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Asexuality, the Internet, and the Changing Lexicon of Sexuality

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JO TEUT, AUG 22 2019

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According to the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), the largest online community and online archive on asexuality, 'an asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction'. The most inclusive definition of an asexual individual is a person who self-identifies as an asexual individual, a person who does not experience sexual attraction, not merely the lack of attraction itself (Carrigan 2011, 2012 and Chasin 2011). However, this non-experience of sexual attraction is experienced in many different ways, such as experiencing only romantic or platonic attraction, or both. AVEN defines the community's mission is to create awareness about asexual identity. To do this, people who self-identify as asexual continue to develop language to describe the diverse modes of not experiencing sexual attraction. Both scholarly research and activism have led to emerging forms of explaining how people experience sensual, romantic, and sexual desires and attractions, such as Carrigan (2011) and Mardell (2016), explored later. These new formulations have had direct implications in several disciplines, especially psychology and queer studies. Within psychology, researchers and practitioners are at odds with the asexual community, using them to attempt to discover cures for asexuality under the guise of hyposexual (lack of sexual) desire disorder. The asexual community, in turn, resists this manipulation by engaging in research projects themselves and by developing community activism to better inform practitioners and combat harmful practices. The self-definition has permitted the community to gain validation as a sexual identity and has enabled community building to resist imposed definitions and to further educate those outside of the asexual community on best practices and available resources. On the other hand, the development of new language around asexuality is pushing queer theorists to re-examine their own assumptions, how they theorise desire and attraction, and what it means to be queer.

The struggle for recognition as a sexuality, especially within academic discourse, has material consequences. In addition to educating people who might potentially identify as asexual, information around asexuality could reach professionals who are likely to interact with asexual people, such as mental and physical health practitioners. The information about asexuality based on lived experiences must be taken seriously, and asexual individuals who participate in and create academic research need to be treated as experts of their own identities. In 2016, I presented on asexual diversity at the HumanitiesNow Conference at the University of Cincinnati. Someone in the audience asked me what is the point of creating language on asexuality and why people cannot just be instead of having to label themselves and put themselves in boxes. I am very invested in the society I am living in because I experience the material results of it, as do other asexual community members. We are told that we do not exist, that we are broken and should be fixed, that there's a pill for that, that we need some serious psychological help. We are told that our relationships are invalid, immature, and not allowed to receive legal recognition. We are subjected to corrective rape and interpersonal violence. We commit suicide. For these reasons, it is important to have the language to articulate our experiences and find communities of support.

This chapter examines how scholarship has defined asexuality and how the usage of the internet aided the asexual community in resisting these definitions imposed upon them – as well as their material consequences. I survey the depth of language the asexual community has created for itself, including its collaboration with researchers, exploring

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the new ways of delineating attractions and desires. To conclude, I broaden the discussion to the potential of language around asexuality for informing queer theory.

Defining and Curing Asexuality

A variety of definitions of asexuality exists within academia. In *Understanding Asexuality*, one of the first and few books written on asexuality, Anthony Bogaert (2012b) explores the 'true asexual', that individual that has never felt sexual attraction or desire and never will. For Bogaert, this is the only way to experience asexuality, and understanding this type of asexuality, he claims, enables a better understanding of sexuality as a whole. In contrast, Mark Carrigan (2011) argues for exploring diversity within the asexual community. Recognising and understanding the commonalities and differences within asexuality 'is a necessary starting point for research that attempts to understand and/or explain asexuality and asexuals [sic]' (2011, 465). Some disagree. Lori Brotto and Morag Yule (2009) argue that allowing for diversity within asexuality may attract people to identify as asexual when they are actually not, especially in academic research studies. Eunjung Kim (2010) disputes this by looking at lived experiences. According to Kim, 'many narratives of individuals demonstrate that asexuality escapes monolithic definition, simple behaviour [sic] patterns, bodily characteristics, and identities despite some researchers' efforts to draw a clear boundary for the "condition"'. (2010, 158). Concretely, individuals who self-identify as asexual understand themselves in a variety of ways which are not monolithic, but fluid and changing, and cannot be defined in static or rigid terms – as is the case with most identities.

In the face of definitions purported on asexual people by some researchers, Kim argues that asexuality itself escapes these boundaries and asexual people perpetuate diversity through attempts at understanding themselves. For Carrigan (2011), asexual community members transform these boundaries and definitions through their collective activity. Asexual individuals can shape the conversation about their identity by resisting current narratives and forming new ones about asexual identity inside and outside academia. This requires collaboration, such as when asexual individuals research asexuality in academia or participate in research studies. Asexual people can also create knowledge that the asexual community can then incorporate into educational and awareness efforts.

