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And Now I’m Just Different, but There’s Nothing Actually Wrong With Me”: Asexual Marginalization and Resistance

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the relationship between contemporary asexual lives and compulsory sexuality, or the privileging of sexuality and the marginalizing of nonsexuality. Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews, I identify four ways the asexually identified individuals in this study saw themselves as affected by compulsory sexuality: pathologization, isolation, unwanted sex and relationship conflict, and the denial of epistemic authority. I also identify five ways these asexually identified individuals disrupted compulsory sexuality: adopting a language of difference and a capacity to describe asexuality; deemphasizing the importance of sexuality in human life; developing new types of nonsexual relationships; constituting asexuality as a sexual orientation or identity; and engaging in community building and outreach. I argue that some of these practices offer only a limited disruption of compulsory sexuality, but some of these practices pose a radical challenge to sexual norms by calling into question the widespread assumption that sexuality is a necessary part of human flourishing.

In the past two decades, the advent of the Internet has allowed for the emergence of new sexual identities, including asexuality. The largest online community for individuals who identify as asexual, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), has defined an asexual person as someone “who does not experience sexual attraction.” There is a great deal of diversity within the online asexual community in terms of identification and sexual practice (Carrigan, 2011).

Contemporary asexual identities and communities should be of interest to scholars in the field of sexuality studies because they differ from other minority sexual identities and communities in several key respects. In many cases, minority sexual communities have challenged what they perceive to be the “sex-negativity” or “erotophobia” of contemporary Western society and have celebrated nonnormative forms of sexual pleasure (see, for example, Rubin, 1984). Contemporary asexual communities challenge different aspects of Western sexual norms—identifying the ways in which “pro-sex” aspects of contemporary...
Western society can negatively affect asexually identified individuals and potentially undermining any naturalization of sexual attraction as a universal motivating force or as an essential component of adult identity.

There is a small but growing body of scholarship investigating the relationship between asexual identities and contemporary Western sexual norms. A number of scholars studying asexuality have argued that although Western society is certainly “sex negative” in some ways, Western society also systematically privileges sexual identifications, desires, and activities while marginalizing different forms of non-sexuality, to the detriment of asexually identified individuals (for example, Chasin, 2013; Emens, 2014; Gupta, 2015a). According to some scholars, asexual community formation poses a challenge to this society-wide system of “compulsory sexuality” or “sex-normativity,” calling into question deeply held assumptions about sexuality and relationality (Chasin, 2013). Additionally, some scholars have argued that asexual community formation poses a challenge to “pro-sex” rhetoric within some feminist, queer, and disability studies scholarship and activism (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010; Gupta, 2013b; Kim, 2011).

However, other scholars have questioned the extent to which contemporary asexual community formation actually challenges sexual norms. For example, Przybylo (2011) argued that current asexual activism, which seeks public recognition for asexuality as an innate sexual orientation characterized by a lack of sexual attraction, does not pose a fundamental challenge to contemporary sexual structures. Przybylo wrote, “in its current reactive, binarized state, asexuality functions to anchor sexuality, not alter its logic” (Przybylo, 2011, p. 452).

Although much of this scholarly discussion has occurred at a theoretical level or has analyzed the discourse of AVEN and other online asexual communities, a growing number of qualitative studies have begun to investigate how asexually identified people engage with contemporary sexual norms in practice. A number of studies have explored one or more of the negative impacts of contemporary sexual norms on the lives of asexually identified individuals. According to this scholarship, asexually identified individuals can face pathologization (Foster & Scherrer, 2014; Robbins, Low, & Query, 2015), difficulties in relationships and social situations (Carrigan, 2011), and disbelief or denial of their asexual self-identification (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014).

A smaller number of qualitative studies have explored how asexually identified individuals work to challenge contemporary Western sexual norms in practice. For example, based on an analysis of written survey responses from 102 individuals recruited from AVEN, Scherrer argued that individuals who identify as asexual disrupt sexual norms in several ways; for example, by redefining sexual activities as nonsexual, asexually identified individuals disrupt the socially constructed distinction between the “sexual” and the “nonsexual.” In addition, according to Scherrer, by establishing new types of intimate relationships not based on sexuality, asexually identified individuals challenge Western society’s
privileging of sexual relationships over nonsexual relationships and can undermine Western society’s conflation of romantic and sexual attraction (Scherrer, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). Similarly, based on interviews with 15 individuals, Sloan argued that asexually identified individuals can challenge sexual expectations by practicing “kink” as a nonsexual activity (Sloan, 2015). Drawing on interviews with three asexually identified men, Przybylo argued that asexually identified men can disrupt Western notions of hegemonic masculinity (Przybylo, 2014). As a caveat, however, Cuthbert (2015) argued that although asexually identified individuals may challenge some contemporary Western sexual norms, they may also reinforce ableism through the denial of any causal links between asexuality and disability (Cuthbert, 2015), and Owens (2014) argued that participants in online asexual communities often ignore or deny the importance of racism as a social system of power and privilege (Owens, 2014).

This article seeks to further our understanding of the relationship between contemporary Western sexual norms and asexually identified individuals by using the concept of compulsory sexuality to analyze 30 in-depth interviews with individuals who identify as asexual. I first chart what interviewees identified as the negative impacts of compulsory sexuality on their lives. Largely confirming earlier scholarship, here I offer a typology of these negative impacts: pathologization, isolation, unwanted sex and relationship conflict, and the denial of epistemic authority. I then discuss how interviewees explicitly or implicitly challenged, resisted, or defied aspects of compulsory sexuality in their discourse and described praxis. Confirming and expanding on existing scholarship, here I offer a typology of these forms of challenge, resistance, and defiance: adopting a language of difference and capacity to describe asexuality; deemphasizing the importance of sexuality in human life; developing new types of relationships not centered on sexual activity; constituting asexuality as a sexual orientation or identity; and engaging in asexual community building and outreach. I argue that some of these practices likely offer only a limited disruption of contemporary Western sexual norms, but some of these practices could pose a fundamental challenge to Western society’s sexual system by calling into question the widespread assumption that sexuality is a necessary part of human flourishing.

