The Sociological Review

Negotiating the boundaries of intimacy: the personal lives of asexual people

Matt Dawson, Liz McDonnell and Susie Scott

Abstract

This paper uses findings from research diaries to explore the use of practices of intimacy among asexual people. While much of the literature to date has focused on the supposedly transformative and political nature of uniquely asexual practices of intimacy, our findings suggest something different. Rather than seeking to transform the nature of intimate relationships, asexual people make pragmatic adjustments and engage in negotiations to achieve the forms of physical and emotional intimacy they seek. We discuss this in relation to three areas: friendships, sex as a practice of intimacy, and exclusion from intimacy. Our findings suggest the importance of not only considering the social context in which asexual people practise intimacy, but also how the practices in which they engage may be shared with non-asexual people.

Keywords: asexuality, friendships, practices of intimacy, sex, symbolic interactionism

Research into asexuality, defined as low levels of sexual attraction and/or desire, has greatly expanded in the last ten years. Literature has emerged from sexology (Bogaert, 2004), psychology (Brotto *et al.*, 2010), health studies (Kim, 2010), demography (Prause and Graham, 2007), legal studies (Emens, 2014) and social science (Scherrer, 2008; Carrigan, 2011). Given the 'emergent' nature of both asexuality itself and the research field (Gazzola and Morrison, 2012) it is perhaps unsurprising that early studies primarily focused on the demarcation of asexuality as an identity and community. In doing so, the ways in which asexual people conceive of, and practise, intimacy has been somewhat marginalized. While, as we shall see, some researchers have highlighted the prevalence of romantic relationships among asexual people, there has been little in-depth discussion of such relationships.

At the same time, literature within the sociology of intimacy has, to date, been largely neglectful of asexuality. While this can partly be explained by the 'newness' of the topic, it is perhaps also indicative of an assumption that romantic intimacy, and the practices (Jamieson, 1998) it engenders, can be found most strongly in sexual activities. Sex, including conflicts over it, is

The Sociological Review, *Vol. 64, 349–365 (2016)* DOI: 10.1111/1467-954X.12362

Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

one of the things said to mark out romantic intimacy, and love, from other forms (Gabb, 2008: 142–143; Carter, 2013), helping to define the 'boundaries' of intimacy (Jamieson, 2005). This connection reaches its zenith in arguments which link changes in sex to wider changes in the nature of modernity (Giddens, 1992; Bauman, 1998).

This article brings these two bodies of literature together. Based upon findings from a research project on asexual identity and practices of intimacy, we discuss the everyday practices, both romantic and non-romantic, upon which asexual people draw in their intimate lives. In doing so, we will temper some of the more radical claims concerning how asexuality can 'remake' the sphere of intimacy, while suggesting that asexual people frame their intimate relationships in light of their sexual orientation. While this group may draw upon some practices of intimacy less and others more, it is difficult to claim there are distinctly 'asexual practices of intimacy'. We conclude that this opens up further questions for sociological research on asexuality.

Asexual studies and intimacy

As we have suggested elsewhere (Scott and Dawson, 2015) existing literature on asexuality can be divided into the psychological and the sociological. In what follows, we outline the key suggestions from both fields in relation to intimacy.

The 'psychological' literature was first to emerge and here is taken to include studies from the human sciences more broadly. The earliest studies sought to establish the proportion of the population who were asexual: originally 1 per cent of the population (Bogaert, 2004) with later samples suggesting 0.5 per cent (Carrigan, 2015: 7) or slightly higher if a more inclusive definition was used (Poston and Baumle 2010). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this encouraged the human science inclination towards the definition and classification of asexuality using scales of sexual attraction (Prause and Graham 2007), measures of health (Brotto *et al.*, 2010) or finger-length ratios (Yule *et al.*, 2014). While such studies shared the goal of treating asexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation, they did sometimes medicalize and pathologize it as a health condition, such as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (see Hinderliter, 2013), schizoid personality disorder (Brotto *et al.*, 2010: 608), poor health (Poston and Baumle, 2010: 524), a 'lack of activitation' (Prause and Harenski, 2014) or as autochorissexualism: an 'identity-less sexuality', whereby sexual desire involves situations not including that individual (Bogaert, 2012: 119–120).

Given the sometimes clinical focus of these studies, little attention was given to intimacy. Some mention was made of the fact that asexual participants had, or were having, intimate relationships (Bogaert, 2012: 67–104). However, even this could sometimes be reversed as a sign of pathology, hence: 'the finding that one-third of the sample had never engaged in a relationship … suggest atypical social functioning which appears to be more widespread than just related to sexual relationships' (Brotto *et al.*, 2010: 608). This also reflected the

ontological assumptions of such literature, where the focus was on *individual* assessment rather than an awareness of the social context of asexuality.

It is here that the sociological literature, which we take to include gender and queer studies, made its major contribution. Scherrer (2008) highlighted the diversity of asexual identity, which works across two axes. The first axis concerns sexual desire: at one end is its non-presence, such as in those who unproblematically define as 'asexual' or even 'sex-repulsed'. At the other end are groups such as those identifying as 'grey-a', who exist 'in the grey area' between asexuality and other sexual identities, as well as demisexuals, who feel sexual desire under certain circumstances, such as when a relationship develops. The second axis concerns romantic attraction. Here, one end is defined by the absence of romantic attraction, as in those identifying as 'aromantic' while the other end of the scale can be marked by the object of romantic attraction (e.g. homo-romantic, hetero-romantic, pan-romantic etc.). These two axes create a complex web of possible and actual asexual identities. It is important to keep this complexity in mind and see asexuality as a 'meta-category' (Chasin, 2011), marked by diversity as much as similarity (Carrigan, 2011).

