

Establishing Asexual Identity: The Essential, the Imaginary, and the Collective

Agata Pacho

Sexuality is seen as a crucial aspect of one's identification and sexual desire is perceived as the core of one's identity. Therefore, the emergence of an asexual identity constitutes a radical disruption of approaches to identity and epistemology in social science. This study explores a virtual community of asexual individuals who engage in discussions about contradictory processes of identification, the instability of sexual identities, gender relations and possible representations of asexuality. This work locates the process of sustaining an asexual identity and its representation within a broader critique of essentialist positions. Furthermore, it investigates the distinctive features of on-line communities and the implications of the Internet in their establishment. These findings may lead to a better understanding of asexuality as well as an enhanced insight into the social and cultural negotiations over the sexual.

Keywords: Asexuality, lack of desire, sexual identities, identity representation, virtual community

Introduction

Asexuality stands for the lack of sexual desire. Even though it belongs to the broad spectrum of sexual identities, asexuality is underestimated by scholars, and receives little media attention. Still, it poses significant challenges to Western discourses on sexuality. The temporality and unreliability of the popular understanding of sexual desires and practices have been emphasized since Michel Foucault introduced the idea of the sexual as a social and cultural construct (Foucault 1990). Yet, sex drive is

still usually seen as a 'natural' physiological need. Assumptions about innate sexual desires and impulses of human beings are deeply rooted in shared cultural and religious beliefs, and so are the sciences of sexology and psychology (Seidman 2003, XI).

This article is concerned with the phenomenon of asexuality, which fundamentally disrupts and questions the notion of a universal innate sexual drive. Here, I will explore the construction of an asexual identity, situating it within a broader critique of essentialist standpoints.

It is argued that rethinking formations of gender and sexuality through a central focus on asexuality can provide a better insight into the social and cultural negotiations over the sexual (Scherrer 2008). This research analyses how the emergence of the asexual identity suggests the need for revising existing perceptions of sexual orientations, gender relations and family formation.

Furthermore, I will discuss the complex issues of representation and propose reasons for the lack of visibility and awareness of asexuality. Finally, this study will consider the role of the Internet in the creation of asexual communities.

The first part of this study provides a theoretical background for the research. There have been only a few published studies on the topic of asexuality. Research rooted in psychology sought to determine demographical and health-related variables predictive of being asexual (see Bogaert 2004) and generate measures of sexual arousability in order to support the idea that low sexual desire is the primary feature predicting asexual identity (see Prause and Graham 2007). This research shares a number of similarities with studies of Lori A. Brotto et al (2010) and Kristine S. Scherrer (2008), which endeavor to theorize the identities and experiences of asexual people. In addition, this work engages with queer and gender studies. The analysis is situated

within the larger discourses of three main concepts: identity, representation and community, which will be used to critically examine essentialist standpoints.

After locating the project in relation to relevant academic scholarship, the second part will give a detailed account of how the research for this study was carried out, with particular attention to the analysis of qualitative data. The empirical research was based on the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), the largest association of asexual people in the world.¹ Due to the virtual resources used in this work, the unique character of Internet research must also be taken into account. Finally, questions related to methodology will be used to explore the ethical dimensions of the research.

The third part will present the data analysis. It will attempt to investigate the findings of the study using the theoretical frameworks and concepts discussed in the first part.

Part I: Exploring Theories of Identity

The aim of the research is to identify and examine how asexuality constitutes a radical disruption of the approaches of social science to identity and epistemology. In what follows, the discussion will focus on the postmodern critique of identity, the theory of sexual identities and desire and the process of

identification. The latter relates to the establishment of representation, which makes an identity visible and politically valid. Finally, the last section will investigate the significance of establishing a sexual community and the implication of the Internet for that process.

As an introduction to asexuality, it is useful to explore its possible definitions as well as the ways in which asexuality is considered by scientific discourses.

Asexuality in Context

AVEN's homepage states that asexuality is a sexual orientation, in which there is no sexual attraction. Asexual people distinguish themselves from celibates who choose not to have sex, and, therefore, must control their sexual drive. They also emphasize their ability to form intimate relationships, as their orientation does not affect their emotional needs.

However, asexual identity is not a new phenomenon; A. C. Kinsey's studies are helpful in tracking the scientific interest in the absence of sexual drive. Kinsey, a leading sexologist, assumed that an average human male is able to reach orgasm as often as every day. Less frequent intercourse may be due to absence of a partner or a work routine (Kinsey 1948, 205). Kinsey pathologised low sexual outlet, and attributed it to poor health or hormonal problems requiring medical attention (1948, 209).

Kinsey also dismissed another phenomenon that challenged the notion of an active sexual drive, sexual frigidity. Kinsey argued that the failure of a female to be aroused or to reach orgasm during sex resulted not from a lack of capacity to function sexually, but from a limited understanding of the nature of women's sensuality (Kinsey 1953, 373). Within the tradition of sexology, a lack of sexual drive is necessarily read as a medical or psychological problem. Quite the opposite, I will argue through the further analysis of data that asexuality may be seen in its own right as a part of a complex field of sexualities rather than a pathologised condition.

Identity and the Critique of Essentialism

Before moving on to look in more depth at the construction of the asexual identity, it is necessary to discuss the theorization of identities in more detail.

Stuart Hall (1996) gives an account of the postmodern critique of an 'integral, originary and unified identity' (Hall 1996, 6). He encourages understanding of identification as a process that is never fully completed, but is always 'in progress' (1996, 6). The concept of identity used by Hall is one that is increasingly fragmented, fractured and often constructed across intersecting or antagonistic practices and cultural discourses (1996, 1–3). Similarly, Scherrer's exploration of asexual

identities suggests the need for a larger project of re-writing simplified narratives of sex, sexuality and physical intimacy (Scherrer 2008, 629).