This study

Research design

This article is drawn from a larger study designed to explore how self-identified asexuals understand their own experiences and engage with sexual norms (Gupta, 2013a, 2015b; n.d.). Informally, I analyzed content posted on AVEN and on other Web sites. I also attended three in-person meetings of AVEN
members in the Atlanta area. Formally, I conducted 30 in-depth semistructured interviews with self-identified asexual individuals. Interviewees were recruited through AVEN. Inclusion criteria were as follows: the participant must live in the United States, must be 18 years of age or older, and must identify as asexual or as a member of an asexual community. Recruiting materials indicated a preference for in-person interviews but also invited phone interviews. Interviews were conducted from January of 2011 through May of 2012. All interviewees gave informed consent and filled out a short demographic questionnaire before the interview. Questions focused on current (a)sexual identification, (a)sexual development and relationship history, participation in asexual communities, interactions with medical professionals, perceptions of contemporary sexual norms, experiences of stigma or marginalization, responses from others to asexuality, personal life goals, and desires for social or political change. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2.5 hours (mean = 1 hour). Interviewees were given a $25 gift certificate for participating. Twenty-five of the interviews were conducted in-person in metropolitan areas in the United States. The other five interviews were conducted over the phone. The project was approved by the Emory Institutional Review Board (IRB) and by the AVEN Project Team. All interviews were voice recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were coded using the framework developed by Rubin and Rubin (2005), which involves first identifying concepts and themes from the existing literature and the researcher’s own interview transcripts, then coding based on these themes and concepts, and, finally, looking for patterns and linkages within and between concepts and themes and considering the broader implications of one’s findings (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Pseudonyms have been assigned to all the interviewees. Quotations have been edited for readability. All interviewees were provided with an early version of this analysis and were invited to give feedback.1

Respondents2

Most of the interviewees (90%) identified as asexual, whereas 3% identified as gray-aseual or grey-aseual (between asexual and sexual identification) and 7% identified as demisexual (capable of developing sexual feelings within a longer-term relationship). Most of the interviewees indicated that they sought romantic but nonsexual relationships, with 63% identifying as romantic and 17% identifying as demi-romantic (capable of developing romantic feelings in a longer-term relationship). Seventeen percent of respondents did not seek romantic relationships, identifying as aromantic, and one person identified as “other” in terms of romantic identity. Of those who identified as romantic or demi-romantic, 48% identified as heteroromantic (interested in an opposite-gender partner), 12% as homoromantic (interested in a same gender partner), and 36% as bi/panromantic (interested in both genders or open to any gender). Seventy percent of
interviewees identified as female, 23% as male. One interviewee identified as a transwoman and one as “other” in terms of gender identity. Interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 50 (mean = 29, SD = 9.5). All but four participants indicated that they were not currently in a romantic relationship. All but three participants identified as White. Respondents were generally well educated: 66% had attained a bachelor’s degree or higher, and most of the remainder were still in school. This sample included respondents from across the socioeconomic spectrum, but the majority of the respondents were either white-collar professionals or students from middle-class families.

Although this study was limited to people living in the United States, the demographics of this sample are generally similar to the demographics of online asexual communities, according to a community survey conducted by Asexual Awareness Week (Miller, 2012). However, the current sample was significantly older and better educated than the online sample, as the current study was restricted to those 18 or older. In addition, the current sample included more asexually identified individuals (90% compared to 56%) and fewer gray-aseexual individuals (3% compared to 21%) and demisexual individuals (7% compared to 21%), possibly as a result of the recruiting materials. Finally, there were proportionally more men in the current sample than in the online sample, and a smaller proportion of people identified as “other” in terms of gender identity (6% compared to 23%). I can only speculate about the causes of this difference in gender composition.

**Theoretical approach to data and analysis**

In analyzing my data, I understood sexuality as shaped by social, cultural, economic, and political influences. In addition, I understood the interview data as a record of the participants’ interpretations of their “lived experience”—with the recognition that the interpretations they offered were shaped by available discourses, by myself as the interviewer, and by the interactional context of the interview itself (Aguinaldo, 2012; Gavey, 1989; Wilkinson, 2000). Throughout the following discussion, I will highlight ways in which my position and interests as a researcher shaped the data and analysis. I will also identify ways in which the position and interests of the interviewees may have shaped the data. Most importantly, the fact that all the interviewees were members of AVEN (although they varied in their level of participation in the community) meant that they had a common language through which to understand and interpret their own experiences. In addition, the fact that many of them participated in the interview to increase knowledge about and visibility for contemporary asexual identities may have shaped how they presented themselves; in particular, they may have drawn on discourses that they hoped would legitimize asexuality to me as a perceived outsider (albeit a friendly one) and to the general public.
Limitations

Because I limited my sample to English-speaking adults living in the United States, this study should not be taken as representative of the entire AVEN community. In addition, the AVEN community should not be taken as representative of all contemporary asexual formations. Thus this study should be understood as an investigation of how some members of the AVEN community understand their experiences with stigmatization and work to reconfigure contemporary sexual norms. Future research is needed to extend the findings of this study.

