The Desexualization of Society. A Digital Ethnography on the Asexual Community

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Abstract: the paper focuses on asexuality and its implication for society and identity. Asexuality poses particular challenges due to the huge array of terms, concepts through which asexuals articulate their differences and affirm their commonalities. Defined as a lack or low level of sexual attraction, asexuality challenges sexual normativity which imposes sexuality and sexual attraction as an imperative.

This paper analyses the experience of self-identification of members of one of the most important online asexual communities through digital ethnography. The online community represents a coping response used to manage and overcome social threats deriving from their confront with a sexuality affirmative social context. It represents a tool to disrupt compulsory sexuality, to introduce new language and forms of discourse, to deemphasize the importance of sexual relationships, introducing new types of non-sexual relationships.

What we found is a plurality of experiences, attitudes and identifications united in their call for sexual freedom in a desexualized society without hierarchical assumptions supporting existing oppressive institutions.

Keywords: sexuality, asexuality, identity, online community

Introduction

Asexuality can be conceived as an umbrella concept, a meta-construct which includes different sexual identities and encompasses a diverse array of dispositions toward sex, attraction, desires, fantasies, behaviors, forms of relationships and gender (Alcaire, 2020; Carrigan, 2011; Scott, McDonnell & Dawson, 2016). The first definitions of asexuality provided by the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) and Bogaert (2006; 2008) conceive it as a total and lifelong lack of sexual attraction toward other people. Recently, the AVEN definition has been updated into the experience of little or no sexual attraction to include a more comprehensive spectrum of sexual attraction experiences (Carrigan, 2011; Decker, 2014) as other binary constructs such as gender which is now understood as falling along a spectrum and overcome the binary division between asexual and sexual taking into account that asexual individuals fall along a continuum (Chasin, 2011).

Differently from other minority sexual identities which challenge the sex-negativity of contemporary society, asexual identities question the naturalization of sexual attraction as a universal and essential component of identity. Thus, asexuality questions the dominant conceptualization of sex and sexuality and in order to legitimate needs to find other spaces of expression, different from those of sexusociety (Przybylo, 2011). Sexusociety is used by Przybylo (2011) as a substitute of "sexual world" to indicate the omnipresence and centrality of sexuality and sex in everyday life through discourses creating, legitimizing and recreating sexual normativity. These spaces are often online communities and groups, online environments where identities can free from the constraints of social structural inequalities and hierarchies as the literature on digital sexualities and the significance of digital spaces in the construction of sexual selfhood projects has largely emphasized (Adams-Santos, 2020; Ward, 2015; Dowsett et al., 2008).

This paper analyzes how asexuals cope with a society based on the fundamental assumptions that all people should experience sexual attraction, how they affirm their commonalities and articulate their differences and the role of their digital life in shaping their identification.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section reviews the sociological literature on asexuality and its implication for society. The second section describes the research design of the digital ethnography carried out on the AVEN community. The third, fourth and fifth sections provide the findings. Particularly in the third section the stigmatizations narrated by asexuals within society is described. The fourth section analyzes the role of the online community in helping to construct their sexualities through a continuous process of collective negotiation, contestation and boundary work. The fifth section articulates the nuanced forms of asexualities by detecting the dimen-

sions around which they operate and providing a typology of asexuality. Then in the last section the implications of such different types of asexuality for society and sociology are discussed and conclusions are drawn.

Defining asexuality: the challenge to dominant understanding of essentialist sexuality

Sexuality has represented an interesting topic for sociological inquiry for several decades. While referring to subjective aspects of the person (psychological dimension), to a naturally function that ensures the reproduction of the species (biomedical dimension), sexuality recalls the subject's belonging to society and their deeper connection with elements of the reference culture, such as norms and values (social and cultural dimension).

The sexual dimension makes it possible to respond to a fundamental need for the existence of a society, namely the necessary condition of entering into a relationship with the other (Cipolla, 1996); an obligation to otherness, which although connected to the need for reproduction, is not expressed without a form of cultural and social control and conditioning.

