

MITCHELL, HEATHER SUNSHINE, M.A. *Becoming Impossible: Asexual Narratives of Identity, Experience, and Importance*. (2016)  
Directed by Dr. J. S. Kroll-Smith. 78 pp.

Our current society assumes that sexual attraction or desire is natural and experienced by all human beings. The idea and lived experiences of asexuality, however, is beginning to challenge this assumption. The purpose of this Master's thesis is to gain a better understanding of asexual identity through interviews regarding experience and importance of asexuality with 10 self-identified asexual individuals. Six themes emerged from the interviews: discovery of asexuality, importance of asexuality to the lived experience, identity labels, definitions of asexuality, lack of education on asexuality, and libido and the various types of attraction. Many of the issues discussed in the 6 themes related back to the lack of education regarding asexuality in society. Asexuality is still a relatively unknown sexual orientation. In addition, the ongoing debate over the definition of both asexuality and now sexual attraction reinforces the view of asexuality as an insecure sexual orientation. Finally, the conflation of all types of attraction into sexual attraction reduces awareness of the different attractions and relationship possibilities for individuals.

BECOMING IMPOSSIBLE: ASEXUAL NARRATIVES OF  
IDENTITY, EXPERIENCE, AND IMPORTANCE

by

Heather Sunshine Mitchell

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Greensboro  
2016

Approved by

---

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by HEATHER SUNSHINE MITCHELL has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
The Context.....	1
Research Focus .....	2
II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	5
Norm and Normal .....	5
History of Asexuality.....	8
Research on Asexuality.....	8
Research on Identity Formation.....	15
Coming Out.....	23
Research on Asexual Identity Formation and Performance .....	25
The “Real” or “Gold Star” Asexual .....	26
III. METHODS .....	28
Interviews.....	29
The Life Story Interview.....	30
Access .....	30
IV. RESULTS .....	33
“Discovery” of Asexuality .....	33
Importance .....	40
Identity Labels .....	45
Definitions.....	51
Lack of Education .....	54
Libido and Attraction.....	59
V. DISCUSSION.....	63
Asexuality Unknown .....	64
Definition Debate.....	65
Attractions.....	67

VI. CONCLUSION.....	68
Limitations and Future Research .....	68
REFERENCES .....	71

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most pervasive social assumptions is that all humans possess sexual desire (Scherrer, 2008, 621).

#### *The Context*

Our society is built around the assumption that all humans possess (or should possess) sexual attraction, desire, and behavior. In modern society, sexual essentialism describes the widespread assumption that sexuality and sex are normal, natural, and biological. Asexuality is, therefore, seen and presented as a lack or deficit. Asexuality research and asexuals themselves are beginning to challenge the idea that sexuality is pervasive and “natural”, problematizing ideas surrounding sexuality and what is sexual, and allowing exploration and “negotiation of identity and desire” (Scherrer, 2008, 622).

Although (or maybe because) asexuality challenges the sexual norm, asexuality has received little attention or acknowledgement in most scientific and academic research. Prior to 2000, asexuality was rarely mentioned in research, and, when mentioned, seldom discussed with any interest (Przybylo, 2012). Asexuality was almost exclusively mentioned as one of the four mutually exclusive sexual orientations in emerging sexual models, but researchers were disinterested “in exploring its definitions, parameters, and implications” (Przybylo, 2012, 4). Instead, the sparse mentions of asexuality imply a general acceptance of asexuality as abnormal, founded on lack, and

against the ideas of nature. Sexual identity, like most identities, is socially constructed and varied based on time and culture. The fact that asexuality has recently begun to gain the attention of both the academic and scientific communities shows that asexuality is becoming “culturally relevant and intelligible” within our “particular cultural nexus” (Przybylo, 2012, 3). Unfortunately, current knowledge of asexuality is being created almost exclusively by scientific and academic research which attempts to “bind (a)sexuality indiscriminately to the biological body while reproducing and naturalizing harmful sexual differences” through accepted scripts of sexual normality (Przybylo, 2012, 3). As Callis notes (from Foucault), “society’s laws become written into our bodies, so that we discipline ourselves rather than relying on external governing” (2014, 71). We establish and perform our identities based on the scripts that have been socially and culturally constructed in design and become highly political in practice (Fullmer, Shenk, & Eastland, 1999). We end up moderating our actions, behaviors, and desires to fit scripts that dictate how we should think and act (or how we *think* we are supposed to think and act).

### *Research Focus*

Current research, like research into most areas of identity, tries to establish similarities that will allow for the easy classification of an individual into an identity category. Unfortunately for asexual (ace) individuals, this classification in an identity category has become medicalized and pathologized by society, with the assumption that ace individuals are somehow immature in sexual development or have experienced a

traumatizing event in their past, though some asexual research is attempting to refute this idea (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010).

Scherrer (2008) highlights the fact that research which focuses on asexuality as both an identity and legitimate experience is minimal, and what identity research is available focuses on finding similarities between all ace individuals to assist in the classification of someone into the category of asexual. Ace individuals are currently viewed more negatively than other sexual minorities. Studies have shown that “asexual individuals were evaluated more negatively as a social group, were viewed as less human, and were less valued as contact partners compared with heterosexual and other sexual minority groups” (Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes, & Erskine, 2014, 647). Cerankowski and Milks highlighted that the alienation that ace individuals experience “comes from lacking sexual desire in a world that presumes sexual desire and that attaches great power to sexuality” rather than any innate characteristic of asexuality (2010, 661).

In addition, through research and input from the medical and scientific communities, narratives that seek to identify certain individuals as “real” asexuals are beginning to emerge. Although there may be similarities in experiences and processes of identity formation and performance, the path that each ace individual takes through that process and the lived experiences of each ace individual is distinct and different (Morgan, 2013). Asexual identity is not formed in isolation but interacts with other identities such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, age, and ability, as well as other social experiences. Currently, the limited research on asexuality neglects to examine individual

lived experiences, the importance of an ace identity, or multiple individual differences in identity. Asexual research must also begin to examine variations in understanding of asexual identity, the use and acceptance of asexual definitions, and the assemblage of attractions and experiences that constitute an ace identity (Morgan, 2013).

How do we “analyze and contextualize a sexuality that by its very definition undermines perhaps the most fundamental assumption about human sexuality: that all people experience, or *should* experience sexual desire” (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010, 650)? The purpose of this thesis is to explore those factors which influence and interact within asexual identity formation and performance through interviewing ten self-identified asexual individuals. My focus is horizontal. I want to “go deep” to explore the diverse lived experiences of asexuals before and since coming to an asexual identity. My goal is to gain a greater understanding of the place and significance of asexuality in both their current and past lives. In bringing to light this hidden and often veiled identity, I hope to foster a better understanding and acceptance of asexuality in society.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to exploring these ideas and questions, it is important to understand where current research stands in relation to asexual identity. Limited research on asexuality has only taken place within the last 15 years in academic or scientific research. First, I want to discuss ideas surrounding norm and normal within society, specifically in relation to sexual identities. Next, I want to briefly discuss the history of the view of asexuality as a sexual orientation. Then I want to focus on the asexuality research to date, the general topic of identity formation and coming out, and current research and understandings on asexual identity formation and performance. Finally, I want to discuss ideas surrounding the “real” asexual.

#### *Norm and Normal*

Most sexual orientation research defines sexuality either on a continuum with heterosexual on one end, homosexual at the other end, and bisexual between the two, or as one of three or four categories (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and sometimes asexual). A heterosexual orientation is considered the norm, the standard sexuality against which all other sexualities are defined, compared, measured, and classified. Normality is defined based on who identifies as heterosexual, with various degrees of abnormality assigned to sexual minorities (Galupo, Davis, Gryniewicz, & Mitchell, 2014). In other words, heterosexuality is “established as the foundational sexual identity”

within society and, as McRuer noted of homosexuality, all other sexual identities are “always and everywhere supplementary – the margin to heterosexuality’s center” (2006, 301).

Power and privilege are given to individuals who identify as heterosexual; heterosexual identity is invested with a good deal of agency in society and social relationships. The power and agency associated with the group, however, is not based off “any sort of objectively describable social reality” or “pre-existing and recognizable similarity” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2003, 370,371). Instead, difference is downplayed so that similarities are invented and highlighted (Bucholtz & Hall, 2003). The group in power is then able to construct power and privilege for in-group members, creating a hierarchy where those in power continue to experience power and privilege while those in the out-group become othered and pushed to the periphery of society. As society progresses and the hierarchy of power and privilege remain, the in-group begins to constitute itself as the norm and, therefore, naturalized and invisible (Bucholtz & Hall, 2003). Essentialism develops in which “those who occupy an identity category (such as women, Asians, the working class) are both fundamentally similar to one another and fundamentally different from members of other groups” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2003, 374).

Any difference between the in-group and various out-groups is seen as a deviation from the standard and “used as a justification for social inequality” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2003, 372-373). The boundaries between the groups are constructed as natural, and social boundaries are created to separate one group not only from the norm but from each other. In the end, this creates a “dichotomy between social identities constructed as oppositional

or contrastive” and reduces “complex social variability to a single dimension: us versus them” where only some identities are considered “real” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2003, 384).

Although heterosexuality is currently the norm, homosexuality and bisexuality have experienced minimal levels of acceptance within society. Recently the idea of homonormativity has emerged. Homonormativity is “the extension of heteronormative privilege to certain normative gays and lesbians” (Vitulli, 2010, 156). Homosexual individuals who fit certain acceptable criteria in other identity categories begin to experience nominal power and privilege within society. Categories of acceptable identities most often include “whiteness, traditional and essentialized gender roles, property and wealth, monogamy and the nuclear family structure, able-bodiedness, and US citizenship” (Vitulli, 2010, 157). Unfortunately, homonormativity ultimately only serves to reify normative sexual and gender identities (Vitulli, 2010).

Bisexuality is a sexual orientation category that often encompasses numerous levels and varieties of heterosexual and homosexual identity and behavior. Bisexuality is often confusing to those in power due to the overriding assumption that all individuals are either attracted to men or women but not both. Bisexual individuals are seen as “lesbians and gays who are afraid to come out for fear of losing their ‘heterosexual privilege’” or as going through “a ‘transitional’ phase between straight and gay, rather than its own stable identity” (Callis, 2014, 67). Despite the negative outlook toward bisexual individuals (and the vast identities that are currently stuffed into the bisexual category), bisexuality is normally recognized as falling on the continuum or as one of the three socially recognized sexual orientations.

The key to acceptance is that some form of sexual attraction or desire is experienced, whether that is with the opposite gender, the same gender, or some ratio of both. Asexuality falls outside the continuum and is only occasionally recognized as one of four sexual orientation categories in research. Scott and Dawson state that “asexual people and practices are at best viewed as a puzzling aberration, and at worst rendered invisible by their different (non-legitimated) ways of relating” (2015, 3). However, within the last 15 years, asexuality is increasingly becoming “socially visible as a new ‘problem’ to be explained by the growing willingness to recognize and talk about it, in both academia and popular media” (Scott & Dawson, 2015, 4).

#### *History of Asexuality*

At this point, it is important to briefly acknowledge the history of asexuality as a concept within research. Although the term asexual was first used in relation to humans in the 1970s, until Bogaert’s research in 2004 most people used the term asexual to describe single-cell organisms. Prior to use of the term asexual, asexuality was first labeled as category X by Alfred Kinsey. Category X was a category created to house individuals who failed to exhibit any *acceptable* level of sexuality that would fall on the heterosexual/homosexual continuum. Currently, asexuality is slowly becoming recognized as the fourth category of sexual orientation, though still viewed as outside normal sexuality.