Despite the strength of such narratives, a unitary identity is still present in social theory due to the lack of a possibility of replacing it with another, entirely different concept (Hall 1996). An analysis of the asexual identity may bring a better understanding of the contradictory and dynamic character of the process of identification. It will be pointed out later that AVEN proposes several categories of asexuality, some acknowledging sexual behaviours allowing members to move freely between them. AVEN's principles resemble the process of forming an identity which Hall describes as fragmented and involving antagonistic elements. Sexuality also, following Foucault's argument, may be considered a 'practice of being' within certain historical and cultural contexts rather than a fixed or static concept (Fraser 1999, 21–25).

While sexuality is seen as a crucial aspect of one's identity, sexual desire is perceived as its core, and it needs to be subjected to further analysis. Theorists such as William Simon (1996) propose that contemporary discourses provide us with a specification of an appropriate desire as well as places, times, gestures and utterances to articulate that desire. Our longings are dependent on cultural scenarios, thus

desire follows rather than precedes behaviour. Whenever individuals fake their sexual responses or invoke authentic sexual excitement, they draw upon acts that mirror cultural expectations (1996, 46–47).² Within the constructionist discourse, the absence of sexual desire could be seen as a form of resistance to social and cultural expectations.

Sustaining Identity

While identity is dynamic, it also assumes some degree of coherence and continuity. As such, it gives a sense of personal unity and social location (Weeks, 1987, 31). One of the aims of AVEN's enterprise is to support the process of identification of asexual people.

According to Hall, identity is constructed through the recognition of shared origins or characteristics with another person or group. Moreover, formations of discourses and social practices give ideological meaning to the constitution of subjects (Hall 1996). Consistency of identity is also assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender and sexuality, and through the conflation of the experience of gender with sex and desire. Yet, Judith Butler (2004) suggests that gender is necessarily performative. Butler argues that gender is produced through fantasy but also practice (e.g. iteration), and its false stabilization ensures the interest of the heterosexual regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain (2004, 172). Moreover, re-

ardless of this fact, it will be perceived to be necessary and natural (2004, 178). Most significantly, for Butler, performativity is never simply the reproduction of certain ideas of gender and the sexual. The practice of performance gives them new meanings and puts them into new contexts, which always carry the possibility of subversion (2004, 218).

In turn, the common assumption of the normativity of heterosexual identity and relationships depending on an erotic longing between a man and a woman enforces gender difference and inequality (Hollway 1996). The emergence of asexual attraction sheds new light on the formation of intimate relationships, and thus may enable a new way of gender enactment as well as new possibilities of gender relations.

Traditionally, a lack of erotic bonds is thought to allow women more independence. Gherardi (1995) argues that the common understanding of femaleness is deeply rooted in our history and culture, and that we use archetypes to interpret our social worlds. Gherardi gives two examples for models of femaleness which operate within our culture. The first archetype, the 'virgin goddess' represents a woman who does not engage in sexual relationships and stays independent from men's judgments. The second model, the 'vulnerable goddess' represents a woman who seeks her identity and well-being in relation with

often dominating men (Gherardi, 1995, 71–73). Based on the above, the archetypical understanding of the connections between sexuality and gender may enforce the representation of asexual women as less dependent on their partners.

What is more, identity always exists in relation to the other, and it marks difference as well as rejection and abjection. That is, exclusion has a political meaning, as it is located within hierarchy-producing objects and marginalized subjects (Hall 1996, 4–5), and while there are boundaries between the self and the other, these boundaries are not fixed, nor clear. Hence, heterosexuality cannot ignore the proximity of homosexual desire, and homosexuality cannot escape the social pressures of heteronormativity (Butler 1999, 31). Although asexuality is defined as the opposite of orientations that imply sexual attraction, it also challenges the basis on which distinctions between different sexualities are made. For instance, an asexual homosexual disrupts the fundamental assumptions of a homosexual relationship, to which active sexuality is ascribed.

Representation of Identity

For Hall, identities are constructed within representation, which is as much imaginary and invented as based on the resources of history, language and culture. Emerging identities use cultural resources in the process of becoming by asking

the questions of what they might become, how they have been represented and how these facts affect their own representation of themselves (Hall 1996, 4). It has been already mentioned that within the discourse of sexology, a lack of sexual drive is read as a medical or psychological problem. Despite this, asexuality is often ascribed to particular social groups. For instance, disabled people are believed to be unable to engage in sexual activities. Such discourses institutionalized in mass culture use the concept of asexuality to normalize heterosexuality and to marginalize other sexualities as abnormal or dangerous (Shildrick, 2004, 135). Many disability scholars complain that even though physical and mental impairments alter functioning, they do not eliminate the desire for love, affection, and intimacy. However, people with disabilities may find it difficult to avoid internalising social values and attitudes denying their sexual nature and, therefore, adapt a nonsexual lifestyle (Milligan and Neufeldt 2001). The phenomenon of asexuality becomes increasingly complex as the lack of sexual desire is accepted or even imposed on certain social groups while healthy adults are required to engage in sexual behaviours. AVEN's endeavours to establish asexuality as a sexual minority have the potential for challenging both assumptions.

As representation is based on cultural discourses, it may be sug-

gested that asexual people relate to the politics of other marginalized sexual identities. In accordance with this observation, I will suggest that a comparison between the former group and the gay pride movement may offer a better understanding of the possibilities and difficulties related to the representation of asexuality.

The Essentialist Politics of Identity

In spite of the general interest of social scientists in the deconstruction of identity categories previously taken for granted, essentialism persists. The notion of identity as fixed and immutable actually enables the articulation of minority politics. For instance, biological essentialism can be used to challenge homophobia, which treats homosexuality as a matter of (wrong) choice rather than of biology (Fraser 1999, 5–6). Similarly, asexuality can also mobilize essentialist themes. Even though it challenges the naturalness of sexuality, asexuality can embrace the essentialness of the lack of sexual desire (Scherrer 2008, 636).