From a sociological point of view, the study of sexuality implies considering it on a par with any other social facts. Going beyond the bio-psycho-medical reading, which tends to exalt the biological and physical aspects of the question, sociology takes a further step forward: it analyses the detachment of sexuality from reproduction and the secularization of values, the progressive tolerance with respect to choices in sexual orientation, the differentiation between sexuality and affectivity, the pluralization of the forms in which individuals self-define their sexual identity (Masullo, 2022, p.41).

In recent years, the sociological study of sexuality has embraced different areas, focusing not only on identities and normative arrangements, but exploring the different ways in which people experience sexuality, and arriving at a more complex view of the concept of sexual identity itself. The homosexuality/heterosexuality dichotomy, also as a result of the explosion of LGBT and queer studies, has been complexified to include hybrid forms taking into account the growing need for self-determination of the contemporary subjects. Among these possibilities, one of the least explored in the sociological literature is that of asexuality, a condition that on a definitional level can include aspects only partly covered by the concept of sexual orientation, as asexuality includes subjective dispositions that go beyond the sexual question itself. This because asexuality connects to subjective and cultural imaginaries that need to be further explored with a proper sociological perspective not residual or derived from that proposed by *scientia sexualis* (Rinaldi, 2016).

If sociological attention on asexuality has been very limited, the field has been very studied in psychology. Some psychological studies on asexuality have assimilated it to established categories of disfunctions such as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD) (Bogaert, 2006; Hinderliter, 2013; Prause & Graham, 2007) or Schizoid Personality Disorder (Brotto et al., 2010). Apart from the pathologization of asexuality, an inherent problem of these studies is that they are often based on measures reflecting dominant sexualized approaches (Hinderliter, 2009).

From a methodological point of view, asexuality questions traditional definitions and instruments used to measure sexuality based on identity, attraction or behavior by challenging the assumption that attraction exists equally for all respondents, not including the possibility that respondents are not attracted to anyone and forcing often them to choose among an attraction to both sexes, a prevalent attraction to the same sex, an exclusive attraction to the same sex.

From a sociological point of view, asexuality can be framed within a postmodern landscape of sexuality (Caroll, 2020) made up of multi-term identities and dispositions not embraced in our current sociological concepts of sexual orientation (Chasin, 2019). The discussion on asexual identity interrogates on the individual processes in reaching a fixed identity. The development of an asexual identity is conceptualized as a process which originates from the development of a sense of difference from peers and society, an assumed pathology refused through sharing of biographical narratives with asexuals' peers and the consequent building of a communal identity (Carrigan, 2011). Some studies highlight that asexuality is a range of sexual dispositions falling outside the norm which question the traditional concept of intimacy necessarily based on sexual attraction, the general understanding of attraction seen as equated to sexual attraction, the assumption that sexual desire needs to be intentionally focused on a specific person (Brunning & McKeever, 2021; Caroll, 2020). It demonstrates that intimate relationships may be based on intellectual attraction, that sexual attraction may occur or not, that it can be also dependent on emotional bonds instead that physical ones, in so doing disaggregating sexual and romantic attraction, sexual desire and attraction (Caroll, 2020).

Others enrich such process of identification considering the micro-level interactions responsible for identity formation among asexuals in a Symbolic Interactionist perspective (Scott, McDonnel & Dawson, 2016; Scott & Dawson, 2015).

These studies lay the foundations for a new ontology of sexuality and a vision of it which places particular emphasis on the influences of the cultural context, that is, on the imaginary that is created, recreated, and nego-

tiated around sexuality through socio-sexual interactions, and in particular through language (Masullo, 2022).

Although there are many differences between these approaches, they all have in common a greater attention to identifying the spheres of meaning within which sexual experience is concretely lived and to linking aspects of an intrapsychic nature - inevitably called into play by sexuality - to those aspects of a cultural nature that provide normative and value orientations of sexual practices (Gagnon & Simon, 2005). At the heart of these studies, there is therefore the question of the formation of a sexual self that is not only the result of processes linked to nature, but on the contrary the product of a negotiation between the subjective self and the relations of the vital world within which sexuality, like any cultural phenomenon, acquires specific connotations.

