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# Understanding Asexuality

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# What is Asexuality?

Definitions of asexuality have focused on:

- Lack of sexual **orientation** (Storms, 1980)
- Lack of sexual **behaviour** (Rothblum & Brehony, 1993)
- Low **excitatory processes** (Prause & Graham, 2007)
- Lack of **sexual attraction** (Bogaert, 2004)



# What is Asexuality?



I'm not bad.  
I'm just drawn that way.

- Jessica Rabbit



[www.abanim-publications.com](http://www.abanim-publications.com)

*sexual*

*asexual*



# What is Asexuality?

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- **Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)** [www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)
- “absence of sexual attraction” +
- “each asexual person experiences things like relationships, attraction and arousal somewhat differently”



# Recent Media Attention

- “Glad to be Asexual”  
New Scientist article  
October 2004
- 20/20 special March  
2006
- The View January  
2006
- Montel Williams Show  
January 2007





# Asexuality Research

- Bogaert, 2004, found 1% in a national probability sample of 18,000 to endorse:  
*“I have never felt sexual attraction to anyone”*
  - later age of first sexual intercourse, fewer sexual partners, less frequent sexual activity
  - female, older, from lower socioeconomic conditions, and less education



# Asexuality Research

- Prause & Graham, 2007, mixed-methods
- Qualitative study on 4 asexuals
- Quantitative study on n = 1146 individuals (41 asexuals)

*“Would you describe the type of person you find most sexually attractive as...” (multiple choice)*

*“Which of these commonly used terms would you use to describe yourself?” (textbox with response options)*

- 53.7% of those writing asexual as their identity also identified as asexual in the MC
- Only 41.5% of self-identified asexuals reported not being attracted to men or women



## Prause & Graham (2007) cont.

- Discussed advantages & disadvantages of asexuality
- Discussed low/no desire & experiences as defining features of asexuality
- Low SES and SIS-2

- **Few had long-term relationships**

- **No gender differences**

- **Educated**

- **No difference in # lifetime partners vs sexuals**

Opposite found in  
Bogaert, 2004



# Objectives of the current studies

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1. To use a qualitative approach to understanding the definition and features of asexuality
2. To further explore the nature of the lack of sexual desire/no distress phenomenon using validated questionnaires
3. To explore possible psychopathological correlates of asexuality



# Part 1: Quantitative

- N = 214 asexual individuals recruited via AVEN (final sample, n = 187)
- Online questionnaires of:
  - **Sexual Behaviour & Response** (DSFI, FSFI, IIEF)
  - **Sexual Distress** (FSDS, modified SDS for men)
  - **Psychiatric Symptoms/Personality** (PAS, TAS, BDI)
  - **Interpersonal Functioning** (IIP)
  - **Socially Desirable Responding** (BIDR)



# Participant Demographics

	<b>Males (n = 54)</b>	<b>Females (n = 133)</b>
*p < .05 gender diff		
<b>Age</b>	30.1 (11.9)	28.2 (12.1)
College degree+	37.7%	31.3%
Earning > \$45,000*	27%	12.5%
% reporting identity "asexual"	80%	73%
% choosing "other" as orientation*	5.6%	13.0%
Feeling distressed at orientation	15%	25%
Currently in a relationship *	9%	26%



# Sexuality Measures

	<b>Males (n = 54)</b>	<b>Females (n = 133)</b>
DSFI Drive* (0-9)	6.51 (4.2)	3.19 (3.6)
Ever had intercourse*	4.8%	9.7%
Age at 1 <sup>st</sup> intercourse*	22.5 (7.3)	19.0 (5.0)
Masturbation freq*	1-3/week	< 1/mon
Kissing/petting freq*	Not at all	< 1/mon
Sexual fantasy freq*	1-2/mon	< 1/mon

\*p < .05 gender diff



# FSFI Scores (Women)

	Mean	Std Dev	Scale Range
FSFI-Desire	1.43	0.55	1.2 – 6.0
FSFI-Arousal	0.83	1.58	0 – 6
FSFI-Lubric.			0 – 6
FSFI-Orgasm			0 – 6
FSFI-Satisfaction	3.55	1.03	0.8 – 6
FSFI Pain	1.84	1.35	0-6

