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Title	"And then things clicked" – Developing a measure of asexual identity development
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Publication date	2022
Original Citation	Kelleher, S. (2022) '"And then things clicked" – Developing a measure of asexual identity development', The Boolean: Snapshots of Doctoral Research at University College Cork, 6, pp. 127-132. doi: 10.33178/boolean.2022.1.21
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://journals.ucc.ie/index.php/boolean/article/view/boolean-2022-22 - 10.33178/boolean.2022.1.21
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Download date	2026-11-02 00:39:45
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14659

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"And then things clicked" – Developing a Measure of Asexual Identity Development

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Abstract

Asexuality is best defined as a lack of sexual attraction towards other people that is not explained by a physical or psychological disorder. Like homosexuality and bisexuality, asexuality is recognised as a minority sexual orientation, with approximately 1.05% of the population (70 million) believed to be asexual. Recent research suggests that asexual people experience heightened levels of anxiety and depression when compared to both their heterosexual (i.e., straight) and non-heterosexual (i.e., lesbian, gay and bisexual) peers. This may be as a result of negative attitudes held towards asexual people, and a lack of recognition of asexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation. My research comprises of the steps taken to develop a psychometric tool to identify aspects of asexual identity development and internalisation. This will provide a theoretical foundation to inform sex education as well as the application of theory and knowledge within clinical settings to better evaluate the processes contributing to such heightened levels of depression and anxiety amongst asexual individuals.

Keywords: psychometrics, identity development, internalisation, gender, sexuality.

> *"In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity"*
>
> *— Erik H. Erikson*

Introduction

Asexuality is best defined as when a individual does not experience sexual attraction towards other people and this is not explained by a physical or psychological disorder. According to members of the asexual community, asexuality is a sexual orientation that includes a broad spectrum of sub-identities and unlike celibacy, is an intrinsic part of who they are. Like homosexuality and bisexuality, asexuality is recognised as a minority sexual orientation, with

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approximately 1.05% of the population (70 million) believed to be asexual.[1] Despite a growing recognition of sexual and gender diversity within society, asexuality and the experience of being asexual remains largely unknown. This is because it is only relatively recently that an asexual movement emerged and led to the development of asexuality specific communities such as the Asexuality Visibility Education Network (AVEN). Features of someone's identity such as their race, gender, religion, age and sexuality play a key role in how they understand their position within society, as well as how they make sense of the opportunities and challenges that they face. In psychology, this involves an awareness of the qualities that are unique to them as an individual and is strongly associated with their self-image, sense of belonging and evaluation of their self-worth.[10] Because of this, developing a positive sense of identity is considered fundamental to well-being, confidence, sense of belonging and ultimately, how someone sees themselves.[7] However, aspects of someone's identity may influence how they are perceived within society as well as their interactions with others. For example, a lack of acceptance may hinder the development of a positive sense of identity and in some cases, cause an individual to integrate negative attitudes or ideals into their own self-worth. This in turn, may result in anxiety, insecurity and in some instances may be detrimental to an individual's mental health[9]. Recent research suggests that asexual people experience heightened levels of anxiety and depression when compared to both their heterosexual (i.e., straight) and non-heterosexual (i.e., lesbian, gay and bisexual) peers.[12] This may be as a result of negative attitudes held towards asexual people, and a lack of recognition of asexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation. For example, many asexual people describe experiences of ridicule, disbelief, and the dismissal of their asexual identity, which they attribute to a lack of understanding within a largely sex-positive society. The sources of these negative attitudes can vary, but stem predominantly from partners, friends and family, as well as social, educational and clinical misunderstandings.[3–5] As the prevalence of those who do not experience sexual attraction continues to rise, so too does the need for research to fully uncover the orientation of asexuality and the experiences of asexual people. The asexual community, allies and researchers alike, are becoming increasingly concerned with uncovering the processes that surround asexual identity development and in doing this, aim to alleviate mental health issues associated with the orientation. As part of my PhD research and as an ally to the asexual community, I will develop a tool to successfully identify aspects of asexual identity development and internalisation. This has been divided into four studies that include a systematic literature review, two qualitative investigations and finally, the collection of quantitative data and psychometric evaluation. The completion of these studies will provide a theoretical foundation to inform sex education as well as the application of theory and knowledge within clinical settings to better identify the processes contributing to heightened levels of depression and anxiety amongst asexual individuals. Ultimately, this research seeks to effect social/attitudinal change and to promote a growing openness towards diversity and varied human sexualities.

Measuring Asexual Identity Development

In psychology, education and social science, psychometric tools allow us to measure characteristics or 'psychological constructs' that cannot be observed directly. Examples of such constructs include intelligence, personality traits, attitudes and abilities. This involves asking people a series of questions that are representative of the construct being measured and assigning scores to their responses. To ensure that a psychometric scale successfully measures the given construct, researchers must apply a systematic approach to scale development. This involves completing a series of steps including; construct conceptualisation, 'item' or question generation, content analysis and finally, evaluating the structure and 'fitness' of the scale through statistical analysis.[6] The current paper outlines both completed and ongoing studies that aim to develop a psychometric scale to assess asexual identity development and internalisation.

Construct Conceptualisation

Prior to developing a psychometric scale, researchers must have a clear understanding of the construct that they wish to measure and should be able to accurately define concepts and theories in relation to their target population.[2] In the context of this research, the development of an asexual identity involves a process of searching and becoming aware of oneself as asexual, disclosure and interactions with others. Moreover, the target population is defined as individuals who do not experience sexual attraction and identify along the asexual spectrum. This conceptualisation has been informed by the completion of studies one, two and three.

