

Theoretical Issues in the Study of Asexuality

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ABSTRACT

Academic interest in asexual people is new and researchers are beginning to discuss how to proceed methodologically and conceptually with the study of asexuality. This article explores several of the theoretical issues related to the study of asexuality. Researchers have tended to treat asexuality either as a distinct sexual orientation or as a lack of sexual orientation.

Difficulties arise when asexual participants are inconsistent in their self-identification as asexual.

Distinguishing between sexual and romantic attraction resolves this confusion, while simultaneously calling into question conceptualizations of the asexual population as a single homogenous group. Arguments are considered in favor of exploring diversity within the asexual population, particularly with respect to gender and romantic orientation, proposing that the categorical constructs employed in (a)sexuality research be replaced with continuous ones.

Furthermore, given the recently noted bias toward including only self-identified asexuals, as opposed to non-self-identified asexuals or “potential-asexuals,” in research about asexuality, the nature and meaning of asexual self-identification are discussed. Particular attention is paid to the theoretical importance of acknowledging asexual self-identification or lack thereof in future research into asexuality. This article discusses what these current theoretical issues mean for the study of asexuality and sexuality more generally, including a brief consideration of ethical implications for research with asexual participants. Finally, directions for future research are suggested.

KEY WORDS: asexuality; sexual orientation; sexual desire; romantic attraction; sexuality

INTRODUCTION

Asexual people are those who experience little or no sexual attraction and/or who self-identify with asexuality. There is some ambiguity regarding exactly what is meant by asexuality, with the current focus being on a lack of sexual attraction, not a lack of sexual desire. In the first academic article on the topic of asexuality, Bogaert (2004) defined asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction toward both men and women, in accordance with Storms' (1980) model of sexual orientation, and subsequent researchers have continued this practice. Similarly, the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), the largest and most well-known asexual community in existence, adopted a definition of asexuality based on lack of sexual attraction. Founded in 2001 with the goals of "creating public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community" (AVEN, 2008), AVEN was created to be inclusive of all self-identified asexuals.¹ Neither the academic nor the asexual community defines asexuality as a lack of participation in sexual behavior.

The prevalence of asexual people is estimated around 1% (Bogaert, 2004), although this figure refers specifically to people who have *never* experienced sexual attraction, excluding people who experience sexual attraction rarely as well as those who no longer experience such attractions. Moreover, this estimate is based on data collected for purposes unrelated to asexuality, and therefore does not address asexual self-identification in any way. It did, however, expose academia to asexuality, which laid the foundation for subsequent inquiries. In their recent methodological critiques, Brotto and Yule (2009) and Hinderliter (2009) addressed critical limitations hindering asexuality-related research, focusing on the lack of both appropriate tools for measuring asexuality, as well as a consistently accepted operational definition of asexuality

¹ David Jay recounted the events leading up to his creation of AVEN in episode five of his podcast, Love From the Asexual Underground, available here: <http://asexualunderground.blogspot.com/2006/08/5-history-lesson.html>. This includes a brief explanation of why an attraction-based definition was more inclusive than a desire-based definition at that time of AVEN's inception, in the context of the budding asexual community.

upon which to base such tools. While these concerns are valid, they result from a larger theoretical confusion underlying the study of asexuality, which has not yet been thoroughly explored.² This article will discuss several of the theoretical issues related to the study of asexuality. First of all, following from conventional conceptualizations of sexuality, asexuality is implicitly presumed to be a singular sexual orientation (or lack thereof), which precludes other sexual orientations. Moreover, apparent diversity within the asexual population raises implicit challenges to viewing the asexual population as a single, unified group, which in turn calls into question models of sexuality predicated on categorical sexual-orientation-related constructs instead of continuous ones. Finally, the meaning of asexual self-identification will be explored, along with theoretical, practical, and ethical implications for studying asexuality.

(IMPLICIT) THEORIES OF ASEXUALITY

In accordance with Storms' (1980) model placing same-sex and other-sex attractions on two orthogonal axes, researchers rely on an understanding of *asexuality* as one of four mutually exclusive sexual-orientation-related categories, along with *heterosexuality*, *homosexuality*, and *bisexuality*. In this view, *asexuals* are people who simultaneously have low attraction to people of the same sex and to people of the other sex; *bisexuals* have high attraction to both groups, and *heterosexuals* and *homosexuals* have high attractions only to one group.³ This presumed conceptualization is illustrated by how researchers employ forced choice questions about sexual orientation listing *asexual* along with options for *straight*, *gay/lesbian*, and *bisexual* (Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes, & Erskine, 2010; Prause & Graham, 2007). Additionally, Bogaert (2006) and Brotto et al. (2010) have drawn explicitly on Storms' model in order to consider asexuality as a lack of sexual orientation and analogous to other sexual orientations. In the only

² Bogaert (2006) addressed asexuality as theoretically distinct from hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD), but did not explore more general theoretical issues relevant to *asexuality research*, many of which have only taken shape since his article's publication.

³ This model does not acknowledge the existence of people who are intersex.

published conceptual consideration of asexuality, Bogaert (2006) discussed arguments in favor of understanding asexuality as a sexual orientation, as well as objections to this perspective which were largely based in doubting the genuine existence of asexual people.⁴

Understanding asexuality in terms of mutually exclusive sexual orientation-related categories entails expecting self-identified asexuals to consistently report their sexual orientation as asexual. In contrast, as Hinderliter (2009) noted in discussing the results of Prause and Graham (2007), this is simply not the case. The focus of the Prause and Graham study was not to explore asexual self-identification, but instead to compare sexual and asexual people along dimensions of sexual experience and motivations, and in terms of their perceptions/suppositions about asexual people. Prause and Graham (2007) found that only 22 of 41 participants who declared themselves to be *asexual* on a forced choice question wrote in “asexual” in response to an earlier open question about sexual orientation; the remainder responded with a variety of other sexual-orientation descriptors, and only four participants providing no information. Prause and Graham only discussed inconsistencies in asexual self-identification insofar as they related to the sensitivity of Bogaert’s (2004) initial definition of asexuality—lack of attraction to men and women. For purposes of the Prause and Graham (2007) study, asexual group membership was defined by selection of the *asexual* option in the forced choice question.