Furthermore, establishing a sexual identity prevents the denial of the phenomenon by defining it. For example, homosexuality became acknowledged within society after sexology had introduced a scientific terminology for it (Foucault 1990; Weeks 1995). In a similar manner, Scherrer argues that essentialist notions of asexuality enable the rec-

ognition of this new sexual identity (Scherrer 2008, 629).

At the same time, the notion of identity needs to be distinguished from biological sexual orientation. While the latter results from a 'natural' desire, and does not carry any political meaning, sexual identity stands for an active sexuality, and relates to certain values and lifestyle. What is more, identification as a choice implies that freedom is a condition of all actions, and thus it is charged with responsibility and inscribed with ethical values (Fraser 1999, 129). According to Weeks, identity is politically significant, especially when personal desires are in contradiction to social norms, and when the process of identification entails the rejection of dominant values (Weeks 1995, 63). The development of selfhood and one's identity cannot be separated from the development of citizenship (Bell and Binnie 2000, 8). The private spheres of citizen's lives are not only open for political interrogation and intervention, but the emergence of new ways of living together indicates the democratization of relationships (2000, 27–31). This project attempts to rethink the potential of asexual identity for challenging social conventions and redefining the role of the family, for instance, by decoupling marriage and sex and strengthening the argument for legitimising single-parenting in adoption policies. Noteworthy, the emergence of a new sexual identity

necessarily draws attention to the role of community in the process of sustaining that identity.

Community Formation and Internet Technologies

According to Weeks, every community is based on shared traditions and fundamental agreements. As such, it offers a sense of solidarity and a common understanding of the social, as well as a basis for political activity. At the same time, community is never fixed, but it changes over time (Weeks 1995, 79). Establishing sexual communities is possible only when there are sufficient numbers of individuals sharing similar experiences. It also requires identifiable targets of opposition and specific goals. Even though new sexual minorities challenge conventional moralities, there is always a certain agreement with the mainstream.

While Weeks also suggests that geographical concentration of the members of a community is essential (Weeks, 2003, 81), virtual communities enable social connections irrespective of the actual locations of the individuals involved. Moreover, theorists such as Massey separate social interconnectedness from the local, and argue that multiple connections across space are just as important and authentic as face-to-face relations (Massey 2005, 185).

Even so, relationships in virtual communities are different from social interactions in geographically based associations. The former en-

hance the development of the latter (Harrison and Stephen, 1999, 221). Irrespective of their origins, they are attributed with a democratic character and a great potential to provide access to information for many, as well as a new kind of public space making a genuine dialogue possible between community members (1999, 226). It also has an ability to develop trust, social connectedness and bind a community together (1999, 229). Online communities can be argued to have positive attributes and promote a whole new community that prior to the Internet was not available. On the other hand, they can lead to numerous problems. For instance, Clay Shirk (2003) argues that the possibility of creating multiple virtual personae may cause confusion and ambivalence about one's identity. Also, as online self-presentation is often restricted to a few sentences, perceptions of such identity can be entirely misguided and incorrect. Above all, Shirky (2003) records that the most common problem with online communities tend to be online harassment, understood as threatening or offensive content aimed at known friends or strangers through ways of online technology.

The community of AVEN is based on computer-mediated communication, and, therefore, it is necessary to push the investigation towards exploring the significance of online communities for asexual people. Some authors believe that Internet

networking is a response to the loss of communities in real contexts. It is also a location of solidarity and resistance for traditionally marginalized groups (Benwell and Stokoe 2006, 249).

The spatiality of identities has been a significant theme in the studies of other sexual minorities. In her analysis of bisexuality, Clare Hemmings (2002) stresses the lack of social space for experiencing sexual attraction to people of both genders. Bisexual social existence is always partial, and it is located in a hetero- or homosexual sphere (2002, 38). This problem is observable in the absence of concrete bisexual spaces (2002, 46), while, as Hemmings argues, the Internet functions as an imaginary home for bisexuals (2002, 175).

In an attempt to gain a broader perspective on the emergence of sexual identities with the aid of the Internet, this study draws upon data collected from the AVEN forum. The research possesses a number of possibilities as well as difficulties regarding methodology.

Part II: Methods

The research is based on the analysis of data collected from the forum of AVEN, which hosts the world's largest online asexual community. The decision to base the research on online data was influenced by the various debates on the relationships between the Internet and new possibilities of identity politics and

representation (e.g., McKema and Bargh 1998). Internet communities are a distinctive phenomenon of the last two decades, and as such, they seem to be pertinent to analyzing the emergence of sexual minorities in postmodern times.

Data have been gathered from the homepage of AVEN and forum debates with a focus on the first three years of the existence of the network. It may be argued that at the beginning, the process of establishing an identity and community was the most intense. However, there is an exception: that of using posts dated from 2007, which concern issues of gender, as these appear in discussions after the initial period.

Online Communities

Interactive communication brings a new form of interaction and structure. Yet, the relationship between the Internet communities and academic life is parallel. Both flourish with diversity of opinion and maintain stability at the same time (Costigan 1999, xi).

Analysis of online interactions draws attention to the specific methodological characteristics of Internet research, its advantages as well as the difficulties it poses. Theorists share the view that investigating virtual communities raises the issues of the interplay of technology and society (Sudweeks and Simoff 1999, 29). They recognise a worldwide society created by the Internet as consisting of heterogeneous so-

ciocultural structures created by people representing different values, beliefs and material culture (1999, 42). In addition, it has been argued that interactions occurring in cyberspace cannot be separated from the social and political contexts within which participants live their daily lives (Kendell 1999, 60). Indeed, an everyday experience of social prejudice induces asexual people to join AVEN. Likewise, online relationships are often established on the basis of real-life interactions, and are modelled on off-line resources and experiences (Mann and Stewart, 2000, 204).

