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The Identity Development and Internalization of Asexual Orientation in Women: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the identity development and internalisation of an asexual orientation and how asexual individuals attempt to reject and resist societal attitudes held towards their orientation. Participants were recruited through the online community the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) and included five women between the ages of 18 and 40. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Five themes emerged from the data: The Asexual Self, Discovering Asexuality, Disclosure, Navigating Relationships and Barriers to Asexuality. The development of an asexual identity was initiated through an awareness of the self as different within society and supported by external resources such as the online asexual community. Although all participants described a sense of pride surrounding their asexual identity, some participants at times attempted to minimize the importance of asexuality to their self-concepts. Social norms and the values of a heteronormative society influenced participants' abilities to accept their orientation, as well as their coming-out processes. There were notable discrepancies between participants' accounts that were specific to their romantic orientation and age. The theoretical implications of each theme within the development of an asexual identity and internalization of an asexual orientation are discussed.

Keywords: *Asexuality, Identity Development, Internalization, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Heteronormativity*

Lay Summary

This research outlines the process of developing an asexual identity including an awareness of the self as different, active searching, finding a community and coming-out. These findings inform our understanding of how asexual individuals develop a positive sense of self and come to accept their lack of sexual desire.

Research surrounding asexuality has increased considerably over the past several decades and is growing in profile (Catri, 2021; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet & Lackman, 2018). This may be due to the enhanced visibility of the orientation and community cohesion, as well as the need for research surrounding the experiences and issues of asexual individuals (Hammack et al., 2019). While there is currently no definitive conceptualization of asexuality within the literature, it is defined predominantly as either a unique sexual orientation or as a sexual identity (Catri, 2021). When considering asexuality as a sexual orientation, a proportion of the literature has attempted to define asexuality as an "enduring" lack of sexual attraction directed towards others (Bogaert, 2015, p. 364). This definition derives from both theoretical and empirical research surrounding the orientation and develops upon Storm's (1980) two-dimensional model of sexuality, in which asexuality encompasses individuals who score low on both heteroeroticism and homoeroticism. Moreover, this understanding of an asexual person as one who "does not experience sexual attraction" corresponds with the definition used by many members of the Asexuality, Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), the largest online community for asexual individuals (Asexuality, Visibility and Education Network, 2018).

Definitional Issues Surrounding Asexuality

An understanding of asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction directed towards others does not necessarily imply, therefore, a lack of sexual experience or of romantic attraction amongst asexuals (Bogaert, 2006; Bogaert, 2015). For example, research has shown that many asexual individuals are sexually active (Aicken et al., 2013; Brotto et al., 2010) and can hold varying attitudes towards sex such as sex-positive, sex-neutral, and sex-averse (Carrigan, 2011). Moreover, reduced sexual behavior, or a state of chastity may not be understood as a hallmark of asexuality, as individuals abstaining from sexual activity may not lack sexual desire nor

understand the self as asexual (Bogaert, 2015). As mentioned previously, a lack of sexual desire does not necessarily constitute a lack of romantic attraction or affection directed towards others, with many asexual individuals identifying as heteroromantic, homoromantic, biromantic and so on (Bogaert, 2004; Hinderliter, 2009). To elaborate, sexual and romantic attraction are often recognized as separate, with romantic attraction deriving from feelings of "infatuation" and "emotional attachment" (Diamond, 2003, p. 174) and sexual attraction involving "a wish, need, or drive to seek out sexual objects or to engage in sexual activities" (Regan & Berscheid, 1995, p. 346). Moreover, it is common within the asexual community to distinguish between romantic and sexual attraction on the basis of gender (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Scherrer, 2008). For example, some asexuals may report a capacity for romantic attraction irrespective of gender (i.e., biromantic) but experience some level of sexual attraction towards a specific gender (i.e., the opposite gender).

Using a definition that centers upon a lack of sexual desire directed towards other people does not mean that an asexual individual inherently lacks sexual desire. On the contrary, much literature indicates the presence of sexual desire or a capacity for arousal amongst asexual individuals, although "solitary" in nature and not directed towards others (Bogaert, 2012; Bogaert, 2015, p. 364). Within the broader context of the asexual population, some individuals may experience varying levels of sexual attraction (i.e., graysexual) or develop sexual attraction towards another individual upon the presence of romantic attraction (i.e., demi-sexual) (Hammack, 2019). Thus, asexuality is believed to exist along a spectrum, with some individuals reporting fluctuating levels of sexual attraction and varying experiences surrounding sexual activity and romantic relationships (Hammack, 2019).

Conversely, a lack of sexual attraction does not necessarily imply that an individual identifies as asexual. While self-identification with a sexual orientation is considered "important from both developmental and sociocultural perspectives" (Bogaert, 2015, p. 364), there are many issues when defining an orientation purely in this way. This includes an inconsistent awareness of self-labels, hesitation towards coming out, fluctuating allegiances to a label, as well as political motivations (Bogaert, 2012). Thus, defining sexual orientation through self-identification or labels alone may impede the complex and multidimensional identity formation apparent amongst many sexual minority individuals (Diamond, 2003).

In the context of the current research, asexuality has been operationalized as when an individual identifies as asexual and describes experiencing no sexual attraction (Catri, 2021). Moreover, to remain sensitive to the complexities and nuances surrounding identification with an asexual orientation, participants were asked to describe what the term 'asexuality' *meant* to them. This granted an unbiased depiction of each participant's understanding of their asexuality and allowed an openness towards varying sexual behaviors, desires, labels and romantic attraction.

Asexual Identity Development

Identity can be understood as a "personally and socially meaningful sense of one's goals, beliefs, values and life roles" (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1987; Morgan, 2013, p. 53) and may comprise of both individual and collective identities that interact with each other (Vignoles et al., 2011). According to Savin-Williams (2011), sexual identity can be considered as both a cognitive and emotional understanding surrounding the significance of an individual's sexuality and may include sexual attraction, desire, behavior, values and relationships. Research is

becoming increasingly interested in non-heterosexual individuals' understanding of their sexual orientation and the processes surrounding sexual identity development (Morgan, 2013).

Although the terms 'sexual orientation and 'sexual identity' are often used interchangeably, they can be distinguished; sexual orientation may account for an individual's sexual predisposition, whereas sexual identity is referred to as an individual's recognition of their sexual orientation and "identification with such predispositions" (Gordon & Silva, 2015; Worthington et al., 2002, p. 497). Essentially, an individual's sexual identity may comprise of the label that they use to identify their sexual orientation both to themselves and to others, and is representative of their "sexual thoughts, behaviours, attractions and fantasies" (Gordon & Silva, 2015). Moreover, it is important to note that sexual identity, sexual orientation, and the label that an individual places on their sexuality do not always correspond perfectly (Glover et al., 2009), with many sexual minority individuals identifying with a sexual orientation that most closely aligns with their behaviors and experiences (Morgan, 2013). Because of this, it is plausible that some individuals' awareness and understanding of their sexual identity and sexual experiences may change across their lifetime (Diamond, 2004; Morgan, 2013). Forming an understanding of one's sexual identity is an important process which first manifests during adolescence (Fivush & Zaman, 2015; Morgan, 2013) and can continue across adulthood and into old age (Kroger, 2015). Although previous models of non-heterosexual identity development tended to focus on stages or 'milestones' that occur in a sequential order (e.g., Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989), more recent models conceptualize identity development in a multidimensional manner, with a consideration of intersecting identities (e.g., race and gender). For example, the Non-Sequential Task Model of bi/pan/polysexual identity development (Harper & Swanson, 2019), demonstrates the complexities of individual experiences and identities, and attends to processes of identity

development that do not occur within a particular order. Similarly, the Interpretative Sexual Landscape Model of sexual identity (Gordon & Silva, 2015), illustrates individual perspectives of identity development and how interactions with others may impact the interpretation of an individual's sexual identity. Interestingly, research suggests that there are many elements specific to the development of an asexual identity that are not witnessed within other non-heterosexual theoretical models (McInroy et al., 2020). Within their proposed model of asexual identity development, Robbins et al., (2016) identified experiences common among asexuals, including: an absence of social information surrounding asexuality, the role of the internet within the discovery and disclosure of asexuality, as well as a desire to educate others and promote awareness of asexuality. Most notably, Van Houdenhove et al., (2015, p. 262), reported that for many asexuals the development of an asexual identity includes several stages such as "coming to an (a)sexual identity, experiencing physical intimacy and sexuality, and experiencing love and relationships".