Reflecting such diversity, some of Scherrer's participants suggested how their asexuality shaped the forms of intimacy they practised. For example, one participant claimed 'I'm romantically attracted to the opposite sex, but don't desire sexual contact. I enjoy cuddling, and kissing and even pleasing my wife, but I don't desire sexual intercourse' (Scherrer, 2008: 627). Furthermore, Carrigan's (2012) work suggests how, given that the large majority of asexual people have romantic relationships with non-asexual individuals, these tend to involve negotiating the 'sexual assumption' of such partners.

However, Carrigan also hints at another stream of literature on asexuality by emphasizing the transformative nature of asexual practices of intimacy, since 'when sexual activity ceases to be the *sine qua non* of intimacy, an otherwise stable and naturalised boundary between "friendship" and "relationship" becomes decidedly fuzzier' (Carrigan, 2012: 15). This creates the need for new forms of language to describe the relationships asexual people engage in, beyond simple 'single' and 'coupled' definitions (Scherrer, 2010a, 2010b). This chimes with writers such as Fahs (2010), Pryzbolo (2011), Chasin (2013) and Gressgård (2013) who focus on the political potential of asexuality. Such writers argue that in disrupting this sexual assumption asexuality has the potential to suggest alternative ways of human being and interaction. For example, in her call for asexuality to proclaim its radical potential and not succumb to 'academic conservatism', Chasin (2013: 416) argues:

> If it can be okay for asexual people to not want sex, maybe we can make it okay for anyone to not want sex. This would be a world where being sexual is no longer mandated as a prerequisite of normalcy or intimacy and where nonsexual relationships are recognized and valued.

Therefore, this literature claims that asexuality breaks down the 'boundaries' of intimacy (Jamieson, 2005). Different relationships, most notably

friendships and romantic relationships, become less distinct and their similarities throw *any* distinction into question. Importantly, as the above quotation suggests, these asexual practices are then seen to be indicative of more; for these authors, they are (hopefully) the harbinger of further social transformation (Pryzbolo, 2013; Kahn, 2014). Interestingly, from a different political and intellectual perspective, here we have a claim similar to Giddens' suggestion that same-sex couples were the pioneers of 'plastic sexuality' (Giddens, 1992: 28), which is 'decentred' and 'freed from the needs of reproduction' (Giddens, 1992: 2). Unfortunately, again like Giddens' work, much of this political literature on asexuality does not make use of empirical evidence.

Consequently, although the sociological literature has begun to discuss the relations between asexuality and intimacy, in doing so it has either not fully explored the everyday practices of intimacy due to limited focus or methodology, or subsumed claims about asexual intimacy within a wider political argument, without empirical evidence. Therefore, this paper aims to provide an understanding of the everyday contingent practices of intimacy used by asexual people, a topic that has been neglected.

Methods

The findings below come from a two-year project entitled 'A Qualitative Exploration of Asexual Identities and Practices of Intimacy', funded by the Leverhulme Trust (grant code RPG-2012-575). The project set out to answer two questions: 'How do individuals form an asexual identity?' and 'How is intimacy constructed and maintained in relationships where one, or both, of the principles identifies as asexual?' Our choice of a two-part methodology reflected these questions.

Firstly, participants were asked to take part in a biographical narrative interview (Wengraf, 2001) which sought to explore not just how participants came to an asexual identity, but also how this had changed over time. We have discussed some of the findings from this approach elsewhere (Scott *et al.*, 2016); the focus of this paper is primarily on our second methodological tool: research diaries.

Participants who took part in the interview were then asked to fill in a research diary for two weeks. The diary had space for daily entries with three prompts concerning interactions, experiences and thoughts concerning asexuality. We chose research diaries as a method due to their ability to 'get at' everyday experiences (Elliott, 1997), especially concerning sensitive topic matter (Kenten, 2010). For this reason, diaries have been seen as a valuable tool in research on intimate lives (Gabb 2009).

The diary questions reflected our understanding of intimate practices as relational, drawing on the 'connectedness thesis', which considers how 'association remains possible and desirable, as well as how it may take different shapes at different times' (Smart, 2007: 189). Together with our symbolic interactionist approach to the study of asexuality (Scott and Dawson, 2015), this means we

were interested in seeing how forms of intimacy, and the types of practice these create, were negotiated by participants at an everyday level (Jackson and Scott, 2010). We turned to a symbolic interactionist perspective since we were interested in these contextual and negotiated elements of practices of intimacy. As we discuss below, particularly significant here is the way in which a normatively sanctioned common 'definition of the situation' (Thomas and Thomas, 1928) shapes expectations concerning the 'appropriate' action in an intimate relationship. This helped overcome the tendencies towards an individualized focus in the existing literature, expressed either through the natural science desire to classify, or approaches which removed questions of being asexual from the context of social relations. Consequently, our focus is on the nature of these relationships and the obligations they place on individuals. This is intended to correct to some extent the aforementioned neglect of everyday practices of asexual intimacy (Carrigan, 2015: 18).

