panromantic

**Figure 1.** Common identifications within the emerging asexual discourse.

I've never understood how beauty relates to sex. I can love and be intensely passionate about people, however. When I say somebody is beautiful, I mean it in the sense that a picture is beautiful, or an animal, or a child. It has nothing whatsoever to do with sex though, and doesn't relate to sex in my mind.

Within this group of romantic asexuals, orientation varies: heteroromantics only feel romantic attraction to the opposite sex, homoromantics to the same sex, bir-omantics to both sexes and panromantics without reference to sex or gender.<sup>2</sup> Some romantic asexuals actively seek relationships because, as Brotto et al. (2010) suggest, 'the closeness, companionship, intellectual and emotional connection that comes from romantic relationships' is personally desirable. Others are simply open to the possibility, given their experience of romantic attraction, without actively seeking it or assigning it any priority in their lives. Aromantic asexuals experience no romantic attraction and have no desire to pursue romantic relationships. In some cases this may be a matter of simple lack of interest and a prioritization of the platonic, as in the case of one respondent who, when explaining their lack of interest in ideas of romance, wrote 'I vastly prefer to maintain close friendships. I would rather have a romantic relationship than only have loose friendships, however'. Similarly Scherrer (2008) found that 'self-identified aromantic asexual individuals tend to describe their ideal relationships as primarily friendship-like'. In other cases though, romance may be actively and viscerally rejected, as exemplified by the respondent who wrote of their '*disgust*' at ideas of romance and annoyance at the priority commonly ascribed to them within people's lives.

With regards to sex, attitudes also vary. Those who are sex-positive<sup>3</sup> endorse sex as positive and healthy, sometimes with a concomitant intellectual and/or cultural interest in it, without experiencing sexual desire or seeking to engage in it themselves. Those who are sex-neutral are simply uninterested in sex: as one typical respondent put it, 'I don't find it disgusting, just not something I care to experience'. However some may be willing to have sex in certain contexts. For instance Paul, a 22-year-old asexual, told me of his willingness to have sex within the context of a committed relationship:

Assuming I was in a committed relationship with a sexual person – not an asexual but someone who is sexual – I would be doing it largely to appease them and to give them what they want. But not in a begrudging way. Doing something for them, not just doing it because they want it and also because of the symbolic unity thing.

In some cases, as with Paul, this willingness had been enacted in the context of an actual relationship whereas for others it was simply an openness to the possibility. As well as pleasing a partner, for some people it may be a source of intimacy and confirmation without being enjoyed in a way that is, per se, sexual.<sup>4</sup> This qualifies the findings of Brotto et al. (2010) that asexuals who have sex do not find it brings them closer to their partners, although for others it may simply be a 'chore' which is a term that came up at numerous points in the interviews and questionnaires.

However for those who are sex-averse or anti-sex, the idea of sex, let alone the actual practice of it, is deeply problematic. Here too there is variety, as some are rendered mildly uncomfortable by sex ('I don't really like it, because it feels a bit weird and unnatural to me, and genitalia aren't exactly beautiful'), others find themselves slightly revolted by it ('I find the whole idea of sexual contact slightly repulsive') and then there are those for whom it is disgusting and deeply distressing. Although for those who are anti-sex these feelings are a generalized response to sex, for others, those who are sex-averse, the feelings relate to themselves and not to others:

I believe I differ from many other repulsed (as opposed to indifferent) asexuals in that it is purely the idea of *myself* having sex that I find disgusting. The idea of others doing it does not bother me in the slightest, apart from finding depictions of female sexuality a little uncomfortable as it reminds me of myself.

However not everyone fits under the strict definition supplied by the umbrella term. Demisexuals experience sexual attraction as a consequence of romantic attraction but not independently of it. When they are emotionally connected to a person sexual attraction may ensue but only directed toward that person. Grey-a is a catch-all term which refers to those who fall in the perceived grey area between sexual and asexual. For instance one questionnaire respondent described himself as physically though not sexually attracted to other men; he did not desire sex but was able to take physical pleasure in it. A-fluid was a term used by Jess, a 21 year old asexual, which described her own asexuality in terms of a more general fluidity held to apply to sexuality as a whole. While Jess was the only participant to use the term a-fluid it was striking that the theme of sexual fluidity emerged in a number of the questionnaires and interviews.