As mentioned previously, experiences associated with an individual's sexual orientation may be subject to other dimensions of identity such as gender roles and expressions within society (Warner & Shields, 2013). For example, while asexual women have been shown to experience greater level of acceptance due to societally expected 'female sexual passivity' (Gupta, 2019; Vares, 2018), they are often subject to greater levels of sexual coercion and are typically less able to refuse unwanted sexual activity (Cerankowski & Milks 2010; Gupta, 2019). Conversely an assumption of male sexual desire as inherent may cause many asexual men to experience disbelief and denial of their asexuality (Vares, 2018). This multi-dimensional understanding of sexual identity and sexual orientation has gained prominence within the study

of sexual identity and poses many implications for current models of sexual identity development.

Asexual Identity Development and Heteronormativity

According to Thoits (1999), the development of an individual's sexual identity is influenced by cultural and societal factors and can account for varying levels of well-being. Identity development within the context of a heteronormative society presents many legal and structural barriers for non-heterosexual individuals (Morgan, 2013) and may lead to higher levels of discrimination and victimization (Friedman et al., 2012). Specifically, classification as part of a non-heterosexual minority can result in difficulties such as social rejection, isolation, and stigmatisation (Mayer et al., 2014) and this in turn, can negatively affect the development of a non-heterosexual identity.

The societal subjugation of asexual individuals due to their deviation from heteronormativity may be understood through Minority Stress Theory, whereby sexual minorities experience "persistent, excessive stress as a result of their minority status in a heterosexist society" (McInroy et al., 2020, p. 1). This theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding sources of mental health difficulties among sexual minorities, including stressful social environments, stigma and prejudice (Meyer, 2003). Although not studied extensively within the area of asexuality, features typical of minority stress theory are witnessed throughout literature. For example, research has shown a markedly higher prevalence of interpersonal problems and mental health difficulties associated with the asexual orientation, with many attributing this to discrimination and negative coming-out experiences (Borgogna et al., 2019; Lucassen et al., 2011; Yule et al., 2013). According to Chasin (2015), negative sentiments held towards the orientation, as well as a lack of acceptance from friends, family and

professional misunderstandings, appear detrimental to asexual individuals' self-concept and identity development. Negative sentiments such as a lack of social credibility, denial, and invisibility of the asexual orientation (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Rothblum et al., 2019; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2018), as well as an assumption of sexual pathology, have been shown to hinder the coming out process (McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet 2020; Mollet, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2020). Moreover, the sexualisation of media and advertising, as well as communication that sexuality is an expected component of intimate relationships, has led to increased isolation witnessed within the asexual population (Gupta, 2017; Mollet, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2019; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2020).

Although research surrounding the asexual orientation continues to grow, limited literature focuses specifically on the development of an asexual identity or attempts to *place* this within the context of a heteronormative society. Thus, through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this study aims to investigate the identity development and internalization of an asexual orientation and how asexual individuals attempt to reject and resist societal attitudes held towards their orientation.

Method

Research Design

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). By asking questions that concern 'how' rather than 'what', IPA reveals the essence of meaning-making and lived-experience, particularly within the life narratives of non-heterosexual individuals (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Farmer & Byrd, 2015). Moreover, this approach grants an openness towards the diversity and differential experiences within a non-heterosexual community and provides insight into societal and cultural factors that influence identity development (Misgav, 2016). IPA's flexible methodology allows a greater understanding of the phenomena that relate to diverse sexual, affectional and gender categories (Chan & Farmer, 2017) and thus, is particularly fitting when investigating the asexual orientation. Moreover, as identity development and internalisation are not easily reached and potentially outside of our "perceptual field" (Pringle et al., 2011, p. 22), IPA may grant "more room for creativity and freedom", particularly during analysis and write-up of research (Willig, 2001, p. 73). This will allow the reporting of results in an accessible manner (Pringle et al., 2011), while adhering to guidelines regarding commitment, rigor and pertinence when studying existential experience (Finlay, 2011; Pringle et al., 2011). Finally, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to engage in in-depth conversations with participants (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009) and is therefore consistent with the idiographic commitments of IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Participants

Five participants between the ages of 18 and 40 who responded to the research call were interviewed. See table 1 for participant demographics. The researcher and participants did not have any interactions prior to completing the interviews. Inclusion criteria included participants that spoke fluent English, identified as asexual and described a lack of sexual attraction towards others. Sex, age, socioeconomic status, and romantic orientation were not considered criteria for exclusion. Participants were female, identified as asexual and gave a common understanding of asexuality as a lack of sexual drive or desire directed towards others. Pseudonyms were used to preserve confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

[Table 1 near here]

Recruitment Procedures

Participants were recruited through the online community AVEN between June and August 2019. An announcement advertising the research was posted on the AVEN discussion board along with researcher contact information and a statement detailing the research. Participants were not compensated. All participants were required to complete written and/or verbal informed consent and were reminded of their right to withdraw their participation both before and after taking part. Ethical approval was received from the institutional review board and permission to conduct this research was received from the AVEN Project Team. Following the interview, the researcher provided their contact information as well as details of sites linked to AVEN and other forms of support provided within the asexual community. Although sex was not a criterion for exclusion, all participants who responded to the research call identified as female. Recruitment was stopped when no new information emerged from the interviews and data saturation was attained. This may be seen through the replication of themes across

interviews. Moreover, this sample size of five participants is in line with recommendations provided by Smith and Osbourne (2008).

Data Collection

Each interview was conducted independently through Skype and lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes, with an average of 6o minutes. During the interview, the researcher engaged in active listening and was receptive to conversation and the accounts of participants. The researcher allowed the participant to lead the interview, describing in detail their experiences or beliefs that were important to them and promoting unexpected developments within the conversation. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, questions varied between participants and topics of conversation followed suit. The researcher promoted the discussion of topics that were unexpected or appeared to hold significant meaning to each participant. Conversations were recorded using a dictaphone. The interview schedule was designed to facilitate a comfortable interaction between participant and researcher and was informed by extensive reading in the area of asexual identity development (see Appendix). Questions were phrased in an open format and were mainly descriptive in design. Constructs that underlined questions consisted of cognition, behavior, awareness, context, experience, relationships, nature of relationships, time in context and disclosure. Any initial impressions were recorded immediately after each interview and these ‘reflections’ or post-interview memos were utilized during the analysis phase.

Analysis

Data Analytical Strategy

To capture and explore the meanings that participants assigned to their experiences, interview transcripts were analyzed using IPA. Researchers employed a 'theme-within-case' approach, analysing each individual's account (Smith et al., 2009). This was achieved through a double hermeneutic process with authors attempting to understand how participants understood their experiences and the meanings that they assigned to this, as well as using cyclical analysis of themes, moving from individual to shared perspectives.