This pattern of inconsistency regarding asexual sexual orientation-related self-identification was repeated in a more recent study by Brotto et al. (2010), aiming to characterize asexuals according to measures of sexual and interpersonal functioning, personality, and psychopathology. Brotto et al. incidentally discovered that 47 of their previously 187 self-identified asexual participants (25% of the sample) answered a forced choice question with a

⁴ Bogaert (2006) addressed arguments speculating that so-called *asexual* people may in fact be subject to physiologically defined sexual attraction (i.e., respond physiologically to sexual stimuli) but may either lack subjective awareness of this, or may wish to conceal their awareness.

response other than “asexual.” Several of the non-exclusively asexual-identified participants in this study specified labels like “homoasexual” and “biromantic asexual” in the free-response box available to those selecting the *other* choice in the sexual orientation question. In doing so, they illustrated that, for them, distinguishing between romantic and sexual dimensions of attraction resolved the apparent problem. Brotto et al. discussed the apparent inconsistencies in asexual self-identification briefly by referring to the importance many self-identified asexuals seem to place on their romantic orientations, and recommended that future asexuality research take this into account. In doing so, Brotto et al. implicitly acknowledged the limitations of viewing asexuality as a single distinct sexual orientation when they decided not to reject data from the 47 non-exclusively self-identified asexual participants (as they might have done, arguing instead that these people were not, in fact, asexual).

Considerations on the topic have been limited in empirical work—beyond a sociological exploration of negotiating asexual identity (Scherrer, 2008),⁵ at the time this article was provisionally accepted for publication, no studies beyond the ones already mentioned had been published including data from self-identified asexual people. Since then, three other articles have been published. Carrigan (in press) employed a mixed-methods approach including both collected and existing data in order to “understand self-identified asexuals in their own terms” (p. 1), and noted the vast diversity within the asexual community, including diversity of romantic orientation. Gazzola and Morrison (in press) conducted a comprehensive review of asexuality-related literature, explicitly addressing romantic attraction as distinct from sexual attraction, before exploring anti-asexual discrimination. Brotto and Yule (in press) explored asexual women’s psychological and physiological sexual arousal, finding that asexual women do

⁵ Scherrer has recently published both a book chapter (Scherrer, 2010a) and a journal article (Scherrer, 2010b) referring to the same data set as her 2008 article, discussing respectively what asexuality can contribute to thinking about polyamory (i.e., responsible non-monogamy) and the same-sex marriage debate.

experience physiological arousal in response to sexual stimuli,⁶ just as non-asexual women do, and that asexual women are aware of their physiological arousal. Nevertheless, asexual women show significantly lower arousal in response to various forms of sexual contact, and experience significantly lower desire for partnered (but not solitary) sexual contact, in comparison to non-asexual women. Furthermore, unlike heterosexual, bisexual and lesbian non-asexual women, asexual women did not show an increase in either positive affect or sensual-sexual attraction after exposure to sexual stimuli. Brotto and Yule's findings illustrate that asexuality is evidently neither a disorder of sexual arousal, nor a disorder of cognitive or attention processes. While their research did not address romantic attraction directly, Brotto and Yule called for future research to help understand how romantic and sexual attraction become "de-coupled," thereby demonstrating that the romantic/sexual attraction distinction can now be presumed, at least in some asexuality-related research. Bogaert (2006), Brotto et al. (2010), Diamond (2003, 2008), and Hinderliter (2009) had all picked up on the sexual/romantic distinction previously. Bogaert (2006) argued specifically that lacking sexual attraction, even according to Storms' model, does not entail also lacking romantic or affectional attraction. Bogaert and others (e.g., Brotto et al., 2010; Hinderliter, 2009) have emphasized the importance of considering this distinction when dealing with asexuality. Diamond (2003, 2008) has explored the sexual/romantic distinction further in considerations not directly related to asexuality.

This distinction between the *sexual* and the *romantic* appears to be featured prominently in the self-produced asexual materials, discourses, and discussions that self-identified asexual people are likely to have encountered. It is in this context where identity labels such as *demisexual*, *hyposexual*, *romantic*, and *aromantic asexual*, *hyporomantic*, *straight-A*, *gay-A*, *bi-*

⁶ Brotto and Yule noted that this pattern of arousal matches the target non-specific physiological sexual responses consistently documented in the literature, as reviewed by Chivers, Seto, Lalumiere, Laan, & Grimbo (2010).

A, *gray-A*, etc. take on meanings, as people attempt to position themselves not only according to the genders of people to whom they experience attraction, but also according to the degrees to which (and the ways in which) they do so. Moreover, asexual language seems to position *asexual* as an alternative to *sexual* or “*non-asexual*,” instead of as an alternative to *straight*, *gay* or *lesbian*, or *bi*. Asexual people seem to vary both in “romantic orientation” and in the degree to which they experience (or do not experience) romantic and sexual attractions.

Brotto and Yule (2009) wondered whether the diversity apparent in recent asexuality research could be an artifact of researchers having recruited from AVEN. AVEN consists of an informational website which currently hosts online discussion boards in several languages, with tens of thousands of registered members worldwide. While Brotto and Yule’s (2009) point was well taken, since AVEN is a subset of the asexual population and not vice-versa, AVEN’s diversity is part of the broader diversity of the asexual population. There does, therefore, appear to be considerable and genuine variability within the asexual population. Given the apparent heterogeneity of asexuals, it makes little theoretical sense to approach asexual people as though they represented a single, homogenous, and unitary population. There is no reason to believe a straight asexual person and a gay/lesbian asexual person should be described by the same set of characteristics or theories simply because both people share the same sexual/asexual qualifier, just as we already take for granted that heterosexual and gay/lesbian sexual people do not represent a single homogenous population. While Brotto and Yule legitimately question whether participants recruited from AVEN constitute a representative sample of the asexual population, the concept of a single *representative sample of asexual people* is itself problematic.