## Identity and community

In the previous section I have presented the diverse range of attitudes and orientations that can be found within the asexual community. Some asexuals are willing to have sex whereas others are repulsed by the very thought. For some, the pursuit of a romantic partner is central to their lives whereas others have no interest in romantic relationships. There are those whose romantic feelings are founded on gender and others for whom gender barely registers. One of the most curious features of the asexual community is that it has simultaneously facilitated the articulation of individual difference and the solidification of a communal identity. In this section I will explore the commonalities found within asexual experience with a view to understanding the genesis of the earlier discussed diversity and gaining insight into the common trajectory through which individuals come to identify as asexual. The terms encountered thus far emerged through debate and discussion, online and offline, which clarified the ways in which people within the community differed (with regards to sex, romance, object choice, identity and so on) but also the

things which united them in spite of these differences. The following is the story told by a questionnaire respondent of how they came to identify as asexual:

The year I was sixteen (and for some time after) I spent a lot of time in the company of a few people who were very sexual and it was through their near-constant talk of sex that I was finally convinced that sexual attraction was real. I had heard that something would happen to make you want to have sex with another person, but I had never experienced it myself. In fact, I did not really believe that a person could have physical feelings ‘down there’ that they identified as sexual feelings, despite having learned what erections etc. were in my health class. I thought everyone was like me, until my classmates and friends begin to talk about sex. Then I realized that I was not like them, and for a while I thought I must be immature . . . except that in every other way they seemed so much *less* mature than I. I thought there might be something wrong with me, except that I am otherwise in perfect health. Then, one night while I was surfing the internet, I came across an embarrassingly girly website which included, as one of its pages, a ‘definitions’ page. I suppose the point was that was that sheltered girls with internet access could look up all the words they were afraid to ask their parents about and get solid, medical definitions. The first word on the list was ‘asexual’ and it caught my interest, because I had never heard it before. I clicked on the link which read the same thing AVEN does, ‘Asexual: a person who does not experience sexual attraction’ and it was like coming home. I knew immediately that this was me and that I wasn’t alone.

Although the specific biographical details vary greatly with different individuals, many of the elements of the foregoing story are typical of asexual experience: adolescent experience gives rise to a sense of difference from a peer group, provoking self-questioning and the assumption of pathology (i.e. ‘I thought there might be something wrong with me’) before self-clarification is attained through the acquisition of a communal identity. In the case of this story a sense of difference emerged for the individual relatively late. While she had been exposed to sex education it had left her with an attitude of disbelief; given that nothing in her own experience had confirmed what she was told about sexual feelings it led her to regard the notion as fictitious. When she saw incontrovertibly that her peer group experienced such feelings, it left her suddenly aware of how she differed from those around her. Perhaps she was simply immature? Or was there something wrong with her? Neither of these self-explanations were sustainable so it was only when she became acquainted with the notion of asexuality that she was able to achieve self-clarification, as the acquisition of a communal identity brought the self-questioning process to an end. As noted, the details of the story are biographically specific but the elements (individual difference, self-questioning, assumed pathology, self-clarification and communal identity) typify asexual experience more widely.

My results indicate that a sense of individual difference was a crucial biographical factor in the lives of the majority of participants and this reflects the findings of Brotto et al. (2010) in their in-depth telephone interviews. However the point at

which individuals start to develop a sense of individual difference varies, as does what they consider constitutes that difference. However, prior to a *sense* of difference is an *actual* difference, as at some point the trajectories of those who do experience sexual attraction begin to diverge from those who do not. The causal processes underlying this difference are, as earlier discussed, the domain of aetiological studies: the phenomenology of the ensuing process is the topic of the present article.