In so doing, these studies conceptualize asexuality as a life-long process of identification based on negotiation of meanings with significant others through interaction which can culminate in a positive identification or not. This latter case realizes when after negotiation the asexual identity is rejected or repudiated (Scott, McDonnel &Dawson, 2016). This because the adoption of a sexual orientation which deviates from the social norms can constitute a threat to the maintenance of a coherent identity (McNeela, Murphy, 2015) driving also toward interpersonal difficulties with non-asexual people (Carrigan, 2011), social exclusion and denied recognition.

In our society sexuality is a form of omnipresent power embedded in multiple, dispersed, and repetitive forces and discourses which legitimate the sexual imperative. The categorization of sexual orientation and identity is a form of power which contributes both to self-regulation of dispersed experiences into a fixed identity and social control through the intervention and regulation of institutions (Foucault, 1990).

Thus, another strand of literature focuses on the positioning of asexuals with reference to normative cultural depictions of sexuality and its consequences for society. Poststructuralist theorists have conceptualized asexuality as a subversive challenge to the dominant, normative, oppressive and essentialist discourses of sexsociety (Przybylo, 2011). This places asexuality on a political terrain, as a form of anarchist protest against contemporary political domination (Fahs, 2010), as intrinsically and inherently radical and containing the potential for resisting the assumption of sexuality as the central element of humanity (Gupta, 2017). Asexuality is reified, divorced from the personal and supposed to have an intrinsic agentic power able to introduce non-normative forms of marriage (Scherrer, 2010), feminism (Cerankowski & Milks 2010), healthy lifestyle (Kim, 2010).

What is marginalized in such studies is the importance of the lived experiences of the asexual people, their process of identification, their place

of identification, their discourses and narratives and how they internally differentiate.

Research methodology

The research is based on digital ethnography which is a qualitative research approach adapting ethnographic techniques to the study of online social space of discussion (Delli Paoli, 2021; Delli Paoli & D'Auria, 2021).

We decided to select as digital field the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), the largest online community for individuals who self-identify as asexual. AVEN was founded in 2001 by David Jay, an asexual activist and in few years, it reached thousands of registered users from different parts of the world becoming a reference place of knowledge and discussion about asexuality. The community provides a wide range of features such as scientific resources, bulletin boards, chat rooms and discussion forums. The digital field for this research is the discussion forum - section "Questions about asexuality" which include deep information about asexual identity, process of identifications, languages, labels and categories, key assumptions about asexuality by those who self-identify as asexuals.

Based on the type of community, the research aims and the features of the research field, there are two basic ways of gaining access to the search site which can be perceived as a *continuum* with two extreme positions:

- *covert access or lurking:* the researcher assumes an observational role, invisibly observes the community without informing people about the research and the researcher's presence within the group;
- *overt access*: the researcher informs community members of the research and asks for their consent, often through the gatekeepers (Silverman, 2000), focal actors who act as gates and intermediaries for entering the community. In this case which can be equated to *participant observation* in ethnography, there are different degree of participation in the community: researchers can decide to interact in a very limited way, just informing members about the research purposes and asking them some clarifying questions. They can also decide to interact with members as full participants, giving their contribution to the shared knowledge and practices.

In this case we opted for lurking, for a non-participant approach without interacting with the subjects of the study and disclosing our role as researchers because we thought that the presence of an outsider within this particular community would be undesirable and unwelcome. Arguments around the invisibility issue range a lot. Although we are aware that lurking has several ethical implications (Hine, 2005; Bell, 2001; Heath et al., 1999), we think that in the case of the asexual community it is able to offer a unique oppor-

tunity for collecting 'natural' data, as the members are not aware of their informant status and do not modify their behaviour due to the researcher's presence (Puri, 2007; Langer & Beckmann, 2006). In other words, we think that in this case the benefits of lurking outweigh the social and ethical costs of such violation (Delli Paoli, 2022). For this reason to protect the anonymity of participants, direct quotes were reported anonymously, deleting any personal details of the users.