While some generalizations about asexual people will prove instrumental for some purposes, namely comparing asexual people with sexual people, the asexual sample required for

this kind of comparison (i.e., the representative sample) must be sensitive to diversity within the asexual population. Furthermore, since this sample would need to represent the diversity among various groups of asexuals, the representative sample would therefore be comprised of various representative sub-samples of asexual people. Moreover, these categories of representation would likely depend on the nature of the kind of generalization being sought. For example, there could be, say, four relevant sub-samples (e.g., asexuals who have engaged in sexual behaviors with men, with women, with both, with neither) needed for one kind of generalization, but only two relevant sub-samples (e.g., asexuals who experience or do not experience romantic attraction) for another. In other words, the instantiation of representativeness is itself context-dependent. Evaluating a sample of asexual people—or any people for that matter—is not about determining whether the sample is *representative per se*, but instead is about evaluating whether the sample is *representative for a given purpose*. More generally, while it is crucial for researchers to include participants who reflect the diversity of their population, the kinds of diversity that are relevant (and which therefore merit representation in a given situation) will vary according to the purpose for which that sample is sought.

Additionally, while the relevant sub-samples of a “representative sample” of asexual people would share a common thread (i.e., they are all sub-samples of asexual people), it is plausible that different common threads could tie together different groups of asexual sub-samples. Namely, it is possible that one set of asexual sub-samples would share one asexual commonality, which would, in turn, be different from the asexual commonality shared by a different set of sub-samples. For example, it could be the case that one sexual/asexual comparison would require a sample of asexual people tied together with a desire-related thread of asexuality, while another sexual/asexual comparison would demand a sample of people linked

by an attraction-related thread of asexuality. This would certainly be so if asexuality proves to be a multifaceted phenomenon described by several relating constructs, for example, pertaining to the presence, degree, and quality of attractions and desires, instead of described by a monolithic essence. After all, sexuality is often defined as a meta-construct encompassing constructs of attractions, desires, fantasies, behaviors, and self-identity even though these may not be related in the same ways for all people (Chivers & Bailey, 2007).

Bogaert (2006) briefly contemplated how some self-identified asexual people experience notable levels of undirected sexual desire in the absence of sexual attraction, while others may have the capacity to experience attraction but happen not to because of their utter lack of desire. This suggests that asexuality may not be as simple as a lack of sexual attraction and may, instead, be a meta-construct, analogous to sexuality. Because of this, it makes little sense to seek one single, objectively representative sample of asexual people. It is not in challenging the diversity apparent on AVEN (or any other specific asexual community) but instead in exploring it as a subset of the asexual population's diversity that researchers will come closer to fully understanding asexuality. Taking seriously the variability discovered within specific asexual communities like AVEN is just as important as seeking to include asexual people not represented in those communities: the asexual population contains more diversity than AVEN, not less. This diversity is not a problem hindering the development of a clean and simple theory of asexuality, but instead merely evidence of asexuality's nuanced complexity. More generally, it is because the asexual population does not represent a single, homogenous population that implicit conceptualizations of asexuality as a single sexual orientation (or lack thereof) have engendered confusion. This is why it is important to consider romantic attraction as distinct from sexual attraction, and to explore the extensive diversity (e.g., Carrigan, in press) within the asexual

population, including desire-related variability. It may also be time to distinguish between romantic and sexual attraction on measures of sexual orientation more generally.

GENDER DIVERSITY

Little is known about the demographics of the asexual population. In Brotto et al.'s (2010) recent exploration of asexuality, 27 (12.6%) of 214 participants refused to provide information about their gender by not answering a forced choice question, and were therefore excluded from the analysis because they could not be sent the appropriate gender-specific second section of the survey. Given the nature of the survey, the participants likely would have been aware that they could not access the remaining questions without providing gender information, and yet more than 10% chose to cut their participation short instead of claiming ownership of either an *M* or an *F*. Similarly, in Gazzola and Morrison's (in press) recent asexuality research, seven (18%) of the 39 participants chose to self-identify, in terms of gender, as neither men nor women (i.e., four participants self-identified as two-spirit and three self-identified otherwise). While this phenomenon may be a meaningless artifact, at this early stage of asexuality-related research, it is important not to dismiss prematurely the possibility of substantial gender diversity within the asexual population.

Including only non-trans-identified (i.e., cisgendered) women and men in future asexuality research excludes a segment of the population which may prove comparatively large or conceptually important. It is conceivable that asexual individuals are statistically more likely to be trans-identified or to claim a gender identity beyond simply *man* or *woman* (e.g., such as individuals who are *androgynous*, *genderqueer*, *bi-gendered*, *agender*, etc.). There are many reasons why this may be so. It is possible that sexual attractiveness standards govern gender presentations and behaviors, and that without the desire to attract a sexual partner, asexual people

may have more freedom to explore their own genders. Furthermore, there exist (historical) pressures on transsexual people to be “asexual” pre-transition in order to access medical services, with the implicit expectation that the treatment will lead to their becoming (hetero/sexual) people. Moreover, the DSM-IV-TR diagnostic criterion for Gender Identity Disorder categorizes trans-identified individuals by sexual orientation in terms of sexual attraction to men, women, both or neither, while sexual orientation is defined elsewhere as erotic attraction to men, women or both (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Even if this proves no longer to be the case in the upcoming DSM-5, the culture and attitudes around transsexual people seeking medical services will not change overnight. While only a small portion of the asexual population appears to be trans-identified (and a small portion of the trans population to be asexual), it is possible that trans-identified individuals, amid all the other pressures they face, are simply granted more implicit permission to be asexual than the general population. In any event, future research should be open to considering gender diversity within the asexual population.