Recruitment and sample

Research into asexuality has both a notable advantage and challenges when it comes to recruitment. As noted elsewhere (Brotto *et al.*, 2010; Carrigan, 2011) the asexual community is both heavily informed about, and eager to take part in, research. To date, the main, and most efficient, way of recruiting participants is via the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), a website which forms the largest asexual space and community. AVEN, and those involved with it, most prominently the American activist David Jay, have been central to the increased knowledge, and acceptance, of asexuality (Kim, 2010) and have helped facilitate much of the research on the topic to date. But, the users of AVEN are a particular population, likely to be well-educated, broadly middle class, white, American and female.[1] Furthermore, those recruited via AVEN are likely to use the definitions and discourses around asexuality found on that site (Hinderliter, 2009: 620).

Therefore, while we did post a call for participants on the AVEN website, we also sought out other avenues. Our first was by publishing a piece on asexuality on the Huffington Post which included a contact for any interested participants (Dawson, 2013). We also contacted LGBTQ groups, posted notices in public spaces and found the announcement was reposted on various internet fora, such as Tumblr and Twitter. There was also an inevitable element of snowball sampling, as participants contacted others whom they thought may be interested.

The result of this was over 150 expressions of interest, while we unfortunately only had resources for 50 participants. Noticing that our population was still skewed to the demographics of previous studies, we first engaged in purposive sampling, by contacting all those who did not match those characteristics (most notably, men and/or people over the age of 30). We then used a random number generator to bring our total sample to 50.

These 50 participants all took part in the interview and were invited to complete the diary; 27 agreed to do so. Of this 27, the large majority were 'white',[2] 20 were aged between 18 and 29 and 18 had a university degree. From these participants we also found eight different gender identities: 'female' was the most common (18) followed by 'male' (3) then one each identified with other gender identities including 'cismale', 'agender' and 'androgynous'. Therefore, despite our best efforts, our sample was largely white, young, female and middle class (if we accept level of education as a marker of class). Given that ours is not the first study on asexuality to have had such a sample, we would suggest that this partly reflects the demographic profile of the community, especially the online spaces from which most participants were found. Since there is no reason to assume the practices of asexuality are more prevalent among this demographic grouping we would suggest that having access to the label 'asexual', and adopting it as a form of identity, may imply the resources not just to access such spaces but also to adopt the terminology used there.[3]

Our sample also showed the diversity of sexual orientation among the asexual group, with the 27 participants producing 17 different sexual orientations. The only repeated identities were 'aromantic asexual' (6), 'heteroromantic asexual' (4) and 'asexual' (3). We also found participants reflecting the variety of asexual identities, including 'grey asexual', 'panromantic demisexual', 'mostly asexual', 'repulsed heteroromantic asexual' and 'hetero-romantic, pandemiromantic, polyamorous flexible asexual'. As we shall see, it is important to highlight the diversity of asexual identities, not just to be true to participants but also because it makes generalizations about 'asexuals' as a group problematic. Some asexual individuals (such as our heteroromantic or grey asexual participants) may have more in common with heterosexual people than with our aromantic or repulsed participants concerning romantic intimacy.

Findings

Firstly, our data indicated that asexual people experience full and varied intimate lives, including romantic relationships, friendships and family relationships. There was also mention of non-human forms of intimacy, such as relations with pets (Charles and Davies, 2008), for example Freya's report that lying on the sofa with her dog fills 'my daily need of closeness to another creature'.

In many ways this is not a 'finding' since as researchers we did not expect anything else, and there is very little evidence to indicate some sort of 'deficit of intimacy' among asexual people. However, it is still an important statement to make, given some of the claims in the aforementioned literature about asexual 'atypical social functioning'. This leads to a wider point, discussed by Kim (2010), that the desire for, or engagement in, sex, is not a compulsory part of a 'healthy' lifestyle. But, below we will question to what extent this is a polarized choice between 'sex or no sex'.

There are three key themes which emerged: friendship, sex as a practice of intimacy, and exclusion from intimate practices. However, these themes incorporate many other areas of asexual intimate lives, including physical intimacy, the nature of romance, conflict, consensus, negotiation and different expectations.

Friendships

Friends were the most commonly mentioned source of intimacy in the diaries. However, this may reflect the nature of the method and the sample (being relatively young people). More specifically though, our data relate to the aforementioned claims that asexuality breaks down the boundaries of intimacy.

While friends were frequently invoked as a source of emotional intimacy, it was marked how often participants also spoke of them as a source of physical intimacy. This was sometimes attributed explicitly to their asexuality, as in Delphi's conversation with a friend:

> Nell stayed to chat for a while. She's just broken up with her partner and I wanted to see how she was doing. We had a hug, she kissed my hair, and I was holding her hand for a bit while she was talking to me. Being openly asexual seems to make other people around me feel more comfortable expressing their platonic affection for me in physical ways that are normally only reserved for romance.

Here, for Delphi, friends provided forms of physical intimacy which, were she not asexual, would be 'misread' as signs of romantic/sexual attraction. This desire for physical intimacy, and its availability from friends, was a common claim, epitomized by Ed, who said 'basically, I want to cuddle with other people'.

