1

Asexuality

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The history of asexuality

What is ‘asexuality’? While answers to this question would once have predominantly involved references to biological processes, it is increasingly likely that someone asking this question will receive a rather different response: an asexual person is someone who does not experience sexual attraction. Bogaert (2004) was an early and influential contribution to the literature on asexuality, reporting on a secondary analysis of the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL), in which 1.05% of participants reported never having experienced sexual attraction towards anyone. Follow-up studies on the next generation of NATSAL found 0.5% of respondents falling into this category (Bogaert, 2012, p. 45). While asexual people are numerous, it is still difficult to be clear about how numerous they are. First, these results do not indicate identification as asexual, but only experiences which have, in other instances, led people to identify as such. Second, there are important questions which can be raised about the criterion of having never experienced sexual attraction, reflecting different orientations to how we understand something like ‘asexuality’. The question “what is asexuality?” is much more complicated than it can initially seem.

One way to go further is to look towards the commonalities and differences which can be found among those who self-identity as asexual (Carrigan, 2012). Another is to clarify what asexuality is not, so as to better understand the topic by addressing the confusions surrounding it. Finally, we can look beyond self-identification and consider asexuality as a sexual orientation (Bogaert, 2006). This chapter will pursue all three strategies, using them as a framework through which to make sense of a growing academic literature. It will then discuss some of the key debates that have emerged within this literature, before turning to their implications for applied practitioners. The chapter concludes with a discussion of directions for future research and suggestions for further reading.
Key theory and research

The asexual community

The notion of ‘asexual’ as a social identity is a relatively recent one, consolidating through online community spaces and moving from the ‘online’ to the ‘offline’ as these communities gave rise to activists and were discovered by the media and academics. However, people not experiencing sexual attraction is certainly not a new thing (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010), nor is identifying oneself positively in these terms (Kahan, 2013). What does seem to be entirely novel, however, is the affirmative community, partly virtual though, nonetheless, obviously real, which has both given rise to and been strengthened by the growth of this identity. One identifiable strand within the asexuality literature, within which we might locate Carrigan (2011), Chasin (2010), Hinderliter (2013), and Scherrer (2008, 2010a, 2010b), has been primarily concerned with understanding the character of this community, the experiences of those within it, and the relationship between the two.

Investigation of this community immediately cautions against a tendency to assume we know what asexuality ‘is’. Przybylo (2011) warns that ‘asexuality’ as an identity category should be addressed with care, given that such categories delineate ‘inside’ from ‘outside’ and, in doing so, foreclose certain ways of being asexual while recognising others. What can appear to be a converging self-identification as asexual might, nonetheless, mean very different things for different people. Some asexual people experience romantic attraction, developing ‘crushes’ and pursuing relationships, while others do not. Some asexual people are entirely indifferent to sex, some are viscerally repulsed by it, while others can derive enjoyment from sexual acts without these acts being motivated by sexual attraction. Carrigan (2011) suggested that this can be usefully understood in terms of divergent attitudes towards sexual behaviour (positivity, neutrality, repulsion) and romance (aromanticism and romanticism, which can take heteroromantic, homoromantic, biromantic, and panromantic forms). Other identifications include gray-a, commonly understood to refer to those falling within the ‘grey area’ between sexuality and asexuality, as well as demisexuality, referring to the experience of sexual attraction as something ensuing from romantic attraction and never independently of it.

Our few sources of information about the size of groups within the asexual community, as opposed to the distribution of asexual people within the population at large, come from The Asexual Awareness Week Community Census. Conducted in 2011 as part of a broader visibility project, this community-led project collected responses from 3430 respondents about their demographic characteristics (Miller, 2011). While there are obvious issues of self-selection and social selection attendant to internet-based research, particularly when recruitment is enacted through in-group networks, this is a broader point