#### *Research on Asexuality*

A majority of asexuality research to date has covered areas such as definitions of asexuality, biological and physical characteristics, psychology, sexual function, and

relationships. The definition of asexuality is still not clear, and a variety of possible definitions exist within academic and scientific research. A majority of research on definitions has focused on “discovering” if asexuality could be defined as a lack of sexual attraction, lack of sexual experience, lack of sexual desire, combination of the above, or self-identification (Van Houdenhove, Gijs, T’Sjoen, & Enzlin, 2015; Aicken, Mercer, & Cassell, 2013). In Bogaert’s 2004 study, asexuality was defined as a lack of sexual attraction (Bogaert, 2013). In Van Houdenhove et al.’s study, “a lack of sexual attraction resulted in the highest percentages of participants categorized as asexual” (2015, 676). In fact, in most asexual research, using a lack of sexual attraction as the definition is preferred because of the view that attraction “is likely to form the psychological core of one’s partner-oriented sexuality and is less open to interpretation than these other measures” (Bogaert, 2013, 285). In addition, is the official unofficial definition of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), which is highly popular and influential in the academic, research, and asexual communities themselves (Carrigan, 2011). Although AVEN and many within the asexual community have accepted the lack of sexual attraction as the definition, asexuality is a heterogeneous group of individuals and not all asexuals agree with this definition (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010).

In a 2007 study by Prause and Graham, the authors found that asexuality seemed best characterized as low or no sexual desire or excitement rather than lack of attraction (Bogaert, 2013; Brotto et al., 2010). The “absence of desire for sex with a partner was a particularly strong predictor of asexual self-identity” in comparison to other predictors and definitions (Aicken, Mercer, & Cassell, 2013, 122). Other research has defined

asexuality based on behaviors, categorizing individuals who engaged in limited or no sexual behaviors as asexual (Brotto et al., 2010). However, Bogaert notes that it is “important to distinguish both a lack of sexual attraction and a lack of sexual desire from a lack of sexual behavior” (2013, 276). Recently, discussions of definitions have expanded to include self-identification of an asexual identity (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). For many researchers, academics, and asexuals, “self-reported sexual attraction is at the heart of sexual orientation, regardless of one’s sexual behavior proclivities” (Brotto, Yule, & Gorzalka, 2015, 647).

Finally, debates have begun on whether or not asexuality should be defined as a sexual orientation along with heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality or as a meta-category analogous to sexual. Van Houdenhove et al. agree with Chasin and Poston and Baumble, and “argue for a dimensional approach to asexuality in which ‘asexual’ is an alternative to ‘sexual,’ rather than an alternative to heterosexual, homosexual/lesbian, or bisexual” (2015, 677). Viewing asexuality as a meta-category means seeing asexual identity from a social-constructionist perspective, without binary categories and recommending that asexuality is viewed as occurring on its own continuum (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

Any definition of asexuality, however, can be seen as problematic because they are defined in ways that are “*reactive* and *absolute*, predicated on lack, absence and ‘neverness’” (Przybylo, 2011, 445). In addition, no matter the definition of asexuality (if one is used), a definition “does not necessarily mean a lack of interest in intimacy or its component factors (love, sociability, emotional depth) that help build close relationships”

(Scott & Dawson, 2015, 3). Many asexual individuals report “sexual desire and sexual behavior (e.g. masturbation) but [do] not direct this sexual desire or sexual behavior toward other individuals” (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015, 671). Other asexuals may experience a low degree of sexual attraction or desire without the need to act on that attraction (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

Another area of asexuality research has focused on possible physical characteristics or biological reasons that could lead to asexuality. Bogaert’s original research on the British probability sample explored whether or not characteristics such as height, physical health, birth order, and handedness (to name a few) would predict asexuality (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Bogaert noted that “these differences provide some support for a biological origin to sexual orientation (including asexuality) insofar as height is relatively stable after puberty and is influenced by early biological factors such as prenatal hormones” (Bogaert, 2013, 284).

Bogaert’s 2004 study found that asexuals had their first sexual experience later in life, engaged in sexual activity less frequently, and had fewer sexual partners over time (Brotto et al., 2010). In addition, asexuals were less educated, came from lower socioeconomic conditions, were older, and were more likely to be female (Brotto et al., 2010). Brotto et al.’s study also supported the finding that “more women than men were asexual” (Bogaert, 2013, 277). However, Bogaert notes that societal influences and ideas regarding women’s sexuality - naturally less sexual and more open to expressing deviant sexualities - may lead to a perceived higher rate of asexuality in women (Bogaert, 2013).

Other asexual research studies have looked at possible psychological correlates such as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD), alexithymia, depression, and Cluster A as predictors of asexuality (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). HSDD is a sexual disorder in which the individual experiences distress from low or lack of sexual desire (Bogaert, 2013). However, as many studies highlight, most asexuals do not experience distress from their asexuality. Brotto et al. (2010) note that the distress experienced, if any, was most often due to social stigmas and consequences rather than personal distress over low or no sexual attraction or desire.

Brotto et al.'s study used psychological and personality screens to explore the possibility that asexuality is linked to a personality disorder, especially those that fall under Cluster A of DSM-IV syndromes, in which one of the characteristics is a "tendency towards solitary activities" (2010, 601). Brotto et al. (2010) also included measures to examine a possible link between asexuality and alexithymia or Schizoid Personality Disorder. In particular, Schizoid Personality Disorder includes the characteristics of emotional coldness, a lack of or limited capacity to express feelings or emotions toward others, and a lack of desire for close relationships (Brotto et al., 2010). However, findings from both Bogaert's and Brotto et al.'s studies suggest that asexuals are mentally healthy and that they seek out relationships with others which are both engaging and emotionally connected (Brotto et al., 2010). In asexual communities, as in most sexual minority communities, there is resistance to psychological labeling of asexuality due to the pathological aspects of psychological diagnoses (Brotto et al., 2010).

Sexual function, including sexual activity, sexual desire, and sexual excitation is another area of focus in scientific and academic research. A majority of this research revolves around sexual experiences and behaviors, exploring whether or not or to what degree asexual individuals are sexually inactive (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Research by Van Houdenhove et al. (2015) and Brotto et al. (2010) in this area shows that asexual individuals are not necessarily sexually inactive; in fact, asexuals often engage in both partnered and solitary sexual activities. Asexual individuals who participate in sexual activities with sexual individuals stated they initially participated in sexual activities out of curiosity, noting that “curiosity was the main motive for their first sexual experience” (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015, 271). This is also true of sexual individuals.

While participating in sexual activities was normally due to curiosity or to please their partner, solitary sexual activities such as masturbation were done for non-sexual reasons such as relaxation or to relieve tension (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015; Brotto et al., 2010). Several studies have found that asexuals who masturbate often do not associate the masturbation act with or direct the experience toward a specific individual (Bogaert, 2013; Brotto et al., 2010). Asexual participants in Brotto et al.’s (2010) study noted that masturbation or other solitary sexual activities are different from partnered sex, and that masturbation stems from physical needs rather than sexual, emotional, or relational needs. In addition, many asexuals do not view masturbation as a “sexual act because there are no sexual thoughts or emotions involved” (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015, 273).

Other asexual research on sexual function has shown that asexuals are able to become physically aroused and reach orgasm, but that any physical arousal is not linked

to emotional arousal or feelings (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Asexuals who engage in sexual intercourse often maintain that they lack “sexual attractions despite engaging in sexual behavior” (Brotto et al., 2010, 607). The study showed that a lack of sexual attraction is distinct from other aspects of sexual function, such as desire (Brotto et al., 2010). In addition, for asexuals, the sexual experience was usually “void of feelings” (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015, 271). Asexual individuals noted a lack of anticipation for the sexual acts, suggesting that the lack of anticipation distinguished asexuals from sexuals rather than the sexual behavior itself (Brotto et al., 2010). Sexual activity, participants felt, did not produce the feeling of being more connected or closer to their partner in the ways that their sexual partners experienced (Brotto et al., 2010). Finally, some of the asexual participants stated that they had difficulty focusing on the sexual act, often needing to focus on something else, which led to the participant experiencing the physical aspect without emotional intimacy (Brotto et al., 2010). Only a subgroup of the asexual population identifies as sex-averse, feeling fear or disgust toward sexual activity.

Finally, relationship dynamics has been a focus of asexuality research. In studies on asexual relationships, ace individuals note that most “problems” involving asexuality mainly arise in relationships with sexual individuals (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

Asexual individuals often feel romantic attraction toward another individual or individuals, but that romantic attraction is apart from and unrelated to any type of sexual attraction (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Asexual research is beginning to highlight the possibility that love and sex are both different and unrelated. Brotto et al. noted that the sentiment arose among asexual participants in their study that “since one could have sex

without love, why could one not also have love without sex?” (2010, 614). The focus of asexual relationships is on the romantic aspects of the relationship where “the key characteristic of a relationship is the emotional bond between partners” (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015, 274).

Most asexual identity is based on their romantic attraction, identifying as aromantic, heteroromantic, homoromantic, biromantic, panromantic or polyromantic, to name a few. When asked about their ideal relationship, in Van Houdenhove et al.’s (2015) study, most ace individuals stated they preferred romantic relationships that are identical to sexual relationships but without the sexual component. Ace individuals note they desire “the closeness, companionship, intellectual, and emotional connection that comes from romantic relationships” without the sexual component (Brotto et al., 2010, 610). Some asexuals, however, are unsure how a non-sexual, romantic relationship would differ from what society deems a close friendship (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). In addition, many asexuals state that disclosing their asexuality identity to their sexual partner often meant the end of that relationship and those who continued their relationships had to compromise with their partner on ways to approach sexuality within the relationship (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Sexual activities were most often negotiated because, like sexual individuals, some asexual individuals believe “a relationship without sex is not a real relationship” (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015, 271).

#### *Research on Identity Formation*

Eric Erikson (Erikson) developed a theory regarding identity formation in which individuals evolve and grow through a series of eight stages (Munley, 1977). As the

individual matures and grows, they not only change and grow individually, they also come into contact with other individuals; mutual interaction between the individual and society occurs (Munley, 1977). The eight stages of growth are said to be universal stages in which all children and adults must pass at various points throughout their lives (Munley, 1977). According to Erikson, the eight stages are “basic trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus identity confusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation, and ego integrity versus despair” (Munley, 1977, 262). As an individual successfully navigates each stage, they are given the strength to confront the next stage in the process of identity formation. In addition, as each stage is confronted and passed, the individual develops “particular attitudes toward oneself, one’s world, and one’s relationship to one’s world” (Munley, 1977, 262). Waterman notes that Erikson sees identity as a “subjective sense of wholeness, both conscious and unconscious, comprised of synthesized identifications that represent the person’s psychosocial stimulus value both for himself or herself and for significant others in the community” (Waterman, 1988, 187). Although Erikson’s theory highlights the universality of his eight stage process and the importance of the process to the individual, he also notes the importance of the contributions that social, historical and cultural factors place on resolution of the stages (Munley, 1977).

Marcia developed a model of identity formation, attempting to build on and operationalize Erikson’s theory (Grotevant, 1987). As stated by Marcia, the identity theory framework “is *developmental* in its focus on the process of forming a sense of

identity... *contextual* in that it considers the interdependent roles of society, family, peers, and school or work environments in identity formation... [and] *life-span* in scope” (Grotevant, 1987, 203). Waterman (1988) notes that for Marcia the structure of identity is most significant in examining identity formation. The structure of identity “functions to organize and harmonize diverse aspects of the person’s physical, psychological, and social being, thereby aiding in achieving both differentiation from others and solidarity with them” (Waterman, 1988, 188). Despite receiving criticism for the theory, Grotevant notes that Marcia’s paradigm work on identity status “has pointed to the importance of two key processes involved in identity formation: *exploration* of alternatives and *commitment* to choices” (1987, 204). Identity exploration in Marcia’s theory is defined “as problem-solving behavior aimed at eliciting information about oneself or one’s environment in order to make a decision about an important life choice” (Grotevant, 1987, 204).