Kendell (1999) also rejects the notion of a multiple and fluid virtual identity that is separate from bodily experience. In fact, he uses Goffman's theory to argue that off-line environments also offer opportunities to perform multiple identities, while members of online communities still perceive their identities as integral and continuous. Discussions on the AVEN forum indicate that participants are occupied with embodied experience; not only sexuality, but the issues of age and gender are also often discussed.

Approaches to Data Analysis

The unique character of online communities allows insight into the relations between individuals and social structures as well as into the regularities of an external reality (Sudweeks and Simoff 1999, 32). Although the Internet has given birth

to new research fields, there are numerous attempts to apply traditional methodologies to these emerging environments. This research was conducted using Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA), which aims at deriving a theory on the observed phenomena from data collection and examination (1999, 35). As such, it seems to be a desirable alternative when there is a significant shortage of relevant literature.

Simultaneously, a prior theory of identity, community, and representation was used to order and give pattern to the data. According to some theorists, naming or typifying objects incorporates them into the sphere of relevance, which can reduce the complexity of the researched realm (Layder 1998, 67). It is also the case that exploration of the data may challenge or complete emerging knowledge (Layder 1998, 55). Therefore, I strove to remain open to reject or modify the analytical concepts I used if they were not confirmed by the analysis of the data.

Through the analysis of online data, it was possible to get acquainted with the most popular narratives shared by AVEN members, and identify the pertinence of the main themes, i.e. those of identity or community. It was possible to derive a theory about the establishment of a distinctive asexual identity from the detailed examination of the fragments of discussion on the forum.

Ethics of Internet Research

It is also crucial to consider the ethical implications of online research. Sharf (1999) points to the ambiguity of the electronic medium with regard to issues of anonymity and confidentiality. Researchers need to be aware that they have access to 'sensitive' information shared by people who, encouraged by the possibility of staying anonymous, may exchange verbal intimacies normally withheld in other interactive contexts (Sharf 1999, 246). Here, the use of AVEN's members' nicknames secures their anonymity while allowing tracing sources of conclusions.

Furthermore, Sharf is also concerned about researchers interpreting the words of others and quoting them out of context (1999, 254). Hence, it is desirable for analysts to retain the entire content of the discussion.

The founders of AVEN declare their willingness to provide information for academic researchers (AVEN). The main reason for encouraging studies based on their resources is to make asexuality a legitimate and better-understood phenomenon. These purposes are also underlining this research.

Part III: Researching AVEN

I will present the analysis of data gathered from the AVEN forums. In each of the thematic sections, I will consider sequentially the ways of establishing an asexual identity, its

relation to sexual populations as well as its potential for deconstructing gender stereotypes. Furthermore, I will discuss the representation of asexuality and the online community of AVEN.

Establishing the Asexual Identity – The Question of Sexual Desire

One of the central objectives of this research is to gain a picture of how asexual identity is sustained by members of the community and how it is determined by their sexuality. As it has been already argued, sexual desire lies at the heart of one's identity, which is dynamic, yet assumes some degree of consistence and continuity (Hall 1996). AVEN attempts to provide a sense of coherent identity by defining the lack of sexual desire as common among asexual people, and by distinguishing between sexual and asexual attraction. Scherrer (2008) pays particular attention to ways of establishing this division through revising some of the assumptions about physical intimacy. She remarks that sexual implications are often attributed to acts of masturbation, cuddling or kissing, but these are seen differently by the asexual community (Scherrer 2008, 629). The AVEN homepage as well as data collected from the forums also reveal the complexity of the meanings of these practices. Furthermore, despite the denial of sexual attraction, AVEN states that asexual people may experience sexual arousal: 'For some

sexual arousal is a fairly regular occurrence, though it is not associated with a desire to find a sexual partner or partners.' Asexual people may also feel the need to masturbate or be stimulated by a fetish. They may occasionally engage in sex with their partners. Yet, what is said to distinguish them from a more sexualized part of population is the lack of sex drive towards others. If sex occurs, it is an expression of romantic or emotional attraction and not of sexual desire (AVEN March 24 2009).

On the other hand, many sexual people may be involved in sexual practices in spite of the lack of desire. Moreover, as it was argued before, desire follows rather than precedes behaviour, which, consequently, mirrors cultural expectations (Simon 1996; Laan and Both 2008). Sexual acts that are not related to sexual desire still respond to the mainstream sexual narratives, and thus compromise with the latter.

The ambiguous nature of sexual desire is the source of many uncertainties among the readers of the forum. Many of its members describe their feelings, share their doubts and ask for help in defining their identity. One is of particular interest here:

I see my friends checking people out, but I just don't get it. I mean, I think some people are beautiful in an artistic way, but I don't 'want' them.

And I'm so in love with my girl-

friend, it's hard to describe how my love for her is deeper than friendship when I don't want to have sex with her... (true, October 10 2003)

Asexual people's focus on romantic attraction and commitment corresponds to the definition of asexuality.

Other posts challenge the definition of asexuality, which appear to be imprecise. For instance, some participants ask what behaviours are regarded as explicitly sexual. One of the members inquires:

Does oral sex count as having sex? Does anal sex count as having sex? Does intimate touching count as having sex? Does cyber sex count as having sex? Does phone sex count as having sex? Does masturbation count as having sex? (guardianoftheblind, October 14 2003)

As the discussion becomes more complex, another member responds: 'The more you try to draw a clear line the hazier it gets...' (AVENguy, October 15 2003).