Item Generation

Study 1

The first study *'Asexual Identity Development and Internalisation: A Scoping Review of Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence'* identified published literature within the subject area and helped to better outline the goals and conceptualisations of this research.[3] Through a review of 29 articles, we outlined what is currently known about asexual identity development and internalisation, as well as the major challenges that underlie this process. Themes include understanding asexuality, coming to an asexual identity, stigmatisation and the need to educate, isolation and invisibility, disclosure, individual differences, negotiating relationships, and conservative sexual beliefs and religion. Moreover, this review highlights how heteronormative beliefs (i.e., being straight is a preferred sexual orientation) and allonormative assumptions (i.e., all people experience sexual attraction) causes many people to adopt negative attitudes towards their asexuality and hinders the development of a positive self-concept. Findings from this study informed the research design and protocol for studies two and three and confirmed the absence of a psychometric scale measuring asexual identity development and internalisation.

Study 2

The second study 'The Identity Development and Internalisation of Asexual Orientation in Women: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis', presents the experiences of five self-identified asexual women. Consistent with the themes presented in study one, the discovery of participants' asexual identities began through an awareness of themselves as different from their peers and was assisted by asexuality-specific communities. Moreover, all participants referred to the impact that heteronormativity and allonormativity has within society and how this hindered the development of a positive sense of identity and their willingness to come out. Despite the existence of a common trajectory among asexual women, there were several discrepancies across their individual accounts that were subject to their romantic orientation. For example, participants desired different types of relationships depending on their romantic identity, with aromantic women (i.e., those who do not experience romantic attraction) seeking friendships and romantic identified women (i.e., those who are romantically attracted to other people) pursuing romantic relationships. Moreover, while some aromantic women considered coming out as asexual as irrelevant, romantic identified women considered this as an important step when pursuing potential relationships. Ultimately, these findings brought us to consider the role of romantic orientation within identity development and inspired the next step in this research to compare the experiences of romantic and aromantic asexual people. Moreover, as this study focused on the identity development of asexual women, this led us to consider how this may differ on the basis of gender.

Study 3

The third study *'Asexual Identity Development and Internalisation: A Thematic Analysis'*, presents the accounts of 99 asexual people with varying romantic and gender identities.[3] Through a focus on the diverse nature of the asexual community, this research provides a more comprehensive insight into the experiences of asexual people and contributes towards the development of a robust and psychometrically sound measure. The themes presented within this study align closely with the processes of identity development outlined in studies 1 and 2. For example, discovery of the asexual orientation and identification as asexual was shown to be a common experience among participants, irrespective of their gender or romantic identity. Moreover, stigmatisation and dismissal of participants' asexual identities corresponds with the role of allonormativity and the assumption that all people should experience sexual attraction regardless of their gender or romantic identity. Similar to findings from study 2, the relationships that participants desired were dependent on their romantic identities, with romantic identified asexuals being more open to the possibility of a sexual relationship with a non-asexual partner. Moreover, gender appeared to influence reactions to participants' asexual identities, with female participants experiencing greater pressure to have sex as well as conflict surrounding their choice to not pursue a nuclear family. On the other hand, male participants described incidences where other people doubted the legitimacy of their asexuality and questioned their

masculinity as they did not experience sexual attraction.

The items

Following the completed of studies one, two and three, an initial item pool was developed that comprises of four major components or 'content dimensions' of asexual identity development and internalisation. This includes being asexual (e.g., asexuality describes me well; I am proud to be asexual), becoming asexual (e.g., I felt relieved upon discovering the asexual orientation), being in an allosexual world (e.g., allosexual people view asexuality as a phase or not a legitimate orientation) and internalisation (e.g., asexuality is alien, lacks credibility, is a choice). Questions are phrased both positively and negatively and will encompass processes surrounding identity confusion and an awareness of the self as different, discovering asexuality and sources of information; the role of the internet and asexuality-specific communities; identity acceptance and the integration of sexual and romantic identities; and finally, disclosure of an asexual identity, education and reactions from others.

Developing the Measure: The Next Steps

Content Analysis

To ensure that questions included in the survey are a valid representation of the attitudes, experiences and beliefs of asexual people, we will carry out content analysis. To do this, we will ask people with relevant scholarly knowledge (i.e., those who have carried out research on asexuality or with LGBT people) and 'lay experts' (i.e., those who identify as asexual), to assess the relevance of questions to their content dimensions. Questions that have a low score of relevance will be deleted or rephrased to develop a more concise measure. This will be carried out prior to releasing the final survey

Distributing the Survey and Evaluating the Measure

The final stage of this research will involve distributing the asexual identity development and internalisation scale (AIDI) to a sample of approximately 600 asexual people with varying romantic and gender identities. This will be achieved through the release of an online Qualtrics survey to platforms such as AVEN, the asexuality reddit website and other similar forums. Once data has been obtained, participants' responses will be divided into two groups of approximately 300 each. Exploratory factor analysis will be carried out on the first data set to determine the variables that best describe features underlying asexual identity development and to remove any questions that do not seem relevant.[11] Confirmatory factor analysis will then be carried out on the second data set to confirm the structure of the psychometric measure and the relevance of included questions.[8] Dissemination of this research will be done at a national and local level through traditional academic routes, social media and professional networks. This will include peer-reviewed publications, research symposiums and a research blog on the AVEN website.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my supervisors, Dr Mike Murphy and Dr Raegan Murphy, UCC and to all participants who partook in my PhD studies.[8]

Declaration of Interests

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. All ethical guidelines relating to the research and publication process were adhered to throughout this study

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