The most crucial struggle around asexuality is being named a sexual desire disorder, specifically hyposexual desire disorder (HSDD), and not a legitimate sexuality. While many of these discussions are theoretical (Bogaert 2008; Brotto 2010; Brotto et al. 2015), the resulting reality for asexual individuals is not. Andrew Hinderliter (2013) states that one of the goals for the asexual community is for asexuality to be seen as a legitimate sexuality like others, not something to be cured. For an asexual individual diagnosed with HSDD (Chasin 2013), treatments can range from low dose testosterone treatments (for women) that are not approved by the FDA (Snabes and Simes 2009) to sex therapy, cognitive-behaviour therapy, flibanserin (female Viagra), oestrogen therapy, testosterone treatments, and other alternative medicines (Simon 2009). Keesha Ewers (2014) explains that many females worldwide suffer from HSDD, and several of these cases are a result of past negative experiences with sexual activity that has altered the brain's wiring. Using something called the HURT model, these women can rewire their brains to heal the trauma and continue with sexual activity. Alyson Spurgas (2015) recalls interviews with women being treated for low female desire with Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, part of which includes sexual role playing, which some participants realised was conditioning them for female receptivity (for male penetrative acts) instead of increasing their own desire for the acts. These merely 'rational knowledge claims' (Haraway 1988) become the justification for imposing potentially harmful and irrevocable 'cures' on individuals who have nothing wrong with them.

Taking back control of the narratives and the very definition of what it means to be an asexual person is not merely educational activism but a form of anti-violence activism. In *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America*, Sarah Deer (2015) discusses the harm that sexual violence does to identity:

If our sexuality is part of that which defines who and what each of us is, then it is at the very core of our self-identity. I think this is because the very nature of sexuality represents the best of humanity – the creation of new life, or the sharing of deep mutual affection and attraction. When this manifestation of our humanity is violated, it has life-changing ramifications for one's feelings about self, others, justice, and trust. (xvi-xvii)

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Deer's argument is for autonomy over one's own sexuality as part of one's own humanity, something that is violated with sexual violence. Likewise, the same logic can be applied to the asexual community. The denial of autonomy in defining one's own sexuality is a denial of humanity that also has 'life-changing ramifications' such as suicidal ideations, interpersonal violence, lack of trust of others and medical/psychological practitioners, and lack of education around identity, an injustice in itself, as mentioned in the introduction.

While Deer articulates that sexual violence is a weapon of war and means of control and power, I argue that systematically denying self-definition and autonomy is also violence. Both are different and distinct types of violence, but violence nonetheless. Researchers who support the pathologisation of asexuality as a sexual disorder are building an institutional response to lack of sexual attraction that treats patients on the assumption that everyone should want to engage in – heterosexual – sexual activity. This institutional response is fuelled by interpersonal interactions – the idea that, within society, people interact with each other under the assumption that everyone should want to engage in heterosexual sexual activity. These interactions push people into seeking medical interventions and personal counselling, which attempts to 'cure' asexual individuals and which, in turn, further fuels the interpersonal responses, a revolving cycle that perpetuates itself. There is nothing new about curing sexuality with an interconnected web of violence. Chasin (2017) notes that sexuality as a category exists as a divisive political issue that separates people to discriminate, criminalise, and cure.

Creating Language to Match Experience

In 2015, I was asked to lead the asexual identity forum at the Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay Transgender Ally College Conference, one of the largest LGBT conferences in the US. The conference organiser had asked me to encourage naming identities in the room. I stated my romantic and sexual identity, asking participants to do the same. For the next twenty minutes, the 80 participants took turns stating their identities, explaining the terms they used, and affirming each other's identities. For many of us in the room, myself included, that was the first time we had met another asexual person face-to-face, let alone another person that identified using the same exact language we used.

While meeting other asexual people in real life is becoming less rare because of conferences and meet-up groups, the asexual community became a community because of the internet. The first widely-used asexual community is AVEN, created in 2001 as a web forum. The largest asexual community exists on tumblr, a community blogging website. Both of these websites are free, and both are based in the United States. According to the 2014 asexual census, which asked participants about their identities as well as if/how they engage with a larger asexual community, the tumblr asexual community is the most widely used platform (53.9%) with AVEN coming second (28.3%). The rest of the respondents reported using other social media like Facebook, Reddit, Livejournal, Meetup, and Twitter (14.25%) (AVEN survey team 2014). Following this trend, the 2015 asexual census reported that one third of respondents first heard of asexuality on tumblr and about a fifth on other internet websites (such as AVEN, Wikipedia, and personal blogs) (Bauer et al. 2017).

The asexual community uses the internet to meet, share experiences and advice, do activism, and conduct academic research. However, these are not fully separate spheres. Educating others about identity is a form of activism. Conducting research requires people to share their experiences. Sharing experiences has allowed us as a community to create new language to delineate a variety of attractions and desires that had previously been unnamed. What happens on the internet affects what happens in the non-virtual world. Activists have collaborated to create content that is used in an educational context, such as in Safe Zone or Asexuality 101 training at colleges. Community members have collaborated with academic researchers to publish better research on asexuality, including the *ABC's of LGBT+* (Mardell 2016), one of the first books to include asexual identity concepts as a way of informing all sexual identities.

In their book, Mardell (2016) identifies as an activist who started as a YouTube blogger; the book was made possible with the knowledge and expertise of fellow bloggers and activists. Before addressing any of the identities in the book, Mardell first takes 20 pages to talk about how identities are experienced on spectrums, including the experience of sexual attraction (none to lots), conditions required for attraction to be felt (total stranger to intimate relationship), intensity of experiencing gender (apathetic to strongly), and intensity of experiencing attraction (none to strongly).