Findings and discussion

Negative impacts of compulsory sexuality

In response to a direct question about whether they had ever felt stigmatized or marginalized as a result of their asexual identity, more than one half of the interviewees answered “yes,” more than one quarter answered “maybe” or “in some ways yes, in some ways no,” and around 20% answered “no.” In addition, all the interviewees described at least one negative experience attributable to compulsory sexuality. Here I offer a typology of these negative impacts of compulsory sexuality: pathologization, isolation, unwanted sex and relationship conflict, and the denial of epistemic authority. It is important to emphasize that what follows should not be taken as direct evidence of marginalization, stigma, or discrimination but as the interviewees’ interpretations of and narratives about particular life experiences.

Pathologization

Lack of interest in sex has historically been pathologized by Western medical and mental health professionals (see Cryle & Moore, 2012; Gupta, 2015b). As a result, I asked the interviewees specifically about their experiences with medical professionals, and, in response, around one half of the interviewees described experiences of pathologization. For example, according to some interviewees, when they came out as asexual to family, friends, or acquaintances, their confidants offered them medical or psychological explanations for their asexuality, and some even tried to convince them to seek medical or psychological treatment. For example, according to one interviewee, when she came out to her (then) boyfriend, he told her that low sexual desire is a mental disorder and that she should seek treatment from a psychiatrist. Another interviewee described being pressured by her parents to see a doctor: “The longer I went that way, the more worried they got. Like they used to keep telling me to go to a doctor and tell them what I’m feeling and
then see if they have a pill that can cure me.” In addition to the one half of interviewees who reported pathologization, two interviewees expected to be pathologized if they came out as asexual.

Around one third of the interviewees (7, \( n = 29 \)) reported that they were led by a number of factors (especially relationship difficulties) to consult a health professional in an effort to find an explanation for their asexuality and/or in an effort to increase their level of interest in sex.\(^4\) One interviewee reported a positive experience—she enjoyed seeing her therapist but decided to stop the therapy because she did not think it would change her sexuality, and she had decided to break up with her partner. Four interviewees reported neutral experiences—the health professionals they consulted were unable to find an explanation for their asexuality, and the interviewees decided to stop pursuing the issue. Two interviewees described negative experiences with mental health professionals. Hillary, a woman in her 30s, described visiting a number of therapists with her (then) husband. Of these visits, she said, “We ended up going through three different intakes for various reasons...And all of them basically thought there was something wrong with me. The last one...eventually agreed that it was possible that I was asexual, but again, I don’t really think she truly believed it. I think she thought I was a repressed lesbian.” Lorri, a recent college graduate, described her negative experience with therapists as follows: “It wasn’t just one therapist; I went to like three. And they didn’t last long. It was pretty much the same verdict: ‘go have sex and you’ll like it. You don’t know yet; you’re silly.’”

**Isolation and invisibility**

When asked about experiences of stigma or marginalization or if they saw any negative aspects to identifying as asexual, at least two thirds of interviewees reported occasionally feeling isolated or alienated from others or from society as a result of the stigmatization or invisibility of nonsexuality.\(^5\) For example, Hannah talked about avoiding restaurants, bars, and clubs to avoid feeling isolated: “I think that a lot of social activities are like that, a lot of people think the goal is to hook up...So I sort of don’t want to participate in these sorts of things.” Anne, a current undergraduate majoring in psychology, described feeling isolated during a classroom discussion about sex: “It’s sort of a lonely feeling...everyone was like laughing and so forth, and I was kind of like ‘Ha-ha-ha, I don’t really get it,’ you know?” Sharon, age 49, described being bullied as a child, which she attributed to her weight and social awkwardness and to her lack of interest in dating or sex. She said, “I know my general social awkwardness, especially then, was a big part of what made me a target for them, but I also think that the asexuality played a significant part as well. I didn’t react to those boys the way they wanted me to. I had no sexual interest in them, and didn’t know how to fake it.”

At least 12 interviewees described feeling left out when their friends or peers talked about sex. For example, Lilly, 19, stated, “There would be a
sleepover and people would be like, ‘Let’s play truth or dare.’ And almost all
the questions are like, ‘Oh, who do you like? Have you ever kissed a guy?
Who do you have a crush on?’ And I’d just be sitting there, like, ‘I don’t have
a crush on anyone.’ … And usually they’re like, ‘Oh, you’re boring.’”

At least eight interviewees described feeling isolated as a result of what they
perceived as the overwhelming sexualization of the media and advertising.
Mark, 25, said, “And now there’s sex everywhere…Also, sex sells on television,
commercials, television shows…It’s just—I feel like it’s everywhere.” At least
seven interviewees reported feeling isolated because asexuality is not represented
in the media. Lilly said, “And so definitely the main thing that we face is
erasure…the number of [asexual] characters in books and movies and TV
who openly identify as asexual is two…it’s hard to figure stuff out just because
there’s no examples.”

**Unwanted sex and relationship conflict**

In response to a question about their relationship history, almost two thirds
of interviewees reported that social norms about sexuality and relationality
and the invisibility of asexuality had negatively affected their interpersonal
relationships. Ten interviewees (all female) described engaging in consensual
but unwanted sex as a result of social pressure and pressure from a partner.6
Explaning why she had engaged in what she considered consensual but
unwanted sex, Marcie, 19, said, “there’s not a lot of visibility for asexuality
so when you’re young and you don’t really know that that’s a genuine
orientation that you can embrace…you have all of society telling you, ‘You
should want to be doing these things…’ So, it tended to get a little sexual but
I was always trying to avoid that.” Christine, 21, described the following
experience:

The guy I lost my virginity to, I had been in a relationship with him for about
a year and I guess I just felt like, well, you know, I need to do this…And everybody
was like, ‘Oh, you were raped and that’s awful.’ And like yeah, I guess. I should
have said no. I could have said no, but I didn’t. I thought that this is what
everybody did in their free time, and so I was trying to be like everybody else.