This could be seen to echo the claims about asexuality redrawing, and potentially blurring, the boundaries of intimacy: with sex removed from the equation, the distinction between 'friends' and 'partners', becomes less clear. However, there are two caveats we would add to this interpretation. Firstly, it relies upon friends being comfortable with the idea of asexuality and accepting this orientation as valid. Given reports of discrimination towards asexual people (MacInnis and Hodson, 2012), we should not assume that this acceptance is always forthcoming. Unfortunately, we found examples of this, such as Martha, whose close friend seemed accepting of her asexuality before one day saying that he did not believe it was real, and offering to 'throw a fuck her way'.[4] Therefore, the use of friendships as sources of physical intimacy ultimately relies upon a common definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas, 1928) – that is, both partners to the relationship have to operate with common assumptions of what is 'allowable' within a friendship, while accepting asexuality as a 'legitimate' orientation. Some of our participants were able to reach such a consensus, while others, such as Liam, who enjoyed touching, hugging and sometimes massaging his friends, faced more difficulties.

Secondly, the suggestion that asexual practices of intimacy involve transcending boundaries of intimacy implies that asexual people currently operate

outside or beyond these. However, what our participants spoke of was a careful awareness of, and negotiation around, the different boundaries of intimacy; the lines between their 'friends' and (actual or imagined) 'romantic partners' were carefully monitored rather than transcended.

An example of this comes from Freya, who could ostensibly be seen to reflect the 'transformative' nature of asexual practices of intimacy. She had been in a semi-poly relationship with a married couple, during which time she said she had a 'wife, a girlfriend and a mistress'. In her interview she said that she preferred always being someone's 'second choice' and that this arrangement created 'a relationship where I'm considered family'. However, this story of a day out with her friend indicates something more complex:

> When we walked together through a very crowded place she took my hand. It startled me slightly because she never does that. She usually takes me by the arm as we walk together ... but she never takes my hand. I think she considers it a too intimate gesture, something you save for a romantic partner. So that was ... strange.

Freya's confusion at her friend's actions represent a trend we identified amongst participants, to be monitoring, rather than transgressing, the boundaries of intimacy. While in her case this was about questioning the actions of her friends, we found a broader tendency towards ensuring that behaviour participants considered to be acts of 'friendly' physical intimacy were not misinterpreted as indicators of something 'more'. For example, Maisie spoke about how when she met a man she was 'conscious of every action/gesture/word we exchanged' since 'flirting between an asexual and a non-asexual can mean potentially mixed signals'.

Such concerns with negotiating and monitoring the boundaries of intimacy, rather than seeking to reject the divide between 'friends' and 'partners', could then cause problems for asexual people. Thus Carla complained one day that she was experiencing:

> Same problems as usual. Intimacy, intimacy, intimacy. Need. Need. Friendship. Wanting to be close. Making awkwardness. Being sexually confusing to other people. Being .... Almost making sexual overtures out of a need for intimacy. Knowing that that's not what it's really about.

Participants highlighted how the difficulties of negotiating such physically, yet not sexually, intimate relationships would sometimes leave them feeling, as Freya put it, 'touch-deprived'.

This does not detract from the fact that our participants expressed very high levels of intimacy, including disclosing intimacy (Jamieson, 1998), with friends. Our participants' accounts in many ways resemble claims that friendships are the 'ideal relationship' of late modern times (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). However, akin to scholars critical of these optimistic claims (Heaphy and Davies, 2012), we want to emphasize that the nature of friendships for asexual people sometimes involves complex negotiations around physical intimacy. A singular, idealized notion of friendship 'does not allow for messy and

asymmetrical periods of needing practical help or feeling dependent or needy which are routine occurrences ... in some friendships' (Jamieson, 1998: 105), such as the desire for physical intimacy.

Sex as a practice of intimacy

Reflective of previous research (Carrigan, 2012), only one participant was having a (long-distance) relationship with another asexual person who shared their romantic and sexual orientation. While a few were in relationships with those of different *asexual* orientations, the large majority of those in relationships were with persons of a different *sexual* orientation.

This meant that sex was currently practised by roughly a third of our participants in the research diaries. Again, here our findings reflect previous studies which have highlighted the extent to which asexual people engage in sexual activity (Scherrer, 2008; Van Houdenhove *et al.*, 2014). What we add is an awareness of the reasons why asexual people may do so. Given the aforementioned diversity of asexual identities, there are some, such as those identifying as demisexual and grey-a, who will experience forms of sexual desire at certain points, and so their active sex life should not be a surprise. In what follows, however, we primarily comment on those who experience romantic, though not sexual, attraction.

One explanation of why asexual people engage in sexual activity is societal pressure and expectation. For example, Fahs (2010: 456) claims that 'social desirability and economics drive asexual people into relationships despite lack of sexual attraction or arousal'. We did find some evidence of this, most prominently in the story of Idra, who was in a relationship that, while she was completing the diary, was in its relatively early stages. Idra had made the decision not to tell her partner Broc about her asexuality, since 'in the past it hasn't been received well by my friends and family' and instead had decided to 'just go with the motions and do what should be the reaction of "normal" couples'. In particular, she was keen that he should not know at this point, since 'I like him and I don't want him to know that more than a couple kisses is something that doesn't interest me and I don't want him to take it personally'. In this sense, she adopted strategies of 'passing' in order to conceal what she considered a stigmatizing attribute (Goffman, 1963). The pressures on Idra had been relieved, and her ability to pass enhanced, by the fact that Broc had been sharing a home which offered little privacy for the two of them to be alone. However, this passing became more difficult when Broc moved to his own house and wanted to be more sexually intimate. After spending her first night there, Idra wrote:

> Spending the night with Broc in his new place was an issue; issue I'm not sure is the right word but I can't think of another one. Having sex is something that we do because I succumb to peer pressure and want to be normal so I go ahead with it. I just wish that I knew how to approach the subject with him and then even know what to say if I did.