Selection criteria were necessary to filter through large amounts of data which were then manually stored. A purposeful approach (Patton, 1990) was used for sampling message threads. Comments from the forum were downloaded and saved when they were found to be relevant in the community (they received a high number of comments and likes). A total of 900 comments were analysed.

As is the case with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the process of data collection was ceased when further data obtained did not contribute to additional insights on the topic (Kozinets, 2002), that is when theoretical saturation (Bertaux, 1980) was achieved.

Data analysis was performed through a combination of coding and hermeneutic interpretation (Kozinets, 2002, 2010). Following the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the researchers moved back and forth between the data collection and analysis. Data analysis and data collection were conceived as simultaneous and interrelated processes: already codified data were compared with emerging categories, and categories were compared in order to highlight any similarities and differences (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001).

Asexuality within society

In this section we will focus on the common core experiences highlighted by asexuals directly deriving from their confront with a sexuality affirmative social context, also defined *sexusociety* (Przybylo, 2011). Although not being monolithic and coherent, *sexusociety* is dominated by a sexual normativity (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010; Chasin, 2011) imposing sexuality as an imperative through language, forms of discourse, desires, thoughts, collaborated for by various institutions and coded as natural (Przybylo, 2011; Butler, 1999; Rubin, 2006). The normative scripts, coded as natural, are those based on sex with the purpose of reproduction or orgasm, within marriage or coupledom, understood most in a physical sense as opposed to an intellectual one, where pleasure is situated as compulsory and taken for granted (Przybylo, 2011; Rubin 2006).

What emerges is the sense of *social invisibility* and *loneliness* experienced by asexuals deriving from a lack of social acknowledgement of asexuality as

a legitimate orientation (McNeela & Murphy, 2015; Carrigan, 2011), from the equation between love and sex, from a lack of social credibility with asexuality being unbelieved, denied, refuted, or positioned in a transitory state.

In many narratives there is a feeling of isolation or alienation from others or from the society as a whole, as a result of stigmatization or invisibility of non-sexuality:

> I just wanted to rant about how it is so common in our society for love and sex to be the same thing. According to a few people I have spoken to, "you can't love someone romantically without having sex with them, without the sex you are just best friends." I think that way of thinking is total bullshit. If your love only exists if you are able to enjoy sexual pleasure with someone than do you really love them? That is the kind of thinking that results in people feeling pressured to have sex with their partner even if they don't want to or aren't feeling well, they have to or else they "don't love" their partner. I just can't understand this way of thinking and it is so frustrating to me because life is way more than just bonking your bits together. There are so many ways to gain excitement and joy, but it seems like the world thinks the only way that matters is through sex. I'd have way more fun playing video games together with my partner than I would having sex, but by societies standards we just don't love each other, or are just friends. It's indescribably irritating to be Ace and have almost everyone else in the world can't understand your way of thinking and have decided that it is weird.

The strategy of *limited disclosure* is applied in the educational, professional and social environments where sexuality is assumed, and an invisible sexual ideology dominates. They report of feeling left out when their friends or peers talked about sex, feeling isolated as a result of the overwhelming sexualization of the whole society, of the media and advertising. It is like a spiral: in order to avoid this sense of isolation, they further isolate avoiding sociality.

> I avoid 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.

> I felt 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?"

> This is another thing that I always found really bizarre, my whole life. Until working out that I'm simply seeing it differently that is.:lol: When people carried on and on with sex talk, and how awesome such and such sexual things are, it always sounded really esoteric to me -

sort of like when you're in a conversation with friends and they're talking about some obscure mutual hobby they have that you're not really into. You just kinda wish the conversation would move to another topic - not because you find it repulsive or anything - but simply boring to talk about that topic in so much nitty gritty detail. It's like "OMG! We've covered that already when we were 15! Why are we on it again?!".

Such sense of difference is also alimented by a rejection of sexual-gendered differences and a discomfort with socially gendered conventions. The departure from the accepted sexual norms has implications also for other facets of identity and causes discomfort also towards the accepted expectations for gender roles, gender expressions, gender labels, gender belief and gender stereotypes (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015) driving toward a deconstruction of gender together with sexuality.