Cass (1979) focused identity formation research on a theoretical model of homosexual identity formation in an attempt to describe the process that homosexual individuals experience as they acquire a gay or lesbian identity over time. For Cass, two assumptions were made “(a) that identity is acquired through a developmental process; and (b) that locus for stability of, and change in, behavior lies in the interaction process that occurs between individuals and their environments” (1979, 219). Cass’s model involves a six stage identity process that “proposes an interactionist account of homosexual identity formation and recognizes the significance of both psychological and social factors” (Cass, 1979, 220).

The six-stage model begins with the feeling of incongruency by the individual, followed by tentative commitments to homosexuality, and feeling isolated and alienated from both society and personal circles (Cass, 1979). In stage 2, the focus is on social incongruency, with the individual beginning to identify as homosexual in private but not in public. Stage 3 involves greater connections to other homosexual individuals, allowing them to no longer feel as socially isolated (Cass, 1979). By the end of stage 3, the individual now fully identifies as homosexual privately (Cass, 1979). In Stage 4, the individual begins to interact in homosexual subculture and their homosexual identity is validated as an acceptable identity (Cass, 1979). However, the difference between how the individual perceives themselves and how they believe others perceive them in everyday life becomes accentuated (Cass, 1979).

Throughout stage 5 the individual begins to devalue the perspectives and opinions of heterosexuals and increasingly value those of homosexuals, associating more and more with other homosexuals (Cass, 1979). In the final stage, the individual begins to experience more balance, recognizing that some heterosexual individuals accept their homosexual identity and the divide between the heterosexual and homosexual worlds for the individual lessens (Cass, 1979). A homosexual identity is no longer seen as *the* identity in the individual's life, and the individual begins to incorporate other aspects of their identity. Despite outlining six specific stages, Cass notes that the model is not intended to be universal for all individuals coming into a homosexual identity because "individuals and situations are inherently complex" (1979, 235).

In developing this model, Cass relied on and recognized the interpersonal congruency theory which states that “stability and change in human behavior are dependent on the congruency or incongruency that exists within an individual’s interpersonal environment” (Cass, 1979, 220). Cass argues that individuals have “been socialized by and into a society that is antihomosexual and heterosexual in its outlook,” and the possibility of identifying outside of the socially accepted heterosexual identity causes turmoil and incongruency in their perceived sense of self (1979, 222). When examining minority sexual identities (specifically homosexuality), recognition of a minority sexual status creates an “inconsistency between perception of self and others” (Cass, 1979, 220). The incongruency propels the individual to go through the six stage process in an attempt to resolve any incongruencies in the identity, producing growth in their understanding of their identity as they proceed through the stages (Cass, 1979). Incongruences are resolved as a congruent matrix is formed either through the restoration of the matrix to its original congruent state (so a change in perception of self is not required) or through the formation of a new congruent matrix “involving a different perception of self” (Cass, 1979, 221).

Other theorists have built on these assumptions and models. Sophie proposed a four stage general process for homosexual identity formation that includes “(a) awareness of homosexual feelings or of the relevance of homosexuality for oneself, or both; (b) testing and exploration, with no homosexual identity; (c) identity acceptance, in which the individual adopts a homosexual identity; and, (d) identity integration” (Morris, 1997, 8; original from Sophie, 1985-1986, 42). Others have suggested that the process of

identity formation is defined in terms of the systematic exploration of alternatives followed by the commitment to a choice (Grotevant, 1987). However, Grotevant notes that in order “to benefit from exploration, individuals must be able to evaluate information and draw inferences about both the self and the environment” (1987, 208). Grotevant (1987) highlights four contexts in which identity formation can occur: culture and society, family, peers, and school and work environments. The outcome of any exploration must then be integrated into the growing and changing identity and coordinated with the reality of the four social contexts for the individual (Grotevant, 1987).

Grotevant (1987) also discusses an individual’s willingness and ability to engage in identity exploration. Grotevant notes that identity formation is culturally, socially, and historically bound “in that it is based on the assumption that individuals have choice about careers, ideologies, values, and relationships” (1987, 215). Varying aspects of an individual’s life can become interwoven with specific identity choices, and “the momentum of continuing on that path and the inertia against breaking such strong bonds may discourage additional exploration” (Grotevant, 1987, 211). In addition, an individual may be unwilling to move away from certain aspects of their identity in order to commit to new (and possibly scary) identity choices (Grotevant, 1987). However, even if an individual is dissatisfied with their situation in life, identity exploration cannot occur unless the individual has alternatives available (Grotevant, 1987). In America, “access to alternatives is strongly influenced by one’s position in society”; things such as race, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status all contribute to how identity is shaped

through establishing what norms will govern specific, appropriate behavior and determine how different identities are treated within society (Grotevant, 1987, 215).

In Cass's model, and most other stage-based theories of identity formation, "each stage of development must be resolved before subsequent stages can be completed" (Coleman, 1982, 31). A developmental, linear, stage-based identity process "has a beginning stage and an end stage, connected to each other by a series of intermediate and sequential steps" in which "positive value [is] assigned to later stages in the process," with the goal to reach the final stage (Rust, 1993, 52). Any activities that takes place through the various beginning and intermediate stages are seen as working toward the goal of reaching the end stage which is considered identity maturity (Rust, 1993).

Identity formation, however, is rarely "orderly and predictable; individuals often skip steps in the process, temporarily return to earlier stages of the process, and sometimes abort the process altogether by returning to heterosexual identity" (Rust, 1993, 51). Although authors of linear models note that their models will not fit all individual's experiences of identity formation, this allows for deviation from the linear process rather than creating a model "that effectively describe the formation of sexual identity" (Rust, 1993, 51). Instead, identity formation and performance is affected and influenced by "social factors such as dichotomous thinking about sexuality" and antagonism toward sexual minorities (Rust, 1993, 54).

Richard and Hart have argued for re-conceptualizing identity formation from a goal-based process to "an ongoing process of dynamic social interaction" (Rust, 1993, 55). This is primarily due to the fact that, rather than a few who do not fit a linear

process, “[m]ost individuals do not progress through stages in an orderly sequence” but tend to “switch back and forth between sexual identities” as time and circumstances change (Rust, 1993, 67). In fact, Rust (1993) argues that variations to the linear process are too common to be considered instances of deviation from the norm. Instead, “[s]ocial constructionism teaches that self-identity is the result of the interpretation of personal experience in terms of available social constructs” rather than any linear process (Rust, 1993, 68).

Sexual identity formation should be seen as a continual and multidimensional process that changes throughout a person’s life without an endpoint (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002). Van de Meerendonk and Probst (2004), in their study of homosexual identity formation (based on the last four stages of Cass’ model), found that participants, rather than progressing through a stage model, progress through two phases in which the sexual minority identity is either fully integrated or unintegrated into an individual’s overall identity status. Unlike Cass, Van de Meerendonk and Probst (2004) found that identity formation is not a developmental, linear process in which an individual cannot revisit a previous stage. Instead, each stage can be revisited throughout life as new “uncharted intrapersonal territory” is experienced and negotiated by the individual (Van de Meerendonk & Probst, 2004, 88). Rather than a six stage linear process, perhaps, homosexual identity formation should be viewed as a two-stage fluid process because to assume a neat an orderly process of identity formation “seems implausible” and contrasts with “anecdotal evidence of women’s experiences” (Morris, 1997, 6, 10).

In contrast to linear models, Horowitz and Newcomb argue for a social constructionist perspective to sexual identity formation. The lived experience of sexual identity formation is more complex than the stage models allow, with greater “variety in the order and timing” of the sexual identity formation process (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002, 5). Although stage models may capture the general experience, they cannot account for the variety and range of experiences (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002). In fact, the “interaction of many factors specific to the individual and their significance in the person’s life experience” are crucial in the development of sexual identity formation (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002, 12).

Given the amount of heterogeneity of asexuals, Chasin (2011) notes that it does not make sense to approach research studies on asexual individuals as though they are a single, unitary population. The idea of a “single *representative sample of asexual people* is itself problematic” (Chasin, 2011, 715). A social constructivist, non-linear perspective of sexual identity formation views asexual communities as heterogeneous groups with “considerable and genuine variability within the asexual population” (Chasin, 2011, 715). A social constructionist model of sexual identity formation is needed “in which variation and change is the norm,” showing “that self-identity is the result of the interpretation of personal experiences in terms of available social constructs” (Rust, 1993, 68).

### *Coming Out*

Authors and researchers argue that part of the sexual identity formation and performance process is “coming out” or telling someone else about your sexual identity. “Coming out” usually follows a period in which the individual realizes they have

“deviant” feelings, desires, or attractions, but do not yet label or, in the case of many ace individuals, do not have a label for their sexuality (Coleman, 1982). Coleman (1982) refers to this period as pre-coming out. Once an individual reconciles their sexuality with their identity, the individual tends to disclose their sexual identity to a few carefully chosen individuals that they trust. Most linear, stage-based models of “coming out” see multiple moments of “coming out” as “deviations from the underlying linear process” rather than a common occurrence (Rust, 1993, 53). In addition, through the lens of a linear, developmental process, “changes in self-identity are considered indicative of immaturity, that is, signs that one is still in the process of development” and not ready to move to the next stage (Rust, 1993, 68).

Although researchers initially thought of “coming out” as a singular event applied to the first expression of sexual identity to another individual, “coming out,” according to Rust, “refers to processes as well as particular events within these processes” and occurs multiple times in an individual’s life (1993, 52). In addition, a social constructionist perspective does not see the “coming out” process as “discovering one’s essence” (Rust, 1993, 68). Instead, changes in sexual identity over time are deemed necessary because an individual’s lived experience and social location as well as social context change over time. Although a social constructionist model of sexual identity formation is important, it must be noted that the process of sexual identity formation is often “understood as a goal-oriented process of essential discovery by those who experience it” (Rust, 1993, 70). However, a social constructionist perspective is “useful in approaching the complexity of

sexual orientation, life-style, and psychological maturity” within current society (Coleman, 1982, 40).

### *Research on Asexual Identity Formation and Performance*

Limited research has occurred on asexual identity formation, and those studies which include identity formation include it only as one aspect of a larger research project. Van Houdenhove et al. (2015) included asexual identity formation as part of a larger research study into understanding asexuality. The researchers found that asexual individuals, at some point in their lives, experience the sensation that they are different or that something is wrong with them. Numerous studies on asexuality highlight this feeling of difference for an extended period of time without the ability to explain why they felt different. Asexual individuals in Van Houdenhove et al.’s (2015) study noted that they had different opinions than their peers on sex and love and priorities other than sex and relationships. The exclusion or perceived exclusion from their peers, along with the perceived difference, initiates self-questioning of their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). The individual must then try to understand this difference through exploring different sexual identity options, searching for an identity that fits. Some asexual individuals in the study reported wondering for a time if they could be lesbian but also felt that this label did not fit (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Only when the individual discovered the existence of asexuality and asexual communities in which other individuals were “like them” did the option of asexual identity become a possibility, and they were able to make sense of their past feelings and experiences (Van

Houdenrove et al., 2015). Finally, after exploration and examination, the asexual individual is able to accept their asexual identity (Van Houdenrove et al., 2015).

