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What Can Asexuality Offer Sociology?
Insights from the 2017 Asexual Community Census

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In August 2018, the ASA Section on Sociology of Sexualities hosted a preconference before the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association to gather insights and showcase the work of top contributors of sociological work on sexualities. Outstanding work from across the discipline was featured in panels, workshops, and roundtables across the two days of conferencing, and critical questions of race, politics, and violence were deservedly prioritized amid an increasingly urgent political climate. While this preconference served to advance the discipline's efforts toward generating knowledge and healing social divides, it also symbolized the range of American sociology's contributions to interdisciplinary knowledge on sexuality. Missing from the work presented at the pre-conference was any mention of asexualities.

Sociological insights on asexuality (i.e. a lack of sexual attraction) have been very limited. While some sociologists have devoted attention toward asexualities in their work (e.g. Carrigan 2011; Cuthbert 2017; Dawson, Scott, and McDonnell 2018; Poston and Baumle 2010; Scherrer and Pfeffer 2017; Simula, Sumerau, and Miller 2019; Sumerau et al. 2018; Troia 2018; Vares 2018), the field more often contributes to the invisibility of asexuality than sheds light on it. Much of the current knowledge of asexuality comes from psychology and the humanities, and the work of these scholars is rarely integrated into our sociology journals or classrooms. The resultant gaps in the literature represent theoretical and empirical opportunities to explore new frontiers in the range of human sexuality, creative family arrangements, and the impact that intersecting systems of oppression have on sexual minorities.

What an Understanding of Asexuality Can Contribute to Sociology

The sociology of sexualities has historically embraced empirical approaches to human sexuality that shine light on otherwise invisible and marginalized populations. It has foreseen a more fluid and complex landscape of sexuality among younger generations, including the proliferation of new and more specific terms that describe sexual orientations (Robertson 2019; Savin-Williams 2001). Asexuality embodies these trends. Asexual communities have developed new vocabularies to describe a range of asexual dispositions. These new vocabularies challenge the traditional definitions and instruments used to measure sexuality, complicating our methodological choices and paradigms of sexual orientation (Cerankowski and Milks 2010; Chasin 2019; Poston and Baumle 2010). Asexuality exposes nuances in the relationships between sexual identity, behavior, and attraction in ways that remain relatively unexplored in the sociology of sexualities. An understanding of asexuality can therefore help the field become a more inclusive discipline, welcoming a wider range of perspectives, while at the same time helping sociologists adapt to a landscape of sexual fluidity and proliferating vocabularies of sexuality.

Asexuality is not only a worthy topic of the sociology of sexualities, as a subfield; it also offers important contributions to sociology as a whole. Asexuality speaks to sociological theories of post-modernism and feminism. It queers dominant norms of love, marriage, gender, and sex. It challenges what it means to be human. Key social institutions and social constructs like medicine, family, gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, disability, technology, media, religion, education, and the body all interact with asexualities. Each has a stake in whether one experiences sexual attraction. An understanding of asexualities can thus advance sociological theories across multiple subfields that pertain to the precarious relationship between social institutions and marginalized populations.

This chapter is divided into four sections designed to answer the question, *what can asexuality offer sociology?* First, an understanding of asexuality can help sociologists adapt to a postmodern, fluid landscape of sexuality. In this section I review new vocabularies of asexualities and their implications for sexual identity. Second, asexuality can help sociologists of sexuality develop theories of consent and sexual boundaries. In this section, I examine the sexual and relationship histories of asexual people, whose experiences can serve as models of communication and violence prevention. Third, asexualities can shine light on how sexuality intersects with gender, race, and class, among other social dimensions. The demographics of the online asexual community reveal a unique gender composition, and its race and class demographics suggest inequalities that perpetuate through relatively new social movements. Finally, asexuality can also shine light on how boundaries within the LGBTQ community are made and remade as gender and sexual orders change to accommodate relationships and identities beyond the gay/straight and male/female binary.