Sexuality and gender are so intimately intertwined that those people who do not identity with some aspects of sexuality also seem not to identify with some aspect of gender or get confused about gender questioning traditional expectations, distancing from one or both genders or rejecting a traditional gender identification altogether (Gupta, 2019). Most of people who self-identity as asexuals experience a *social dysphoria* expressing discomfort with social conventions relating to gender and how people gender them, a discomfort with the way people perceive them to be gendered including pronouns, washroom usage and anything else that could count as a social convention. Sometimes this translates also in a *body dysphoria*, a discomfort with their own body (the voice, the chest, etc.) or biological attributes (menstruation):

> First of all, I've never been very masculine. I don't have any typical masculine personality traits. In fact, I think I have more feminine personality traits if I'm honest. I like dressing in male clothing, and sometimes when I see another guy, I'll think "Wow, I like his style". With females, I can appreciate how they dress, but it's in more of an 'attraction' way. I like having long hair. I started growing a beard in my mid-teens to stop being mistaken for a girl, but these days I'm thinking of just shaving it off. It just feels 'too' masculine for me. I don't like very masculine people, whether they are male or female. I just don't get on very well with them.

> In general, I'd say I feel like... Me, but I don't know who me is.

> Gender for me can change over the course of a couple hours, daily, or even taking weeks to change even subtly. My pronouns I prefer would probably switch with my gender most of the time except for the fact that I don't really want to confuse people so it's easier to tell people that overall I like if they use both pronoun. The dysphoria I experience can be fairly specific to what percentage of a certain gender I am feel-

> ing, but it is fairly consistently about the same things (menstruation, my chest, and my voice are the big ones). Also I'm afab, which becomes part of my gender identity in the fact that occasionally feeling partially female made vaguely understanding my gender difficult considering I'm still questioning if it's cisnormative society that makes me think I'm female or if it's a real thing.

It is against such lack of conformation to normative sexual and gender scripts that pathologies of non-sex are constructed driving asexuals to give medical and psychological explanations for their asexuality (Gupta 2017). This sense of social difference drives toward the assumption of pathology and the thought that, due to the social normativity, there might be something wrong in themselves and their lack of identification with the normative sexual and gender scripts:

> I thought everyone was like me, until my classmates and friends begin to talk about sex. Then I realized that I was not like them. I thought there might be something wrong with me.

The socializing role of the online community

The online community provides a social representation of asexuality and in so doing it represents a coping response used to manage and overcome social threats highlighted in the previous section by reaching acceptance.

Although the specific biographical details vary greatly with different individuals, we found in the asexuals' online narratives the typical process already highlighted by Carrigan (2011) and developing in a sequence of stages:

- first the manifestation of a sense of difference from a peer group (see previous section);
- second the assumption of illness due to this sense of difference (there might be something wrong with me);
- third the accidental and serendipitous discovery of the asexual community;
- forth the acquisition of a communal identity which allows to reject pathologizing explanations and instead to impose the lack of sexual desire as a source of pride and affirmation.

Many members mention the relief they felt upon finding an asexual community deriving from just knowing that other asexual-identified people exist. The discovery of the asexual community is described as the tool for overcoming the sense of loneliness, for improving the capacity for reflexivity, self-understanding and acceptance, in one word for building a social identity:

Then, one night while I was surfing the internet, I came across an embarrassingly girly website which included, as one of its pages, a 'definitions' page. The first word on the list was 'asexual' and it caught my interest, because I had never heard it before. I clicked on the link which read the same thing AVEN does, 'Asexual: a person who does not experience sexual attraction' and it was like coming home. I knew immediately that this was me and that I wasn't alone.