It is important to note that, according to a substantial body of research, a
significant percentage of both women and men report engaging in consensual but
unwanted sex for some of the same reasons as those given by the interviewees in
this study (e.g., Gavey, 2005; Impett & Peplau, 2002; Muehlenhard & Cook,
1988).7 Thus it is possible that the system of compulsory sexuality negatively
affects asexually identified and non–asexually identified people in some of
the same ways.

Overall, according to approximately two thirds of the interviewees, sexual
norms and the invisibility of asexuality had made it difficult to maintain
romantic relationships with sexual partners. For example, Clare, in her late
20s, talked about the fact that before she had found the word *asexual*, she did not know how to communicate her wants and needs, which made negotiation with a partner difficult. She said, “I’m not really like even opposed to [sex]—like I think I could do a long term relationship with someone if they understood that I was just not going to be into it as much, but like I didn’t know that at the time. So it was very hard to communicate.” Kerry, a recent medical school graduate, talked about the fact that because potential partners maintain socially influenced expectations about sex and relationships, negotiating the sexual aspects of a relationship are more difficult. She said, “Even trying to like kind of negotiate that kind of thing, it’s like your partner knows that you’re not as into it as you *should* be or a sexual person would be…[your partner] can’t not be hurt by that because they don’t understand that it’s not that I’m [just] not attracted to [them]” (emphasis added). On the other hand, two interviewees reported that they had managed to successfully negotiate the sexual aspects of relationships with sexual partners in the past, and one interviewee was currently in a relationship with a sexual partner.

Finally, contemporary Western society’s privileging of sexual relationships over nonsexual relationships was perceived by some interviewees to have had negative effects on their ability to maintain long-term friendships. Two interviewees mentioned that it was hard for them to maintain friendships because their friends often wanted to turn friendships into sexual relationships. Three interviewees talked about their sense that their friends prioritized sexual relationships with others over nonsexual friendships. Sarah described her sense of this as follows:

> I feel like a lot of sexual people, they’re like, ‘Oh, you’re my friend,’ but then like maybe they start dating someone else and they lose contact with a lot of their friends. Like a lot of people become really invested in their sexual relationships. And then they’re like, ‘Oh,’ and your commitment with them sort of vanishes—this happened to me once. It was really hard because I had all this commitment toward the friendship and then the friendship just sort of evaporated on me.

Chris offered another example of this phenomenon: “I’ll be really good friends with someone, but I have to step aside whenever they get in a romantic relationship in a way that no one’s ever stepped aside because of a relationship I have with anyone.” Again, this kind of experience may not be unique to asexually identified individuals, as compulsory sexuality may effect sexual people in similar ways.

**Denial of epistemic authority**

Lastly, in response to a question about how others had responded to their (a) sexuality, almost two thirds of interviewees reported at least one experience where they had been denied epistemic authority in regard to their own (a)
sexuality. In other words, according to these interviewees, they had been met with the reaction that they could not know that they were asexual—they were told that they could be late bloomers, they had not met the right person yet, or they were repressing their sexual desires. About this Hannah said, “They insist that you essentially are not mentally competent to make your own decisions about yourself, which is really insulting to imply. You’ve met them for five minutes and they automatically know that you can’t make decisions by yourself. Like that’s really rude.” This was a response that interviewees reported encountering even in some LGBT communities. Eleanor, 50, said, “Nobody will just say, ‘Cool, you’re asexual.’ … Even among gays and lesbians—that’s the one that always freaks me out—that gay and lesbian people can’t understand since they have a unique sexuality. But I guess they feel like everyone should have a sex, want to have sex, be attracted sexually to people.” On the other hand, it is important to note that at least 17 interviewees also described an instance in which they received a supportive response upon coming out.

**Challenging, resisting, and defying sexual norms**

In addition to reporting experiences of stigma, marginalization, or invisibility, interviewees also described a number of explicit and implicit ways they challenged, resisted, or defied the privileging of sexuality and the marginalizing of asexuality. I group these into five general categories: adopting a language of difference and capacity to describe asexuality; deemphasizing the importance of sexuality in human life; developing new types of relationships not centered on sexual activity; constituting asexuality as a sexual orientation or identity; and engaging in asexual community building and outreach. In addition to describing these different practices, I also analyze the extent to which these practices have the potential to fundamentally challenge the system of “compulsory sexuality.” This analysis runs the risk of what Milks (2014) critiqued as the “stunted growth narrative” offered by many asexuality studies scholars, or the narrative that the asexual community is “politically immature” because it has not fully realized its transgressive potential to challenge gender and sexual norms (Milks, 2014). The analysis here is not intended to suggest that asexually identified people or asexual communities must offer a radical challenge to compulsory sexuality if they are to reach political maturity. Rather, the focus here is on identifying the resistance practices actually engaged in by interviewees and evaluating the potential sociopolitical effects of these practices.

**The language of difference and capacity**

Many interviewees rejected the description of their own asexuality as a pathological condition. Around two thirds of the interviewees (22, n = 29) never consulted a health professional with the intent of seeking an explanation or
treatment for their lack of interest in sex. The explanation offered by Hannah for not consulting a health professional is typical: “So I never felt like I needed to talk to someone about it, you know? I never felt like I needed to seek out mental health professionals or anything like that. You know, it wasn’t bothering me. I wasn’t feeling depressed or suicidal or anything like that, so I didn’t feel like I needed one. It’s not something that I wanted to cure or anything like that.” As noted above, around one third of the interviewees had consulted a health professional at some point to seek an explanation or treatment, but most went on to eventually reject the language of pathology for themselves.