In Van Houdenrove's study, the majority of participants stated that they "had accepted their asexuality and came to terms with their own (a)sexual identity," and most participants had "'come out' to others, at least partially" (Van Houdenrove et al., 2015, 268,269). Reactions to expressing their asexuality to others ranged "from not understanding, not believing in the existence of asexuality, to unwanted advice about the necessity to change their asexuality" (Van Houdenrove et al., 2015, 269). Although asexuality often does not have a major effect on most aspects of daily life, relationships were impacted by asexual identity. Participants noted changes have occurred "since they realized they are asexual", and that their asexuality had negatively impacted their personal relationships (Van Houdenrove et al., 2015, 270). Some individuals noted that they "worried that their asexuality may prevent them from having a relationship one day" (Van Houdenrove et al., 2015, 270).

#### *The "Real" or "Gold Star" Asexual*

The limited acceptance of asexuals in society is experienced by a small group of asexual individuals – individuals society considers the "real" or "Gold Star" asexuals. In order to discipline excesses of sexual identity, especially asexuality, a category of real must be created (Salamon, 2010). Asexuals are deemed real (and given minimal power and privilege) based on specific characteristics that interact with other identities that are viewed as privileged. Privileged identities for an asexual include being white, middle or upper-middle class, and educated. In addition, real asexuals cannot offer an excuse for

their asexuality, so they must be mentally stable, have never been abused, and physically healthy (Chasin, 2013). Real asexuals must have previously tried sex and, though they must not enjoy sex, they also cannot be overly disgusted by sex (Chasin, 2013). Finally, real asexuals must fit into the gender binary and assume the label of hetero-romantic, aromantic, or (occasionally) biromantic orientations (Chasin, 2013). Deviance from any of these characteristics is seen as “a sign of non-normativity and exclusion” (Vitulli, 2010, 157).

Despite the increase in research, much is still unknown regarding asexuality. Exploring all aspects of asexuality discussed in the literature review in this or any research project would prove impossible. Therefore, a subset of the issues highlighted in the literature review will be revisited and analyzed during the findings and discussion.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

Underlying my research is the fundamental idea that asexuality is both a way of thinking and experiencing oneself as an individual with a unique way of being in the world. How an individual thinks and experiences the world as an asexual is captured in the narratives, the stories they tell about themselves. My focus is on the narrative stories of asexual lived experiences, on the ideas and feelings surrounding these experiences, and ultimately on living in society as a self-identified asexual. Chasin argues that in order to understand asexuality, one must seek out and consider the “actual experiences of real asexual/ace people” rather than extrapolating meaning from other non-normative sexuality experiences (Chasin, 2015, 170). Every individual will have different life experiences and, therefore, the experience of sexual identity formation will be different for each individual.

When looking at asexual research and the limited amount of research and understanding surrounding asexual identity, existing quantitative measures are unable to capture the complexities surrounding identity formation. In addition, most quantitative measures are not sensitive to the interaction of other identities such as gender, race, economic status, or other differences that can affect an individual’s experience of identity (Creswell, 2012). As noted by Creswell, “[t]o level all individuals to a statistical mean

overlooks the uniqueness of individuals in our studies” (2012, 48). This also applies to asexual research.

### *Interviews*

Interviews are a widely used method or example of qualitative research. A key feature of interviews is that they can provide a focus on the individual in order to not only provide opportunities for exploration of an individual’s perspective but also provide “in-depth understanding of the personal context within which the research phenomena are located” (Ritchie, 2003, 36). Interviews also provide an in-depth understanding of the social, cultural, and historical world of participants through learning about their individual, familial, and social circumstances along with their history, experiences to date, and perspectives on various topics and issues (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Data collected from interviews can be “very detailed, information rich and extensive” (Snape & Spencer, 2003, 5). Interviews also work well for studies with small sample sizes in which the participants are selected based on salient criteria (Snape & Spencer, 2003). In addition, interviews are both interactive and developmental, allowing for exploration of ideas or issues as they emerge throughout the conversation (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Finally, interviews are well suited to research “that requires an understanding of deeply rooted or delicate phenomena or responses to complex systems, processes or experiences because of the depth of focus and the opportunity they offer for clarification and detailed understanding” (Ritchie, 2003, 36-37). Asexual identity formation research fits all of these reasons for using qualitative research, specifically the use of interviews.

### *The Life Story Interview*

As part of the interview experience, life narratives can provide a unique perspective on the lived experience of an individual. Atkinson, in his book *The Life Story Interview*, notes that, as individuals, “[w]e often think in story form, speak in story form, and bring meaning to our lives through story” (1998, 1). When we tell our story, we are giving narrative accounts of events and other experiences in our lives (Atkinson, 1998). Narrative accounts allow us to hear about an individual’s unique experience of life through their own voice and perspective (Atkinson, 1998). Narratives also give us “the vantage point of seeing how one person experiences and understands life, his or her own especially, over time” (Atkinson, 1998, 8).

I used a modified life story narrative approach with an open-ended interview process and guiding questions with the purpose of soliciting and recording unique asexual narratives. A set of ten guiding questions were developed prior to the interviews to have on hand in case participants did not know where to start or needed additional ideas regarding what to discuss during the interview. In addition, at the end of the interview each participant was asked at least once if they had anything to add that had not been discussed to that point. Otherwise, the discussion that took place during the interviews was led by the participants.

### *Access*

AVEN is currently the largest asexual community, and most research takes place through the AVEN website (Scherrer, 2008). Asexual individuals are assumed to make up a small percentage of the human population, so the internet provides the opportunity

for asexuals to communicate with others like them and form relationships. Scherrer notes that “the internet has made virtual space available for highly stigmatized, marginalized groups to find community and support for their identity” (2008, 624). The internet also provides privacy, which “is beneficial to the foundation of asexual identities” (Scherrer, 2008, 624). Recruitment of participants took place through the online asexual community on AVEN and at the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG).

Members of AVEN were recruited through an online posting of the research call on their research forum. The research call was approved through the AVEN members who are in charge of the research forum. The research call, IRB approval, and list of guiding questions were submitted to the research approval committee, followed by a group Skype (voice only) call to clarify any questions. Once approved, the research call was posted and recruitment quickly followed. Participants at UNCG were recruited through the SafeZone coordinator who sent the call for participants to listserves of various LGBTQIA\* groups on campus. On AVEN and various asexual communities, the definition of asexuality is becoming highly debated, with a focus on a personal definition of what lack of sexual attraction means. Morgan notes that a “component of sexual identity is the understanding an individual holds about her or his sexual orientation,” (2012, 53). For this reason, I recruited self-identified ace individuals to allow for inclusion of asexuals with various personal definitions of sexual attraction and asexuality.

A total of ten participants were recruited to provide a sample size large enough to garner enough variety and information to be meaningful but small enough to handle given the unpredictable interview length associated with narrative life stories. Interviews

lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours and 48 minutes, and were conducted in person, via Skype, or via email. The three UNCG in person interviews were conducted in a conference room on campus. Six of the seven AVEN interviews occurred via Skype, either through video or voice calls (participant's choice). The final AVEN interview was completed via email as the participant had only limited access to the internet. All participants chose (or had me choose) a pseudonym for this study.

The in-person and Skype interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed. After transcription was complete, the transcribed interviews were reviewed and moved to a more narrative format to allow for the interviews to flow under the three main themes: experience, importance, and identity. The transcript content was left unchanged; however, sentences were moved around in order to fit into one of the three main themes. Once the narrative arrangements were complete, a copy of the narrative for each participant was sent to that participant for review and validation. Participants were given 2.5 weeks to review and request any changes to the transcribed record. After the review period passed and approval from participants was obtained, I went back through each narrative and began highlighting the sentences that spoke best to the three broad themes. After highlighting was complete for all ten narratives, I went back through each narrative and notated any common themes from the interviews. Finally, each narrative was marked as relating to one or more of the 6 common themes that emerged: (1) "discovery" of asexuality; (2) importance of asexuality to lived experience; (3) identity labels; (4) definitions of asexuality; (5) lack of education on asexuality; and (6) libido and the various types of attraction.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Demographic information was not collected as part of the study; however, throughout the interviews participants volunteered information about themselves as they told their stories and experiences of an asexual identity. Two participants self-reported their gender identity as male. A third participant, who currently identifies as male, is questioning his gender identity. Six participants self-identified as female. One participant identified as agender and prefers female pronouns. In addition to gender identity, the participants discussed sexual orientation. One participant identified in each of the following categories: hetero-romantic, homo-romantic (lesbian), and panromantic. Two participants identified as bi-romantic, and four participants identified as aromantic. One participant did not self-report sexual orientation but does identify as polyamorous. Finally, three participants identified as being born outside the United States. No additional demographic information was obtained. The remainder of the results will discuss the 6 common themes that emerged during the interviews.

#### *“Discovery” of Asexuality*

Analysis of the interviews revealed that the “discovery” of asexuality was a common experience for participants. Prior to learning of asexuality, participants mentioned they often wondered what the fuss regarding sex and relationships was all about. One participant, Catherine, mentioned feeling as though “other girls were suddenly

going insane” and that “they all erupted into all these insecurities and foolish jealousies” that she could not understand. Bluetrench and Daniel both expressed bewilderment at those around them who seemed so focused on sex and relationships. Daniel mentioned realizing that sex was “something that people were actually doing and wanted to do... quite possibly the goal all along of a romantic relationship.” Bluetrench also realized one day that individuals were in relationships and having sex because they wanted to, not just because that is what is expected. Another participant, John, was raised with a traditional perspective of no sex before marriage, but it never occurred to him that waiting would be difficult. He mentioned being more concerned about the fact that he was supposed to have sex after marriage.

Prior to learning about and identifying as asexual, several of the participants said they assumed their lack of interest in sexual things was normal. Although Cynthia experienced crushes, she never thought about engaging in any sexual activities with those individuals. Cynthia is from China and noted that, at least where she is from, they do not talk about sex or sexual things to other individuals, so she “just thought that everyone else felt the same as me, just liking a person and wanting to be close to them, not necessarily sex.” Melita also felt she was “normal;” however, this was due to her interest in sex and sexual things from an earlier age. Melita became interested in the idea of sex fairly young and began to “read everything I could about it and I thought this would be really good, this is something I am quite looking forward to trying.” Only when she had her first partnered sexual experience did she realize that she had no desire for or interest in partnered sexual activity. She enjoyed the experience up until “the actual sex would

start happening, like anything requiring my genitals being involved” (Melita). Even with her ex, who she loved, Melita “didn’t ever get anything out of the sex.”

While some participants assumed their lack of sexual desire or interest was “normal,” other participants mentioned a feeling of being different. Sarah would often have fantasies about individuals she would like to date; “I will go through the whole scene in my head of the courtship or something but every time I would try to go to that other scene like a bed scene or something, it’s strange to admit, but I will say it, I couldn’t. My mind wouldn’t.” Daniel knew he was *supposed* to be interested in having sex, and, for a long time, internalized the feeling that “there is something wrong with me if I’m not.”

Haydn’s feeling of difference came in the form of, as her family joked, being afraid of torsos. She never wanted people to take their clothes off and remembers “being like around 10 or 11 and saying wouldn’t it be great if everyone were just like floating heads... people would just take off their shirts and there is nothing there.” After learning of asexuality, her dislike of torsos made more sense. Haydn also mentioned being the naïve one in her group of friends. Her friends would talk about sexual things and she always wondered how they knew these things.

After having sex for the first time and not enjoying the experience, Melita’s feeling of normalcy switched to a feeling of extreme difference. Melita says she began acting out sexually as a symptom of her feeling of difference, noting that she has found that it is quite common for asexuals to act out sexually prior to learning of asexuality. Some asexuals, including Melita, force themselves to have sex in order to “somehow find

whatever it is that is missing... so that we can feel normal, like we're a normal person.” Melita even visited a doctor but was told there was nothing wrong with her physically and to keep trying. The doctor “reinforced that belief that I did need to keep doing it... I ended up putting myself in even dangerous situations um where bad things did happen” (Melita).