93% scored  
< clinical-cut off  
(26.55)



# IIEF Scores (Men)

	Mean	Std Dev	Scale Range
IIEF-Erectile Function	7.84	7.44	1-30
IIEF-Orgasmic Function	3		
IIEF-Sexual Desire	3		
IIEF-Intercourse Satisfaction	1.39	3.33	0-15
IIEF-Overall Satisfaction	6.92	2.88	2-10

All subscales  
< clinical-cut off  
(25)



# Sexual Distress

Males	Females
5.0 (9.8)	5.9 (8.0)

Scale range 0-48 with higher numbers reflecting greater sexual distress



# Psychopathology/Personality

	<b>Males (n = 54)</b>	<b>Females (n = 133)</b>
Ever been dx with psychiatric disorder*	20.6%	9.3%
BDI *	6.8 (7.8)	7.1 (8.3)
Overall alexithymia	47.6 (13.1)	46.5 (10.5)
TAS, difficulty identifying feelings	=	=
TAS, difficulty describing feelings *	>	
TAS, Externally-oriented thinking	=	=

\*p < .05 gender diff



# Personality Assessment Screener

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- 64% had raw total score  $> 19$  so p scores per domain calculated:
  - Social Withdrawal (80%) – markedly significant
  - Anger Control (75%) – moderate
  - Suicidal Thinking (52%) – moderate
  - Alienation, Hostile Control, Negative Affect, Health Problems, Psychotic Features - slight

# Interpersonal Functioning & Social Desirability



	Males (n = 54)	Females (n = 133)
Cold/Distant * - ★	61.2	58.7
Socially Inhibited - ★	63.0	63.7

*Were asexuals giving biased responses due to social desirability?*

- low impression management scores
- low self-deception scores



# Participant feedback

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- “I answered as honestly as I could – but, I don't think the questions are taking into account the difference between arousal through physical stimulation and arousal because of sexual attraction and desire.”
- “Too often the questions don't allow for viable alternatives.”
- “I took the survey, but LIED. I AM depressed, but it has NOTHING to do with asexuality. I lied because I didn't want them to think that depression is the reason for my asexuality.”



## Part II: Qualitative

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- Study 1 found:
  - Many chose “other” as their orientation
  - Distress is associated with asexuality in only a minority of the sample
  - Vague recollections of first sexual interests
  - Masturbation was a common experience
  - Social Withdrawal – marked presence
  - Social Inhibition – above clinical cut-offs
  - Asexuals dissatisfied with questionnaires
- Aim of Study 2: To explore some of these constructs in a semi-structured interview



# Participants

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- N = 15
- 4 males, 11 females
- Age range 20-57
- Countries represented: USA, Germany, UK, Canada, New Zealand
- Interviews ranged 30-90 minutes



# Methods

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- Content Analyses
- 3 independent reviewers not involved in conducting the interviews
- Reliability established



# Theme 1 – Definition of Asexuality

- “I think the thing that distinguishes asexuals from sexuals is the anticipation. I think sexuals have a lot of anticipation and pleasure leading up to the sexual experience. I don’t have any of that. I could do without it. Even though it is very pleasurable and exciting while I am doing it, I have absolutely no anticipation for it at all. I have no interest or desire that would lead me towards that in the way that I do towards other activities that I enjoy”
- “I could be attracted to someone. I can...you know, think they’re good looking and think they’re interesting and want to spend time with them and get to know them better. But to me its never, oh, yeah, I hope we end up in bed.”
- “I’m sure its genetic. It has to be genetic, right? Just like homosexuality is.”



# Theme 1 – Definition of Asexuality

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## It is not motivated by fear:

- “I wouldn't call it fear. I mean certainly being female you have to worry about being raped. I mean, that's just a thing...but I mean, when I had a boyfriend, I wouldn't say I was afraid.”