This may indicate awareness that sexuality is never fixed or static. However, forum debates indicate the necessity of demarcation of sexual and asexual practices for the process of identification. Confusion may also result from having dreams of a sexual nature. For some members they are contradictory to an

asexual identity (I'm supposed to hate sex, right...') while others dismiss them as unrelated to actual desire.

Negotiating Definition

Considering the diversity of questions and doubts, AVEN attempts to organize the wide range of different forms of asexuality into four categories, accordingly to various levels of engagement in sporadic sexual practices and ultimately describing any occurring attraction as purely emotional (AVENguy, November 25 2003). The process reveals how providing understandable definitions of each category reduces confusion and enhances accessibility to the community. What is more, it may be argued that despite problems with providing a coherent definition of asexuality, this new emergent identity has a potential of challenging one of the basic cultural assumptions about human nature, the possession of sexual desire. AVEN exists not only in contradiction to the dominant heterosexual discourse, but also questions the politics of sexual minorities that have proliferated since the rise of the gay and lesbian movement a few decades ago. Asexual people who experience attraction may identify as lesbian, gay, bi or straight. Nonetheless, it has been mentioned on the forum that existing sexual orientations do not reflect the broad spectrum of diverse attitudes towards sexuality as words such as homosexual or heterosex-

ual imply the involvement of sexual attraction (Jayann, December 24 2003). This issue evokes Scherrer's analysis, which traces the lack of appropriate language to engage with asexuality (Scherrer 2008, 630). Forum debates also consider this problem. Members argue that gaps in language indicate a common lack of understanding for and of asexuality. As language mirrors social contexts, linguistic insufficiency suggests that asexual relationships are outside common cultural experience. However, there is a belief expressed that the community of AVEN is capable of introducing new expressions into mainstream use (Marr, October 29 2002).

The awareness of the problem of communication in the process of sustaining asexual identity reflects a theoretical preoccupation with the instability of sexual identities. The following sections will consider further difficulties AVEN members face during discussions.

What is Natural?

The members of AVEN engage in a debate on the distinction between 'natural' and contrived aspects of asexual identity. It has already been indicated that essentialism persists within debates regarding sexuality, and identifying the latter as natural enables the articulation of politics (Fraser 1999). Furthermore, forum readers who are unsure about their sexual preferences seek guidelines in biology and medicine:

Is there a way one can truly find out medically? Should I see a psychiatrist or maybe some other kind of doctor? (Legolas, December 3 2002)

Even though previous discussion indicated the conviction that sexuality is a social construction, medicine is still believed to provide definitive answers to questions about the sexual. Some of the expressions are explicitly essentialist: 'Asexuality, (presumably) is not a choice, it's a state of being', 'asexuality is completely independant [sic] from personality', 'The asexuality is biological' (Drum, December 19 2003).

It may be suggested that asexual people who frequently deny that sexual desire is a 'natural' part of every individual's life also present a lack of sexual drive as an essential component of their identity.

Furthermore, AVEN members also separate asexual orientation and antisexuality, where the latter is one's attitude towards sex and a personal choice: 'Anti-sexuality is more up front, more something you think, as opposed to feel,' 'I see asexuality as something that IS, I see anti-sexuality as something that is MADE' (Naebli, December 19 2003).

These arguments evoke Fraser's stance, which differentiates 'natural' sexuality from actively chosen values and lifestyles (Fraser 1999). While asexuality stands for the lack of sexual desire, antisexuality im-

plies the disapproval of sexual practices.

Sexual Populations – The Constitutive Other

As theories of identities locate identity in opposition to the other (Hall 1996), the process of establishing an asexual identity is preoccupied with its relation to the sexual populations. AVEN members frequently criticize the proliferation of sexual contents in contemporary culture that assumes that everyone is sexual:

[...] every newsagent has shelves stacked with magazines filled with articles on how to improve your sex life/have more orgasms/turn your partner on etc. There are similar things on TV and in books (Artemis, November 30 2002).

I cant [sic] find a place for myself or see a place for myself in this OVERLY SEXUAL society. It's so disconcerting (VivreEstEsperer, March 18 2003).

Asexual people often describe feeling uncomfortable and unaccepted when confronted by this amount of content related to sex. By contrast, AVEN provides a safe space to discuss these experiences, and encourages a sense of social location. One of the members admits:

But now that I realize that I don't

have mainstream sexual motivations, it seemed less repulsive, or more 'normal' (R. M. Hester, August 11 2002).

Identification as asexual gives a sense of social location and a feeling of acceptance.

Simultaneously, there is an explicit tendency among the members to dismiss sexual people as dependent on a constant need to satisfy their sexual desire. Lack of temptation is perceived as an advantage that gives more freedom to the asexual individual:

If you are a person who is that dependent on sex, doesn't it seem likely that those who are NOT dependent on sex for a happy life would seem to possess a freedom from being controlled by their bodies and urges? Perhaps, on a conscious or subliminal level, they wish, too, that they could be 'free' from the strong urges of their bodies (Luisa, October 24 2002).

Furthermore, an AVEN member who identifies himself as sexual shares a similar view wishing his mind was not controlled by 'animal reactions installed by evolution' (Marr, August 15 2002).

The superiority of the mind is juxtaposed to the purely instinctive body. Sexual drive is seen as natural yet oppressive at the same time. It can be seen that while asexuality

emerges in the postmodern realm, rationalistic or dualistic positions are still present in its discourse. Expressions such as 'overly sexually active kens & barbies' indicate the use of stereotypes in defining the other (aury, January 12 2003).

Despite these constructions of the sexual population, the asexual community is also aware of the diversity of sexual people and the instability of identities:

My hypothesis is that 'sexual identity' is not a very tangible item, and that it may even change several times over the course of a lifetime. I don't think that it can be used as gospel, but rather, a guideline, or perhaps a measuring instrument for how an individual feels about this (Luisa, October 27 2002).