The first stage of analysis involved reading and re-reading each interview transcript several times. This led to the development of exploratory comments that focused on semantic content and remained close to the participant's explicit meaning (Smith et al., 2009). This was followed by the development of initial codes whereby researchers reduced the volume of detail within the analysis, while maintaining complexity (Smith et al., 2009). Codes were then clustered into groups that formed emergent themes. The next stage involved grouping themes together to form main themes and allocating labels that best described the concepts underlying each cluster. At this stage, some themes were removed from the analysis as they failed to contribute towards the emerging structure or were supported with limited evidence (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). This series of steps was repeated for each interview transcript. During the final stage of analysis, researchers observed the structure of each major theme and looked for comparisons across interviews. This involved a cross-case analysis of the five participants' accounts and led to the development of superordinate themes which detail how asexual individuals attribute meaning to the development of their asexual identities. They did this by reviewing theme maps and comparing verbatim extracts, memos and notes made throughout the interpretative process. A list of major themes and sub-themes present across interviews was then compiled (Smith et al., 2009). See table 2 for a list of major themes and sub-themes. When

presenting the findings of this analysis, we provide a summary of participants' views and a discussion of the shared meaning for participants that correspond with the superordinate themes (Smith et al., 2013). This allowed us to capture the convergent and divergent themes from each individual's account. We present our analytic interpretation through a narrative account that is supported by verbatim extracts (Smith et al., 2009).

[Table 2 near here]

Methodological Integrity

Regular research team meetings and review of researcher interpretations granted credibility to the analysis and ensured the robustness and quality of the emerging codes and themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). This involved a process of peer debriefing whereby researchers explained the logic behind the decisions made and clarified their interpretations to one another (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This minimized potential biases and highlighted any oversights within the analysis to grant a more complete interpretation. Reflexive bracketing allowed researchers to complete a series of 'reductions' which redirected potential distractions or preconceived assumptions of participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009). As IPA can be considered a double hermeneutic process, researchers continuously reflected on how their engagement with the data and area under investigation may have impacted their analysis (Smith et al., 2009). This allowed them to interpret the original expression or meaning within the text and granted greater insight into the phenomenology present. Finally, researchers engaged in a process called the 'hermeneutic circle', whereby they performed a cyclical or step-by-step analysis of the data (Smith et al., 2009). This caused researchers to move between words, sentences and complete text during analysis and record or make explicit any preconceptions that may influence their analysis (Miller et al., 2018).

The Role of the Researcher

The first author conducted all interviews and gathered the data used within this research. This meant that the research was led largely from an 'outsider' or 'etic' perspective. During the interviews, the researcher was aware that their position as an outsider could shift the dynamic of the interview and may cause participants to doubt their ability to relate to a topic of discussion. Despite these concerns, the researcher did not experience any dubiousness or reticence during the interviews. Each participant spoke candidly about their experience, and the researcher got a sense that participants considered them trustworthy in their motives. To ensure that they used appropriate language and terminology related to the asexual orientation, the researcher familiarized themselves with the asexual community through platforms such as AVEN and Asexuality.LiveJournal. Moreover, the researcher kept a reflective journal in which they noted any preconceptions and assumptions both before, during and after each phase of analysis, as well as when completing the write-up.

Research Findings

Five superordinate themes were identified: the asexual self; discovering asexuality; disclosure; barriers to asexuality; and navigating relationships. While these themes were present for all five participants, their individual accounts were distinctive and subject to their varying experiences, romantic orientations, age and processes of identifying as asexual. The findings of this analysis will be presented through a summary of participants' views and will capture convergent and divergent themes from each individual's account (Smith et al., 2013).

Participant 1: Stephanie

'…maybe there's something else going on here'

For Stephanie, a 25-year-old asexual aromantic woman, a sense of confusion surrounding her lack of sexual attraction and an awareness of herself as different from her peers prompted the discovery of her asexual orientation. This sense of difference was initiated during college as she moved away from her conservative background, in which "sexuality wasn't really talked about" and noticed the importance that others placed on sexual and romantic relationships. She described her college experience as a "learning curve" in which she became aware of herself as different from her peers "both personality wise and sexuality wise". Moreover, her involvement in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships during this time reinforced an awareness of her lack of sexual attraction and encouraged her to find a space whereby "it's ok not to want this".

> …uh in college is when it starts to get more serious or more mature so that's what brought it to my attention I say oh now I'm having these encounters with men and I don't really know why I'm feeling the way I am or why uh why I'm having encounters with women and I don't

know why I'm feeling this way. So then that ah prompted me to actually search "its ok to not want this".

This is turn brought her to uncover the asexual community which she considered as a highly influential mode of awareness and understanding. Specifically, the asexual community granted Stephanie a greater sense of belonging and allowed her to relate to the "common" experiences of other asexuals. Conversely, the presence of diverse orientations within the asexual community appeared to impact Stephanie's sense of being different in a positive way, as she described an openness towards varying sexual and romantic orientations. For example, while she defined herself as on the "extreme end of things", she acknowledged that "people experience asexuality in very different ways" and "view intimacy very differently" within the asexual community. This understanding of the asexual community as diverse allowed Stephanie to better accept her lack of sexual and romantic attraction and disregard asexual stereotypes such as dressing modestly or not assuming a feminine role.

A lot of people think "oh I'm asexual so in don't wear makeup or I don't take selfies or dress a certain way" but if you spend any amount of time in the asexual community, you'll find that there's everyone is pretty different in all of that.

'…not something that I should feel guilty about'

Following the discovery of her asexuality, Stephanie described a strong sense of self-acceptance and considered her lack of sexual attraction as perpetual or how she "always was".

So just acknowledging that it is part of nature, it is common, that nothing happened to me, no one made me this way. It's just me and my personality and how I perceive the world around me.

This allowed her to move away from negative explanations and acknowledge her asexuality as "common" or just another sexual identity. Moreover, her identification as aromantic allowed her to understand her disinterest in forming committed or romantic relationships and set the precedent that it is a "no for everybody".

'They had no idea what it was'

Stephanie described a casual approach to disclosure despite a consciousness of the perceptions of others. For example, while she placed some significance on coming out to her parents, she did not feel the need to disclose to her peers and believed that they would be already aware of her asexual orientation.

> Um I told my parents, they're my parents they probably should know. And they're the only people I've told with "hey let's sit down I'm asexual" that's the only time that happened. Uh other times amongst friends or people in my general age group sometimes people already know what asexuality is so when we do come into conversations of "oh how many partners have you had" or "what's the best type of canoodling you done?" and you say "oh I'm just not that interested in that sort of things" and they say "oh are you asexual?" and I say "oh that's a word you could use" and then we kind of move on.

This relaxed approach to disclosure appeared as a protective mechanism against experienced or expected negative reactions. Moreover, she considered other people's reactions to her disclosure as dependent upon their knowledge of asexuality and understood her parents' negative response to her orientation as derivative of their conservative background and lack of awareness. For example, while she considered her parents' response to her orientation as a "big issue", she described her peers' reactions as more "open" and accepting.

I had a big issue when telling my parents. They had no idea what it was they didn't know it was possible they usually just think "ah our child is sick somehow" and it's our fault that she's this way am so it's definitely good when they know about it when though most people don't it's good to just see people be accepting of your experiences.