Here we see the difficulties of negotiating sex as an open issue when the definition of the situation, a romantic relationship, demands it. However, this story also shows the need to move away from blanket statements such as that offered by Fahs. While she did feel pressure to have sex Idra had not been 'driven' into a relationship; she wanted to be with Broc, though at the moment some practices within that relationship were not to her liking. Others, such as when they danced together and chatted about their families one night on their university campus, were.

However, we also found other negotiations around sex in relationships, best illustrated by the story of Simone. Simone had been in a relationship with George for a few months, which included sex. They had developed some non-verbal signals for when Simone was willing to engage in sex but she was also very aware of how George may desire sex occasionally, leading to the following story:

> Last night I had hoped to have sex with George, mostly because it's been a while and we weren't able to last time we saw each other. I had an infection a few days ago but it seemed to be better, but it turned out penetration was still painful for me. He noticed my cringing and stopped. I was willing to give him a blowjob anyway, but he didn't ask for one.

For Simone, having sex was something she did for the good of the relationship as a unit and because it was something she could do to make George happy. It would be too simplistic, and an underestimation of Simone's agency, to see this as something she was 'forced' or 'driven' to do. Instead, it reflects the fact that relationships create a certain definition of the situation and expectations upon actors. These same actors can, within limits, negotiate such expectations, but also may embrace them as something they want to do.

Simone and Idra represent two opposite ends of the continuum between those who offer sex as a valued part of the relationship and those who engage in sex, though not romantic relationships generally, due to pressure. Many of our participants who engaged in sex often ended up somewhere between these two poles, such as Ed. Ed had not learned about asexuality until his early forties; his marriage dissolved soon after. However, his ex-wife continued to live with him, and although they had separate bedrooms they would sometimes sleep together, which could involve sex, though often, reflecting Ed's desire for physical intimacy, would take the form of cuddling. Nevertheless, much like the confusion with friends mentioned above, the cuddling could sometimes take on another form:

> Well, during the cuddling, she was hinting that she wanted to have sex with me. Truthfully, I wasn't interested. However, it had been a couple months since she had asked before, and I couldn't figure out a way to get out of it without hurting her feelings. Finally, I just gave in. I mean, it didn't hurt me or anything, but I just wasn't interested.

While Ed would, as in the above, sometimes acquiesce to his ex-wife's requests for sex – indeed, towards the end of his diary Ed and his ex-wife were considering becoming part of a polyamorous relationship with another man she had met – he increasingly developed ways of avoiding being in a situation where sex was possible, for example by getting dressed before she woke up.

Therefore, sex as a practice of intimacy occupied different positions in the lives of our participants. However, in all cases, it was a contextual practice of intimacy (Jamieson, 1998) carved out within the circumstances of a wider relationship. It is only by understanding the nature of the relationship of which it is part that we can appreciate its place alongside other practices of intimacy in the lives of asexual people, since 'to closely describe these limits is to closely study the social relations of the people who draw them' (Goffman, 1983: 46). In short, we cannot assume sex is unwillingly performed by asexual people. This is true not only of those who do experience sexual attraction, but also of others involved in negotiations with non-asexual partners.

However, for many of our participants, sex was not a practice of intimacy they engaged in. For our sex-repulsed/aromantic participants this was a choice, while for others it was a circumstance: they had not yet been in relationships where this had been a consideration. Nevertheless, it could become one. Many diaries recounted discussions with friends and questions about asexuality, a frequent one being whether their asexual friend would have sex with a partner. Answers to this reflected the discussion above, that they would, to please their partner and/or for the good of the relationship. This would often lead to a worry expressed by Delphi that 'even if I was prepared to have sex, how could my awkward fumblings compare with an allosexual[5] partner who felt real desire and knew instinctively what to do?' In this sense participants such as Delphi suggested a comparison with a 'competent other' who appeared to understand the unspoken rules (Scott, 2007) of sex, from which they felt excluded due to their asexuality.

Although asexuality shaped our participants' views of sex, the actual practices they adopted are not unique to asexual people. After all, non-asexual people sometimes have sex in relationships when they do not really want to, 'for the good of the relationship' (Gabb, 2008: 143), people who have not had sex worry about their relative lack of competence in relation to their more experienced peers (Tolman, 2005), and so on. Without wanting to marginalize the ways in which these practices are experienced and 'framed' (Morgan, 2010) by asexual people, we do want to highlight that what goes on in such relationships is not automatically unique to asexual people. We return to this point in the conclusion.

Exclusion from practices of intimacy

As we have seen, our participants lived full intimate lives, including both friendships with the negotiation of physical intimacy, and romantic relationships

which may include sex. However, they also reported feelings of social exclusion from dominant conceptions of intimate life and practices.