Instead, in response to a variety of questions, at least 12 interviewees explicitly (and all interviewees implicitly) talked about asexuality as a different way of being in the world. In this, they echoed the language used by many trans* and disability rights scholars and activists. One of my interviewees, who was involved with AVEN early on, talked about how he had adopted language and ways of thinking from queer and trans* activists. He said, “I finally kind of came to the conclusion that [asexuality] was like a sexual orientation, that there wasn’t a problem with the way that I was, that this didn’t need to be intrinsically limiting to my life.” In some cases of asexual community building, in rejecting the language of pathology in favor of the language of difference, some asexually identified people have reinforced ableism by distancing themselves from people with disabilities (Cuthbert, 2015; Gupta, 2014); however, this did not seem to be the case in this study. Interestingly, four interviewees explicitly compared asexuality to other congenital disabilities as a way of suggesting that asexuality should be perceived as a benign form of human variation.

For example, Akiko, 37, said:

Yes, I admit I’m ‘abnormal’ as a human and yes as an animal...but there are so many, so many people who don’t have eyesight, hearing, or some IQ...And one of my nephews was born with very, very fragile bones. So he can’t be hugged by everyone because of his bones. But just like that, there are so many disabilities and disorders and people accept that...We [asexuels] don’t do any harm. We are just not interested in other people.

Echoing the findings of a separate study (Cuthbert, 2015), in response to a question asking what they thought were the positive aspects of identifying as asexual, around one half of the interviewees talked about how their particular way of being in the world had enabled them to develop certain capacities. For example, some interviewees felt they had gained the capacity to reject societal norms and develop nontraditional relationships. Sarah said:

A lot of people just sort of walk through their life and accept all of the norms. Like they get married; they have kids, because that’s what they’re supposed to do...And like that’s probably what I would have done had I never found asexuality, right. But being forced to reevaluate all that is a very interesting process. And I think it opens a lot of doors to new things that you would never have considered otherwise.
Similarly, Alana said, “I really look at asexuality as not a negative thing, not being like I don’t like sex, but really more of embracing other types of relationships like romantic friendships and things like that, so I see it more as freedom from a restricted type of relationship.” Other interviewees felt that because of their sense of being different and because of their participation in asexual communities, they had become more accepting of diversity. Allison said, “I find that because I’m not having sex, maybe I’m a little bit more open to other things because when you look at asexuals, I think we have a wider variety of different kinds of associations, like gender fluid, gender queer…. I think that we can help…show people that, hey, there are lots of different kinds of people out there.” Similarly, Sharon said, “On the plus side I think [asexuality] makes me more accepting of difference and people’s feelings.” However, a number of interviewees (including some of those who discussed asexuality in terms of capacities) were careful to emphasize that they did not see asexuality as better than other forms of sexuality or nonsexuality. It is important to mention, as well, that two interviewees said that they did not see any positive aspects to identifying as asexual and would probably change their sexuality if they could.

On the surface, it may seem to be a relatively simple practice to reject the universal attribution of pathology to asexuality and instead talk about asexuality as simply a different way of being in the world that can allow for the development of certain capacities. Yet I believe that this was, in fact, one of the most radical practices engaged in by interviewees. This practice directly challenges the idea that a lack of sexual attraction or sexual activity is inherently limiting while suggesting that one can live a full, flourishing life without normative sexuality.

**Desexualization**

In my estimation, a number of interviewees engaged in various practices of discursive desexualization, although they might not have recognized or conceptualized these practices as such. For example, some interviewees practiced a form of discursive desexualization by refusing mainstream society’s mandate to center sexuality as a major part of their identity. At least six interviewees described their (a)sexuality as not very important in their lives. Allison, a recent college graduate, said, “I don’t think my sexuality is the most important thing about me. There are other things I put first, like… I am also a person who speaks seven languages. I’m also an older sister. I’m also a film major. It’s not something I put as my highest priority.” Jack, in his early 20s, said: “I think sexuality, for the most part, is fairly detached from how I interact with most people, coworkers, family members, casual acquaintances.” About her hopes for the future, Dona, 33, said, “I think for the most part a lot of the things that I want for my life really actually have very little to do with me being asexual or not. A lot of the things [more free time, less time working, a reliable car, and fewer bills] are just the
same as anybody else wants you know.” Again, while refusing to center sexuality as part of one’s identity appears to be a simple practice, it can be radical in that it contests the idea that sexuality is a central part of what it means to be human.

Another way that interviewees practiced discursive desexualization was by suggesting that certain activities that are defined as sexual by mainstream society can be experienced as nonsexual, although, again, the interviewees themselves may not have conceptualized this as a form of desexualization. Echoing participants in a previous study (Prause & Graham, 2007), at least seven interviewees in this study talked about experiencing masturbation as a nonsexual activity. One interviewee offered the following typical description of masturbation: “I don’t think about sexual things when I do it though…It’s almost kind of like a massage, and I don’t really think of it in the same way.” Again echoing the interviewees in a previous study (Sloan, 2015), two interviewees in this study described kink as not necessarily sexual. By contesting the idea that masturbation or kink are always already sexual acts, these interviewees suggested that the very definition of sex itself is subjectively and socially constructed, a potentially radical move given that contemporary Western sexual systems are based on an understanding of sexuality as an essential category. However, in other contexts, interviewees often implicitly reinforced essentialism in regard to sex, by, for example, talking about their desire for a relationship without sex as if the definition of sex were self-evident.

It is important to note that practices of desexualization may coexist, if uneasily, with a commitment to sex-positivity. Only one interviewee expressed a desire to see pornography and sexualized advertising removed from the public sphere, while at least five interviewees described themselves as sex-positive or mentioned that they were interested in sexuality as a topic. All five of these interviewees also engaged in at least one practice of discursive desexualization.  