Moreover, Stephanie related her parents' misunderstanding to her own lack of exposure to non-heterosexual orientations and again described awareness as key to others' acceptance. This is witnessed through her changing perception of non-heterosexual orientations and in particular, the prevalence of homosexuality.

Again sexuality wasn't really talked about when I was growing up. I didn't know what homosexuality was until I was like sixteen and even then I thought "oh it's just a few people who are born every ten years off in the mountains" (laughs) not really common it just it's fine there's gay I'll probably never meet anyone who is and now of course fast forward five years and one in four people I know experiences same sex attraction. But ah yeah that's just to talk about homosexuality all the other sexualities I didn't hear about 'til I got to college and had been there a bit.

'…someone to 100% get me… connect with on every level'

In keeping with her aromantic orientation, Stephanie valued platonic relationships and desired to form deeper connections with family and friends. She described her ideal relationship as a "sibling-type relationship" and considered "conversational aspects" and "common interest" as "important". Moreover, Stephanie outlined boundaries within her platonic relationships and made it apparent that she did not desire "physical touch" or "exploring deep into the psyche of each other".

…because again I don't like physical contact and I don't really want relationships to go down that particular path of intimacy that involves physical touch and again exploring deep into the psyche of each other whatever.

The presence of these boundaries corresponds with her accepted understanding of her orientation and her ability to express her limitations within platonic relationships.

'…I'm asexual and most people are not'

Stephanie related her sense of being different from others to her asexual orientation. Specifically, she described a "wall" between herself and everyone else and, at times, considered herself as "less human". This sense of difference appeared to emerge from others' lack of awareness and a general consideration of asexuality as a "very out there conclusion". Moreover, she considered how her inability to comply with sexual and relationship norms caused her to explore "other answers or explanations for a long time" as she struggled to accept her asexuality.

Participant 2: Gwen

'…something was a bit strange really'

At the time of interview, eighteen-year-old Gwen had just recently discovered and come to identify as both asexual and aromantic. The discovery of her asexual orientation appeared to stem from a concern surrounding her lack of sexual attraction and romantic inclinations, as well as an inability to identify with other non-heterosexual orientations. Despite the recent nature of her discovery, Gwen initially became aware of her lack of sexual and romantic attraction during her first relationship. This delay in her discovery of the asexual orientation is indicative of the hidden nature of asexuality,

But ah I knew ah it's been a long time I think ah since primary school actually since I ah since I met my first boyfriend in primary school… he was a very nice boy actually we're still on

good terms ah still ah friends and he's absolutely fine now but I ah never really had feelings for him or anything (pause) and ah that's when I realized that maybe something was a bit ah bit off – to say it.

Moreover, a fear that her lack of sexual attraction may be derivative of her autism, mental health difficulties, or as a result of being sexually "repressed", reinforced her desire to later seek alternative explanations.

I felt that something was a bit wrong with me. I didn't know what it was exactly (pause) I might have am trouble with hormone levels or something like that. I felt I had a mental health issue and so that led me to being ah repressed.

This led Gwen to actively research her lack of sexual attraction before eventually discovering asexuality. In addition to this, exposure to a gay fictional character appeared to enhance Gwen's awareness of other sexual orientations which in turn caused her to consider the possibility of being something other than heterosexual.

…then I encountered the word am later I think it was a few weeks ago (pause) basically I decided to research some sexual orientations because I watched a video it was my favorite (inaudible) coming out as gay so am I decided to educate myself a bit in that

'They obviously know what I am'

Gwen understood AVEN as a source of support and channel for self-discovery. Specifically, she described how the presence of an "introductory post", as well as a "supportive" and "very welcoming" environment gave her a space to safely explore and be open with her asexuality. Moreover, exposure to other asexuals online appeared to ameliorate Gwen's previous sense of otherness and fear of sexual pathology.

The people on the forums… the forums I go to the asexuality forums AVEN, they know obviously so am well my orientation is basically on the side bar. They obviously know what I am and have even am have even created an introductory post and am they have been very welcoming actually, very supportive.

'…and then things clicked'

Gwen expressed gratitude towards her newfound knowledge of the orientation and felt "glad that there's a word that exists" for her lack of sexual attraction. Her sense of "relief" was apparent through her description of the orientation as a "simple word" that allowed her to recognize her lack of sexual attraction as a legitimate orientation and not derivative of her autism. Moreover, when reflecting on her past relationships, Gwen interpreted her behavior through her asexual and aromantic orientations, which in turn, allowed her to better understand why she "wasn't up to a relationship".

But it's just a valid sexual orientation like any other sexual orientation so I'm as valid as anyone else… But to be fair I have met, heard of autistics who have sexual urge, sexual competency with a sexual orientation of any kind really.

Gwen's displays of asexual pride helped to form her sense of asexual identity and self-acceptance. Interestingly, her decision to wear "just a black ring" that she considers as "discreet" is in keeping with the recent nature of her identification and growing sense of asexual pride.

…it's a pride ring it's an ace ring if you prefer (pause) it's how you ah express pride in your sexual orientation when you're asexual. It's basically a black ring – nothing too fancy just a black ring that needs to be worn on the middle finger.

'…somebody just to talk to… nothing more actually'

Gwen outlined the presence of strict parameters within her relationships and sought to maintain non-sexual and non-intimate, or purely platonic friendships. She achieved this by making her physical and romantic limits evident to others and rationalized her decision through her identification as both aromantic and asexual. Moreover, Gwen depended on the quality of her platonic relationships and sought to develop strong emotional connections.

> Maybe somebody I can ah somebody I can ah have fun with. Somebody I am well ah just discuss ah somebody just to talk to. Nothing more actually just somebody who spending time with is pleasant.

'…at first I completely rejected it'

A consideration of asexuality as negative and an inability to accept that she was something "different from straight" appeared as barrier to both the acceptance and disclosure of Gwen's asexual orientation. For example, Gwen understood her asexuality as a burden to her family and feared disappointing her parents by not providing grandchildren.

> …it's obviously quite a lot to take in for my parents… Because basically they won't have any grandchildren from my side… Naturally they want me to be happy and am… but yeah it's still a lot to take in for them.

Moreover, Gwen discussed how a lack of information surrounding asexuality contributed towards her initial misunderstanding of the orientation, as well as current misunderstandings from others. For example, she described how asexuality is "completely unknown" where she lives, with limited exposure in media and news articles.

> …I think ah there have been ah a couple of articles about it pretty recent and I think ah one ace I think was featured in the news last year but am (pause) yeah I the TV channel but ah pretty much flew off of the radars.

As mentioned previously, Gwen displayed her asexual pride covertly, with an awareness that the ace ring would not be easily recognized as symbolic of asexuality. Her use of the word "code" when describing the ace ring is again indicative of the hidden nature of asexuality and acts as a further barrier to the orientation.

> …that's the code to say you're ace well ah asexual. That's how you recognize asexuals in public and that's how you can ah show pride. It's pretty ah… I like it because it's pretty ah discreet ah it just looks like an old black ring.

'…you are the first person I came out to face-to-face'

Although she had not disclosed her asexuality outside of the asexual community or this interview, Gwen expressed an assumption that others would react negatively towards her orientation. Moreover, she feared that others would assume that her asexuality was derivative of her autism or that she had "invented" her asexuality. This reinforced a negative understanding of asexuality as Gwen incorporated her parents' assumed reactions to her own understanding of the orientation.

> They might tell me that my sexuality doesn't exists and ah another of my main fears yeah that I might be told am this is a pretty strange thing. I might also be told that my ah my ah I might act like that towards sex because I'm autistic too.