We have already seen one instance of this: Delphi's worries that her 'awkward fumblings' would lessen her attractiveness to a non-asexual partner. Indeed, Delphi later experienced this after a friend kissed her at a club and she felt awkward, since 'this wasn't going to lead to us hooking up'. Similar experiences were reported by other participants. For example, Carmel had met Ned, and they quickly realized they were attracted to each other. However, Carmel spoke of a 'disconnect when it comes to sexuality' which meant that they never entered a relationship, despite their mutual attraction. Ed also wrote about his realization that his ex-wife had cheated on him due to his lack of sexual desire.[6] Meanwhile, Simon suggested that although he could 'understand sexual attraction in theory' his lack of practical experience meant he found it difficult to console his friend after her messy break-up.

A lack of felt expertise and/or desire along with a disconnection from the expectations of others led to some participants feeling excluded from areas of intimate life, or practices of intimacy. Maisie spoke about the difficulty of finding an 'ACE soulmate'[7] who would share the same expectations and practices. Indeed, it was notable how few of our participants even considered this an option, despite the presence of online asexual dating spaces, such as Acebook and Platonic Partners. Some saw singledom as their fate, for better or worse.

However, it is dangerous to assign such exclusion to 'asexuality' and important to recognize that asexual people live complex lives of intersecting identities, which may have an equal or greater impact on their intimate practices. A good example of this came from Ella, who was our oldest participant at 59. Like other older people who live alone, she had a wide network of friends while also experiencing some instances of isolation (Jamieson and Simpson, 2013: 182–184). This was illustrated in the following story of a friend's wedding:

> I was at a table with a younger couple and 2 men in their early 40s … I and one of the men, Kane, had sat down as far as we could from the speakers. We chatted a bit. Then I got up to get a lemonade … When I got back to the table, my place had been moved to the opposite side of the circular table, closer to the speakers, and the couple and other man had joined Kane. They were chatting away and there was not even the slightest acknowledgement when I returned to the table. Such is the life for an older, single woman. Is it asexuality at work, age, or just rudeness? Who knows?

Here, Ella's age could be seen to limit her interaction with potential friends and partners. Undoubtedly her experiences were partly shaped by her asexuality, for example many of her female friends of the same age had formed 'mommy groups' to maintain their friendships, from which she felt excluded.[8] But, in this instance, it was her status as an 'older, single woman' which seemed to shape the interaction. Such stories, showing the intersection between asexuality and older age, have been invisible in previous research, due to its focus on younger people.

Furthermore, given the diversity of asexual identities, we should not assume a commonality of such exclusion. Martha was an aromantic asexual and was one of the few to have asexual friends beyond online spaces. She had met John by arranging to meet for coffee via AVEN. Once she arrived, she quickly realized that John, who was heteroromantic, had imagined the meeting to be a date. Once she told him she was aromantic he initially seemed content but became more irritated, before finally saying, 'it would be so much easier if I could date an asexual but no – you're unavailable still. You aromantics!' Therefore, although Martha and John were both 'asexual', their differing identities within this meta-category (Chasin, 2010) fundamentally shaped how they imagined their interaction to occur.[9] This is another example of the disconnection between personal desires and the normative, socially sanctioned, definitions of the situation.

Without wishing to understate the ways in which asexuality can exclude its holders from practices of intimacy or make certain relationships difficult to form, such a claim should always take account of the intersecting identities held by that group (as in the case of Ella) or the complex and different forms of intimate practices such an identity produces (such as the cases of Martha and John). As we suggest below, these two points have a broader significance.

Conclusion

This article has, based upon findings from research diaries, detailed the practices of intimacy used by asexual people. In particular, we have focused on three themes present in the diaries: the centrality of friendships, including for physical intimacy; the role of sex as practice of intimacy; and the ways in which asexual people can feel excluded from intimate practices. In doing so we have emphasized that the ways in which asexual people practise intimacy have to be understood within the context of the relationship of which it is part. This supports the 'connected' thesis of intimacy, as opposed to individualized conceptions (Smart, 2007). It is not sufficient to explain the forms of intimacy favoured by asexual people without also recognizing the way their intimate others adjust to, negotiate or reject such practices. This in turn demonstrates the negotiated elements of interaction and the value of a symbolic interactionist approach (Blumer, 1969; Jackson and Scott, 2010; Scott and Dawson, 2015). Delphi's physically intimate friendships and Carla's continued frustration at having her 'friend' signals misread as sexual, were both shaped by the negotiations they are able, or unable, to undertake with significant others (Mead, 1934).

There are three implications to take from our findings. Firstly, the claim that asexual people are engaged in radical practices which seek to transcend or negate the boundaries of intimacy is not borne out by our data. As we have seen, our participants were very much aware of such boundaries and sought to stick within them, rather than critique them. In this sense, we would echo claims that, while sociologists have often wished for people to be part of the 'vanguard' in their personal lives, they have more often than not been

'pragmatists' (Duncan, 2011). Lay conceptions of love do not always match the overly optimistic or pessimistic views of much social theory (Carter, 2013).

Secondly, we highlight the intimate connection between personal asexual identity and intimacy. For our participants, the practices they were willing or even eager to engage in were framed by where they identified along the sexual and romantic attraction axes. This opened up potential relationship forms (such as physically intimate friendships) but also closed down future possibilities (as in concerns about sexual experience). Therefore, the connection between asexual identity and intimacy both opens up, and forecloses, potentialities. Some participants seemed to have their asexuality rejected as a legitimate social identity, as in Martha's friend or Idra's worries about Broc's reaction.