Star, Sarah, and Haydn all mentioned being uncomfortable with sexual talk and the portrayal of anything sexual. Haydn remembers becoming uncomfortable discussing with friends whether or not someone was “attractive” or “hot.” Star expressed being uncomfortable when shows or movies included sexual content. Sarah mentioned feeling uncomfortable when her sister and mom talk about sexual activities and experiences. Sarah also mentioned becoming uncomfortable when her 9<sup>th</sup> grade boyfriend wanted to “touch me and uh he would um he would try to engage in explicit texts.”

Several participants mentioned realizing they were asexual only after becoming involved in a relationship, realizing, at that point, they did not experience sexual attraction or desire. Alex was a junior in high school when he realized, after becoming involved with someone, that he “just didn’t have the sexual urge.” Cynthia was married before she “discovered” asexuality and began identifying as asexual. Star has dated but, even with the ones she cared about and loved, has “never met anyone I’ve wanted to do things with.” Daniel was dating someone (who was also a virgin) and one day they “decided to take the plunge and experiment a bit... it didn’t really do anything for me.” The sex was “the same satisfying experience as playing a board game... enjoyable but it wasn’t, you know, anything more than that” (Daniel). Sarah also began identifying as

asexual when she was in a relationship that became close enough to warrant sexual feelings but she still felt no desire to participate in any sexual activity. Melita described her experience of sex as unenjoyable, stating “you might as well be licking my eyeball.”

Although Cynthia and Star previously heard the term asexual, they initially brushed off the idea that asexual applied to them. Star was unaware that asexuality could be applied to humans, noting she was only aware of it “in respect to plants... I didn’t know people could identify as asexual.” Cynthia first heard about asexuality when someone mentioned that Sheldon on the TV show Big Bang Theory was asexual, but she did not think about it much at that time. Despite not knowing about asexuality, once the term was learned, most participants recognized their experiences as asexual and, after some research, began identifying as ace. Although Alex did not accept the term immediately, when he began researching the term he realized “this isn’t out of the question” (Alex). Catherine “discovered” asexuality through a newspaper article. She decided to look AVEN up online and felt “yeah, that was me all right, I found my lost tribe” (Catherine). Melita, upon learning about asexuality, felt she finally had an answer to her constant questioning of her lack of sexual desire and enjoyment. She was relieved that she could finally apply a term to her lived experience.

Two years prior to identifying as ace, one of Star’s friends mentioned that they thought she might be asexual, but Star initially thought “I’m not ace, what are you talking about?” However, Star began slowly thinking about asexuality and how she has never been sexually attracted to anyone. Star eventually asked one of her friends who had “come out” as asexual to explain asexuality, hoping that it would make more sense

coming from someone who identifies as ace. After talking with her friend, Star felt that she is asexual; she has not and does not want to do anything sexual with anyone else.

Most research took place on the internet through websites such as AVEN or through social media such as Tumblr, and Reddit. Sarah first heard of asexuality when she joined Tumblr about 6 months prior to identifying as asexual. Initially she felt confused about what asexuality was, so she proceeded to research the term further. Sarah was not in a relationship at the time, but thought that the descriptions of asexuality described her lack of interest in anything sexual, so she decided to start self-identifying as asexual. Haydn also “discovered” the term asexual on Tumblr where she “found descriptions [of asexuality] and I was like oh, so that’s what it is.” Although John had previously heard of asexuality and assumed it was not something that described him, approximately three years prior to this interview, he read something posted on Reddit regarding asexuality, and thought “hang on a minute this sounds a bit familiar.”

Melita found AVEN after watching *The Fourth Sexuality*, a video about an asexual couple. While watching the video, Melita slowed down and paused the video so that she could see the computer screen of one of the individuals which showed “Asexuality Visibility and Education Network” at top. With that information, she had a term to research and was able to eventually find AVEN. Daniel read about asexuality in an article and felt he finally had something he could Google. He started researching asexuality online and eventually found AVEN. Haydn also found and visited AVEN though she “didn’t spend much time on like online communities or like looking into it too much.” She accepted an asexual identity upon hearing the term, already aware that she

“was very comfortable not experiencing sexual attraction and not understanding romance and stuff” (Haydn).

Bluetrench found the blog Asexuality Archive helpful. The site provided useful information and had articles she felt described her experiences. Sarah initially began researching asexuality to be respectful to some of her asexual friends. She wanted to make sure that she did not say anything offensive or upsetting to her asexual friends. Sarah also began following blogs that she felt were helpful in answering questions “about, well like, if I engage in this, does this mean I am still asexual?”

Reading personal stories of individuals who described their asexual experiences was one of the most useful sources to the participants while researching asexuality. Alex found that it was extremely useful “having other people going through the same, I wouldn’t say it is as drastic to call it a struggle, but kind of just journey you are um it really helps.” Bluetrench found the personal stories on AVEN and Reddit useful because there are several threads that discussed other people’s previous experiences. She could identify herself in their experiences, many times not realizing that those experiences were “different” or not “normal” until she read them on asexual websites. Daniel also found his experiences in the stories of other asexual individuals. He found it really amazing that he was reading stories of other individuals who had the same issues with sex that he was having. John not only read about other ace individual’s experiences, he actively decided to meet with other asexuals. He discovered, through AVEN, that there was a meet-up not too far from where he lived, and found that it was really helpful to meet other ace individuals and talk in person.

### *Importance*

Importance was another theme that emerged from the interviews. Participants spoke of both the current and past importance of their asexuality as part of their lived experience. Alex said that although asexuality is a big part of who he is, he does not want to be known as the ace guy. He is not extremely vocal about his asexuality (and is unsure whether or not he should be); however, he would easily defend his asexuality if needed. Daniel has “kind of unconsciously, I think, arranged my life in such a way that sexual identity doesn’t come up very often.” Although he has not found much of a need to express his asexuality, he will bring it up in the right context, but wonders if he should make it more of a focus in his life since “asexual invisibility is a thing” (Daniel). Daniel also grapples with the realization that he is now part of a community “that for years and years I thought I was just an ally of... are these issues actually my issues?”

Cynthia discussed experiencing a difference in importance in her current life in comparison to when she initially identified as asexual. She feels that her asexual identity was more important when she was researching and exploring asexuality, trying to decide if she was asexual. Currently her asexuality only plays an important role in relation to her relationship with her husband or when doing presentations at school regarding asexuality. Although she does not feel she is a “super advocate” regarding asexuality, she is open to her friends, her mom, and to others when she does presentations and panels.

Both Catherine and Melita have active asexual identities with other asexual individuals. Catherine only identifies “out loud” as asexual when she is around other asexual individuals because they understand asexuality – the experiences and struggles.

Melita also communicates primarily with other asexual individuals due to their shared experiences and understandings. The importance or focus of Melita's asexuality depends on the context of whether she is online or offline. Melita's life offline revolves around books and taking care of her kids, but her persona online is "as a fully open and very vocal asexual person." Sarah also feels that her asexuality does not define her outwardly as much as it is something in her.

Bluetrench identifies as both an introvert and aromantic. She spends a lot of time watching TV but does go out with friends approximately once a week. Bluetrench believes that being an introvert plays as much importance in her life as her asexuality. Haydn also feels that her asexuality is not a focus in her life. She has had what she calls a "simple experience with being ace" and notes that she has not had to deal with the type of issues other ace individuals have to deal with (Haydn). Her family and friends have always accepted her and never made her feel like she was missing anything. Due to her experiences, when Haydn "discovered" asexuality, she did not feel as though asexuality filled any gap missing in her life.

Most participants expressed a sense of relief upon learning about asexuality and adopting that identity for themselves. After identifying as ace and letting his friends know, Alex's interactions with his friends are no longer as awkward, "like I won't have my friend nudging me during lunch just like, hey – who would you rather bang?" Asexuality has allowed Catherine to give up on dating; she "would rather clean the cat's litter box than go out on a date." Her friends would often try to fix her up with some "wonderful" guy, and she felt she had to organize her life "around not letting people fix

me up with some awesome guy” (Catherine). Now she no longer experiences the need to please her friends and go out on these dates.

Star felt relief from the pressure to find the right person. In high school, Star would go back and forth between “I think I like girls, no I like guys, no I like both... [I was] finally given the option to be like I don’t have to like anyone... very calming.” Now Star feels that she can be more honest in her interactions with others because she knows more about who she is as an individual; “there was a giant storm in my head and now it’s faded a little bit and I can see a little bit more in front of me.”. Upon identifying as aromantic, Bluetrench no longer felt the pressure of worrying about and trying to figure out why she did not want sex. Sarah also expressed relief in identifying as asexual because she feels there is a “huge expectation... that sex is a part of life, that it is natural, everybody does it.” Upon identifying as asexual, she no longer feels any personal expectation to participate in sexual behavior.

Haydn feels more comfortable articulating her feelings and interacting with the world. Identifying as asexual has allowed her to feel “more comfortable just existing” (Haydn). Prior to “discovering” asexuality, Melita felt she was “in this constant confusion and not understanding like how’s the future going to be... I didn’t think there was anybody else like me.” After identifying as asexual, the questioning stopped. John also thought that some of his questioning stopped. He feels that “things make sense to me now in terms of why I don’t connect with a lot of things.”

Most participants are comfortable talking about their asexual identity with others and feel it is important to talk about asexuality in order to increase awareness. Alex is

most comfortable talking about his asexual identity with friends but does not feel comfortable talking about his asexuality with individuals he does not know. Asexuality “is not really something you bring up... it just feels so out of place to bring it up” to individuals who do not know much about you as a person (Alex). John feels that it is hard to “come out” as ace because “it’s not really the sort of conversation you have - oh, by the way, I’m asexual.” Haydn is also uncomfortable discussing her asexuality when other individuals ask her about her sexual identity; “the only times that any sort of like weirdness came up for me about sexuality was like the couple of times that people like flat out asked me like are you a lesbian?” Sarah feels that strangers are less receptive so she only speaks up if the individual says something that she considers insulting. Despite being less receptive, she feels that it is easier to discuss her asexuality with strangers, at least the ones that are willing to learn, than to talk to her family.

Participants, for the most part, have “come out” (or attempted to “come out”) to family and friends. Bluetrench has discussed her asexuality with her best friend and a few other friends. Luckily everyone that she has talked to about her asexuality have been supportive and understanding, no one “said oh maybe it’s a phase or maybe, you know, you’ll find the right person” (Bluetrench). Through the process of exploring what being an aromantic asexual means to her and what that means for her life, she has made more of an effort to connect with friends. She feels that she has “come to appreciate being with people more often than just by myself” (Bluetrench).

Sarah’s friends have been very supportive of her asexual identity, and “if they’re confused, I explain, and they are respectful.” Sarah and John have noticed that they tend

to surround themselves more by friends who are also asexual. Almost all of Sarah's close friends are asexual, which helps with acceptance and understanding. John is not sure why he makes friends easier with other asexual individuals, but he does. When Daniel began identifying as asexual, he spoke with his friends about his identity, and although they had a few questions regarding asexuality, they accepted his identity without any negativity. In addition, Daniel feels less stressed about dating and relationships. He feels he has "a lot more confidence about romantic relationships... I have a better context of like what I actually want." John feels that his asexuality does have an impact on his relationships, especially romantic relationships, noting that if he was not asexual, he would be less likely to be single right now. Cynthia also spoke about romantic relationships and how she has negotiated the sexual aspect of her relationship with her husband so that the level of sexuality was pleasing to both her and her husband.