What is proposed here is the need for recognising the fluid nature of the sexual.

Whilst AVEN establishes a dichotomy between sexual and non-sexual attraction, its overview stresses the affinity of asexual relationships to those of sexual people. Both are based on the same principles, such as communication between and closeness of the partners. Moreover, sexual and asexual people share similar problems of finding the right person and staying intimate and monogamous in a relationship (AVEN, March 25 2009). These resemblances echo Butler's claim (1999) that the boundaries be-

tween self and the other are never fixed or clear. Further analysis of the relations between sexual identity and one's recognition as a gendered subject will support the argument of the complexity of maintaining a coherent self.

Intersecting Identities

Sexual identity does not emerge in isolation, but is linked to a person's identification with a certain class, ethnicity or gender. Various socially and culturally constructed categories interact on multiple levels and never act independently of one another. Gender has an especially significant relation to the discussion on sexuality and selfhood. Furthermore, issues of gender differences and stereotypes are consistently present in the debates on the AVEN forums. Whenever AVEN members admit feeling like a 'real' man or woman or, on the contrary, being confused about their gender, they use their actions and appearance as the main indicators of masculinity or femininity:

Im [sic] the worlds [sic] biggest girly girl myself. I love make up [...], I figure skate, I like dresses better than pants, Im [sic] a soprano [...], I love pink and light blue, I love my puppies and kitties (skatepixie, September 23 2003).

I don't identify with many masculine personality traits. I'm extremely sensitive and emotional,

I'm not competitive, I don't care about being physically or emotionally tough [...] (guardianoftheblind, September 24 2003).

Forum readers recognize that intelligible genders are maintained through coherent and continuous relations among sex differences, preferences of certain activities and the level of sensitivity. At the same time, they often express criticism of stereotypical gender roles. One of the posts states: 'After all, boys will be boys, if you make them' (Moose-Alini, September 24 2003). This particular remark evokes a constructionist view of gender.

Even though many asexual people prefer not to identify themselves with any gender, they still attach meaning to the commonsense understanding of femininity and masculinity. It may result from the fact that people follow gender roles, or perform them to secure their sexuality and social location (see Butler 2004). Defining oneself as a man or a woman imposes order upon an ambiguous social reality.

While for Butler, performativity is never simply the reproduction of certain ideas of gender and the sexual, it may be argued that asexuality enables enacting gender differently. For some female members, being asexual means more independence from men. One of them states:

Being asexual, I truly don't need a man [...] In other words, men

admit to being perverts, and are damn proud of it! Women, however, are supposed to be nice. They want a man around for sex, however, so pretend (to themselves and others) that they are helpless and needy (thylacine, December 31 2007).

While other members suggest that independence of women is not determined by their sexual orientation, asexual women emphasize their self-sufficiency. According to what one can read on the forums, a lack of sexual desire gives an opportunity to challenge conventional relationships between men and women. This argument is parallel to the feminist critique of erotic intimate relationships as ones that enforce gender differences and inequalities (Hollway 1996). It also evokes an archetypical understanding of connections between sexuality and gender as proposed by Gherardi (1995).

Asexuality and Parenthood

It may also be argued that the emergence of asexual identity also influences social interactions, especially by redefining the role of the family. Asexual people often declare their willingness to engage in a committed relationship or to get married. Regardless of whether they identify themselves as gay or straight, they discuss the possibility of raising children. Yet, marriage for them does not necessarily lead to the for-

mation of a traditional family bearing children. Moreover, asexual people rarely express a readiness to conceive children. We read:

I like children. I don't want to have sex just to have them. Sometimes I think I want children on my own, sometimes I think I'd be just as happy adopting them I don't really want to give birth either (nemesi, September 4 2002).

Adoption is the main solution for non-sexual couples, but the idea of artificial insemination is also an alternative. At the same time, people fear negative attitudes towards single parenting and same-sex marriages, and raising the issue of asexual orientation within the family. One of the members expresses her concern in the following way:

I'd imagine most adoption agencies are unwilling to consider [...] adopting a child into a single-parent home. [...] And then there's the whole two-parent thing. A number of people in my family have expressed displeasure at the fact that I am disinterested in marriage, but wish to raise a family (fillerbunny41702, November 8 2004).

This post expresses awareness of social conventions and traditional beliefs that support heterosexual normativity.

Representing Asexuality – Against Biological Essentialism

Challenging social norms requires establishing a representation of asexual identity and an agreement to certain politics to increase its visibility and acceptance. Discussions relating to the representation of asexuality often refer to the gay pride movement. AVEN members propose the incorporation of the same slogans, such as being 'out and proud.' On the other hand, they point to the significant differences between the social locations of homosexuality and asexuality.

Firstly, these minorities encounter discrimination in different ways. While homosexual people may experience being called shameful, asexuality is seen as a state of being incomplete or underdeveloped. Ignorance is often experienced by asexual people who decide to come out. According to one AVEN member, admitting being asexual is more difficult than coming out as homosexual. It is because asexuality requires explanation as the most common reaction to this term is disbelief. The need to clarify what asexuality is causes discomfort and annoyance. Some of the seemingly warm responses can also be read as patronizing:

I've also gotten the annoying and condescending 'Oh, you'll experience attraction someday' line — which of course has the unspoken addition of, 'You silly little ignorant

and late blooming child' (Eta Carinae, June 17 2002).