In each section, I review the existing knowledge on asexualities, much of which originates from the fields of psychology and gender studies, and I supplement this information with characteristics of the online asexual community from the 2017 Asexual Community Census. In the discussion, I synthesize this information into sociological questions that can push the field forward. My goal is to demonstrate the potential theoretical contributions that research on asexualities can offer to the sociology of sexualities, gender, social movements, and related fields in light of contemporary shifts in the global landscape of sexual identities, spaces, and concepts.

Measuring Asexuality

Conventional instruments of measuring sexuality using identity, attraction, and/or behavior do not translate well to asexualities (Poston and Baumle 2010). Asexual respondents' sexual behavior tends to vary (Aicken, Mercer, and Cassell 2013; Van Houdenhove et al. 2015a),

and behavioral metrics potentially conflate asexuality (a sexual orientation) and celibacy (a choice) (Cerankowski and Milks 2010; Poston and Baumle 2010). Collecting data on asexuality using metrics of identity is also complicated by the fact that few people are familiar with the definition of “asexual” (MacInnis and Hodson 2012). Surveys of random samples that have included asexuality as an option (particularly when identity options are listed in alphabetical order) have led to poor reliability as many respondents are ignorant of asexual terminology (Mary Hoban, American College Health Association, email to the author, June 19, 2018).

Popular instruments of sexual attraction are also unreliable as they tend to measure responses to gendered object of desire, assuming that attraction exists equally for all respondents (Poston and Baumle 2010). For example, the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), widely considered to be the most robust and inclusive national survey for measurements of sexuality, asks respondents to decide whether they are (a) only attracted to the opposite sex, (b) mostly attracted to the opposite sex, (c) equally attracted to the opposite sex and the same sex, (d) mostly attracted to the same sex, (e) only attracted to the same sex, or (f) not sure. By excluding the possibility that respondents are not attracted to anyone, surveys like the NSFG fail to account for asexual respondents, as well as others whose attractions are not defined in reference to binary gender systems (Callis 2014; Poston and Baumle 2010).

In this paper, I use data from the 2017 Asexual Community Census (ACC), a volunteer-run organization led by members of the asexual community that has gathered survey data annually since 2014 for the purpose of providing information on the asexual community to researchers and investigators. The 2017 ACC consisted of about 100 questions that cover respondents’ demographics, identities, and histories of relationships, sex, health, violence, and community interactions. Convenience sampling and snowballing techniques were utilized by

distributing the survey online through major asexual websites and asexuality-themed groups on social networking platforms. Respondents were encouraged to share the link with other asexual communities and individuals.

Sample Description

A total of 6,404 respondents between the ages of 18 and 65 were included in the analysis. The mean age was 25, indicating a relatively young sample. Respondents included in the analysis indicated their nationality as either the United States (75%), the United Kingdom (14%), or Canada (11%). To maintain consistency, non-asexual respondents, including those who identified as aromantic, were excluded from the present analysis.

This survey was distributed online through popular asexual forums. The online asexual community, like all minority community spaces, is governed by a specific set of norms and is likely to be frequented by those who are relatively comfortable with their identity and frame their identity as appearing on the asexual spectrum. As a large, robust sample of the asexual community, this dataset offers a grand and rare opportunity to explore characteristics and complexities of the asexual community.

Postmodern Landscape of Sexuality

Research has shown that younger generations are embracing fluid and complex models of sexuality, developing new vocabularies to include more specific terms that describe their sexual orientations (Robertson 2019; Savin-Williams 2001). The rise of asexualities is part of this pattern. Asexuality refers to those who do not experience sexual attraction, a definition which originated with the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) and appears in much of the literature (Brotto et al. 2010; Jones, Hayter, and Jomeen 2017; Van Houdenhove et al. 2015a). Although there are competing definitions of asexuality that refer to individuals' sexual desire or sexual behavior (Aicken, Mercer, and Cassell 2013; Brotto et al. 2010; Prause and

Graham 2007), Van Houdenhove and colleagues (2015a) studied the interaction between identity, attraction, and behavior among 566 asexual survey respondents aged 18 to 72 and concluded that “lack of sexual attraction” was the most appropriate and commonly shared definition.