Participants also discussed their asexuality with their parents and other family members. Star knows that her parents know she is "not simply heterosexual" and that they have seen her ace button (and know what it is), but she has not discussed her ace identity with her family. Sarah has tried to "come out" to her mom previously, but her mom refuses to listen. She has told Sarah that "you'll meet some guy at college, and he will just sweep you off your feet." Sarah even sat her mom down one time and talked about asexuality, what it means, and asked that her mom respect her asexuality. However, if Sarah brings her asexuality up, her mom will say something or do something to end the conversation. Sarah has decided, at this point, to not tell her family about her girlfriend, who is also asexual, because she feels they would not be accepting of the relationship.

Haydn has never felt criticized or as though she was wrong for being herself. Her family never said she should feel or act a certain way, but, instead, accepted however she said she felt. Her parents and other family members have also never questioned why she was not dating someone. Although Haydn will tell her mother things (that she will pass on to Haydn's father), she does not feel comfortable bringing up her asexuality to her grandparents. She would rather not make it into a big thing with her family. John has also spoken with his mother about being ace. Her reaction "was oh, okay and doesn't really want to know more about it" (John).

### *Identity Labels*

Identity labels were discussed throughout the interviews, with a majority of the participants stating that identity labels, particularly those related to asexuality, were helpful. When Daniel first started researching asexuality, he felt overwhelmed "by the variety and spectrum and vocabulary," and felt that some of the distinctions were hair-fine distinctions. However, as he continued to research, he realized that they describe different experiences. Although the labels may be initially confusing when researching asexuality, the "labels are useful as long as they're not used to exclude or invalidate people's actual lived experience" (Daniel). Bluetrench finds identity labels useful when speaking with others because you can tell them the identity label that describes an aspect of your life, and if they are confused they can ask you for clarification. Sarah also believes labels are helpful. For Sarah, having an extensive label "helps me, it grounds me, it puts me in the now... this is who I am, I know who I am, I know how I identify, what

category I am in.” She believes that it makes it easier to be able to break your identity up into specific and distinct categories and give yourself an extensive label.

Star is not against labels but feels that if categories and labels are used, they should be equal categories, without a hierarchy of difference that is based on which label describes an individual. Every individual experiences life differently, even individuals who share certain labels or categories. One identity should not have more power and status than any other. Haydn understands that labels can clarify what it means to be asexual or aromantic or any other identity. However, she is cautious because “if we keep breaking it down into all of the little distinctions, all of the sudden we are going to have like 8 billion different words because every single person experiences these things differently” (Haydn). She suggests finding the line between “words so people can feel comfortable articulating their identity and then also having them still be terms that apply to large groups of people.” Although John identifies as an aromantic asexual, he realizes his identity is much more complicated because identity labels cannot precisely define anyone. Bluetrench agreed, noting that despite having a label, “it doesn’t change who you are and the fact that you, you know, you are these things whether you call it by that name or not.”

One main reason for the desire for identity labels was due to the need for a distinction between sexual and romantic orientations. Just as there are those who have sexual desires without romantic attraction, there are individuals with romantic desires and no sexual attraction or intentions. Alex identified as asexual and panromantic during his interview, distinguishing between his sexual (asexual) and romantic (panromantic)

identities. Melita also distinguished her sexual and romantic orientations. Melita is asexual and biromantic. Prior to learning about asexuality, Melita identified as bisexual without the sex part because she was attracted to both men and women, but knew she did not want sex with anyone. At that point in life, she had no other way to explain her orientation except “bisexual without the sexual part” (Melita). Once she learned about asexuality and the distinction between sexual and romantic orientations, she was able to identify with the label biromantic asexual. Melita, Cynthia, and John believe that the distinction between sexual and romantic attractions is important, especially those who have a different romantic orientation from their sexual orientations. Daniel feels that the differences between romantic asexuals, aromantic asexuals, and demi-sexuals are important to consider. Identifying the direction of one’s romantic attraction can be important and helpful when dating and attempting to find (or not find) a romantic partner.

Several of the participants mentioned initially identifying as demi-sexual before researching further and realizing that asexual was a better fit. Prior to any type of relationship, Sarah identified as demi-sexual. After dating someone for a few months and noticing she still did not have any sexual interest, she realized she was not demi-sexual. Cynthia initially identified as demi-sexual primarily because she was not sure what sexual attraction meant. She does find her husband “physically attractive, so I thought maybe I was experiencing sexual attraction, which meant I wasn’t asexual” (Cynthia).

Over time and after researching more, Cynthia thought she might be grey-asexual but finally “came to realize asexual is the best fit.” Bluetrench also initially identified as demi-sexual after stumbling on the demi-sexual sub-Reddit. She decided to keep the

demi-sexual identity in the back of her mind, but chose not to analyze at that point. A month later she stumbled onto the sub-Reddit again and began identifying as demi-sexual. However, a couple weeks later she stumbled on the ace sub-Reddit and thought that asexual made more sense to her than demi-sexual. A week or so after that, she found the aromantic sub-Reddit and realized aromantic asexual described her best.

Many of the participants discussed the invisibility of asexuality. Bluetrench feels that asexuality is invisible for two reasons. First, asexuality is invisible because people do not know that asexuality exists. Second, asexuality is invisible because it is easy to fake being sexual. Melita agrees, noting that it is easy for ace individuals to appear “normal” and their asexuality kept secret because most people assume that everyone is sexual unless the individual verbalizes otherwise. John also agrees and noted he has two male asexual friends who are a couple. Individuals who do not know they are asexual assume they are a gay couple.

Bluetrench finds the invisibility of asexuality “kind of annoying because I feel like it makes it harder to “come out”... if you “come out” as gay or bi or something you never get the response – oh, what is that?” For Daniel, the invisibility aspect of asexuality provides the most angst. He is unsure whether or not to tell people, and, if so, who should he tell and how much information should he provide. Catherine usually does not reveal that she is asexual to others because she feels that no one will understand anyway. She refers to asexuality as her secret identity; “so yeah, my ‘secret identity’ isn’t ‘Batman’ if yah know what I mean” (Catherine). Haydn, however, does not mind that asexuality is considered invisible. She questions the need to articulate her sexual orientation in certain

situations and environments, especially when "no one needs to know, it's not relevant" (Haydn).

Several participants discussed how gender identity interacts with asexuality. Alex feels that it is harder to openly identify as ace if you are male, which he assumes is because "people are more open to the idea of a female being asexual." Alex, Star, and Sarah all feel that men are expected to want sex. Sarah feels that asexual men are subjected to more mockery and ridicule due to their lack of desire for sex. Star agrees, stating that other individuals, especially other males, "are just going to look at guys who identify as ace and be like no bro, you're a guy, you want to put your dick in something." She believes this is because males who are sexual are unable to see a perspective in which another male does not have the same sexual desires. Women do not have the same sexual expectations placed on them. However, Sarah feels that women have difficulty identifying as asexual because men always assume that asexual women can be "turned" sexual through having sex, which subjects asexual women to sexual innuendos, sexual talk, and other sexual behaviors.

Alex and Sarah stated that they do not necessarily strictly identify as male (Alex) or female (Sarah). Alex currently uses male pronouns but is not sure if that accurately describes who he is as an individual. Although Sarah uses female pronouns, "I don't identify strictly as female... I identify as asexual, agender, homoromantic lesbian." Sarah hopes that future generations will raise their children as gender neutral and move the focus in society away from gender and gender expectations.

Throughout the interviews, participants noted other identities that play an important role in their overall identity. For Cynthia, polyamory is a major part of her identity and relationships. Although Cynthia currently has 2 asexual partners, her husband, who is sexual, “hasn’t found other partners yet.” He may not have any additional partners yet but she feels the openness to have other partners reduces the sexual pressure on the relationship. Cynthia spoke about polyamory in relation to asexuality and does not believe that the two identities are necessarily related. Cynthia identified as poly prior to “discovering” that she was asexual. However, Cynthia mentioned that some asexuals, including one of her partners, believe there might be a connection, even if small, between being asexual and open to poly. One of her partners stated that “because of asexuality he realized relationships don’t have to be, don’t have to be about sex” (Cynthia).

A variety of other identities were mentioned throughout the interviews. While Cynthia mentioned that being child-free was an important part of her current identity, for Melita, being a mother to her two children was a major factor in her identity. Alex, Daniel, and Haydn all mentioned that family, friends, and acquaintances have assumed (or currently assume) that they were homosexual. This is a fairly common assumption applied to asexuals who do not participate in the dating scene in a way that others feel is common or appropriate. Sarah, though she currently identifies as asexual, is questioning whether she would also be considered autochorrisexual. Autochorrisexual “means you don’t experience sexual attraction to people but you can experience sexual arousal to like material or um sort of third-party viewing fantasies... I think I fit into that, I am not sure,

but I definitely identify strictly as ace” (Sarah). Although she is questioning, Sarah says that she defines herself currently more around her homosexuality than her other identities.

### *Definitions*

The lack of a set and officially accepted definition of asexuality was discussed throughout the interviews. Several of the participants identify as asexual using the attraction-based definition which is currently the most commonly accepted definition of asexuality. When discussing the definition, Catherine says that asexuality is the lack of attraction to other individuals. Sexual attraction and sex drive are different – some individuals have a sex drive, some do not, and some have a low sex drive, but they are all asexual (Catherine). Sarah believes that in order to identify as asexual “you can’t experience sexual attraction, that’s a given... I think that is the only one that you need to solidify your identity as an asexual.” Bluetrench said she assumed that the definition on AVEN was *the* definition, and was surprised when AVEN was taking a vote on the definition of asexuality. She had “taken whatever definition that was posted on their main website, I just thought that was what it meant... a lack of sexual attraction, you know, not ever experiencing sexual attraction.”

Another definition of asexuality that was used during the interviews was a desire-based definition. Melita was the most vocal participant regarding asexuality as a desire-based rather than an attraction-based definition. When she first began researching asexuality, she felt that “the sexual attraction definition didn’t seem fully complete.” She felt confused because she knew she was attracted, in some way, to other individuals and,

for her, her lack of desire for partnered sexual activity defined her asexuality. As Melita continued researching, she started listening to the sexual individuals who are on AVEN describe what defines their sexual orientation, which they describe as a desire for partnered sexual contact. Melita feels that there is a difference between sexual attraction which involves looking at another individual and experiencing sexual feelings for that individual and the definition of sexual attraction that defines sexual orientations.

One of Melita's primary concerns is that "attractionists" on AVEN will portray asexuals as individuals who "can love sex and desire sex and want sex just like any other sexual person as long as you don't want sex um for looking at someone and getting turned on by their appearance and wanting to have sex with them based on their appearance." She feels that the attraction definition can lead to confusion both within and outside the asexual community, and that lumping all sexual orientations into a lust-driven definition is "anti-sexuality." Instead, she feels that an asexual should be defined as someone who does not possess "that innate desire to connect sexually with other people the same way as sexual orientations do."

Although Melita was the most vocal participant regarding a desire-based definition, Cynthia and Daniel also believe that a desire-based definition of asexuality is needed. Cynthia prefers a desire based definition because she feels that a desire-based definition is "easier to understand and it's just more accurate." Sexual individuals who participate on AVEN have stated that "the desire for partnered sex is the most important thing in their sexuality not the attraction" (Cynthia). Daniel feels that low or no sexual desire defines asexuality, then it is up to the individual to designate the direction of their

romantic attraction, if any. Haydn feels the term asexual is being used as both an identity and an umbrella term. A distinction needs to be made between asexual as an umbrella term that includes individuals who experience sexual attraction differently and asexual as an identity that does not experience sexual attraction or sexual desire at all. She feels there should “be a different word for describing people who experience sexual attraction like less often or less frequently or differently” (Haydn).