Asexual people recognize that asexuality is often dismissed as medical or psychological underdevelopment. As they are made to feel uncomfortable and repressed but not ashamed, they believe they need to demonstrate being comfortable with asexuality rather than proud of it (AVENguy, January 11 2003). As members of the community attempt to form their manifesto, proposed narratives of asexuality appeal for acceptance and challenge the common understanding of the lack of sexual desire as requiring medical attention:

Please do not send me or tell me that I should go to a doctor, psychologist, social worker, counsellor, priest, imam, pastor, guru or any other helper [...] There is nothing wrong with being asexual... (ApolloSeek, January 16 2003).

(In)visibility of Asexuality

Yet, raising awareness of asexuality appears to pose significant challenges. While homosexuality is believed to be more noticeable as society is directly confronted with homosexual behaviour, the lack of sexual practices makes asexuality invisible. People decide to come out as asexual when they are asked directly about their sexual prefer-

ences. The lack of willingness to declare being asexual is explained as a result of the nature of asexuality. Asexual people are not confronted with the need to seek acceptance for their sexual practices (ApolloSeek, June 3 2003). The act of coming out is only motivated by the desire to reduce the stigma which asexual people experience as a minority. Nonetheless, asexual people also understand that the act of revelation has consequences of admitting being not 'normal,' but the other to the established cultural narratives (Cerberus, November 6 2008). This awareness mirrors a theoretical critique of representation, which, even if associates new identities with affirmative values, also creates exclusion (Fraser 1999, 143).

On the other hand, the process of identification helps AVEN members to accept themselves. Some of them admit: '(...) when I discovered asexuality, I didn't feel abnormal anymore.'

The sense of belonging to a community also encourages acceptance of their sexual orientation: 'but it's easier to accept when you know there are other people who are asexual' (Artemis, March 19 2003).

The process of identification as asexual builds the self-confidence of individuals. Yet, it may be achieved only within the community. The distinctive character of the asexual community will be explored in the following section.

Online Sanctuary

AVEN is designed to allow people to share their experiences with each other. Through these interactions, the members can explore the diversity as well as the similarities within the group, and learn how to be more comfortable with their orientation. AVEN, called a 'sanctuary' by its members, gives an opportunity to express asexual identity.

As asexuality is not recognized as a sexual orientation, there is a significant lack of exclusively asexual spaces. The members of AVEN often express their need to escape 'the constant, implied or obvious, presence of sexuality' (VivreEstEsperer, June 8 2003).

It was the Internet that started to function as a space for asexual people, just as it became an imaginary home for bisexuals according to Hemmings (2002). Furthermore, computer-mediated communication enables one to overcome geographical distance, which is especially significant in the case of new and small communities. Even though asexual people emphasize the importance of their network, they still willingly arrange local meetings.

Negotiating possible definitions of asexuality and formulating a common aim for community politics point to the involvement of individuals in the creation of the community. This phenomenon suggests democratic relations attributed to online communication in general (Harrison and Stephen 1999).

Online communication also allows anonymity, and, therefore, encourages honest discussion about sexuality. At the same time, AVEN members realize the need to increase the visibility of asexuality. They are also aware that such recognition may also entail losing this privacy. We may read:

The more that I do asexual visibility type stuff, the more that I worry about losing my privacy in this community. [...] Now that people in my 'real' life are possibly finding the site... I'm afraid of losing my sanctuary (VivreEstEsperer, November 1 2003).

AVEN members appreciate the advantages of a virtual community, of which anonymity appears to be the most important. Yet, they are also aware of the necessity of becoming visible within their local communities in order to educate people about asexuality.

Conclusion

Throughout this research I argued that asexuality fundamentally disrupts and questions the notion of a universal innate sexual drive, and, therefore, it can provide a better insight into formations of sexuality.

The theoretical study as well as data analysis focused on the process of establishing asexual identity in times when notions of identity and sexuality are believed to be increasingly fragmented and often

constructed across intersecting or antagonistic practices and cultural discourses. One of the central objectives of the research was to gain a picture of how a sense of coherent identity is provided by identifying the lack of sexual desire towards others, a characteristic shared by asexual people. Yet, determining a definition involved negotiations over intimate behaviours and practices and problematizing the dichotomy of the sexual and non-sexual.

The diversity among the asexual minority suggests the fluidity of sexuality and the ambiguity of sexual desire. At the same time, linguistic insufficiency to articulate this multiplicity indicates that existing sexual orientations do not reflect the broad spectrum of diverse attitudes towards sexuality.

While AVEN members point out the instability of the sexual, they are also aware of the affinity of asexual relationships to those of sexual people. Still, they situate themselves in opposition to sexual populations, and making that distinction, asexual people use rationalistic mind/body dichotomy.

Rethinking formations of gender via a central focus on asexuality suggests possibilities of different enactments of gender roles, especially for women who often admit feeling more independent in asexual relationships with men. Nevertheless, a commonsense understanding of femininity and masculinity is still explicit in the forum

discussions. Furthermore, asexuality has a potential to question social conventions of marriage and parenthood.

While asexuality challenges essentialist understandings of sexuality as fixed and innate, sexual essentialism persists in its aim to identify the lack of sexual drive as natural, which would assure a sense of coherent identity. It also allows establishing a representation that challenges the common notion of asexuality derived from the discourse of sexology. Yet, gaining recognition for asexuality is complex due to the lack of sexual practices, which makes asexuality invisible. Furthermore, there is an observable lack of willingness to come out as asexual, which may result from the fact that asexual people are not confronted with the need to seek acceptance for their sexual practices.

Ultimately, AVEN, called a 'sanctuary' by its members, gives an opportunity to express asexual identity and learn how to be more comfortable with it. Online communication is especially significant due to a lack of exclusively asexual spaces. The members of AVEN appreciate the advantages of this virtual community, of which anonymity is stressed the most often.