Participant 3: Vanessa

'…holy s* that's me'**

For Vanessa, a 29-year-old asexual biromantic woman, the process of discovering her asexual orientation was initiated through a desire to seek alternative explanations for her lack of sexual attraction and overcome an ongoing sense of self-conflict.

> …I have been having trouble dealing with but then the hyper-critical portion of my brain was like "no you're not asexual you just have a crap ton of issues" and it all of this and even as I was having this conflict in my head, I started doing more research into asexuality like googling asexuality.

Specifically, she wished to move beyond negative explanations for her discomfort during sex including sexual trauma, introversion, anxiety and body-image issues.

> …I was never really comfortable with it (sex), and I didn't know that it was because that I was raped or was it because I was an introvert or because I have anxiety or… because I was a plus sized woman it can be really hard to like… engage with people.

Vanessa referred to fiction and YouTube as a mean of discovery, although she noted that this was supported by online resources such as AVEN, in which she gained clarity through other asexual individuals' accounts. This allowed her to move beyond a sense of "conflict" and make sense of past experiences surrounding her lack of sexual attraction.

> I was like that's been me! Like those moments of like hearing other people's stories either through fiction or YouTube videos or forms online or things like and being like oh my gosh the moments that I've experienced, that's the feeling that I've been feeling. Those recognitions like that's what really helped me to start feeling like maybe asexuality is really who I am and it's not just a result of trauma. It's not a result of social anxiety.

'…I got to a point where I was like "yes this is me"'

Upon discovering the asexual orientation, Vanessa described an "immediate" recognition that was accompanied by a sense of relief and a "release of tension". In doing this, she positioned asexuality as an "answer" and "connected" with the orientation

> Like my first thing when I really started to believe it and really started to accept it was just like deep sigh from like every muscle and bone in my body. This just release of tension and this knowledge of like I was ok.

Moreover, Vanessa's understanding of asexuality as varied allowed her to accept her biromantic orientation and her capacity to engage in romantic relationships. This gave Vanessa the "space" to explore her orientation and engage in romantic relationships despite her lack of sexual attraction.

> …let me explore it figure out you know is this something? Is this not something? How does this impact things? Does it change things? Does it not? Am so you know in that regards my, I currently feel very strongly about the term bi-romantic.

A sense of shared community was expressed by Vanessa as she considered AVEN to be a source of "comfort" and support system for self-discovery and the acceptance of her orientation. Specifically, she described AVEN as a forum where she could express concerns surrounding her lack of sexual attraction, share her experiences with others and develop a sense of camaraderie. For example, "seeing" or "hearing other people's stories" allowed her to "believe", "accept" and "claim" asexuality as part of her identity.

> …the relief that like moved into exuberance when I had this connection was incredible and I try to remember that feeling when life gets tough and people ask me or say things that I'm

pretty sure every ace person who I chatted with online has had some experience of someone just saying "will you have sex with me and I will make you all better".

"Have you heard about this thing called asexuality?"

Vanessa's described her past experiences of coming out as "painful", "uncomfortable" and "hurtful", and sought to protect herself when disclosing her orientation in the future. Moreover, she considered how her disclosure may impact others and concealed her orientation to protect her family from their own negative reactions. For example, her family's struggle to accept queer identities deterred her from disclosing her asexuality as she considered the stress that her disclosure may cause.

…I think it's more to do with the struggles that they've had over the past couple of years because they've tried to engage in the conversation about what gender queer is with certain members of our family and it didn't necessarily go very well.

These negative reactions, whether expected from family members or experienced within past relationships, led to Vanessa's cautious approach to disclosure and avoidance of romantic relationships.

…that I had difficulties in relationships, that I had difficulties around partners. That was very hard and that's why I honestly stopped dating and why I stopped seeing and socializing with people a lot because there's just something wrong with you.

Moreover, these responses to her disclosure appeared to later influence who she decided to come out to and how she approached this. For example, within her current approach to dating, she described initially disclosing her biromantic orientation and gauging others' knowledge of asexuality before coming out as asexual.

> …the first round is definitely like the bi conversation and then if I think that they can go more then there's the asexuality conversation… am because I think if you can't accept the idea of me being romantically attracted to other people of different genders then you are definitely not going to get the ace portion of my life and who I am.

Despite an apprehensiveness towards coming out, Vanessa felt that disclosure was necessary when pursuing romantic relationships. For example, she described disclosing her asexuality early on in a relationship to establish her lack of sexual desire and avoid confusion surrounding sexual parameters.

> …this is a conversation that I need to have and they need to be aware before I go further that if there is any sexual contacts it's going to be extremely minimal. Am and it's not something that I am interested in pursuing.

'…being very open and honest about it'

Vanessa sought to form romantic relationships that were similar to a sexual partnership and maintained a strong desire to have a family. Specifically, she desired "companionship" as well as a "committed" relationship in which both partners supported one another.

> I also want to find a way to have a relationship with someone that is committed in the way that I need it to be committed… We have this intention of being together and supporting each other not someone who comes and goes but you know, is more or less at home every night that idea of commitment as spending my life with someone.

Despite these desires, Vanessa considered the prospect of finding love as "hopeless" and attributed this to her inability to maintain a relationship with a non-asexual partner. Again, she

recalled past negative experiences in which her lack of sexual attraction ultimately became an issue within her relationship.

> Majority of my dating experiences are – tend to be more like – they start out fine like no more than any first date and getting to know people can be am and then inevitably there begins to be issues and things. Either related to asexuality or other stuff like will kind of like fizzle away or stop.

To combat this, Vanessa described a willingness to engage in mild forms of physical affection and considered the prospect of multiple partners. For example, she did not expect to be "the sole partner" within her relationship and had "no issue" with her partner "having sex with other people". She did however express her limits regarding physical affection and set strict boundaries that withheld sexual activity.

> …I got to a point where I was like "yes I want to be in a romantic relationship, I want to have a partner, I want to have that companionship" ah like some amount of physical contact like I'm ah fine with kissing ah to a certain extent. I'm like very fine with like hugs, affectionate touch but just not sexual touch.

'…have still not met in person someone I know to be ace'

Vanessa's understanding of asexuality as 'other' was compounded by an assumption of stigma and doubt surrounding the legitimacy of her asexual orientation. For example, she feared that others would be unable to comprehend her lack of sexual attraction and this in turn, acted as a barrier towards openly expressing her asexual identity.

> …the idea of being asexual is so far outside the norm.... The whole reason that I'm so anxious is because I'm afraid that my asexuality is so other that the probability is an awkward "we don't know what to do with you anymore because you're like a weird person".

Moreover, an inability to comply with sexual culture appeared highly stressful for Vanessa and she had, at times, considered her lack of sexual desire as "inescapable" and feared that others would be intolerant or dismissive of her asexuality.

> You just have these things that are never going to go away, and the vast majority of human beings aren't willing to like put up or understand you and that is a very hard feeling to live with this like the notion that there's something wrong with you and it's never going to go away and it's never going to get better.

This awareness that others may view asexuality as invalid, or a "choice" had previously caused Vanessa to question the legitimacy of her orientation and relate her lack of sexual attraction to trauma, introversion, anxiety and poor body-image.

> …I was never really comfortable with it and I didn't know that it was because that I was raped or was it because I was an introvert or because I have anxiety or… because I was a plus sized woman it can be really hard to like… engage with people around sex just from like a body image issue. So I had like all of this stuff in my head, and so I was like it must be all of this like the reason I have issues it must be because of all of this and it was really classifying my disinterest in sex as being an issue, something wrong with me.