“Asexual” (or “ace” for short) is used to refer specifically to those that never experience sexual attraction, but it also serves as an umbrella term that represents a range of sexual and romantic dispositions that fall outside the norm. Just as binary constructs of gender, sex, and sexuality have been replaced by the understanding that each falls along a spectrum, asexuality is also conceptualized as a spectrum (Carrigan 2011; Decker 2014). Among the 6,404 asexual respondents included for analysis in the 2017 Ace Community Census, the majority (65%) identified themselves as simply "asexual" whereas 14% identified as gray-ace, which generally means they experience sexual attraction rarely or under specific circumstances. Eleven percent identified as demisexual, meaning sexual attraction only occurs after an emotional bond has formed (Carrigan 2011; Decker 2014). Ten percent of respondents identified as asexual but were questioning or unsure of their specific sexual orientation label.

Multi-Term Identities

Attitudes toward romance vary significantly among asexual individuals, and the emerging discourse within asexual communities regularly disaggregates sexual and romantic attraction (Carrigan 2011; Jones, Hayter, and Jomeen 2017). The “split attraction model” discourse serves to explain that one can be romantically interested in another person and not desire to have sex with them (Przybylo 2019). Additional forms of attraction under the split attraction model, including aesthetic attraction and sensual attraction, expose nuance and

potential within sociological concepts of identity and attraction that have been under-utilized by the discipline.

Just as sexual attraction falls across a spectrum, leading to a proliferation of terms that asexual people use to describe their sexual identities, romantic attraction also occurs along a spectrum. Eleven percent of the 2017 ACC sample consider themselves “aromantic,” meaning they do not experience romantic attraction or have romantic feelings for others. Although the language of aromanticism flourished within the asexual community, aromantic dispositions are not exclusive to the asexual community, as many people who experience sexual attraction are not interested in romantic relationships (Przybylo 2019). But just as not all aromantic people are asexual, not all asexual people are aromantic. Other asexual individuals may strongly desire romantic relationships in their lives, albeit without a sexual connection (Brotto et al. 2010; Decker 2014; Van Houdenhove et al. 2015b).

Within the asexual community, the specific terms for asexual individuals’ sexual orientations are regularly paired with terms that describe the individual’s romantic orientation (Carrigan 2011). This phenomenon is not necessarily limited to asexual individuals. Troia (2018), in her analysis of millennials’ sexual identities, found that multi-term identities, non-binary identities, and “asterisk identities” were common patterns among young respondents situated within a postmodern era of sexual fluidity. In other words, millennials would qualify the subjected meanings of their identity labels to communicate a more specific understanding of their sexuality. Consistent with Troia’s argument, asexual respondents of the 2017 ACC were more often unsure of their romantic orientation (22%) or identify with a combination of romantic orientations (37%). Biromantic or panromantic asexual respondents were the next largest group (14%), followed by heteroromantic (8%), homoromantic (3%), grayromantic or demiromantic

(2%), and other (2%) respondents. By using multi-term identities that describe both sexual and romantic attractions, social actors are constructing themselves as straddling multiple categories and dispositions that are not captured by our current sociological concepts of “sexual orientation” (Chasin 2019). The use of the split-attraction model can therefore contribute greater nuance and deeper understandings of sexual identities within sociology.

Meanings of Sexual Desire and Activity

As part of the postmodern landscape of sexuality, asexuality can give sociologists insights into the meaning-making processes underlying specific sexual practices. For example, people who identify as asexual can appear in many places along the continuum of experiencing sexual desire (i.e. libido), which suggests meaning systems that disaggregate sexual desire and sexual attraction (Bogaert 2004; Brotto et al. 2010). The 2017 ACC survey asked respondents to rate their sex drive/libido on a scale of 1 (“nonexistent”) to 4 (“very strong”). The majority of respondents (53%) rated their sex drive as a “2,” and the mean sex drive for asexual respondents was 1.97. ACC respondents who identified as demisexual, gray-ace, or questioning were more likely to report slightly higher sex drives than those who identified only as asexual. As a liminal sexual orientation, asexuality presents sociologists with a unique lens through which they can examine the relationship between sexuality and/or sexual attraction and dominant institutions and social constructs like medicine, family, gender, race/ethnicity, the body, technology, and community. Its emergence as a sexual orientation category was enabled by the postmodernist decoupling of love, marriage, sex, and romance, as well as access to new technologies and generational shifts in discourses of sexuality. Asexual people represent a heterogeneous population with diverse romantic and sexual dispositions, yet shared experiences within the

asexual community of medicalization and isolation resonate with existing patterns of marginalization for those who exist outside the charmed circle of heterosexuality (Rubin 1998).