ASEXUALITY’S IMPLICATIONS FOR SEXUAL ORIENTATION DIVERSITY

The existing asexual community is inherently limited, in that it includes self-identified asexuals but not, as Brotto and Yule (2009) noted, those who would consider themselves asexual but who are unaware of asexuality as a phenomenon or of the existence of asexual people. Within the self-identified asexual community, there is a clear and creative generation of new language, which asexual people use to explain and shape their experiences, relationships, and identities. This can be observed on asexual community online discussion boards and websites (e.g., the AVEN forum and wiki⁷). This language of asexuality entails certain ideological assumptions upon which the discourse is founded, namely that human (sexual) variation is continuous and not discrete. People are not merely sexual or asexual, but instead there is a

⁷ This includes a lexicon accessible at <http://www.asexuality.org/wiki/index.php?title=Lexicon> .

continuum along which people may fall. Extremely intense sexuality exists at one end, and extremely intense asexuality at the other, and there is a range of *gray-asexuality* approaching the asexual end. In framing ideas this way, asexual community discourse asserts that sexual people and asexual people are not different kinds of people. Instead, they differ only in the degree to which they possess a certain characteristic (i.e., sexuality).

Asexual community discourse, and its underlying ideology, coincides with the continuous spectrum models of sexual orientation adopted by Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) and Storms (1980), and all related theorizing about sexual orientation. While some researchers object to a spectrum conceptualization of sexual orientation, instead using penile plethymographic data to argue that that sexual orientation in men (but not women, e.g., Chivers, Rieger, Latty, & Bailey, 2004) is bimodal⁸ (e.g., Rieger, Chivers, & Bailey, 2005), these claims are controversial. Not only is phallogometric assessment most reliable when participants with low levels of physiological arousal are excluded (Kuban, Barbaree, & Blanchard, 1999) and therefore entails a typical participant exclusion rate of approximately one in three (e.g., Chivers et al., 2004; Rieger et al., 2005), but the retained data themselves are subject to interpretation. For example, while Rieger et al. (2005) found even bisexual men to exhibit more physiological arousal in response to sexual stimuli of one particular gender, all men exhibited markedly more physiological arousal in response to both male and female sexual stimuli than to non-sexual stimuli. Though Rieger et al. argued that no men showed a physiological arousal pattern consistent with bisexuality as per their definition, it is equally plausible to argue that all men showed arousal patterns consistent with bisexuality defined in terms of physiological arousal in response to both male and female

⁸ Recent Canadian governmental data indicate that 1.3% and 0.6% of men are willing to reveal themselves on a public health survey to be homosexual and bisexual respectively (Statistics Canada, 2004). Given that more than ninety-five percent of men were cast as heterosexual, interpreting the distribution as bimodal instead of unimodal is choice based more on analyst sensibilities and/or politics than on the numbers themselves. Moreover, note that even a bimodal distribution of sexual orientation would be consistent with a continuous spectrum that happens to be unevenly populated: bimodal distributions do not require discrete categories of traits.

sexual stimuli. Similarly, Rieger et al. found clear evidence that subjective arousal supports a continuous model of sexual orientation, and interpreted their data as such. Nevertheless, they arbitrarily defined sexual attraction strictly in terms of measured physiological arousal (but not subjective arousal), and used this to claim that in terms of sexual attraction “it remains to be shown that male bisexuality exists” (p. 582). Even so, nobody has ever argued that, since one third of men show too little physiological arousal to measure reliably, one third of men experiences no sexual attraction (and should therefore be identified as asexual).

Similarly, the association between physiological genital arousal and sexual attraction is neither simple nor straightforward. For example, according to a recent meta-analysis by Chivers et al. (2010), objective measures of physiological genital arousal are strongly correlated with subjective sexual arousal for men but the correlation is much weaker⁹ for women. Based on their meta-analysis, Chivers et al. concluded that “a woman’s sexual responding might reveal little about her sexual interest,” (p. 48) but that this is not the case for men. Nevertheless, these correlations indicate that physiological genital arousal, alone, accounts for less than two fifths of the variability in men’s subjective sexual arousal, and only a small fraction of this variability for women.¹⁰ This suggests that physiological genital arousal is a poor proxy for the subjective sexual attractions/desires of women, and raises questions about its usefulness as a proxy for the subjective sexual attractions/desires of men. Moreover, interpreting physiological genital arousal as attraction in some situations would be simply irresponsible and/or victim-blaming, such as for people suffering from persistent arousal disorder and for adults and children whose bodies have responded physiologically to sexual violence, including rape. The equation of physiological

⁹ Based on the available literature, Chivers et al. (2010) calculated these average correlations for non-clinical samples of men ($r=0.61$) and women ($r=0.23$). They computed these correlations in several ways, both including and excluding participants from clinical samples: they found consistently similar gender differences.

¹⁰ These estimates are based on r^2 for men (38% from $r=0.61$) and women (5% from $r=0.23$), as a positively biased heuristic gauging the percentage of variability in one variable (i.e., psychological sexual arousal) that is accounted for by the variability of a second, correlated variable (i.e., physiological genital arousal).

arousal with sexual attraction is evidently problematic. Physiological arousal clearly does not always imply attraction, and subjective attraction apparently does not always imply arousal.

Importantly, physiological arousal in men but not women is equated with sexual orientation *because* various aspects of sexual orientation, including self-identification and subjective attraction, are highly correlated in men but not women (Chivers & Bailey, 2007). If the lack of correlation among these factors for women means that a multidimensional approach to sexual orientation is needed, focusing on psychological aspects, as Chivers and Bailey insist, then this lack of correlation between physiological arousal and subjective arousal in self-identified bisexual men must imply that a multidimensional approach with a psychological focus is important for bisexual men as well. It makes little sense to choose physiological arousal over other non-correlated measures like subjective arousal or self-identification as an indicator of sexual orientation when this can only be justified for non-bisexual men, and is only pragmatically possible for two thirds of this group. Bogaert (2006) discussed more thoroughly the importance of considering psychological and subjective aspects of sexual orientation (e.g., subjective sense of sexual attraction), noting how the psychological aspects and not the physiological ones are related to people's relationships, behaviors, and identities. Psychological aspects of sexual orientation are the ones that are psychologically and socially relevant. Measures of physiological arousal, and the categorical view of sexual orientation they have been interpreted to support, represent a mere heuristic for assessing the sexual orientation of non-bisexual men quickly. However, they clearly fall short of providing the information needed to theorize men's sexual orientation thoroughly, and offers little toward theorizing sexual orientation of women.