**New relationships**

In my estimation, a number of the interviewees implicitly challenged sexual norms by working to negotiate relationships not based on sexual attraction. Around two thirds of the interviewees did want to find a romantic partner. For most of these interviewees, their ideal romantic relationship would be characterized by high levels of mutual engagement and commitment and would involve little or no sexual activity. Most romantic interviewees felt it would be easiest for them to achieve their ideal relationship with another asexual individual; however, many interviewees thought they were not likely to find an asexual partner and were willing to try to make a relationship with a sexual person work. Around one half of the interviewees were open to the possibility of engaging in some kind of sexual activity within the
context of a long-term romantic partnership, if desired by their partner. Three interviewees mentioned that they were willing to allow their partner to engage in sexual activity with other people.15

In conceptualizing these “romantic” relationships, interviewees challenged the idea that sexual attraction and activity are essential elements of an intimate relationship. However, in many ways, apart from the absence of sex, these relationships were not envisioned to be substantively different from the type of monogamous, romantic relationship idealized by mainstream society. In addition, the discourse of “romance” has historically reflected and reproduced gender inequality (Jackson, 1993), and thus in perpetuating this discourse, asexually identified individuals may unintentionally perpetuate a patriarchal imaginary.

However, a number of interviewees (including some who were also interested in a romantic relationship) were in the process of developing new types of relationships that differed more substantively from normative monogamous relationships. At least nine interviewees, including some who identified as romantic, indicated that they would either prefer or would be just as happy with friendship as with romance. Some of these interviewees were interested in forming a very committed friendship or partnership with one person. Donna, 33, was interested in romantic relationships with men; however, she did not want to get married or live with a romantic partner. Rather, she had formed a long-term nonromantic relationship with a female friend. Of this relationship, Donna said, “I have my best friend and her and I plan on buying a house together, eventually…it’s not based on the whims of romance, you know, it’s something a lot more solid.” Other interviewees were interested in developing a number of committed friendships. To avoid being dropped by a friend in favor of a romantic partner, some interviewees stressed the need to talk with their friends about how committed both parties were to the relationship. Sarah, in her early 20s, said, “So it’s really important that you talk about those things and try and be as explicit as possible about like, ‘Hi, this is a really important relationship for me and I want to make sure that you know that and make sure that it’s an equally important relationship for you, because if it’s not, I need to think it’s less important for me.’”

In addition, at least seven interviewees questioned the distinction between romantic relationships and friendships. For example, Christine stated, “It’s kind of hard for me to actually define what is friendship and what is love because, you know, I’ve got friends that I love deeply and sexuality has never been a part of my relationship with my previous boyfriends. It’s almost like, ‘Hey, you know, I’ll love [my friends] too!’” Similarly, Amy, 27, said, “I’m not sure where that line between romantic or aromantic is drawn. I don’t think I have this sort of stereotypical romantic fantasy about love and being together forever. But I wouldn’t say that I don’t want companionship. So is just wanting companionship without like a romantic component being aromantic? I mean, I’m not sure.” Finally, at least six interviewees also sought to emphasize the
value of being alone or by themselves. For example, Phillip, 27, said, “lately I’ve been thinking more along the lines of like, well, gee, if I am by myself my whole life, is that fine? I think it will be. You know, I like my career and it’ll keep me interested…I have plenty of hobbies…I’m continuing to make new friends even as some of my other friends disappear…So that’s kind of plan A.”

In sum, by valuing friendships and aloneness, a number of the interviewees challenged the idea that it is necessary to have a sexual or romantic partnership to enjoy a complete and fulfilling life. In addition, these interviewees challenged contemporary Western society’s tendency to privilege sexual relationships over nonsexual relationships. In this way, as noted by other scholars, the efforts of asexually identified individuals to form new types of relationships may be related to other queer projects to envision new types of relationality (see, for example, Scherrer, 2010a).

Orientation and/or identity
All the interviewees in this study explicitly or implicitly described asexuality as a sexual identity. Many interviewees also described asexuality as a sexual orientation, although a few rejected this term, preferring to think of asexuality as a potentially useful label. As was true in Carrigan’s study (2011), interviewees in this study generally offered a personal narrative that in many ways mirrors the coming-out narrative of LGB individuals. Of course, this life narrative was most likely developed, in part, through the influence of the structuring narratives offered by AVEN.

As was true in Scherrer’s study (Scherrer, 2008), many of the interviewees in this study used some essentialist language to talk about asexual identity and/or orientation. A majority of the interviewees in this study (14, n = 24) did describe their asexuality as inborn or innate, although it is possible that they used this language as way of legitimizing asexuality to myself as the interviewer and/or to the broader society.¹⁶

Still, not all interviewees were wedded to essentialist language. A sizeable number (9, n = 24) said that they could not say whether their asexuality was inborn or innate.¹⁷ Five respondents specifically described their asexuality as likely the result of both biological and environmental factors. For example, Amy, a graduate student in psychology, said, “I have never not felt this way…which doesn’t to me mean that it’s inborn, it just means that there wasn’t something that happened when I was in middle school that caused me to feel this way. But I can’t imagine that it’s completely genetic, but that there would be some sort of combination of genetic and environmental factors.” In addition, many of the respondents thought that sexual identity and/or orientation could be somewhat fluid. Fifteen of the respondents (65%, n = 23) thought that their sexual orientation or identity might shift in the future.¹⁸ For example, Allison, a recent college graduate, said, “I’m always willing to keep an open mind that like sexuality is a fluid thing. Things change over
time. In my state right now, as I’ve been for close to the past decade, I feel no inclination to change how I feel. But if there’s ever a point where I need someone and I feel the desire to be sexual with them, I’d keep an open mind about it.”