As well as coming to some awareness of this difference, inevitably under their own descriptions, it must constitute something to be explained before it sparks self-questioning. For instance Eve, a 20-year-old asexual, came to an awareness during her school years of the apparent interest in sex that her peers showed but assumed it was merely a pretence at adulthood. As she put it to me, 'I've never attempted to be one of the cool kids. So I thought they were getting peer pressure that I wasn't privy to because I wasn't one of the cool kids. I wasn't in those conversations'. So during her school years this sense of difference never sparked self-questioning because it was explained away as merely *apparent*. It was not the case that her peer group were sexual and she was not but rather that her peer group wanted to act 'cool' and, since she differed in this respect, that was the cause of the apparent difference. So a nascent sense of asexual difference (i.e. an awareness of not experiencing sexual attraction while being surrounded by those who do experience it) was subsumed under a prior and independent sense of being different, in respect of not being one of the 'cool kids'. It was not until she had left school that she began to believe that in fact the behaviour of her peer group was, at least in part, genuine and that, unlike her, they did have a desire for sex. This in turn prompted self-questioning which, in conjunction with an article she had read at an earlier age (Westphal, 2004), led her to begin identifying as asexual. In contrast to Eve, many participants recounted how an apparent sense of difference failed to develop into an active concern because of an awareness of temporality. As in the case of James, a 35-year-old asexual, describing how he felt as a young undergraduate, when he was planning on travelling the world prior to undertaking doctoral studies,

I assumed that I would find someone one day but I'm not ready for that at the moment and it's far more convenient not to be tied down with a girlfriend at the moment. Particularly planning to do a PhD and then go overseas and get some overseas experience. It's convenient not to have a girlfriend and have to drag someone half way around the world.

James's immediate concerns, his PhD and his impending travels, acted to displace any sense of difference he felt; while his peer group may have been concerned with sex and relationships, his immediate involvements occupied him, leading to the assumption that at some point a concern for sex and relationships would organically emerge within his life. This sort of temporal displacement can be engendered by the attitude of others, as in the (rather typical) cases of the respondent whose friends tried to convince him 'that my asexuality was just a phase, and that someday I would find 'the right person', whatever that means' or the respondent who described how

'some people have thought that I'm a late bloomer and that I just haven't found the right person yet'. These are pernicious ideas for someone trying to come to a sustainable understanding of their apparent difference, as the recurring thought that it might all just be a 'phase' (i.e. a quirk of their present state rather than a significant and enduring feature of them) precludes the sort of self-questioning which might allow self-clarification. It also illustrates how the demand of others for explanation (e.g. 'why aren't you interested in dating and sex?') is intimately intertwined with self-questioning (e.g. 'why aren't I like everyone else?'). This was exemplified by the anecdote Eve recounted to me of an encounter on the school bus:

They were witting on at me and they were wanting to know who I fancied. So I told them honestly that I didn't fancy anyone. So they asked again and again and I kept shouting at them 'shut up'. Eventually they came to the decision that I wasn't telling them who I fancied because I fancied a girl. Or, as they said, 'you're a lezza because you don't tell us'. That was actually a sort of turning point for me because I hadn't realized that I would be anything other than straight when I grew up. But at the time I just wanted to chuck them out of the bus window.

When self-questioning begins to take place, the individual attempts to make sense of their apparent difference by forming explanations of it. In a very important sense this process is, at least tacitly, a theoretical one; the individual tries out different hypotheses in the search for one that 'fits' (a term which came up repeatedly in the questionnaires) and facilitates self-clarification. Depending on their placement within society, individuals have access to differing material and cultural resources and this conditions the potential explanations available to them. Perhaps the most readily available explanations are those that make sense of individual difference in terms of an assumed pathology. Prause and Graham (2007) found that 56.2 per cent of their asexual participants understood asexuality to involve some form of pathology. My own data suggests that this finding is misleading when considered in terms of biographical trajectory; it underrepresents the assumption of pathology at an early stage of self-questioning but overrepresents it among those who have come to an asexual identity. Identity acquisition is a temporal process, which takes place within changing social and cultural contexts and, as such, personal factors associated with it must be understood in reflexive and biographical terms.

This capacity for reflexivity can be seen in the way that pathologizing explanations are considered but rejected, as the individual comes to other, more affirming, self-understandings. Even so, when the theory in question is a personal one, ensuing from a highly individualized process of self-questioning, it still lacks the affective force that a communal identity can provide. For instance David, an asexual man in his 30s, explained to me how he reasoned that there must be others like himself who, as he saw it, stood as an opposite to bisexuals (attraction to either gender rather than both) but that 'it was always a slight drag on my psyche, that there's no else like me so I'm not sort of "normal" as such'. It was only when he later came across an article in a newspaper that this 'drag' ended as his theory was

confirmed through discovery of the asexual community. There are, however, cases where the individual pursues a pathologizing sequence of explanations at great personal cost. For instance witness the experience recounted by one respondent,