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While all of these spectrums are illustrated in a linear way, Mardell acknowledges that identity is complex and cannot be captured in neat definitions or on paper.

One of the most significant contributions asexuality has made to sexuality studies is the recognition of various types of attraction, which previously did not exist. While it was the asexual community that theorised different forms of attraction, as it is central to its very definition and thus was a logical step, the findings of such research concern everyone else. While Bogaert (2012b) makes the distinction between romantic and sexual attraction, the asexual community defines and recognises at least five different types of attraction: *sexual*, *sensual*, *romantic*, *platonic*, and *aesthetic*. *Sexual attraction* refers to the desire for genital contact or sex, however that sex may occur, whereas *sensual attraction* denotes the desire for physical, non-genital, contact with the person. *Romantic attraction* is characterised by the desire for a romantic relationship with a person. This relationship may include elements of physical and/or genital contact between the persons involved, but that contact is not necessary for the relationship. *Platonic attraction* indicates the desire for a relationship between persons with no element of the romantic, sensual, or sexual relationship or any physical intimacy. A platonic relationship, however, may be as intimate as any of these three because intimacy within a relationship is not defined by physical contact. Finally, *aesthetic attraction* is defined by receiving pleasure or satisfaction from the appearance of a person, in a non-sexual manner. With aesthetic attraction, the attraction is not based on a desire to form some sort of relationship with a person. It is like saying, "I like the way you look, but not in a sexual or even romantic way". These five types of attraction can be overlapping or interchangeable in certain circumstances, as the choice of a category is at times subjective. For example, kissing can be considered a purely sexual or sensual act, or a purely romantic act, or partially both, depending on the person and context.

Another example of the asexual community collaborating with academic researchers is evidenced by Carrigan's (2012) article on the asexual identity formation. In their research with asexual participants, Carrigan found that negotiating relationships with zedsexuals, people who do experience sexual attraction, asexual individuals have developed a spectrum of positions regarding willingness to engage in sexual activities. These positions specifically involve genital contact but in some cases also involve other activities such as kissing. Labels on this spectrum are *sex-positive*, *-neutral*, *-negative*, and *-adverse*. Carrigan found these labels to have specific meanings although they might not be commonly discussed within the community. Mixed relationships between asexual and zedsexuals can be difficult, but this spectrum, as well as other ways to categorise the sexual identity, will hopefully enable productive conversations.

Within the willingness spectrum, *adverse* refers to the complete unwillingness of a person to engage in any sexual activity because genital contact makes them feel anything from physical discomfort to extreme disgust. *Negative* designates the asexual individual that is unwilling to engage in sexual activity but does not have the visceral reaction to sexual activity that sex-adverse individuals have. *Positive* refers to the group of asexual individuals that may not necessarily desire to have sexual activity with other people but do not mind it either. Often, these asexual individuals are most criticised for "giving in" to their partner's sexual desires because of their willingness to have sexual activity with their partner for various reasons. This sex-positive label is different from other definitions of sex-positive that have historical ties to radical feminism. *Neutral*, the fourth category, is to some extent a catch-all label for asexual individuals who do not feel strongly one way or the other about partnered sexual activity. This being just one example, there are a plethora of other words that have been created to further qualify different modes of attraction and desire. For instance, Mardell (2016) delineates many of these in their book.

Above all else, an asexual person is a person who *self-identifies* as an asexual individual, a person who does not experience sexual attraction (Carrigan 2011, 2012 and Chasin 2011). That focus on self-definition is at its core anti-violence work; it resists the notion that we can define other people for them or that we can create a survey tool to define people. Ultimately, it allows people to choose whatever language accommodates them best, even if it is no label or no word at all.

Conclusion

By examining the language the asexual community has created as well as how we use this language in forming our

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identities, we can understand different ways of constructing sexual categories as a whole. Returning to the question of why people feel the need to label themselves, I believe in moving toward un-naming sexual identities and, eventually, we may not have to mark ourselves or rely on sexual communities – we will have a common language around sexuality to discuss the nuances of all of our desires, attractions, and drives, or lack thereof. The categories of sexual identities and their corresponding discourses will no longer be used to discriminate, oppress, and kill. Even though José Esteban Muñoz (2009) calls us to see beyond the here and now for queer futurity and potentiality, I see the potential that the asexuality community has as queerness, a 'rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world' (1). This other world allows us to create our own language for our experiences and identities. This other world allows us to change the narratives about our identities and find liberation.

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About the author:

Jo Teut is the Assistant Director of Diversity and Inclusion Programming at Centre College. Teut received an MA in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from the University of Cincinnati. Teut has presented at the National Women's Studies Conference, the North American Asexuality Conference, and the Creating Change Conference. Teut is the author of a chapter in *Advances in Gender Research 24: Gender Panic, Gender Policy* (2017), edited by Vasiliki Demos and Marcia Texler Segal.