It seems most appropriate, then, to operationalize asexuality as a continuous variable, not a categorical one for the purposes of empirical inquiry, methodology, and theory. Even though the modern research tradition treats sexual orientation as a categorical variable, doing so seems theoretically inappropriate. Adopting a continuous perspective, heterosexual people, bisexual people, and gay and lesbian people are also not different kinds of people, but instead differ only in the degrees to which they experience attraction toward people of particular genders. To draw from linguistics, specifically on Labov's (1973) classic classification example of trying to determine when a cup becomes a mug, we may have (heterosexual) cups and (gay) mugs, and a set of (bisexual) intermediary handled glasses, but there is no definitive point or set of criteria that would permit anyone to sort them into discrete categories. Instead, we are left with a rainbow of queer-looking glasses on the shelf. In other words, people of different sexual orientations would not represent genuinely distinct categories of people.

Adopting a continuous perspective of sexual orientation may be theoretically crucial and would avoid inappropriately shaping data from asexual participants to fit categorical analyses and conclusions. Researchers are bound either to radically alter their research methodologies in their quest to understand asexuality and sexuality more generally, or to continue approaching asexuality (and sexuality) categorically, but to acknowledge that this is strictly instrumental, and that their results must therefore be interpreted provisionally. There are, of course, good reasons for researchers sometimes to approach asexuality as though it were a distinct category of people. Even if the category of asexual (just like other categories of people, such as gay, White, or woman) may not be rooted in an objective, substantive reality, the category itself has a social reality, with a very real impact on people. While categories of race, for example, are fictions, without basis in biology, they nevertheless organize people, power, and violence in societies, and

because of this have developed realities of their own—they are *reified* fictions. As such, these categories may be useful both for purposes of political solidarity and for coming to understand people’s lived realities. Even so, it is important to recall that the categories themselves do not represent monolithic populations. Analogously, it may be useful to consider seriously the reified fiction of asexual people as a distinct class of people who may experience alienation from sexual culture and who may not have the benefit of social recognition for their primary relationships. There may be a shared social reality faced by asexuals, even though asexual people are not an insular monolithic population qualitatively distinct from an insular monolithic population of sexual people. Nevertheless, researchers should keep in mind that the categories of asexual and sexual are, themselves, reified *fictions* and should treat them accordingly. No matter how researchers accomplish this, the rejection of distinct categories of persons based in sexuality would have profound political ramifications for sexual-orientation-related human rights, as does maintaining these categories. For psychology, this begins by questioning which people get to be included in mainstream “normal” psychological research.

In a widely cited exploration of what it might mean for psychology to take lesbians and gay men seriously, Brown (1989) explained how gay men and lesbians live a marginalized sort of “biculturalism,” occupying gay and lesbian spaces, but also sometimes “passing” as straight, either deliberately or by enforced heteronormative presumption. Because of this, Brown argued that logical positivist inquiry with its promise of a single truth does not fit well with the experiences of lesbians and gay men. Brown called for alternative approaches and methodologies which would permit psychologists to explore the complexities of experience and meaning. Brown observed that since gay men and lesbians are simultaneously part of dominant culture and outsiders to it, their unique perspectives might reveal what insiders could simply take for

granted. Brown therefore called for mainstream psychology to incorporate lesbian and gay experiences and non-logical positivist research approaches, hoping this would raise questions that researchers would otherwise never think to ask. In crude metaphorical terms, mainstream psychology is constructing a building brick by brick, but the architect drafted the blue-prints with only the needs of straight people in mind. Brown called for mainstream psychology to incorporate lesbian and gay perspectives, not by adding an annex to the side of the building to accommodate non-heterosexual people but instead to rework the complete set of blue-prints so that the entire building will be able to accommodate everyone. Unfortunately, psychology never heeded Brown's suggestions, and even gay and lesbian psychologies have remained notably entrenched in logical positivism, and largely uncritical of pervasive *heteronormativity*¹¹ within general psychology (Kitzinger, 1999).

In light of Brown's critique, the conceptualizations and implicit theories governing asexuality research appears problematic because they treat asexuality as a special marginal topic, without incorporating implications of asexual perspectives into the mainstream study of sexuality. Even if recent interest in studying asexuality aims ultimately to develop a deeper understanding of sexuality more generally, the enterprise takes the form of adding asexuality-informed bricks to the building, maybe even adding a new sun room, without fundamentally changing the underlying structures of the building. Traditional psychological understandings of sexual orientation coincide with broader cultural presumptions fusing romantic and sexual attraction. These notions position sexual orientation as an individual characteristic, like blood

¹¹ Heteronormativity is the cultural, social and ideological bias that normalizes heterosexuality as a universal "default" way of being, and which positions heterosexuality as an often-invisible reference against which all other ways of being are compared. Heteronormativity represents the privileging of two distinct genders held in opposition to each other, and the prescribed relationship between men and women which is afforded special legal protection and social recognition. Examples of heteronormativity include the presumption that people are heterosexual unless otherwise specified, and the conceptual paradigm in which heterosexuality and heterosexual people (obviously) do not need to be explained or accounted for, but lesbian, gay and bisexual people, relationships and behaviors do.

type or eye color, which comes in several distinct and mutually exclusive varieties. This perspective corresponds with particular attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes, and ideologies about sexuality and sexual orientation that are so culturally pervasive that they literally go without saying. These generally remain unacknowledged in psychological inquiry; nevertheless, they inform the a priori decisions researchers make regarding which features of a subject should be studied, measured, and catalogued, and which questions should be explored (Gergen, 1973).