However, despite my teammate and me using the term asexual, we had never heard of AVEN before. She had heard about an article about asexuality once, but that was all our knowledge. I just recently discovered this website, and it's hard to explain how I felt when I found this. The way I stated it on facebook was, "I feel like a lesbian discovering the LGBT community for the first time. This is so exciting!!" I feel relaxed and comforted finally knowing where I fit in the sexuality spectrum. My teammate is also really excited with the information I've been relaying to her. We just kind-of felt "out at sea" before. Knowing and accepting that I'm asexual has given me some solid footing.

For the user of the AVEN community, the discovery that their feelings, emotions, beliefs are shared with some others allows to reject pathologizing explanations, dissuades them from seeking treatment or being cured and strengthens their self-identification into a communal identity:

I had almost a stereotypical "*whew* I'm not broken..." reaction. Followed by months of poking around and discussion on AVEN and comparing notes with what others are saying. Mostly to work out if I might be subconsciously using it to cover up something - ie Not taking responsibility for some personal issues by labelling them an "orientation", etc. Now I'm pretty convinced that my sexuality is some kind of grey/demisexual, pretty close to ace for the most part really

Yeah, typical feeling of relief to finally know that asexuality is a "thing", and that the label fits me and illuminates parts of my past. I'm okay, I'm not broken. I am happy and don't have to try to fit into something that is not me. And if I ever find my way into another relationship I know better what I want and what I can offer, which would hopefully make for a better relationship.

For me, increased self-knowledge has lead to increased self-acceptance, contentment and peace of mind.

I first heard about asexuality at the start of the year when it was mentioned in a BBC News article, and it was like an epiphany. It was so great to find that other people felt the same way I do, and this place enabled me to talk about sex and relationships in a comfortable manner that I never could have done before.

> So as not to sound completely negative, there are times where I am really grateful to have discovered AVEN and my asexuality, because even if I don't always consider it an ideal orientation, it is nice to feel, for the first time, that there are people who are completely on the same page as me when it comes to romance/sex. A sense of "belonging" is worth a lot, and I appreciate it.

Language and definitions shared and jointly framed within the community provide the social construction of asexuality. Although there is no unanimous agreement on definitions, there is space in the community for everyone to explore their identity without the stigma associated with their experience of asexuality, to find their self-identification and name it accordingly since asexuality is considered a social construct based on autonomy rather than some inherent truth. The community provides an identity-based vocabulary which allows asexuals to position themselves as a type in relation to categories, labels, and identifiers. Thus, thanks to the online community, they define according to their level of sexual attraction which can be conceptualized over a continuum ranging from a total lack of sexual attraction to a low level of it (as the updated definition on AVEN community testifies). However, the level of sexual attraction is not the only identifier but according to the individual self-identification can be combined with romance attraction as a necessary basis of intimate encounters, with specific forms of attraction in particular circumstances, with different forms of pleasure and so on. The concept can have multiple meanings which are the object of the next section. Identity is not a final process but it derives from a negotiated process of identification through which actors navigate the boundaries between different meanings via social interactions with significant others (Scott & Dawson, 2015).

Types of asexuality

Despite their communal identity built through and within the community, there is considerable nuance of variation in how to be part of the asexual community, as recognized by previous research (Carrigan, 2011; Brunning & McKeever, 2021).

There is a certain degree of heterogeneity as to the way they orient toward sex which represent also the personal reasons that individuals have for defining as asexuals. There is considerable nuance of variation in the asexual community in how they define their sexual attraction and how they live their sexual fantasies.

Thus, we can identify two main dimensions of distinction in this community.

The first one is related to *sexual attraction*. Sexual attraction varies between two positions: anti-sex and selective sex. Anti-sex asexuals express a sexual aversion typical of those who reject and are repulsed by sex who instead prioritize the platonic. Selective sex asexuals are those who express a selective interest in sex, who are opened to the possibility of sex although being not very interested in it, who are willing to have sex in certain contexts and circumstances (for example in the context of a committed, strong and emotional relationship).

The second dimension is related to sexual desire and identification and visible in the content of sexual fantasies which sometimes are rooted in their own identity (*identity connected*) and sometimes not (*identity disconnected*). In the former case, these individuals are not directly connected to their real-life identity.

From the intersection of these classificatory principles four types of asexuality derive.