I came to identify as asexual this way: I have never understood the desire to engage in the acts that define sex, from kissing on down the list. . . . This issue haunted me for years until finally, when I was engaged to be married, I knew that I couldn't walk down the aisle until I solved what we called the sex issue. So I went into therapy. I explored every corner and crevice of my childhood. After psychological reasons were ruled out, I took hormone tests to see if my body was functioning properly. When the tests came back as 'normal', I still lobbied to be prescribed low-levels of testosterone. I got the prescription and took testosterone to jump-start my sex drive. The testosterone didn't work, so I switched to progesterone after a few months. I lamented the feeling that I was somehow 'broken', that I was somehow 'less of a person'. I continued to look for psychological reasons in therapy. I continued to engage in sexual activities even though I'd rather take the LSATs or swim the Pacific than be naked with another human. After over a year of hormone therapy, after exclusive sex therapy with my partner, after the kind of lament and struggle that so many of the kids I mentor experience when they're struggling with their sexuality, my relationship ended. I continued in therapy, and I continued to wonder why I was broken. It was another six months before I finally identified myself as asexual, and coming out to myself and the world was one of the most liberating experiences I've ever encountered . . . I'm comfortable with it. I'm relieved by it . . . It makes all the sense that nothing made before and I'm glad to not spend countless hours worrying about why I am broken anymore. I'm happy, and I'm proud of my asexuality.

While the possibility of identifying as asexual was foreclosed, this respondent was led through successive attempts to explain her apparent pathology; none were sustainable but equally none served to question the underlying assumption that the absence of sexual desire represented an unwelcome abnormality. The fact no underlying problem was found through the various forms of therapy she undertook only seemed to make the problem more elusive, rather than problematizing the assumption of pathology itself. As she put it later in the questionnaire, 'I only ever had sex because I thought I was *supposed* to, not because I *wanted* to'.

This 'sexual assumption', which sees sex as a culmination of and prerequisite for human flourishing, was encountered by a majority of participants. This ubiquitous affirmation of sex, its perceived normalcy and centrality to a healthy life, can preclude self-acceptance as a culturally available option for asexuals because of the concomitant repudiation of asexuality as pathological. While this assumption would not necessarily command universal assent when considered reflectively, the pervasiveness of the assumption becomes apparent when considering the experience of asexuals, as do some of the pernicious consequences of it. It invites attempts to negotiate understandings of human flourishing which do not hinge

on sexual expression and sexual fulfilment, and the steady growth of the asexual community demonstrates, *inter alia*, the success of these attempts. For instance the aforementioned respondent eventually came across AVEN and, as we saw, her lack of sexual desire became a source of pride and affirmation rather than worry and pain. The discovery of an asexual community can have a profound effect on the self-understanding of the individual, as exemplified by the typical experience of another respondent,

In a period where I was more actively trying to figure things out, I found the asexual community. Not experiencing sexual attraction made sense to me as a way of explaining this difference I couldn't understand. More than this, I felt that I could relate to the experiences of other asexuals. This was very important to me because it counteracted the message that people like me don't exist. Now I identify as asexual as a matter of solidarity with other asexuals.

The acquisition of a communal identity serves to ward off pathology and ambiguity, as an individual sense of difference gives way to the sense of a shared communal trait. As another respondent put it, 'it validates my non-interest and allows me to remember that it doesn't make me broken'. In this way it facilitates a self-clarification and self-acceptance, which was previously lacking, leading the individual from an individualized questioning process to participation in a shared community. However it is crucial to note that a minority of participants did achieve self-clarification independently of the community and, when this was the case, the community held little for them beyond, for instance, a potential source of asexual partners. I was able to make contact with these people because, for a variety of reasons, they did occasionally use the websites but it seems plausible that there were others who do not often visit the websites, were not interested in participating or not in contact with the asexual community at all.<sup>5</sup> For this group an absence of sexual desire has been relatively unproblematic and they see it as a minor difference, with the consequence that they do not identify strongly with the community. Whereas others found guidance and support in the asexual community, it holds much less for this group, who came to self-clarification independently. Yet changing circumstances and emerging issues impact on what this group can find in the community. For instance James, the 35-year-old asexual we met earlier, talked to me about his changing awareness of his asexuality as he got older,

The world is designed for couples. Particularly straight couples but generally designed for couples. As I said I think the older I get the more difficult it will be to not be 'normal' in that sense. As I commented before, most of my friends are quite a bit younger than me now.