At least four interviewees expressed the idea that asexuality exists on a continuum with other forms of sexuality. Amy expressed this idea explicitly, stating, “I think it is on a spectrum. And somebody somewhere is drawing a line and said, ‘If you’re on this side of the line, you’re asexual. If you’re at least a little bit interested, then you’re heterosexual or homosexual, bisexual.’ But, what if we were to look at those without it being that dichotomous line drawn, I think that would be sort of interesting.” One of the respondents also talked about the use of essentialist language as a consciously adopted strategy (strategic essentialism), stating, “Sexual orientation is a 1950s sort of cultural category that’s really useful because it lends a lot of legitimacy and pretty accurately describes what’s going on, right? Most asexual people, it’s not a choice that we make. It’s something that’s been true for our entire lives. We don’t expect it to change. Politically, we think it is an element of human sexuality that should be respected.”

In my estimation, using the language of sexual orientation and sexual identity does offer an important disruption of contemporary sexual norms, as it challenges the assumption that sexual attraction is universally experienced, and it may create space for some forms of nonsexuality. However, as a large body of scholarship has argued, the language of sexual orientation and/or identity has substantial limitations and can sometimes produce unintended negative consequences (see, for example, Gamson, 1995; Halley, 1994). I do not have the space here to discuss all the critiques of sexual identity politics that have been offered by scholars but will just highlight those that I think are most relevant to this study.

First, treating asexuality as a sexual orientation or identity can produce certain exclusions. Scholars have argued that identity politics can make it difficult, but not impossible, to adopt an intersectional approach (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991), which may partially explain why scholars have identified discourses of racism and ableism within online asexual communities (Cuthbert, 2015; Gupta, 2014; Owens, 2014), although the interviewees in this study did not use racist or ableist language. In addition, even when speakers do not use the term sexual orientation to imply that sexuality is intrinsic and immutable, these are the connotations that the term carries. And implying that sexuality is intrinsic and immutable can have negative consequences for those queer individuals who do not experience their sexuality (or asexuality) as intrinsic or immutable (see, for example, Halley, 1994). In addition, although interviewees often conceptualized sexuality as a spectrum, the language of sexual orientation and identity is a categorical one—either you are asexual or you are not (or you identify as asexual or you do not).
Perhaps it is, in part, a reaction to these limits that the online asexual community has developed the categories of “demisexual” (to describe those who may feel sexual attraction in certain contexts) and “Gray-A/Grey-A” (to describe people who consider themselves to fall in the gray area between sexuality and asexuality), categories that were used by some of the interviewees in this study. Although this may be a positive development (including some who would otherwise be excluded), in my estimation replacing a two-category system with a multicategory system does not eliminate the problems that come from using a categorical system in the first place.

Second, the language of sexual orientation and identity may increase opportunities for the social control of people who identify as asexual. As Foucault has argued, the production of sexual orientation and identity categories at the end of the 19th century contributed both to self-regulation (fluid, unstable experiences were ordered by individuals into a fixed identity) and social control, as institutions gained more access points through which to intervene and to regulate human bodies and lives, both at the individual and at the population level (Foucault, 1990). The self-regulation and internal community-regulation required by the use of identity categories was evident in some of the stories told by my interviewees: several mentioned that (other) AVEN members might feel uncomfortable about acknowledging any interest in sex (which would seem to call into question their identity as asexual), and several mentioned moments of community policing, when some members of the community identified others as not truly asexual. It is important to note, however, that these interviewees themselves did not believe that acknowledging an interest in sex must be threatening to one’s identity as asexual and also condemned community policing efforts and praised efforts by AVEN moderators to create an inclusive and welcoming space. In addition, none of the interviewees in this study described instances where the articulation of asexuality as a sexual identity category had led to visible acts of social control by external institutions; however, it is possible that this could happen in the future.

Finally, using the language of sexual orientation or identity may inadvertently suggest that the concerns of the contemporary asexual movement are relevant only to a few. In Eve Sedgwick’s terms, the language of sexual orientation and identity is a “minoritizing” language, suggesting that asexuality is of primary importance to a small group of actual asexuals or self-identified asexuals (Sedgwick, 2008). This may obscure the possibility that many people experience periods of asexuality at different points in their lives. It may also preclude recognition of the possibility that even very “sexual” people may be negatively impacted by contemporary Western society’s (over)privileging of sexuality and may benefit from a reduction in pressure to engage in sex.
Community building and visibility

Finally, interviewees described intentionally challenging the privileging of sexuality and the marginalizing of nonsexuality by forming asexual communities and engaging in outreach about asexuality. Almost all interviewees mentioned the relief they felt upon finding an asexual community. For example, Sharon said:

Just that reminder, that regular reminder that there are other people like me somewhere in the world I do find really reassuring. I just find it comforting… You know, I spent my whole life just feeling like I didn’t fit in, there was something wrong with me. And now I’m just different, but there’s nothing actually wrong with me.