## Theme 2 – Feeling different

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- “I always knew that I was different and I always knew that I didn't have that interest like my friends had...I always had this babysitting job and I thought it was great because they would always give me a huge tip, but then my friends would go, oh we went to this really cool party and everybody was making out and it was so much fun and you should come next year. I would make a point of getting a babysitting job because there was no way I wanted to be in that kind of environment because I...I just didn't want to. So, what was I going to do, you know, just kind of sit on the side and watch...?”
- “Even as early as late elementary school people would start doing the whole dating thing, albeit in elementary school there's not much you can do with that but I really never saw the appeal then, middle school still didn't see the appeal, high school still didn't see the appeal with the dating or the sex or any of that. People would talk about, you know people would say “I'll hook you up” ... “Well I don't want to be hooked up”

# Theme 3 – Distinguishing romantic from sexual relationships



- “basically I just enjoy being close to someone and spending time with them and doing things that make them happy. Not sexually..... Well like I like being touched and held but I just don't really want to do anything sexual if that makes any sense. Like I desire to be held and like to cuddle and stuff but not to have sex.”
- “there's a girl I met about a year ago and I think I may be romantically attracted to her though I am in no way, shape, or form sexually attracted to her.”
- “I like being close with someone, you know, so you feel closer to them or more intimate...”

# Theme 3 – Distinguishing romantic from sexual relationships



- “...there are all different levels of how far they’ll go, like there are some asexuals who are **aromantic** and they don’t want anyone to touch them and they hate being touched at all....in asexuality there is the same types of romances there is with sexuality. There’s aromantic, heteroromantic, biromantic, and homoromantic and their sexualities could differ and what they desire could differ. It just depends on the person.”



## Theme 4 – Asexuality is not simply another disorder “in disguise”

### Many opposed the notion that asexuality is just an extreme case of HSDD

- “being asexual is having no sexual desire and having HSDD is having some.”
- “I have taken a couple of Psychology courses and it does sound very similar to the Hyposexuality Disorder. My biggest problem with that though is the term disorder because saying it is a disorder or it’s just low sexual desire or something makes it sound like a problem and myself and most other asexuals I’ve spoken with are more than happy with how they are so it really doesn’t seem like much of a problem or anything to me”



## Theme 4 – Asexuality is not simply another disorder “in disguise”

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- “Basically, everyone in the asexual community wants to spread the message that it’s not a disorder and it’s not something that’s a problem and needs to be fixed and that’s the big thing, the reason that we’re trying to get the word out about it as an orientation because if it’s not considered an orientation then there must be a problem.”



## Theme 5 – Is this Schizoid, Aspergers, or a Personality Trait?

- “a lot of people on the website are introverts, which seems related to being schizoid.”
- “To, at least a moderate extent, I pretty much match all of them [referring to schizoid criteria]...although I've never been formally diagnosed and probably never will...I am pretty sure that if I did walk in, they would probably diagnose me with schizoid personality disorder.”

**7/15 interviewees could relate to the schizoid label**



## Theme 5 – Is this Schizoid, Aspergers, or a Personality Trait?

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- “One of the things that has come up on AVEN quite a bit is Asperger’s and after reading the traits of Asperger’s I have pretty much settled with that I probably have Asperger’s as well... I think there is so much more to personalities and stuff that we don’t understand yet that I have no problem with asexuality being connected to some of those things. I don’t necessarily think it is always the case, Like not everybody with Asperger’s has asexuality. Some of them are hypersexual, but there is definitely a connection, because I have seen so many people on the asexuality sites have Asperger’s, and so many people who are Aspie’s say they are asexual, that there is definitely a connection there.”



## Theme 6 - Masturbation

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- “I don’t know if you’re aware some asexuals masturbate, some don’t. I don’t but I mean people who do still consider themselves asexual because they don’t desire sex with another person. That shouldn’t like change anything... they don’t want to have sex with another person because orientations are like your desires with other people not necessarily yourself.”
- “even though they might want to clean out the plumbing once in a while, they don't have any interest in doing it with someone else.”