For example, certain stereotypes may lead researchers to explore emotional intimacy in lesbian relationships, and sexual promiscuity in gay men's relationships, presuming these to be the most relevant features of these respective relationships. No matter how (in)valid the stereotypes happen to be, results will be generated pertaining to intimacy in lesbian relationships and promiscuity in gay men's relationships, thereby perpetuating the stereotypes. For this reason, it is crucial that researchers studying sexuality through positivist inquiry seriously interrogate relevant elements of both their own assumptions and cultural attitudes. Qualitative research methods and theoretical frameworks (e.g., phenomenological analysis, grounded theory, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, etc.) offer fruitful alternatives to traditional methods for the study of sexuality-related topics. These methodologies explicitly involve trying to identify hidden assumptions and directly explore the impact of cultural and historical context. Feminists, interdisciplinary, and postmodernist critics have been advocating the use of various qualitative approaches for years, owing to their ability to "place subordinated knowledges and voices on the same footing, in principle, as that of society's dominant groups" (Miller, 2000, p. 319). However, psychology as a discipline has been notably resistant to knowledge gained from qualitative and interdisciplinary explorations, holding to aspirations of being a scientific discipline, and therefore privileging experimental methods above all others (Snape & Spencer,

2003). Nevertheless, it is important for psychology as a discipline to take these marginalized ways of knowing seriously, and to pay attention to the marginalized voices who speak these knowledges, including the voices of asexual people.

The difficulty many non-asexual people have in coming to understand asexuality when asexual people “come out” and the fascination asexuality seems to hold for audiences of popular televised media (e.g., Montel Williams, *The View*, *MTVNews*, *20/20*, etc.) stress the outsidership of asexual people’s perspectives. Simultaneously, the unquestioned presumption of the *sexual norm*—of sexuality as the norm—dictates that asexual people will very frequently pass as sexual people in everyday lives whether they want to or not. Asexual people therefore live an analogous biculturalism to the one Brown described of lesbians and gay men, and so incorporating the perspectives of asexual people into the domain of sexuality research could have corresponding benefits, as would engaging in alternative forms of inquiry, including qualitative investigations (as is already beginning). This is particularly the case with research related to sexual behavior, identity, and intimate relationships, since these (for anyone) are complex phenomena where subjective experiences are meaningful. Exploring asexual people’s subjective realities will help researchers come to a better understanding not only of asexuality, but of sexuality more generally. Doing so through the use of qualitative methodologies will permit researchers to begin exploring the pervasiveness of the *sexualnormativity*¹² that would otherwise remain invisible in sexuality-related research.

SELF-IDENTIFICATION IN EXISTING ASEXUALITY RESEARCH

¹² Analogous to heteronormativity which positions heterosexuality as the universal and privileged way of being, normalized and socially supported, sexualnormativity positions sexuality as the universal and privileged way of being, which is both normalized and socially supported. Sexualnormativity includes the assumption that people are sexual unless otherwise specified, in addition to the ideological paradigm in which asexuality needs to be explained and possibly treated clinically, while sexuality is merely and often invisibly presumed to be normal.

In pointing out the self-identification bias in recruiting asexual participants from AVEN, Brotto and Yule (2009) suggested that excluding non-self-identified asexuals from research could hinder the development of a clear understanding of asexuality. They specified that in doing so, research findings would be “skewed, and prevalence estimates as well as correlates of asexuality may not be generalizable to the full group of asexuals” (p. 622). Accordingly, Prause and Graham (2007), defining asexuality according to self-identification, and Bogaert (2004), defining asexuality strictly in terms of lack of attraction, found different traits to correlate with asexuality. For example, Bogaert (2004) found evidence of higher sexual inhibitions and fewer lifetime sexual partners among asexuals while Prause and Graham (2007) found no such differences (although they posited that a discrepancy among number of sexual partners of their young adult participants might emerge with age). Moreover, Prause and Graham found *lack of attraction* to be a poor indicator of asexuality, as only 17 (41.5%) of 41 asexual participants indicated that they experienced no attraction to either men or women.

It is likely that the asexual participants in Prause and Graham’s study who did report having experienced attraction toward either men or women (almost 60%) may have been referring to romantic attraction and not sexual attraction. It is possible that non-self-identified asexuals may not know that other people can experience non-sexual romantic attraction, so they may interpret a question about attraction as being necessarily sexual in nature. Alternatively, it is also possible that some non-self-identified asexual people do know that the gender-related attractions most people seem to experience are, in fact, literally “sexual” in a way that asexual people may not appreciate. Given the prominence of the romantic attraction/sexual attraction distinction within the self-identified asexual community (and its relative absence elsewhere), self-identified asexuals and non-self-identified asexuals cannot be merely assumed to interpret

questions about attraction in similar ways. Whether self-identified and non-self-identified asexuals understand attraction in similar terms remains an empirical question to be addressed. As Brotto and Yule (2009) noted, self-identified and non-self-identified asexuals “may differ qualitatively from one another” (p. 622) in a general sense; and there is reason to believe these two groups are (or could be) different insofar as the study of asexuality is concerned. Because of this, it is important to explore what self-identification with asexuality entails, both practically and conceptually.

THEORIZING SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Self-identification might have an impact on a person’s asexuality in a very basic ontological “what is asexuality?” sense, and adopting a social constructionist perspective at this point will enable considerations of this possibility. In designing research and recruiting participants, researchers often take into account cultural meanings of sexual minority identities, including gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities. For example, HIV/AIDS-related research projects (and outreach programs) are often targeted toward populations of *men who have sex with men* and not *gay men*. Similarly, research about *male homosexuality* does not group self-identified gay men with men on the Down Low,¹³ or with men who have sex with men but neither consider themselves gay nor engage in emotionally intimate romantic relationships with men. While neither the experience of specific attractions nor the participation in sexual behaviors distinguishes among these populations, the relationships engaged in by men in the various populations are meaningfully different, as are the social spaces these men occupy. Pooling these groups together in order to understand *same-sex tendencies* would be problematic on theoretical grounds because these populations arguably represent distinct groups, both conceptually and

¹³ The “Down Low” refers to “presumably ‘secretive’ homosexuality among married Black men” (Sandfort, & Dodge, 2008, p. 675). Men on the Down Low typically do not consider themselves to be “homo” or “gay.”

practically. Furthermore, while it is at least theoretically possible for a man on the Down Low to come to consider himself gay at some future time, and to then live as an out gay man, this does not undermine the meaningful distinction between populations of *gay men* and *men on the Down Low*.