Moreover, a lack of exposure to asexuality contributed to Vanessa's understanding of asexuality as hidden and subsequent deterrence from the orientation. For example, she discussed how she had never knowingly been in the company of another asexual individual.

I am different in a way that I had you know no personal, no known personal - like to this day I have still not met in person someone I know to be ace. I'm sure I've had interactions with people but I've not known going into or as part of the conversation that they are.

Although Vanessa identified as a biromantic asexual woman, she often portrayed herself to others as heterosexual and described being typically "assumed as straight". She recalled that she would "lie" or "misdirect" others when discussing her sexuality and would "inflate" past sexual experiences. This desire to disguise her asexuality within social circles appeared stem from a desire to fit in and to be "a part of that conversation".

…like out in a bar someone starts talking about the sex that they're having or the things that they're doing, and ah for whatever reason I'm prompted to speak then I lie for lack – misdirect maybe?... I will call upon my past sexual experiences and inflate them and make them sound better than they were for me. Am, to just be a part of that conversation.

Participant 4: Amanda

'…I sort of figured myself out'

For Amanda, an asexual aromantic woman, a sense of the self as different and "unable to relate" to other people's relationships, caused her to seek an explanation for her lack of sexual attraction.

I do... would particularly notice that's there's a strong emphasis on pairing up both sexually and romantically. Normally both together and its sort of, there can be a sense of being different from that.

This involved exploring other orientations as Amanda initially questioned whether she may be gay or bisexual and engaged in what she considered "awkward" relationships.

I've tried different well when I was high school, I initially thought I was gay and then I started thinking ok, I must be bi like ok I'm not very good at either of these like ok. And I kept on going from one awkward relationship to another.

The failure of these relationships led to further searching and the eventual discovery of asexuality online. During this process, Amanda described AVEN as a mode of understanding and considered the internet as an invaluable "source of information".

Am I think the internet in terms of increasing can actually help people increase their self-awareness. Am I'm not a massive fan of labels but if it increases your self-awareness, you know it can limit confusion and what not?

'…putting my identity down and a bit firmer'

Identification with both asexual and aromantic orientations allowed Amanda to understand her lack of sexual and romantic attraction. Specifically, this gave Amanda the opportunity to make sense of her experiences within past relationships and move beyond negative explanations surrounding her lack of sexual attraction.

…but I found the more I sort of figured myself out the more it sort of answered a lot of things a lot of past relationships had left a lot of questions… am, so it sort of answered an awful lot of past experiences, am I could have gone ah, this is because of x, y, z not because of who knows?

Moreover, her understanding of asexuality as a "spectrum" and the opportunity to "curate" a specific romantic or sexual identity strengthened Amanda's recognition of the self as asexual. For example, this allowed Amanda to engage in a queer platonic relationship (QPR) and make sense of both her and her partner's opposing romantic and sexual orientations.

…she's homoromantic heterosexual. Ah that's how she's explained it to me where she's like homoromantic heterosexual and all that sort of thing… Am with me she's homoromantic ace in that sense. Am but of course I'm an aromantic ace.

Following her identification as asexual, Amanda displayed her pride by advocating openly for asexuality and other non-heterosexual orientations. She did this by organizing an aromantic and asexual social group within her local community and attempted to educate members of her church about the asexual orientation.

I mean I organize a local ace and aro social group. Because there wasn't anything out there, so I do that as well. Am if it wasn't out there I basically would – it had to be more proactive in that sense.

'…they're quite accepting of it'

Amanda described a casual approach to disclosing her asexuality despite an awareness of the perceptions of others and a consideration of the process as "awkward". This approach was reinforced by past positive experiences of coming-out, in which she received acceptance and support from family friends and within her faith community. She understood this support through the "openness" and inclusivity of others and considered negative reactions to be rooted in a lack of awareness. She described the view that asexuals are "scared of sex" as "misconstrued", again indicating how a lack of information underpins these misunderstandings.

…but yeah I used to go to a book group which am but there was I mean am like there was one guy who was quite he made quite aphobic comments he was basically implying that asexuals are actually just scared of sex and I was like well, are you scared of female intercourse or of lesbians or you know and don't believe if they haven't heard that comment made at them.

'…find yourself out of situations unintentionally'

A societal pressure to "pair off" and to adhere to the norms of her religious ideology had previously deterred Amanda from her asexual and aromantic orientations.

> But you know especially being from a Christian background you've sort of got that expectation of you've got this ideal of loving relationship and you sort of just try to fit into that. That ideal which you've been told.

Moreover, an understanding of asexuality as a source of exclusion and precursor to social isolation inhibited Amanda's willingness to accept both her asexual and aromantic orientations. She described feeling "left behind" within a "romanticized world" as she could not take part in "couples only" activities and "talk kiddies" with family and friends.

> …there's a strong emphasis on pairing up both sexually and romantically... Am, and your friends start suddenly start partnering off and the whole order. All their needs met in that romantic/sexual. And they've got married and they've had kids and suddenly you've done suddenly you've grown apart because I'm not sort of in their circles.

Moreover, minimal information and "exposure" to asexuality heightened Amanda's confusion surrounding her lack of sexual attraction. This was exemplified through a lack of readily accessible information, as well as her discovery of the orientation online.

> Well, when I first – it was mentioned – I saw it on a website, and I thought asexual what's that? I googled it and I thought – I was reading through the description, and I thought that explains a lot.

'…it's a platonic relationship that's more committed'

Despite some reservations, Amanda's motivation to engage in a QPR was grounded in a desire to fit into societal expectations, as well as a need for companionship.

> …it's how society's expectations to pair you off that has left me to agree to enter into it. Whereas it perhaps wouldn't be my first choice to enter into a QPR or QPP what have you a queer platonic partnership.

She actively rejected the romantic element of her QPR and set the precedence that she would not behave romantically or sexually with her partner. This understanding of her relationship as "platonic", or similar to a "close friendship", aligns with her self-concept as an asexual/aromantic individual. However, Amanda considered her partner's desire for romance as a "strain" within their relationship and described their current status as in a "bad situation". This stemmed from the presence of differing orientations, as Amanda and her partner's "wants" conflicted with the actuality of their QPR.

> I don't know if you ever had your best friend in school but imagine that as an adult and spending that best friend time together and doing best friend stuff but being an adult… am but in adult ways I suppose that's the best way I could normally describe it, but she comes on it from more of a romantic stance which puts a bit of a more strain onto the relationship but.

Participant 5: Sara

'So I kind of figured – like that is what I called myself'

Sara, a 40-year-old asexual heteroromantic woman, initially became aware of her lack of sexual attraction during high school. Unlike her peers, she lacked interest in forming romantic relationships and was unable to understand the emphasis that others placed on "pairing off",

> …mid-high school when I noticed how everyone would be you know all the girls want to talk about boys and everybody starts you know pairing off… I'm like I'm not interested in this.

This disinterest in forming relationships brought her to develop an initial understanding of her asexuality, which she described as an independent process. Specifically, she referred to the terms "amoral" and "asexual reproduction" when devising a way to understand her lack of sexual attraction.

> Am but like you know "a" like I was mentioning amoral and when you read the Scarlet Letter or maybe one of those plays that you have to read back when ah you're in high school. Am I was just kind of like "meh" wonder if there is something referring to asexual. I had actually thought of that term for a very long time because of you know, asexual reproduction and biological senses. Am… so I kind of figured – like that is what I called myself.