# Theme 7 – Technical language around sexuality and body

In reference to their feelings about their genitals, several stated that “they are just there”. For some with artistic backgrounds, they stated being able to appreciate the artistic value of the genitals, but this was not sexual

- “The genitals themselves they don't bother me. They don't excite me...It's just they're there.”
- “well I would say I was lubricated I guess...but enough? It's hard to know....you know, I mean like the plumbing works, let's say, if you want an expression..... Well, I don't know if I'd call it aroused. I mean, just because I'm lubricated doesn't necessarily mean I'm aroused. I mean a guy can have an erection... I wouldn't necessarily call it being aroused just because there is lubrication”

# Theme 8 – Negotiating boundaries in relationships

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- “in a sexual relationship cheating on someone is the person has sex with someone else. In a purely romantic relationship cheating would just be like if I have a boyfriend who considers himself in love with another girl and like he goes and sees her and kisses her and stuff and cuddles with her and tells her he loves her.”
- **An understanding on “doing the sexual” in sexual-asexual partnerships**



# Theme 9 - Religion

## Disproportionate number of atheists

- “I think it [atheism & asexuality] might be related. I do think that because asexuals are forced to realize that they are different and they know they are different than everybody else, they have to think about something that is perfectly natural for everybody else, I think it does sort of encourage a nonconformist streak in people to where if they have any tendencies whatsoever to be skeptical, then they are going to go that way... And a lot of religions place a lot of value on marriage and appropriate gender roles to include sex, so you can imagine somebody growing up asexual who doesn't want to have a relationship or who doesn't want to get married or doesn't want to be fruitful and multiply...It would be easier for them to reject the religion and become atheist.”

# Theme 10 – A need to destigmatize and educate

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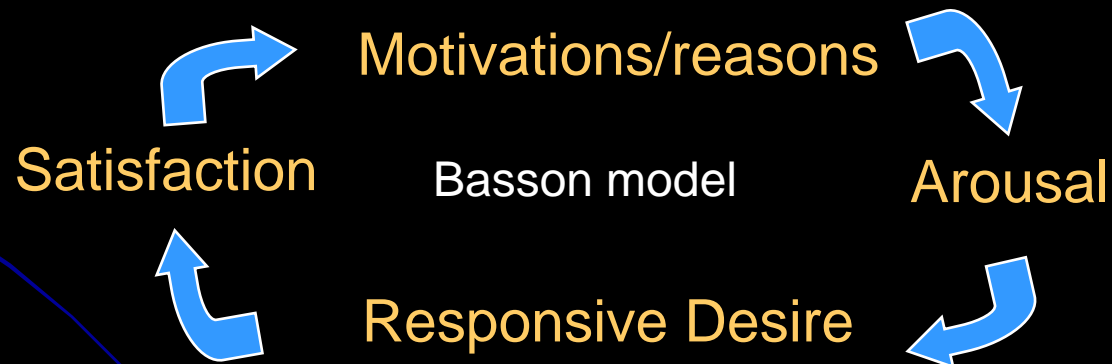


- “The asexual community is fairly new and since so little is known about it we’re still discovering everything that there is to know on the message board by having all the discussions and goals and questions.”
- “Well, I think that it’s really not perceived and that’s the problem and that’s why like we need the message board and all the news reports and stuff because nobody or very few people know that it exists”
- “I am very keen on getting the word out because had I known years ago my life could have been so different. I always knew that I was different and I always knew that I didn't have that interest like my friends had. But I never heard of asexuality. I didn't realize that I could say, hey, I'm asexual, you know...go away.”



# Conclusions

- Replicated aspects of Prause & Graham (2007)
  - It is not a fear-mediated construct
  - Low arousability
- No anticipation for sexual activity



- Variability in sexual behaviours
- “Negotiating” the “institution” of sexual behaviour
- A web community constructs an asexual identity



# Areas to pursue

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- Is this simply HSDD without distress? (akin to Leiblum & Chivers, 2007 discussing two groups of PGAD based on distress)
- What is the link between schizoid and asexuality
- Analysis of data in AVEN message board
- fMRI studies
- Genetic studies (digit ratio, twin studies)

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"What did you expect Cinderella ?  
Remember, we are just a couple of  
animated characters in a children's film."