Figure 1. A typology of asexual identities

Sexual fantasies and identification

	Identity-connected	Identity-disconnected
Anti sex	**Platonic sexuality**	**Autochrisexuality**
Selective sex	**Social sexuality**	**Grey sexuality**

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The first type is anti-sex and identity-connected and is named *platonic sexuality*. They are sex-repulsed and call for emotional, intellectual and platonic intimacy. Their idea of intimacy is not defined by the presence or absence of sex but, instead, it is defined in terms of support, trust, and mutual engagement. They disrupt sexual norms and the socially constructed distinction between what is considered to be sexual and non-sexual in several ways for example by redefining activities considered to be sexual as non-sexual (establishing new types of intimate relationships not based on sexuality). They deemphasize the importance of sex in human life; developing new types of relationships not centered on sexual activity. Many of them feel attraction but without any sexual component to it, instead regarding it as romantic and/or emotional closeness based on sharing and disclosing (Jamieson, 1998), friendship and companionship (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Others feel attraction that is distinctly aesthetic. What is common is that they experience attraction to people of certain genders and yet not wanting to act upon this as they feel repulsed by sex:

> I have starting to wonder if I am somewhere on the asexual spectrum because the concept of sex just kind of seems nasty/disgusting to me. I have never kissed anyone, and I guess I would feel comfortable kissing a future significant other once we get really serious, but sex seems really far away and when people talk about it, I am not really interested. I don't really have a desire to do it and the act just does not attract me. I don't know if this is an indicator of my sexual orientation or just me being afraid and one day possibly wanting it. (Why does the world push a heteronormative agenda???) I was thinking that I am possibly demisexual, but I haven't had that close of a relationship before to even know. I know other friends have mentioned sex being kind-of weird, but I don't know if they feel the same way I do. I also have NO desire to participate in sexual arousal from sexual content or anything related (porn, masturbating, smaller acts, etc.). The only remotely sexual thing that I can imagine myself doing, as I mentioned before, is kissing. Anyway, I am writing to gauge perspectives and opinions since questioning my sexuality every day without input is kind-of tiring.

The second type is anti-sex and identity-disconnected and is named *Autochrisexuality*. They show non-connected patterns of sexuality, a disconnection between their individual sense of self and their sexual target of arousal (Identity less sexuality) (Bogaert, 2012). Their sexual fantasies do not involve their own identities. Also, when their fantasies involve people, these individuals are unknown to the asexual person or are fictional characters; in both cases, these individuals are not directly connected to the asexual person's real-life identity:

> I'm new to all of this, but one thing I know for sure is that I'm a sex repulsed asexual. I don't feel sexual attraction and am completely repulsed by sex. My brain likes to think of sex as fiction, something that doesn't exist outside of books. Mentions of sex in books are the only time sex isn't repulsive, because my brain has dedicated it to fiction. It's kind of like, when you're reading a fantasy book based in a made up world, you know it's fake. Whenever sex is applied to real life, I feel like throwing up. People my whole life have tried to "prepare me" for when I'll "eventually have sex", though the thought of that ever happening disgusts me. What makes everything worse is that I've found I have a pretty high libido. The only thing that helps is by imagining myself as a different person. Whether it's a character from a book, or a character I created, it helps me feel like it's not me. Though afterwards when I realize it was actually me and I "pleasured" myself, I feel like throwing up.

The third type shows a selective and identity-disconnected sexual orientation. It is called *Grey sexuality* since they seem to have an intermediate position. They do experience sexual attraction but very rarely and/or in very specific circumstances and for people they are close to. They also experience some sort of disconnectedness from their identity. They like the idea of sexual attraction and intimate relationships, but they lose interest when this idea realizes in reality:

> Falling in the grey area makes figuring orientation shit out so much harder. Like.... I used to think I was heteromantic heterosexual. Like pretty much everybody thinks at first, I know, but..... my first instance of any romantic attraction was to the opposite sex. (Second, years later, was to the same sex.) And I used to want, or thought I wanted, a relationship and marriage and kids and stuff. Maybe I just liked the ideas of those things rather than an innate desire. Now, like.... I experience romantic attraction in some rare instances, yeah, but I don't want a romantic relationship and may even be a bit more averse to having one than I thought I was. It's weird cuz I like romance in fiction. But in reality?