Participants also discussed the problem of how not having a firm definition of sexual attraction causes issues. Bluetrench states that one issue she has with asexuality is that she has “never seen somewhere where it explains what sexual attraction feels like.” Sexual attraction is never defined. Instead, the definition of sexual attraction is left “up to each individual to define depending on what they think it might be,” which Melita feels does not help anyone. John also feels that using a definition of asexuality that is based on a lack of sexual attraction without defining what sexual attraction means, is very unhelpful. If you do not know what sexual attraction is and how it is supposed to feel, how do you know if you have ever experienced sexual attraction? How do you know if you have no sexual attraction or low sexual attraction? Currently, the answer to the question of sexual attraction is “something along the lines of if you’re not sure, you probably haven’t,” which is not very helpful (John). The lack of a definition of sexual attraction prevented John from identifying as ace for a long time. He knew he experienced a “degree of aesthetic attraction to some people” and assumed for a while that meant he experienced sexual attraction because society bundles all types of attraction together (John).

A couple of the participants discussed the definition of asexuality and the use of “lack” within the definition. Daniel understands the need to define oneself as something other than lacking, but he is not sure how you can define asexuality without using “lack.” Asexuality is the lack of sexual attraction or the lack of desire for partnered sexual activity, but either way, it involves a lack of sexuality. Haydn does not know how to define asexuality outside of lack; “I don’t know how else you would articulate it because for me being asexual is not experiencing sexual attraction, which is something that everyone else experiences.” However, Haydn noted that there is a distinction between lack and lesser; “there is an association that lack of means lesser somehow... I don’t think that is a necessary association and I don’t feel that way” about asexuality.

#### *Lack of Education*

The lack of education and awareness surrounding asexuality was a major issue discussed by the participants. Prior to “discovering” asexuality, Alex had only heard of straight, gay, and bisexual. He feels that “most people don’t even consider the fact that someone might be an asexual, like they’ll question like gay or lesbian but like they never question if they just don’t like sex” (Alex). Asexuality was also unknown to Melita for a majority of her life. If she had known asexuality existed, she feels things would have been different and she would have known there was another option. A common theme on AVEN posts is the relief experienced once asexuality becomes known; “they always describe it as just this massive weight was lifted off my shoulders because I finally have an answer to what I am” (Melita). Relief is due to finally having a word to describe their

experiences where one did not previously exist, and knowing that there are others that are experiencing the same thing.

Bluetrench and Alex both discussed “coming out” as asexual. Most individuals look confused and have to ask what asexuality means. Luckily, for the most part, Bluetrench has had a fairly easy time with “coming out,” as many of the individuals she has spoken with already knew what asexuality was, taking “a lot of the pressure off to have to explain it and defend it and everything.” Star, however, feels she has to ignore her asexuality around her family in order to keep the peace and not to “have to go through the very difficult explanation of what asexuality is.” Melita has tried to discuss her asexuality with her mom, but her mom “doesn’t think it exists pretty much, so you can’t talk, she doesn’t even want to hear about it, like there’s no interest.”

Melita knows that asexuality may not be accepted in society but would like it to get to the point where others acknowledge that asexuality exists and that asexual individuals are real. Daniel feels life would have been easier for him, and for others, if asexuality was known and accepted. He felt as though he was “some weird aberration or like... I have some kind of physical defect,” and if he had known asexuality was an actual legitimate sexual identity, he would not have struggled as much. Sarah agrees that most individuals have never heard of asexuality and do not know what it means. When she has “come out” to others, she says there are individuals who “ask what it is then they call you a plant or I have been called a starfish” (Sarah). Star added that there is a joke that “ace people are dragons because we’re both mythical beings that don’t exist” (Star).

Alex has even had LGBT individuals tell him that asexuality is not a real sexual orientation.

Several of the respondents noted that in addition to being told that asexuality does not exist, they often hear others say that asexuality is just a phase they are going through or similar comments to insinuate that asexuality is not real. Alex's sister told him that he was going through a phase and someday he would meet the right individual. He has heard the "this is just a phase" explanation from individuals a number of times, and he wonders if they realize what they are saying and "how secretly messed up that is to say that" (Alex). In addition, his mom initially thought he might have some sort of mental or medical condition that needed medicine or therapy.

Melita was involved in an abusive relationship. When others hear this, she often gets the response "you're abused, oh, that's why you say you're asexual." However, Melita notes that she was asexual prior to the abusive relationship, and she feels that she stayed in the relationship, at least in part, due to the unidentified asexuality. Melita has also experienced sexual individuals discounting her asexuality, telling her that if she had sex with them she would not be asexual any longer. Within society there appears to be the view that asexuality is so unstable that it can be easily changed. Asexuality becomes "something that can be easily dismissed as uh oh, you just haven't been with the right person or you're just sick... You've got a hormonal imbalance or you were abused... you're repressing your abuse" (Melita). Due to the lack of education and understanding, sexual individuals come up with numerous excuses for why asexuals are not really asexual and why asexuality does not really exist.

Most participants felt relief when they learned of asexuality and that there are other asexuals in the world. However, in the beginning, the participants had to research asexuality in an attempt to understand what it means to be asexual, and with research came frustration. Most participants could find very little information on asexuality. Alex tried looking online for articles and forums, but it was difficult because no one seems to know anything about asexuality. He felt that you learn the term and that is the starting point, but after that no direction and limited information is provided. Asexual individuals are left to figure out what asexuality means to them. Melita also had a difficult time researching asexuality, finding it hard to find any solid, useful information. She originally looked on Facebook and online asexual dating sites, but she was unable to have the in-depth discussions with others that she feels is necessary for understanding.

AVEN was a better option for finding information, but Melita feels that individuals who go there for answers “are actually getting more speculation and ideas and theories, but not actual education one way or another.” Individuals have to become really “immersed in the community and spend a lot of time, having a lot of really long discussions before you can get a full idea of um ace, of asexuality as a, as a sexual, as an orientation” (Melita). Bluetrench also found information hard to find and confusing when she first started researching asexuality. She now tries to help others who post questions on AVEN because she finds it “kind of annoying that no one can answer that question but you.”

Despite being an activist engaged in politics around sexual identity for approximately 10 years, Daniel only recently realized that asexuality exists. Asexuality is

not “part of the discussion of any of the activist or discussions I’ve been involved in” (Daniel). If he had not stumbled onto that one newspaper article, despite being politically active, he feels he might still be wondering and questioning. Sarah would like to see the whole system rebooted so that there is more education, at an earlier age, of sexual and asexual identities. Everyone deserves the opportunity to figure out who they are, and she feels education of sexual and asexual identities could help others realize they have a choice where currently no choice exists. Women are told to practice chastity yet if a woman says they are asexual, people get offended and try to find a “solution” to “fix” that “problem.” Sarah feels asexuality is treated as “the biggest crime in the world, that oh my gosh this woman does not want to have sex and give a man pleasure.”

Haydn would like to see more education about asexuality in order to “stop all of the like it’s a disease or you haven’t found the right person or all of those things.” Sarah notes that although LGBTQIA+ is supposed to include asexuals and aromantics, individuals with those identities are not respected, they do not count. Asexuality can be a blessing in that its invisibility can help avoid extreme harassment; however, you are also often cursed with being erased from the community. Daniel questions his involvement in the community and feels maybe he should be doing more. If more individuals knew that asexuality is real and that a variety of experiences exist within an asexual identity, perhaps everyone would feel more comfortable with asexuality (Daniel). Sarah, however, doubts that anyone who is already close-minded and unwilling to open their minds to new possibilities will ever find asexuality acceptable.

### *Libido and Attraction*

Throughout the interviews, participants spoke about the different types of attractions that individuals often confuse for or lump with sexual attraction. Participants spoke most often about romantic attraction and understanding the differences between romantic and sexual attraction. Alex identifies as a panromantic asexual. He realized he was asexual while in a relationship and the more he “thought about romance, I was just like I thought about the qualities as to why I wanted that relationship in the first place, and not once did any physical attraction come up into it, it was purely off a romantic basis.” Prior to learning of asexuality, Melita questioned her future and the possibility of a relationship without sex. She wants a “romantic relationship with every aspect of a romantic relationship um and long term, but minus any need or requirement for sex” (Melita). After learning of asexuality, she now knows that there are other asexuals in the world and that she can find someone who desires the same type of relationship.

Bluetrench was previously unaware of the different types of attractions that exist outside sexual attraction, and that the different types of attractions can be experienced either with or in isolation from each other. The different types of attractions are never shown or discussed in books, movies or anywhere else; if “the main character is attracted to somebody, they are sexually and romantically attracted to the person... you never see anything in isolation from each other” (Bluetrench). Star also combined romantic and sexual interest prior to learning of asexuality, but now realizes that what she previously thought was sexual attraction was actually romantic attraction. Sarah likes that asexuals can build relationships off of emotions rather than let sex dictate whether the relationship

is good or bad. For Daniel, identifying as asexual has allowed him to realize that if he is interested in someone and they are “looking for a sexual relationship, then we’re probably fairly likely not compatible with each other.”

Cynthia feels that one thing that makes the idea of a strictly romantic relationship difficult for a lot of non-asexual individuals is that they “don’t see a huge difference between friendship and romance” once sex is removed. One of Cynthia’s asexual partners does not know if she feels romantic attraction or just the desire for a strong friendship. Haydn is also unsure whether or not she experiences romantic attraction, noting that she does not “understand the difference once you remove sex between like romantic and friendship.” However, she speculates that there is likely a distinction between romantic relationships and friendships, though she would not be able to articulate what exactly that distinction is. If it were up to Haydn, she “would like to exist outside of all of the like associations with romantic and sexual attraction.” Catherine feels that it is also important to understand that some individuals do not experience sexual *or* romantic attraction; they are aromantic and do not feel the need for romantic relationships.

Aesthetic attraction is also often linked to sexual attraction. Haydn can look at another individual and know they are attractive without wanting to see them naked. Star agrees, noting that she can look at other individuals and know they are aesthetically pleasing without having an urge to do anything with them. However, she feels that sexual individuals see another individual who is aesthetically attractive and relate that attraction to sexual attraction or sexual desires. Alex knows that he can view others as attractive “but when it comes to actually having sexual urges for that, it’s just not there.” He feels

that individuals can be appreciated on a purely aesthetic level, without the need to put sexual expectations on that attraction.

Finally, several participants mentioned the importance of understanding libido in relation to asexual identity. Although the participants do not experience sexual attraction or desires, they want to make sure that others understand that their bodies can still function “normally.” Some asexuals still experience physiological responses that are normally deemed sexual; they can experience arousal but do not have the sexual thoughts that often accompany arousal in sexual individuals.

Asexuals who masturbate have caused confusion for both sexual and asexual individuals. Alex was initially confused about how arousal and libido fit with an asexual identity. He was confused because “it’s just like I don’t have any sort of like sexual attraction to people but like when you do get aroused it’s just like why” (Alex)? Melita has always had a high libido and will get aroused for no reason. If the arousal does not go down on its own, she will have to masturbate to get rid of the feeling. She masturbates as a result of her body getting aroused; masturbation is “just something to get rid of the discomforting, annoying feeling of arousal” and not due to sexual feelings or desires (Melita).