The third finding, however, is the key one: namely, that from the above it is difficult to claim there are distinctively 'asexual practices of intimacy', as opposed to 'practices of intimacy that asexual people draw upon more frequently'. The types of intimate practices engaged in are not inherently linked to being 'asexual people' as a group (leaving aside whether such a diverse set of individuals can be seen as a 'group'), but rather can be found across many sexualities. While our participants, like others who lack established scripts for their sexuality, may have to engage in 'life experiments' in order to realize their ideal forms of intimacy (Weeks *et al.*, 2001), it would be inaccurate to claim their negotiations are entirely unique. This can be seen especially in negotiations around sex, which are not limited to relationships involving asexual people. Rather than treating asexual intimate lives as potential harbingers of radical change, the focus should be on exploring the intersection of intimate practices with other life circumstances (such as age and class background) and other sexual identities. This leads to a wider point for sociologists of not automatically accepting the ontological permanence of categories in which individuals can be placed. Instead, as our symbolic interactionist approach has shown, being aware of the contingent negotiations and expectations of social relationships with significant others challenges the assumed boundaries between groups, revealing similarity as much as difference. Thus while asexual people face some particular circumstances when it comes to intimate relationships, the negotiations and frustrations they face are not unique.

University of Glasgow
University of Sussex
University of Sussex

Received 3 November 2015
Finally accepted 10 February 2016

Notes

1 As suggested by the most recent survey of AVEN members (Ginoza *et al.*, 2014).
2 Demographic detail was provided by self-completion, meaning participants wrote a variety of different ethnic identities. Saying the large majority were white is the extent of the summary we can offer here without listing the various identities offered. The same is true for some of the following categories.

3 We did try to overcome this by not restricting our recruitment material to just those who identified as asexual, including people 'who experience little or no sexual attraction or desire', but it seems this was not entirely successful.
4 That being said, it was marked how often it was friends with whom participants discussed their asexuality rather than family members, who were seen, partly due to differences of generations, to 'not understand'. This can be seen in Bea's vexation at her mum's questioning of why she would buy lingerie when she has no sexual partner to show it to, or Martha's feeling that she was a 'shit daughter' due to the low probability of her having children.
5 'Allosexual' is a term sometimes used in asexual spaces to refer to those who are not asexual.
6 Although Ed was the only participant to have experienced this directly, it was a fear for other participants, meaning some left the possibility open of a polyamorous relationship. In this sense we found some potential evidence in support of Scherrer's (2010a) claim for the link between asexuality and polyamory.
7 'ACE' is a term often used among the asexual community as an alternative to 'asexual'.
8 Of course, being asexual does not mandate being childless, in the same way that being heterosexual does not guarantee having children.
9 We should also be careful to ascribe exclusion when a lack of intimacy may be a choice, as in the case of Lisa. She answered 'no' to the questions on the diary, every day, for two weeks. Reflecting on this, she said her response indicated that, as an 'asocial' person, 'I don't particularly want to feel close to people'.

References

Bauman, Z., (1998), 'On the postmodern uses of sex', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 15 (3-4): 19–33.
Blumer, H., (1969), *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
Bogaert, A., (2004), 'Asexuality: prevalence and associated factors in a national probability sample', *Sex Research*, 41 (3): 279–287.
Bogaert, A., (2012), *Understanding Asexuality*, Plymouth: Rowman Littlefield.
Brotto, L. Knudson, G., Inskip, J., Rhodes, K. and Erskine, Y., (2010), 'Asexuality: a mixed methods approach', *Archive of Sexual Behaviour*, 39 (3): 599–618.
Carrigan, M., (2011), 'There's more to life than sex? Difference and commonality within the asexual community', *Sexualities*, 14 (4): 462–478.
Carrigan, M., (2012), '"How do you know you don't like it if you haven't tried it?" Asexual agency and the sexual assumption', in T. G. Morrison, M. A. Morrison, M. A. Carrigan and D. T. McDermott (eds), *Sexual Minority Research in the New Millennium*, 3–20, New York: Nova Science.
Carrigan, M., (2015), 'Asexuality', in C. Richards and M. J. Barker (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of the Psychology of Sexuality and Gender*, 7–23, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Carter, J., (2013), 'The curious absence of love in women's talk', *Sociological Review*, 61 (4): 728–744.
Charles, N. and Davies, C., (2008), 'My family and other animals: pets as kin', *Sociological Research Online*, 13 (5).
Chasin, C. J., (2011), 'Theoretical issues in the study of asexuality', *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 40 (4): 713–723.
Chasin, C. J., (2013), 'Reconsidering asexuality and its radical potential', *Feminist Studies*, 39 (2): 405–426.
Dawson, M., (2013), 'Asexuality needs to be included when we discuss sex and sexuality', *Huffington Post UK*, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/matt-p-dawson/asexuality-discussion_b_3389963.html
Duncan, S., (2011), 'The world we have made? Individualization and personal life in the 1950s', *Sociological Review*, 59 (2): 242–265.