> I'm open to sexual relationships and have enjoyed them in the past, but I like intimate nonsexual relationships too and don't really feel like I "need" sex. I think the line between grey and (allo)sexual is a bit blurry and I feel like I sort of fall on the cusp between the two, which can be confusing.

The fourth type shows a selective and identity-connected sexual orientation and is named social sexuality because here sex is motivated by altruistic love rather than physical pleasure. They don't have an innate drive for sex, but they are not repulsed for it and they're willing to do it for the sake of their partner's sexual fulfilment, to accommodate his or her partner's desire

for sex and may get emotional pleasure out of making their partner happy. Sometimes they have sex because it seemed to be the expected thing in a relationship but they feel uncomfortable because not having natural instinct they do not know the "social codes of sexuality".

Of course, relationships like this can still run into issues. Sometimes the asexual person understandably finds it increasingly taxing to keep having sex as time goes on. Sometimes the sexual partner feels uncomfortable receiving pleasure from someone they know is doing it only because they (the sexuals) want it and otherwise would not be inclined to engage in sex, and they may feel like something is still missing due to the lack of reciprocal desire:

> Assuming I was in a committed relationship with a sexual person – not an asexual but someone who is sexual – I would be doing it largely to appease them and to give them what they want. But not in a be-grudging way. Doing something for them, not just doing it because they want it and also because of the symbolic unity thing.

> The thing is, I liked doing these things for him, but since he was the only one feeling sexual attraction and being excited, I didn't know how to do things naturally. It was like we were at different levels. Thus, I was wondering if, as asexuals, we had to learn the "social codes of sexuality". As I personally have 0 sexual instinct, I don't know how to behave, I don't know the right gestures etc. I don't know if it is something we have to learn and get used to, or something that will come naturally with experience (I'm not talking about the sexual attraction, but rather the "sexual manners/ways" to adopt).

Discussion and conclusion

This study demonstrates that forms of asexual identity take nuanced forms which operate across two axes. The first concerns sexual attraction running from a complete aversion to sexual desire through people who may feel sexual attraction in the context of selected relationships. This axis intersects which another concerning the connectedness of identity. The complex forms of identities deriving from these intersections shed light on different forms of asexuality, unified in their call for recognition in the overall society, in overcoming the sexual conservatism which implies being categorized on the basis of what is considered to be the ideal sexualization processes and drive toward a pathologization of what deviates from the ideal. They call for sexual freedom in a desexualized society without hierarchical assumptions supporting existing oppressive institutions.

Indeed, the distress the asexuals experience is not over a lack of sexual attraction but over how this lack is perceived, not recognized and pathologized in the society (Chasin, 2013, p. 416):

«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. It would be a world without sanctions against not wanting sex – where sex is no longer an obligation or a commodity that is owed. This would be a world where no level of sexual desire is pathological and where the social emphasis is on sexuality being self-affirming in whatever unique form it takes».

Asexuality finds a recognition and a legitimation within online spaces which represents socializing places where new types of intimate relationships not based on sexuality are institutionalized, new forms of fantasies are legitimatized, new languages are negotiated. Although we are not sure that asexuality can be conceived as a form of active resistance to sexusociety and has the potential to offer a fundamental challenge to social system, for sure the call for desexualisation represents the basis of their process of identification which finds an online legitimation through socializing processes. And perhaps, the viral power of digital voices would contribute to validate various forms of non-sexuality as legitimate ways of being in the world calling into question at least the need to categorize people on the basis of sexuality in the first place. By introducing nuances in the relationships between sexual identity, behavior and attraction, asexuality challenges dominant norms of love, marriage, family, gender and sex, so asking for advancing sociological theories beyond binary and essentialist ideals to embrace a more fluid theoretical and empirical direction.

Acknowledgments

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