Despite being aware of her lack of sexual attraction during her teens, Sara continued to search for her sexuality into her early twenties and engaged in a sexual relationship with a friend. She considered this experience to confirm her asexuality and her indifference towards sex.

> And just you know I had sex with him the one time and I'm like "meh" ok whatever, but I have no desire to do that again. So, like I did because I felt like if I don't ever try maybe I didn't, I'm not gonna know or I'm not gonna have done that thing that would make me have that desire.

Although Sara discovered her asexuality "pre-internet", she later used online resources to enhance her understanding and awareness of her orientation and acknowledged the role of asexual communities such as AVEN.

> But I only ever really thought to "hey I wonder if there's something I could google" like maybe five years ago (laughs) when I was thirty-five-ish and then I was like cool. That's how I found AVEN which is how I found you.

'…just kind of accepted it'

Sara's understanding of herself as a "textbook" asexual is indicative of how the orientation effectively describes and defines her lack of sexual attraction. In doing this, she reiterates both her heteroromantic orientation and unwillingness to engage in a sexual relationship.

> …I'm pretty textbook… Hetero-romantic asexual I do have the, the romantic feelings towards men, I like men not women. And I also have absolutely no desire to have sex with them.

Moreover, a sense of community gained through AVEN appeared to enhance Sara's self-identification as asexual and reduced her feelings of being different. Specifically, an understanding of the asexual community as growing or 'developing', reinforced Sara's sense of the asexual self, as she considered the orientation increasingly recognized and accepted within media and literature.

> Yeah that was when I determined oh this is actually a thing and people actually discuss it. I got one of those, I forget which book it is but there is a relatively prominent book that everybody was mentioning so I read that just because I was curious.

'…I kind of don't want them to feel alone'

Sara is selective in her disclosure and chooses to come out to people who she feels will be accepting of her asexuality or are already aware of the asexual orientation. She describes disclosing only to "very good friends" who she "trusts" or has "known for while". As a result of her attempts to "distinguish between people", Sara describes only experiencing "enthusiastic" and positive responses to her orientation. Sara also describes disclosing her asexuality to increase knowledge of the orientation and relates her experiences to other asexuals. For example, she

noted that her disclosure may act as a source of "comfort" to other asexuals who are "struggling" or "having the same I'm alone in the world thoughts".

> One of them I have not had the discussion with, but I feel like I should probably bring it up with her at some point just in case she's having the same "I'm alone in the world" thoughts… but we're both clearly completely uninterested in relationships or perfectly fine living by ourselves.

Moreover, she often felt compelled to disclose her orientation to address others' assumptions regarding her single status and to avoid being set-up on dates by friends.

> …people will notice that I don't have a husband and I don't date anybody, and eventually good friends will ask and try to set me up with somebody and then I'll be like dude you know, this is like the deal. And that's the only real expression that I would say I would have been when I discuss it with people and that's usually just when I have to bring it up either because of questions that they're throwing at me.

'…they would think that it was just an excuse'

An awareness of asexuality as different from both heterosexual and other non-heterosexual orientations enhanced Sara's sense of otherness. For example, she recognized that "pairing off" happens for both her heterosexual and homosexual friends, and as a result considered asexuality as outside of the LGBT umbrella.

> …I have quite a few gay friends but they're sexual in general and the relationships and the pairing off happens on that side too. The aces are kind of right in the middle, uninterested (laughs)… It does not really fit. I don't think it fits all that well the LGBT either.

Moreover, she considered how a lack of information hindered her acceptance of her orientation and others' awareness of asexuality. For example, she described asexuality as

"inconceivable" and maintained that minimal information contributes towards other people's ongoing misinterpretations.

> …I just recently had ah a friend who I had a discussion with and he was really not like, he wasn't upset, he was just amazed that that was like a thing. Because it had never crossed his mind.

Interestingly, Sara distinguished exposure to asexuality by "age" and discussed how this may have hindered the initial acceptance of her orientation. She recalled that in the past "there was no talking about this sort of thing" and described how there being "no social media" contributed towards her "limited" information. Moreover, Sara acknowledged the role of research within the growing awareness and acceptance of asexuality.

> I have a feeling that you could count that on a couple of hands in this country. For people my age and older. Not because people think it's bad or wrong just because nobody is really aware and those that felt that way growing up just kind of accepted it and moved on and didn't really am think of the possibility. Now there is, there's research being done. People are more aware.

'…I have basically kind of stopped it'

Sara desired romantic relationships that were similar to a sexual partnership and placed emphasis on the security and comfort that this would provide. For example, she considered the prospect of a life partner who she could have children and grow old with.

> …it would be very nice to have somebody as you're growing older, who would have children with you. Who would maybe take care of you when you're old and doddering.

Despite this desire for companionship, she understood her asexuality as an obstacle within relationships and feared that a potential partner would consider her asexuality as an "excuse". This sentiment was reinforced by a sense of "guilt", as she felt that a relationship

without a sexual component would be “unfair” to her partner. This led Sara to consider rejection as “inevitable” and thus, contributed towards her unwillingness to pursue a romantic relationship

> You know, so I have basically kind of stopped. It seems like relatively mean to them because that’s part of why most men consider part of a relationship so… because that’s not what I want that’s just a, I don’t know. Just kind of a rambling explanation but… Like if a guy wants sex I don’t know if I feel right am having him decide to am limit his relationship in that way because that’s not what I want.

Convergence and Divergence across Cases

In the following section, we will discuss how super-ordinate themes manifested differently within each individual’s account. Specifically, we will focus on how experiences associated with participants’ asexual orientation were subject to other dimensions of identity such as romantic orientation and age.

All participants discussed the process of embracing their asexual identity, and how this led to a heightened sense of clarity, self-acceptance, and justification for their lack of sexual attraction. Moreover, each participant referred to the asexual community and recognised its importance in the development and acceptance of their asexual identity. According to participants, the discovery of their asexual orientation was initiated through confusion, negativity, and a sense of being different from others. Although all participants recognised the role of the asexual community within their discovery, Sara formed her initial understanding independently. This is suggestive of the role of age within asexual individuals’ discovery and highlights increasing visibility and access to the asexual orientation.

For some participants, a fear of negative reactions, a general misunderstanding of asexuality and past experiences of stigmatisation inhibited the disclosure of their asexual orientation. Moreover, this process appeared to be influenced by the presence of romantic or aromantic orientations. For example, Amanda and Vanessa's differing approaches to disclosure appeared to be influenced by positive and negative experiences respectively. Moreover, as a biromantic asexual, Vanessa felt the need to disclose her asexuality early on in a relationship to establish her lack of sexual desire and avoid confusion surrounding sexual parameters. This contrasts with Stephanie's account who, as an aromantic asexual, did not emphasise the need to disclose her orientation.

While participants' interpretations of their relationships converged on many levels, there were notable discrepancies when comparing their accounts. For example, while Vanessa and Sara sought to form romantic relationships that were similar to a sexual partnership, Stephanie, Gwen and Amanda desired purely platonic friendships. Moreover, while all participants outlined the existence of boundaries within their relationships, this differed depending on their romantic orientation. For example, while Vanessa and Sara were willing to engage in mild forms of physical affection, Stephanie, Gwen and Amanda made it apparent that they did not desire physical touch or emotional intimacy.

Discussion

This study outlines the key events and sense-making processes that underlie asexual women's identity development, as well as how they attempt to reject and resist societal attitudes held towards their orientation. The themes identified within this study correspond with current theoretical models of both non-heterosexual and asexual identity development, and experiences of minority stress that arise from a heteronormative society. Moreover, this study provides patterns of convergence and divergence across cases that are specific to romantic orientation and age. Although we acknowledge that experiences associated with asexuality may be subject to gender, the homogenous nature of our sample did not allow for the identification of factors specific to women.