Analogous arguments can be made for a distinction between self-identified and non-self-identified asexuals. The possibility that non-self-identified asexuals may come to self-identify as asexual after learning about asexuality is not a relevant issue. Asexuality as a possible social identity is a relatively recent phenomenon, and the asexual community is largely unknown. There is no reason to believe that, without encountering asexual discourse, non-self-identified asexuals would frame their experiences in the terms that self-identified asexuals have spent years developing with each other, through their conversations and interactions. Just like everyone else, non-self-identified asexuals cannot be extricated from their social contexts (Gergen, 1997) ignorant of asexuality, and “whatever we might say (and think) about ourselves and others as people will always be in terms of a language provided for us by history” (Edley, 2001, p. 210). Individuals may select which cultural resources to draw on from those at their disposal (e.g., asexual language), combining ideas in new ways or generating new variations, but they are limited by what they can access.

When individuals employ cultural resources or discourses, such as the language of asexuality, to their own ends to construct themselves and their relationships, they must draw from an order of possibilities which exist socially in language (Shotter, 1997). Not only is language something that people construct with each other in order to describe their social worlds, but it is also something that helps construct the very social worlds it describes, constituting them in a very basic sense (Potter, 2003). The words that people use to talk about relationships and

identities can change what those words and identities mean and therefore what they are all about (Bradac, 1983). In other words, the language of asexuality itself can change what it means to be asexual or to have asexual attractions and relationships, at least for the people using that language. The constructions of identity and models of relationships are both limited by and shaped according to the resources people can access. The limitation of what is and is not possible in a particular sociocultural historical context is the very thing that allows identities and relationships to be intelligible, to be possible (Butler, 2004). Without the constraints of social context, ideas, relationships, identities, etc. would be without the shape that permits them to make sense, and permits people to make sense of them.

Non-asexual people unfamiliar with the existence of asexuality lack the ability to conceptualize anyone cogently as asexual. The same applies to people who might otherwise consider themselves asexual, but who are not familiar with the existence of the asexual community. These “non-self-identified asexuals” additionally lack the benefit of being able to conceptualize themselves intelligibly as asexual. Because of this, non-asexual-identified asexuals cannot really be said to be asexual in the same way that self-identified asexuals are. They may all experience the same kinds of attractions and desires (or lacks thereof), but they would undoubtedly make sense of these experiences in different ways. When non-self-identified “asexuals” encounter asexuality for the first time, they gain access to the cultural resources and discourses of asexuality. The order of possibilities they can access expands to include asexuality and they are able to frame their experiences in new ways. In a very basic sense, they *become* asexual. Their sexuality-related and attraction-related experiences are *made to make sense* in the context of asexuality where these could not have made sense in this way previously. At this point, it becomes possible for non-self-identified asexuals to think of themselves as asexual and

to develop an asexual identity. For this reason, it would be more accurate to refer to non-self identified asexuals as *potential-asexuals*. This is one way that asexual identification differs from other sexual identifications: people of other sexual identifications typically live in a cultural context where it is possible for them to frame their sexual attractions and desires (and lacks thereof) in meaningful ways. The order of possibilities we all access includes *heterosexual*, *gay*, *lesbian* and *bisexual*. Regardless of values and political situations, most people know at least vaguely what “gay” is, while the same does not apply to “asexual.” Twenty-two years ago, Brown (1989) explained: “Simply *being* lesbian or gay has been something we [lesbians and gay men] have had to invent for ourselves” (p. 452, emphasis in original). For asexual people, the process of inventing a meaningful asexuality is just beginning, and only self-identified asexuals have had the opportunity to participate in it. It is crucial for researchers to recognize this, and to acknowledge that self-identified asexuals and potential-asexuals may represent substantively different (diverse) populations.

CONCLUSIONS

The importance of considering self-identification when studying asexuality is not limited to researchers focused on asexual identity, how people directly make sense of their experiences of sexuality and attraction or how they approach relationships. Because of its ability to shape the experience of (a)sexuality, asexual self-identification affects all research that requires *any* subjectively given responses pertaining to asexuality, whether this happens to be in the form of an interview session, a diary entry, or a structured survey. For this reason, it is problematic to approach self-identified asexuals and potential-asexuals as differing only in their superficial expressions of asexuality. Just as it makes little sense to depict the asexual population as a single homogenous group by ignoring romantic orientations, there is no theoretical reason to ignore

self-identification with asexuality. The self-identified asexuals and potential-asexuals may indeed represent two theoretically different phenomena of asexuality; they may be as distinct for the purposes of exploring and theorizing as self-identified gay men are from men on the Down Low. Returning to the idea of asexuality as a multifaceted phenomenon defined by a set of desire and attraction-related constructs, the asexuality of self-identified asexuals and potential-asexuals may very well be described by different subsets of these conditions. In other words, the common thread of asexuality tying together the various sub-populations of self-identified asexuals may be distinct from the common thread of asexuality linking the sub-populations of potential-asexuals. From this perspective, seeking descriptions and correlates of asexuality that are generalizable to self-identified asexuals and potential-asexuals alike becomes a conceptually questionable pursuit. The asexuality of self-identified asexuals is theoretically different from the asexuality of potential-asexuals, on a very basic level. While the practical significance of this difference remains to be seen, the conceptual distinction is something for researchers exploring asexuality to consider, both in their recruitment strategies and their theorizing.