Elliott, H., (1997), 'The use of diaries in sociological research on health experience', *Sociological Research Online*, 2 (2).
Emens, E., (2014), 'Compulsory sexuality', *Stanford Law Review*, 66 (2): 303–386.
Fahs, B., (2010), 'Radical refusals: on the anarchist politics of women choosing asexuality', *Sexualities*, 13 (4): 445–461.
Gabb, J., (2008), *Researching Intimacy in Families*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Gabb, J., (2009), 'Researching family relationships: a qualitative mixed methods approach', *Methodological Innovations Online*, 42 (2): 37–52.
Gazzola, S. and Morrison, M., (2012), 'Asexuality: an emergent sexual orientation', in T. G. Morrison, M. A. Morrison, M. A. Carrigan and D. T. McDermott (eds), *Sexual Minority Research in the New Millennium*, 21–44, New York: Nova Science.
Giddens, A., (1992), *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
Ginoza, M. K., Miller, T. and members of the AVEN Survey Team, (2014), 'The 2014 AVEN community census: preliminary findings', *AVEN*, available at: https://asexualcensus.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/2014censuspreliminaryreport.pdf
Goffman, E., (1963), *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, London: Penguin.
Goffman, E., (1983), 'Felicity's condition', *American Journal of Sociology*, 89 (1): 1–53.
Gressgård, R., (2013), 'Asexuality: from pathology to identity and beyond', *Psychology and Sexuality*, 4 (2): 179–192.
Heaphy, B. and Davies, K., (2012), 'Critical friendships', *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 1 (3): 311–326.
Hinderliter, A., (2013), 'How is asexuality different from hypoactive sexual desire disorder?' *Psychology and Sexuality*, 4 (2): 167–178.
Jackson, S. and Scott, S. J., (2010), *Theorizing Sexuality*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
Jamieson, L., (1998), *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
Jamieson, L., (2005), 'Boundaries of intimacy', in L. McKie and S. Cunningham-Burley (eds), *Families in Society: Boundaries and Relationships*, 189–206, Bristol: Policy Press.
Jamieson, L. and Simpson, R., (2013), *Living Alone: Globalization, Identity and Belonging*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Kahn, K., (2014), '"There's no such thing as a sexual relationship": asexuality's sinthomatics', in K. J. Cerankowski and M. Milks (eds), *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, 55–76, London: Routledge.
Kenten, C., (2010), 'Narrating oneself: reflections on the use of solicited diaries with diary interviews', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 11 (2), Art. 16, available at: http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1002160
Kim, E., (2010), 'How much sex is healthy? The pleasures of asexuality', in J. Metzl and A. Kirkland (eds), *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality*, 157–169, New York: New York University Press.
MacInnis, C. and Hodson, G., (2012), 'Intergroup biases towards "Group X": evidence of prejudice, dehumanization, avoidance and discrimination against asexuals', *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 15 (6): 725–743.
Mead, G. H., (1934), *Mind, Self and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Morgan, D., (2010), *Rethinking Family Practices*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Poston, D. and Baumle, A., (2010), 'Patterns of asexuality in the United States', *Demographic Research*, 23: 509–530.
Prause, N. and Graham, C., (2007), 'Asexuality: classification and characterization', *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 36 (3): 341–356.
Prause, N. and Harenski, C., (2014), 'Inhibition, lack of excitation, or suppression: fMRI pilot of asexuality', in K. J. Cerankowski and M. Milks (eds), *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, 35–54, London: Routledge.
Pryzbolo, E., (2011), 'Crisis and safety: the asexual in sexusociety', *Sexualities*, 14 (4): 444–461.

Pryzbolo, E., (2013), 'Afterword: some thoughts on asexuality as an interdisciplinary method', *Psychology and Sexuality*, 4 (2): 193–194.
Scherrer, K., (2008), 'Coming to an asexual identity: negotiating identity, negotiating desire', *Sexualities*, 11 (5): 621–641.
Scherrer, K., (2010a), 'Asexual relationships: what does asexuality have to do with polyamory?' in M. Barker and D. Langdridge (eds), *Understanding Non-Monogamies*, 154–159, London: Routledge.
Scherrer, K., (2010b), 'What asexuality contributes to the same-sex marriage debate', *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, 22 (1–2): 56–73.
Scott, S., (2007), *Shyness and Society: The Illusion of Competence*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Scott, S. and Dawson, M., (2015), 'Rethinking asexuality: a symbolic interactionist account', *Sexualities*¸ 18 (1-2): 3–19.
Scott, S., McDonnell, L. and Dawson, M., (2016), 'Stories of non-becoming: non-issues, non-events and non-identities in asexual lives', *Symbolic Interaction*, published online first, DOI: 10.1002/symb.215.
Smart, C., (2007), *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
Spencer, L. and Pahl, R., (2006), *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Thomas, W. I. and Thomas, D. S., (1928), 'Situations defined as real are real in their consequences', in G. Stone and H. Farberman (eds), *Social Psychology through Interaction*, 154–155, Waltham: Ginn-Blasidell, 1970.
Tolman, D. L., (2005), *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality*, London: Harvard University Press.
Van Houdenhove, E., Gijs, L., T'Sjoen, G. and Enzlin, P., (2014), 'Stories about asexuality: a qualitative study on asexual women'x, *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 41 (3): 262–281.
Weeks, J., Heaphy, B. and Donovan, C., (2001), *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments*, London: Routledge.
Wengraf, T., (2001), *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative Methods and Semi-Structured Methods*, London: Sage
Yule, M., Brotto, L. and Gorzalka, B., (2014), 'Biological markers of asexuality: handedness, birth order, and finger length ratios in self-identified asexual men and women', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 43 (2): 299–310.