This analysis is far from exhaustive, but it highlights the contribution of asexual identity to a broader understanding of the construction of sexuality. As it is a relatively unexplored field, several suggestions for

future research may be proposed. This research points to affinities and differences between the asexual minority and other marginalized groups based on sexual orientation. Future efforts should investigate if asexual culture, similarly to homosexual lifestyle, may be incorporated into the mainstream.

Furthermore, sexual identity is linked to a person's identification with other social identities. Future research should explore intersections between asexuality with class background and age. The latter may be especially significant as they are believed to affect access to the Internet, and therefore, of the virtual community of AVEN as well as similar online communities.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr Yasmin Gunaratnam who, at Goldsmiths University of London, supervised the dissertation on which this article is based. Her thoughtful comments and enthusiastic encouragement have challenged me and moved my work in fruitful directions. My grateful thanks are also extended to Dr Marsha Rosengarten (Sociology, Goldsmiths University of London) for introducing me to the fascinating fields of Sexuality and Queer Theory. I have also benefited from the insights of the editors involved in work on this article.

Endnotes

- ¹ Launched in 2001, AVEN hosts an archive of educational resources on the phenomena of asexuality that is available for academic researchers and the press. AVEN's enterprise may be defined as an effort intended to serve as a catalyst for widening the definition and discussion about sexuality. AVEN's members are actively engaged in distributing pamphlets, leading workshops and organizing meetings.
- ² A similar view is shared by Laan and Both (2008) who analyse the relation between women's sexual arousal and desire. With reference to their research, sexual arousal is generated by stimulating information and desire succeeds that state (Laan and Both 2008, 510).

Bibliography

- AVEN. 2008. Available at <http://www.asexuality.org/home/> [Accessed October 2008 – April 2009].
- Bell, D. and J. Binnie. 2000. *The Sexual Citizen. Queer Politics and Beyond*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Benwell, B. and E. Stokoe. 2006. *Discourse and Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bogaert, A. F. 2004. Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample. *Journal of Sex Research* 41: 279–87.
- Brotto, L.A., G. Knudson, J. Inskip, K. Rhodes, and Y. Erskine, 2010. Asexuality: A Mixed-Methods Approach. *Archives of Sexual Behaviors* 39: 599–618.
- Bryman, A. 1988. *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Butler, J. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New

- York & London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. 1999. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Costigan, J. T. 1999. Introduction: Forests, Trees and Internet Research. In ed. S. Jones. *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Fraser, M. 1999. *Identity without Selfhood. Simone de Beauvoir and Bisexuality*. Cambridge: The University Press.
- Foucault, M. 1990. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Gherardi, S. 1995. *Gender, Symbolism and Organizational Cultures*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Hall, S. 1996. Introduction: Who Needs Identity? In eds. S. Hall and P. Du Gay. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Harrison, T. M. and T. Stephen. 1999. Researching and Creating Community Networks. In ed. S. Jones. *Doing Internet Research; Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*. London: Sage Publications.
- Hemmings, C. 2002. *Bisexual Spaces. A Geography of Sexuality and Gender*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hollway, W. 1996. *Theorizing Heterosexuality: Telling It Straight*. Open University Press.
- Kendall, L. 1999. Re-contextualizing 'Cyberspace': Methodological Considerations for On-Line Research. In ed. S. Jones. *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Kinsey, A. C., P.H. Gebhard, C. E. Martin and W. B. Pomeroy. 1953. *Sexual Behavior in The Human Female*. Philadelphia and London: W. B. Sanders Company.
- Kinsey, A.C., C.E. Martin and W.B. Pomeroy. 1948. *Sexual Behavior in The Human Male*. Philadelphia and London: W. B. Sanders Company.
- Laan, E. and S. Both. 2008. What Makes Women Experience Desire? *Feminism Psychology* 18: 505–14.
- Layder, D. 1998. *Sociological Practice. Linking Theory and Social Research*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Mann, C. and F. Stewart. 2000. *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research. A Handbook for Researching On-line*. London: Sage Publications.
- Massey, D. 2005. *For Space*. London: SAGE Publications.
- McKema, K. and J. Bargh. 1998. Coming Out in the Age of Internet: Identity Demarginalization Through Virtual Group Membership. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75 (3): 681–94.
- Milligan, M.S and A. H. Neufeldt. 2001. The Myth of Asexuality: A Survey of Social and Empirical Evidence. *Sexuality and Disability* 19 (2): 91–109.
- Prause, N. and C.A. Graham. 2007. Asexuality: classification and characterization. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 36: 341–56.
- Scherrer, K. S. 2008. Coming to an

- Asexual Identity: Negotiating Identity, Negotiating Desire. *Sexualities* 11, 621–41.
- Sedgwick, E. K. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. London: The Regents of the University of California.
- Seidman, S. 2003. *The Social Construction of Sexuality*. London and New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Sharf, B. F. 1999. Beyond Netiquette. The Ethics of Doing Naturalistic Discourse Research on the Internet. In ed. S. Jones. *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Shildrick, M. 2004. Silencing Sexuality: The Regulation of the Disabled Body. In ed. J. Carabine. *Sexualities. Personal Lives and Social Policy*. United Kingdom: The Polity Press.
- Shirk, C. 2003. A Group Is Its Own Worst Enemy. Available at http://www.shirky.com/writings/group_enemy.html [Accessed March 2011].
- Simon, W. 1996. *Postmodern Sexualities*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Sudweeks, F. and S. Simoff. 1999. Complementary Explorative Data Analysis: The Reconciliation of Quantitative and Qualitative Principles. In ed. S. Jones. *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*, ed. S. Jones. London: SAGE Publications.
- Weeks, J. 2003. *Sexuality*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Weeks, J. 1995. *Invented Moralities. Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Weeks, J. 1987. Questions of identity. In ed. P. Kaplan. *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*. London and New York: Tavistock Publications.