Of her reaction upon finding an asexual community, Lorri said, “Oh, I cried. I have no shame in admitting that I cried knowing that I was not alone anymore, knowing that somebody somewhere would accept that, because it’s never been accepted as something.” This sentiment about the value of even just knowing that other asexual-identified people exist was repeated over and over by interviewees.19

In addition to providing comfort to each other, almost all interviewees wanted increased visibility for asexuality, although two interviewees mentioned that they felt uncomfortable engaging in visibility work themselves. Indeed, when asked what they would like to see change in regard to how society treats sexuality and asexuality, almost every interviewee identified greater visibility for and acceptance of asexuality as their top and, in most cases, only goal. At least seven interviewees had engaged or were engaging in some kind of public visibility work beyond participating in this study, such as marching in a Pride parade, contributing to a vblog about asexuality, or organizing a campus workshop about asexuality. In part, interviewees were engaged in this work to create greater acceptance for themselves. For example, Annette, 50, said, “That’s why I wanted to help you with your project because the more people know about this, the better. Then someday, 20 years from now, it will be, you know, something that people will just accept in society and people will get off my back and stop asking me why I’m not married.” Time and again, interviewees also mentioned that they were engaged in this work to help young people who do not experience sexual attraction. Sarah offered this typical reason for engaging in visibility work: “I would just like more visibility…So that the people who are like me but younger don’t have to go through all of the stuff that I went through…it would be nice to have it presented as an option to every child so they don’t have to figure out that it exists before they can like identify as that, right.”

In sum, when articulating their explicit sociopolitical agenda in regard to sexuality and asexuality, most interviewees focused on increasing visibility of and tolerance for asexuality. Like employing the language of identity and orientation, visibility politics can certainly challenge key
societal assumptions about sexuality and create more acceptance for certain individuals who identity as asexual, effects that should not be undervalued. However, visibility politics can suffer from the same limitations as identity politics—for example, by increasing channels for social control, by promoting commodification, and by rendering some lives invisible as others are brought into view (see, for example, Hennessy, 1994). In addition, in many ways, members of the AVEN community face a paradox—in working to increase the visibility of asexuality as a sexual identity, interviewees engaged in public discussion about and brought attention to sexuality; in turn, it is the very focus of the public on sexuality that has in some ways contributed to the social marginalization of people who are not interested in engaging in sex. Thus the strategy of pursuing visibility for asexuality can, in some ways, run directly counter to the strategy of desexualization.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to contribute to our understanding of contemporary sexual norms and contemporary asexual identities by analyzing how some asexually identified individuals are negatively affected by and challenge, resist, or defy compulsory sexuality in practice. I have argued that some of the practices used by the individuals in this study, such as employing the language of romance and constituting asexuality as a sexual orientation, may alter some aspects of compulsory sexuality but do not offer a fundamental challenge to the system. However, other practices, such as using the language of difference and capacity to describe asexuality and valuing friendships and aloneness, could substantially transform sexual norms by validating various forms of nonsexuality as potentially fulfilling ways of being in the world as well as calling into question the very need to categorize people based on sexuality in the first place.

Notes

1. Five interviewees responded; of these, one sent some substantive comments, and one sent significant substantive comments.
2. Two respondents sent updated demographic information upon receipt of a draft of this article. One person who had previously identified as female later began to identify as a transgender man. One person found full-time employment. These updates are not included in this section, as the demographic information presented is accurate as of the time of the interview.
3. More research needs to be done on the relationship between race and asexuality. At this point, it is unclear why online communities are so overwhelmingly White. Ianna
Hawkins Owen found that members of AVEN often dismissed Black asexuals who posted looking for other Black asexuals (Siggy, 2013).

4. This issue did not come up in one interview.

5. A number of the interviewees reported feeling isolated, especially as children, but not necessarily for reasons related to sexuality. More than one third described themselves as loners, shy, socially awkward, and/or nerdy or geeky as children. I cannot say whether this was related to their asexuality (either as a cause or an effect). It may be the case that so many identified this way because they were recruited from an online community, which may skew toward individuals who are loners, shy, socially awkward, and/or nerdy or geeky as children (see Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes, & Erskine, 2010; Lund & Johnson, 2014).

6. Five interviewees (four female, one trans woman) described nonconsensual activity or instances of sexual assault.

7. This is not to imply that all unwanted but consensual sex is problematic.

8. Most interviewees did not reject medical and psychological approaches to lack of sexual interest entirely. According to my interviewees, individuals who are distressed by their level of interest in sex should be able to take on a diagnostic label such as hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD) and seek treatment for HSDD if they so desire (Gupta, 2015b).

9. This issue did not come up in one interview.

10. This may reflect either a disability-positive attitude on the part of these interviewees and/or their lack of recognition of the stigma faced by people with disabilities.

11. By desexualization I do not mean that interviewees originally centered sexuality in their lives or experienced activities such as masturbation as sexual and then came to decenter sexuality and/or experience certain activities as nonsexual, but rather that they challenged society’s centering of sexuality and society’s understanding of certain activities as sexual.

12. Some scholars have argued that desexualizing the public sphere may be a good strategy for the asexual movement (Emens, 2014). However, although desexualization may be appropriate for specific contexts (e.g., the workplace), seeking an across-the-board desexualization of the public sphere may have unintended negative consequences, as it may not be desired by the interviewees in this study who identified as sex-positive or found sex interesting, and it may be experienced as oppressive by sexual people, particularly queer sexual people (for a discussion, see Gupta, 2015a).

13. At least three interviewees were in current relationships with other asexual individuals.

14. Only one interviewee was currently in a long-term relationship with a sexual individual.

15. Only one interviewee described herself as polyamorous. A second interviewee was in a primary romantic relationship and also engaged in secondary romantic relationships.

16. Question was not asked in a number of interviews.

17. Questions was not asked in a number of interviews.

18. Questions was not asked in a number of interviews.

19. As part of an update she sent me in response to receiving a draft of this analysis, one interviewee noted that she had distanced herself from the online asexual community because “it’s become a place where it seems like no one can see the forest for the trees (for lack of a better metaphor) and are too busy arguing amongst themselves to provide (a) a truly welcoming environment for all the people who identify as ace and (b) a reasonable representation of the community as a whole.”
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