James had attended a couple of offline AVEN events but had found little for him there. Earlier in the interview he told me how he thought AVEN was an 'interesting idea and interesting forum but surely getting together to discuss something you're

not interested in does seem a little counter-intuitive?' Yet he had started to use an asexual dating site and it seemed likely he might come to see more for him in the community as meeting potential asexual partners became a greater concern. So while there was a prevalent trajectory among participants (individual difference, self-questioning, assumed pathology, self-clarification and communal identity) it should not be taken as an exhaustive account of the experience of being asexual. Rather it represents certain core aspects in the experience of those who share common subjective attitudes and orientations within socio-cultural contexts which, while diverging in many ways, share a generic repudiation of asexuality.

## Conclusion

This article has presented the preliminary findings of my research, as pertaining to the differences and commonalities within the asexual community, with the intent of offering a hermeneutically grounded starting point for further inquiry into the area. While the AVEN (2009) definition of an asexual as 'someone who does not experience sexual attraction' commands widespread assent, it also conceals a great degree of diversity. A range of attitudes and orientations toward sex and romance can be found within the asexual community, as well as an evolving vocabulary within which to articulate these differences. This diversity stands in contrast to the common experiences and needs which bring people to the asexual community, as different individuals in different circumstances nonetheless share common core experiences as they confront socio-cultural contexts which affirm sex and repudiate asexuality. In fact these commonalities facilitate the aforementioned diversity, as similar experiences lead people to the online and offline forums where discussion and debate allows the asexual vocabulary to expand, thus articulating individual difference while simultaneously entrenching participation in the community.

Necessarily many questions have been left unanswered. Some of these will be addressed in forthcoming papers, which shall analyse the data collected in greater depth and develop a substantive account of how self-identified asexuals negotiate the sexualized world (with particular reference to friends, families and relationships), as well as the agential capacities they bring to bear on this process. I shall argue that asexuals should not be considered passive victims of a pervasively sexualizing social world but rather as actively and creatively renegotiating the boundaries of the platonic, the intimate and the sexual, with socio-cultural ramifications that are potentially far wider than their own community.

However further questions remain which are beyond the scope of the data collected. It seems plausible to suggest that there have been individuals who have not experienced sexual attraction long before the relatively recent emergence of a socio-culturally available asexual identification. If this is so then how have structural and cultural changes facilitated the emergence of asexual identities? How might the emergence of the asexual community, as a corporate agent, generate further structural and cultural change? I would tentatively suggest that the emergence of asexuality has its roots in what Weeks (2007: 3) calls the 'long, convoluted, messy,

unfinished but profound revolution' taking place in our intimate lives and that, furthermore, it represents a continued outgrowth of this still unfinished process. The individualization of sexual choice has, it seems, led to the problematization of sexual desire itself and it is only through understanding the potential trajectory of this process that we might begin to sketch out the consequences it could hold for society, culture and intimate life.

## Notes

1. These were primarily the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), apositive.org (APositive), asexuality.livejournal.com (Asexuality LiveJournal) and asexualexplorations.net (Asexual Explorations). I also looked at a wide variety of asexual blogs and forum postings found via links on the above sites and search engines.
2. Although this could be construed as similar to biromanticism, in actuality it rests on a crucial distinction: the object of one's romantic attraction may *happen* to be of either sex or gender but this is incidental to the attraction. Sex or gender are not experienced as being relevant to romantic attraction.
3. It should be noted that although this is a term used online, only one survey respondent (describing herself as 'very sex-positive') and no interviewees explicitly used it to describe themselves. As a term it also has political connotations, pertaining to the 'sex-positive movement', which many asexuals who are positive about sex would distance themselves from.
4. In the sense that the satisfaction derived from is extrinsic to the act rather than intrinsic to it.
5. Interestingly a number of respondents recounted the discovery that, unbeknownst to themselves, they already had friends who identified as asexual. This might suggest that some individuals achieve self-clarification and then see little reason to talk about their asexuality.

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