Research Findings and Theoretical Implications

Consistent with past research surrounding the experiences of being asexual, the development of participants' asexual identities was initiated through awareness of the self as different within society (Andersson, 2010; Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020; Savage, 2019) and supported by external resources such as the online asexual community (Foster et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; MacNeela & McMurphy, 2015; Robbins et al., 2016). As participants came to identify with the asexual orientation, they gained a more positive self-understanding, embraced their lack of sexual attraction to others (Foster et al., 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and gained a sense of "relief" (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019, p.55). Moreover, it was apparent that self-categorization with the asexual community subdued a sense of otherness associated with their lack of sexual desire (Carrigan, 2011; Mollet, 2020 Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2021) and allowed participants to move beyond individualized self-

questioning (Carrigan, 2011; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

This path to self-discovery corresponds with other models of non-heterosexual identity development, in which gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals engage in a process of self-questioning, experimentation and conflict, before eventually embracing their sexual identity (Rosario, et al., 2006). Like our findings, online communities have been shown to assist in the development of non-heterosexual identities by providing a safe and relatively anonymous space to develop an individual's sexual identity and connect with a larger non-heterosexual group (Harper et al., 2016; Pingel et al., 2013). Moreover, similar to other frameworks of non-heterosexual identity development, participation within a supportive environment appeared to enhance the saliency of participants' identities within their self-concepts (Gordon & Silva, 2015). As these communities were typically accessed online, this reinforces an understanding of the internet as an alternative mode of non-heterosexual identity development, particularly when the identity in question is not readily accessible or subject to societal discrimination (Harper et al., 2016).

Throughout interviews, it was apparent that heteronormative ideals instilled a negative understanding of asexuality, with some participants considering sexual and romantic desires as mandatory and felt that were being excluded or 'left behind'. Like past literature surrounding asexuality, this caused participants to internalize a sense of compulsory sexuality (McInroy et al., 2020) and for some, acted as a threat to their personal identity and positive self-perceptions (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014). This in turn, brought participants to doubt the legitimacy of their lack of sexual attraction and the credibility of asexuality within sexualised cultures (MacNeela and Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Robbins et al., 2016).

Moreover, an awareness that others may view asexuality as invalid or a choice caused some participants to consider alternative explanations for their lack of sexual desire such as autism, trauma, introversion and body-image issues. This negative understanding of asexuality corresponds with past research in which heteronormative ideals contribute towards a more distressing sexual questioning process for non-heterosexual individuals (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003). Moreover, these findings also correspond with minority stress theory whereby non-heterosexual individuals may internalize negative sentiments held towards their orientation (Russel & Fish, 2016).

Similar to past research surrounding the experience of being asexual, participants' perceived invisibility of their orientation reinforced an understanding of asexuality as a source of exclusion and precursor to social isolation (Gupta, 2017; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). Again, this sense of invisibility appeared to stem predominantly from compulsory sexuality and heteronormative ideals (Vares, 2020), as well as the power of sex within marketing and the communication that sexuality is an expected component of intimate relationships (Gupta, 2017; Mollet, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2019; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2020). Moreover, this corresponds with past literature whereby a lack of exposure to similar others and to non-heterosexual communities have been found to exacerbate the hidden nature of non-heterosexual identities (Rosario et al., 2006) and reinforce feelings of inadequacy surrounding romantic desires and relationship dynamics (Jackson, 2006; Robertson, 2014); the prescription of heteronormative ideals can prevent information about non-heterosexual identities from being accessed or heard (Boyer & Lorenz, 2019) and similar to our findings, cause non-heterosexual individuals to doubt the legitimacy of their sexual orientation (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003).

As in previous research surrounding the disclosure of an asexual orientation, participants' approach to coming out was influenced by past negative experiences (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019), a fear of stigmatization (Robbins et al., 2016) and others' assumption of sexual pathology (McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet 2020; Mollet, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2020). As seen within proposed models of non-heterosexual and asexual identity development, participants considered others' positive reactions to be dependent on increased knowledge and awareness of asexuality (Robbins et al., 2016). Moreover, some participants' concealment of their asexuality due to a fear of dismissal and rejection is reminiscent of Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003).

Participants' motivations to engage in relationships and doubts surrounding the feasibility of a sexless relationship correspond with past research. For example, while aromantic participants sought companionship without an element of sexual or romantic attraction (Brotto et al., 2010; Maxwell, 2017; Scherrer, 2008; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015), heteroromantic and biromantic participants desired emotionally intimate relationships and were willing to engage in some forms of sexual activity (Foster et al., 2019; Haefner, 2011) or an open relationship (Gupta, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Moreover, like previous research on asexual individuals' relationships, some participants questioned the feasibility of a sexless relationship with a non-asexual partner (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and were subsequently inactive in their approach to finding a partner (Maxwell, 2017).

Future Recommendations

As this research was carried out using IPA, the findings of this research are not meant to be generalizable to the asexual population. It is, however, recommended that future research should consider multiple genders when investigating the identify development of asexual

individuals and processes of internalization. This may provide valuable information surrounding the significance of gender roles and expressions within the identity development of asexual individuals. Moreover, considering the role that online communities and AVEN appear to play within themes, future research should attempt to access participants through various means. This may provide a broader understanding of asexual identity development and processes of internalization that extends beyond the realms of the online asexual community.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Opening the Interview/guide

The interview will begin with welcoming the interviewee/greeting them through skype and a brief estimation of time provided (approx. 45 – 60 minutes).

Body of Interview

- So as you know, today we will be discussing asexuality and I would like to know, what does that term mean to you? [cognition]
- How do you express this? [behavior]
- Can you tell me how you became aware of your sexual orientation? [awareness]
- And how did that happen? [context]
- Do you find that being asexual makes a difference to you in any way? [experience]
- Can you tell me what kind of relationships are of interest to you? [relationships]
- What would they be like? [nature of relationships]
- Can you tell me a bit about when your sexual orientation has had an influence in your life? [time context]
- Do you engage in sexual activity? [closed question]
- Have you told many people about your sexual orientation? [disclosure]

Can you tell me about that experience? [experiential]

- What was that like? [experiential]

Extra prompts:

- What was that like?
- What do you think that means?

- Tell me a bit more

Closing the Interview

The interview will end with a summary of the topics discussed and a brief discussion on the steps taken following the interview.

Table 1. Participant Demographic

Participant	Sex	Age	Nationality	Sexual Orientation	Romantic Orientation	Relationship Status
Stephanie	Female	25	American	Asexual	Aromantic	Single
Gwen	Female	18	French	Asexual	Aromantic	Single
Vanessa	Female	29	American	Asexual	Biromantic	Single
Amanda	Female	32	British	Asexual	Aromantic	In a Relationship
Sara	Female	40	American	Asexual	Heteroromantic	Single

Table 2. List of Major Themes and Sub-themes

The Asexual Self
Embracing the Asexual Self
The Asexual Community
Asexual Pride
Discovering Asexuality
The Self as Other
Means of Discovery
Disclosure
Barriers to Disclosure
Process of Disclosure
Internal Motivations to Disclose
Reactions from Others
Barriers to Accepting Asexuality
Asexuality as Alien/Strange
Asexuality as Negative
Hidden Asexuality
Navigating Relationships
Incentives for Relationships
Boundaries within Relationships
Asexuality as an Obstacle