In general, the diversity within the asexual community needs to be taken seriously. Considering heterogeneity in terms of self-identification with asexuality, romantic orientation, and gender, there is solid theoretical justification for not conceptualizing the asexual population as a single, homogenous population. Instead, it makes more sense to think of *asexual* as a meta-category, just like *sexual*, encompassing the same kind of smaller categories. There is every reason to believe that similar kinds of gender and romantic orientation diversity exist within the asexual population as within the sexual population, regardless of whether their proportions are similar. Nevertheless, while it may be provisionally useful to consider (a)sexual diversity in terms of distinct categories, it is important to recall how these categories are only metaphorically

distinct and, in fact, blend seamlessly into each other. Asexuality is most realistically represented by continuous variables. Considering possible spectra of romantic attractions, sexual attractions, degree of sexual desire, etc., the study of asexuality reminds us of (a)sexuality's multidimensional complexities. Exploring (a)sexuality through a variety of qualitative approaches would undoubtedly prove valuable, and this includes giving serious consideration to the qualitative sexuality research that already exists, notably just beyond the disciplinary boundaries of mainstream psychology. Furthermore, in distinguishing between the romantic and the sexual, and in conceptually separating the dimensions of asexual/sexual from straight/gay, other theoretical avenues open for exploration. Specifically, for people who experience both romantic and sexual attraction, how do these experiences relate and when do they differ? Might some people systematically experience same-gender attractions of one kind (e.g., romantic) and other-gender attractions of another (e.g., sexual) as Diamond (2003) suggested? Might researchers discover a population of aromantic sexual people hitherto misunderstood? What happens when romantic desire is considered separately from sexual desire? Theorizing about asexuality will prove productive for exploring sexuality more generally.

Finally, the theoretical importance of self-identification raises ethical questions regarding research into asexuality, and whether self-identified asexuals and potential-asexuals warrant different kinds of ethical considerations. Significantly, potential-asexuals are expected to share similar patterns of attraction and lack of attraction as self-identified asexuals; and at least some potential-asexuals would be expected to come to self-identify as asexual if they knew about asexuality and the asexual community. Given these expectations, what ethical obligations do researchers have with respect to providing or withholding information about asexuality and asexual community resources? What kinds of support (if any) would researchers be obliged to

provide potential-asexuals in the event that they do offer information about asexuality?

Furthermore, as Brotto and Yule (2009) noted, some potential-asexuals may be “impossible to distinguish” (p. 623) in practice from individuals fitting the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD), defined by low levels of sexual desire accompanied by distress (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Bogaert (2006) distinguished conceptually between asexuality and (lifelong) HSDD, suggesting that non-asexual people with HSDD experience sexual attraction but merely lack the desire to act on this. However, it is not clear whether this would be useful clinically to distinguish easily between a sexual person lacking sexual desire, and a potential-asexual person who may not realize what sexual people understand sexual attraction to mean. More recent findings by Brotto and Yule (in press) depicted asexual women as differing from sexual women in that asexual women showed significantly lower levels of partner-directed sexual desire. As Brotto and Yule noted, asexuality differs from HSDD in that HSDD includes a requirement of marked distress; however, an asexual person who is made to feel distressed about experiencing low sexual desire (i.e., by a sexual partner who does not value asexuality) would meet the diagnostic criteria for HSDD. Brotto and Yule recommend that an asexual woman who seeks sex therapy at the insistence of her sexual partner should be treated with relationship therapy for both her and her partner together. They argue that the goal of such therapy should be reaching a mutually beneficial compromise about the level of sexual activity, which may occur consensually but without desire on the part of the asexual partner. They also insist that the asexual partner should neither be subject to pharmaceutical/hormonal interventions nor to sexual skills training in order to increase sexual desire. I support both of these propositions wholeheartedly, yet deontic considerations of asexuality and HSDD do not end there. If there is potential for clinical confusion between asexuality and HSDD (as there seems to be), what

responsibilities do researchers have with respect to providing information about asexuality to individuals diagnosed with HSDD who participate in sexuality research? Do clinicians have an obligation to discuss asexuality with individuals before concluding on a diagnosis of HSDD? Should the source of psychological distress be explored explicitly for *everyone* seeking treatment for low sexual desire? These questions are not mine to answer alone. They arise largely because psychological research and practice, and their broader cultural context, are structured around the invisible norms that the dominant sexual majority represents. In this context, it is not obvious how to approach asexuality in order to understand what *being asexual* is, beyond how that differs from *being sexual*. For this reason, I propose other questions for future research, inspired by centering the analysis at asexuality itself.

- 1) How are desire and attraction related? Do people who experience little or no sexual attraction also tend to experience little or no sexual desire and vice-versa?
- 2) What kinds of desire and attraction experiences do self-identified asexuals and potential-asexuals have, including those asexuals in the demisexual/gray zone?
- 3) Demographically, what do the self-identified asexual and the potential-asexual populations look like in terms of gender, romantic orientation, and interest?
- 4) What do healthy asexual romantic relationships look like and which aspects of non-sexual intimacy might be involved or not involved in other kinds of relationships?
- 5) What kinds of close personal relationships are important for asexual people who do not engage in romantic relationships?
- 6) How do romantic relationships (whether monogamous or polyamorous) play out when only one partner is sexual—and how might the genders of the partners be relevant?

- 7) How often and for what reasons do self-identified asexuals and potential-asexuals engage in various kinds of sexual behaviors, and what are the consequences of their doing so?
- 8) What educational and health service needs might asexual people have that are not being met and how can these services be improved?
- 9) What kinds of resistance do people face related to their asexuality and what kinds of protection might their asexuality afford them (e.g., do asexual/potential-asexual adolescent girls, like adolescent lesbians, show a smaller developmental drop in self-esteem than heterosexual girls)?
- 10) When self-identified asexuals and potential-asexuals experience partner violence, what forms does it take; is coercive (but non-forceful) sexual pressure from a sexual partner recognized as violence?

Placing asexuality at the focal point of research questions opens up a new world of potential knowledge about asexuality that will be meaningful to asexual people themselves as well as others. Challenging sexualnormativity in this way, in order to ask different kinds of questions, will reveal new and exciting ways of understanding not only asexuality, but sexuality more generally.

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