Regarding the romantic and sexual histories of asexualities, the prior literature and ACC data show that asexuality is a spectrum in which some asexual people never experience sexual attraction and others do in limited circumstances. Attitudes toward sex and relationships vary considerably among asexual people. Many questions remain that would speak to the relationship between asexuality, sexual activity, relationships, and family. For example, how do asexual individuals negotiate physical and emotional boundaries with their non-asexual partners? How does the concept of “chosen family” map onto the ideal intimate friendships described within asexual communities? What meanings do asexual individuals assign to masturbation, pornography, and sexual fantasies? Do they construct these activities as sexual, or do they draw boundaries around solo sexual activities that protect their identity status? Does sexual behavior vary between asexual individuals of different libido levels? Are there boundaries drawn within the asexual community that exclude gray-asexual or demisexual people, whose attitudes toward sex tend to be less repulsed? Each of these research questions inform sociological understandings of how the meanings assigned to family, relationships, sex, and identity have changed within a postmodern landscape, thus creating a dialogue between asexualities and key questions within sociology.

The data also shows that asexualities intersect with race, class, and gender in meaningful ways. Information regarding gender and asexualities, for example, indicates that a majority of the asexual community are cisgender women and that the asexual community includes a disproportionately high percentage of people under the transgender umbrella. While these findings have become a point of curiosity and exploration for some scholars (e.g. Cuthbert 2019;

Fahs 2010; Gupta 2019; MacNeela and Murphy 2015; Przybylo 2014; Sumerau et al. 2018; Vares 2018), many questions remain unanswered. What does identification with asexualities offer cisgender women in particular? What are the points of connection between asexual and transgender communities, and how are they articulated within trans ace experiences? Given the close relationship between the social construction of gender and sexuality, interrogating how gender is performed within asexual frameworks can expand major theories of social inequality.

Questions of race and class remain especially understudied in asexualities research. Owen (2014, 2018) has offered a theoretical lens through which we can think about the historical relationship between asexuality and white supremacy, and the empirical data indicates that most members of the online asexual community are well-educated and do not consider themselves to be racial or ethnic minorities. Race and class represent key inequalities intrinsic in the construction and maintenance of sexual minority communities. By examining how they operate in asexual communities, we can elucidate how those inequalities are maintained. How are race and class constructed within relatively new communities, built after the onset of the supposedly equalizing force of the internet and the popularization of intersectionality frameworks within social movement discourses? How do racialized discourses of sexuality affect asexual people of color? What can asexualities teach us about race and class, and what can race and class teach us about asexualities?

Finally, research on the points of connection and disruption between asexuality and the larger LGBTQ+ community can help sociologists trace changes in the culture, boundaries, and identity discourses of postmodern sexualities. The data indicates that only 63% of asexual respondents consider themselves to be “queer,” and prior research describes isolation and rejection that asexual individuals have encountered from within the LGBTQ+ community

(Mollet and Lackman 2018). More research is needed to examine why – or in what contexts - some asexual individuals choose not to identify as “queer.” In what circumstances have asexual individuals found understanding and acceptance versus exclusion in LGBTQ+ spaces? Do shared experiences of harassment, exclusion, and rejection create opportunities for cohesion between asexual individuals and the larger LGBTQ+ community, or are boundaries drawn between these populations in ways that exclude experiences of marginalization unique to asexual and/or non-asexual individuals? Major inhibitions to answer these questions can be attributed to limitations in our instruments of sexuality, so how can we adjust our methodologies to capture more complex combinations of romantic and sexual identities?

Generational changes in sexuality and new technologies have allowed asexualities to flourish and become more visible. Complex discourses of sex, romance, gender, and family have emerged, undermining binary and essentialist ideals in favor of a more fluid reality. As sociologists, an increased awareness and understanding of asexualities can help us adapt to this new landscape and push the field forward in new theoretical directions.

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