Sarah also wants to make sure that other individuals are aware that being asexual does not mean they cannot have sex or that their bodies will not function in sexual ways, it’s only that they have no desire or interest in sex. She does have a libido and experiences physical arousal, but she does not want to engage in sexual activities with another individual. Partnered sexual experiences also do not appeal to Star. She questions

why she would need a partner when “I could just do it by myself and still have a romantic or platonic close relationship with somebody” (Star). Melita feels that masturbation has never been “a defining factor in any sexual orientation” and should not be a defining factor in asexuality. She does not want asexuality to be misinterpreted as a “normal” person without a libido because some asexuals have libidos and some do not. Some asexuals masturbate and some do not. The confusion regarding libido and asexuality is one of the reasons why Melita prefers a desire based definition that specifies a lack of desire to connect sexually with *other individuals*.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

An asexual identity is not only difficult to understand because it is relatively unknown to most individuals, but also complicated in that no formally accepted definition exists. Nearly everything that the participants discussed during the interviews relates back to the lack of education and understanding surrounding asexuality. Participants spoke of their experiences before learning about asexuality and the struggle to understand what was “wrong” with them. Participants also spoke of the struggle to find useful information about asexuality.

When speaking about the importance of asexuality in their lives, participants mentioned that the importance changed not only based on where they were in their “discovery” of asexuality but also depending on who they are around. Finally, participants spoke of their asexual identity and the importance of both identity labels and definitions to their identity. Experience, importance, and identity, in regard to asexuality, all related back to the lack of education surrounding asexuality, which will be the focus of the rest of this discussion. The lack of education surrounding asexuality, as discussed by the participants, will be analyzed under three categories: asexuality being unknown, the asexual definition debate, and romantic attraction.

### *Asexuality Unknown*

Throughout the interviews, participants spoke about feeling different from other individuals but not having a word for that difference. Often this feeling of difference did not occur until they were in a relationship in which sexual attraction or desire was expected but did not occur. When those feelings did not manifest, the participants began researching to try to find out why they were not feeling sexual attraction or desire. At some point, whether through social media or friends or the internet, each of the participants were eventually exposed to asexuality. While a few participants did not immediately accept asexuality as an identity, many of the participants did, and all participants accepted asexuality shortly after researching the term.

Unfortunately, researching asexuality proved to be difficult. Due to the lack of knowledge that asexuality even exists, not a lot of information is available. The limited information that is available is not educational or explanatory; the information is either really broad or general in scope or only provides theories regarding asexuality. The asexual community is primarily an online community and most research occurred primarily on websites such as AVEN or through social media such as Reddit and Tumblr – the only places where they could find any information.

The lack of education and information makes it difficult for asexuals to “come out” to others. Asexuality, as a sexual orientation, is relatively unknown. When a participant “comes out” to another individual, that individual often does not know what asexual means, causing the ace individual to have to go through a lengthy and often difficult explanation, answering all levels of questions regarding their asexuality.

Participants experienced other individuals disbelieving their asexuality, offering alternate explanations for why they were not really asexual, or ignoring that the conversation even took place (or ignoring the announcement to prevent a conversation).

Participants were also subjected to hearing that they had not found the right person yet (and when they did, they would feel sexual attraction or desire), that what they think is asexuality was really something else (such as a result of abuse), or that they may really have a medical condition that needs diagnosed and cured. In addition, participants also discussed the invisibility of asexuality and how other individuals, particularly family, constantly dismiss their asexuality as real. However, if participants did not reveal their asexual identity to others, they were assumed to be sexual and subjected to sexual talk and sexual expectations.

#### *Definition Debate*

The debate over a definition for asexuality contributes to the current lack of understanding. A set definition of asexuality does not exist. Although many of the participants agree with the AVEN definition that asexuality is a lack of sexual attraction, there were several participants who thought asexuality was better explained as a lack of sexual desire. The participants who prefer the desire-based definition have spoken with sexual individuals who feel their sexual orientation, whether heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, or any other sexual identity, is defined by the desire, at some point, for partnered sexual contact with another individual.

A major reason that the definition debate is occurring is due to the fact that an accepted definition of sexual attraction does not exist. Though the most common

definition of asexuality used is a lack of sexual attraction, sexual attraction is never defined. AVEN does not define sexual attraction, leaving it up to each individual to determine what sexual attraction means to them and whether or not they experience sexual attraction. The main problem with a self-definition of sexual attraction is the definition used will determine who “fits” the definition of asexual. If sexual attraction is defined as looking at someone, getting turned on by their appearance, and wanting to have sex with that individual, then someone who wants sex and desires sex can be asexual as long as they do not look at another individual and feel the desire to have sex with them. However, if sexual attraction is based on the desire for partnered sexual contact, the number of individuals who fit into this category may be different. Without a set definition of sexual attraction, in relation to defining sexual orientation, the debate between the attraction-based and desire-based definitions will likely continue.

Another ongoing debate is whether or not identities such as demi-sexual or gray-asexual should be classified as an asexual or sexual identity. Several of the participants mentioned identifying as demi-sexual prior to identifying as asexual. If asexuality is a sexual orientation under the sexual meta-category, then, maybe demi-sexual and gray-asexual should also be considered an alternative form of sexuality (alongside heterosexual, homosexual, etc. and not under asexual). However, if asexuality is both an identity and meta-category, demi-sexual and gray-asexual could be under the meta-category of asexuality. A separate asexual identity under the asexual meta-category would distinguish asexual from demi-sexual and gray-asexual. Perhaps a larger discussion surrounding sexuality and asexuality as sexual orientations is needed.

### *Attractions*

Finally, it is important to discuss the significant role romantic attraction plays in asexuality. Most often, the different types of attraction, specifically sexual, romantic, and aesthetic, are lumped into sexual attraction. However, within asexuality an individual can experience multiple forms of attraction that are not necessarily linked to each other or sexual attraction. Someone who is asexual is able to look at another individual and recognize them as aesthetically attractive, but that does not mean they want to have a relationship, romantic or otherwise, with that individual.

Romantic attraction was important for many of the participants. Although ace individuals may not experience sexual attraction or desire, they may desire a romantic relationship, one that looks identical to a “normal” relationship but without the sexual expectations. Unfortunately, due to the assumed sexual nature of relationships and the presumed low percentage of asexuals in the population, finding a strictly romantic relationship is difficult. Most often asexual individuals find themselves in relationships with sexual individuals and have to hide their asexuality, compromise over sexual activities, or break-up due to the differences in sexual expectations. For many of the participants, having a romantic orientation now allows them to discuss their expectations ahead of time and (attempt to) prevent issues after the relationship starts. Being open and direct regarding their romantic orientation, however, also causes issues with finding another individual open to that type of relationship.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Scientific and academic interest and research on asexuality has been slowly increasing. This study attempted to explore asexuality through interviews with self-identified asexual individuals. The interviews focused on three general areas: experiences of asexuality, importance of asexuality, and varying aspects of asexual identity. A major issue that was discussed throughout the interviews was a lack of education and understanding regarding asexuality. Within the lack of education and understanding, three main themes emerged: how unknown asexuality currently is, the lack of a definition of asexuality and of sexual attraction, and the importance of romantic attraction. Although the interviews showed similar experiences, the interviews also highlighted the fact that ace individuals are a heterogeneous group and one size of asexuality does not fit all.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

Research participants were selected through recruiting at UNCG and AVEN, with the majority of participants recruited from the online community on AVEN. Although AVEN is the largest online asexual community, it may not be representative of the asexual population who do not participate on AVEN or of the asexual population as a whole. In addition, the first ten individuals who responded were chosen for the research project rather than selecting a random sample from all individuals who inquired about the

project. Although the asexual population is assumed to be a small percentage of the population, more than 30 individuals were interested in the research project, making a random sample of those who inquired possible. Although this would not be a true random sample of those in society, it would, perhaps, provide a better sample of the asexual community. Although identity is complex and can never truly be generalized to populations as a whole, another limitation of the study is that a small number of participants were selected which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should look at using a larger and more random sample of asexual participants.

Another limitation of this research study (and asexual studies in general) is that only individuals who know that asexuality exists are able to identify as asexual. If an individual has never heard of asexuality, that individual does not have the ability to identify as asexual or participate in research studies on asexuality. Individuals who did not self-identify as asexual did not have access to participate in the study. The limitation will continue until greater education and awareness of asexuality is obtained.

In addition, the lack of a definition of asexuality or sexual attraction is a possible limitation. The self-identified ace individuals in the study used different terminology and definitions when describing their asexuality. The definitions of asexuality that each participant used personally was the definition that individual used to self-identify as asexual. When different definitions of asexuality or sexual attraction are used, comparison between experiences and answers to questions can become more difficult. However, the research showed that whether or not two participants used the same definition of asexuality, the participants had a variety of experiences that sometimes

coincided and sometimes conflicted with the descriptions of the experiences of other participants.

An area for future research is to examine how asexuality interacts with an ace individual's other identities. The assemblage of identities that interact with an asexuality identity was not a focus of this research; however, many of the participants commented on the importance of other identities throughout the interviews. Due to the invisibility of asexuality, for some participants other identities held more importance in their day-to-day lives. Research should examine how identities such as race, class, gender, poly identities, and romantic orientation (just to name a few) interact and influence their asexual identity. Overall, further research is needed to increase awareness, visibility, and acceptance of asexuality.

## REFERENCES

- Aicken, C.R., Mercer, C.H., & Cassell, J.A. (2013). Who reports absence of sexual attraction in Britain? Evidence from national probability surveys. *Psychology & Sexuality, 4*(2), 121-135.
- Atkinson, R. (1998). *The Life Story Interview*. Sage.
- Bogaert, A. F. (2013). The demography of asexuality. In *International handbook on the demography of sexuality* (275-288). Springer Netherlands.
- Brotto, L.A., Knudson, G., Inskip, J., Rhodes, K., & Erskine, Y. (2010). Asexuality: A Mixed-Methods Approach. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 39*(3), 599-618.
- Brotto, L.A., Yule, M.A., & Gorzalka, B.B. (2015). Asexuality: An Extreme Variant of Sexual Desire Disorder? *The Journal of Sexual Medicine, 12*(3), 646-660.
- Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2003). Language and Identity. In Alessandro Duranti (ed.) *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 368-394.
- Callis, A.S. (2014). Bisexual, pansexual, queer: Non-binary identities and the sexual borderlands. *Sexualities, 17*(1-2), 63-80.
- Carrigan, M. (2011). There's more to life than sex? Difference and commonality within the asexual community. *Sexualities, 14*(4), 462-478.
- Cass, V.C. (1979). Homosexuality Identity Formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality, 4*(3), 219-235.
- Cerankowski, K.J., & Milks, M. (2010). New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice. *Feminist Studies, 36*(3), 650-664.
- Chasin, C. D. (2015). Making Sense in and of the Asexual Community: Navigating Relationships and Identities in a Context of Resistance. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 25*(2), 167-180.
- Chasin, C. D. (2013). Reconsidering asexuality and its radical potential. *Feminist Studies, 39*(2), 405-426.

- Chasin, C.D. (2011). Theoretical Issues in the Study of Asexuality. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 40(4), 713-723.
- Coleman, E. (1982). Developmental Stages of the Coming Out Process. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 7(2-3), 31-43.
- Creswell, J.W. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage.
- Fullmer, E.M., Shenk, D., & Eastland, L.J. (1999). Negating Identity: A Feminist Analysis of the Social Invisibility of Older Lesbians. *Journal of Women & Aging*, 11(2-3), 131-148.
- Galupo, M.P., Davis, K.S., Gryniewicz, A.L., & Mitchell, R.C. (2014). Conceptualization of Sexual Orientation Identity among Sexual Minorities: Patterns Across Sexual and Gender Identity. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 14(3-4), 433-456.
- Grotevant, H.D. (1987). Toward a Process Model of Identity Formation. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 2(3), 203-222.
- Horowitz, J.L., & Newcomb, M.D. (2002). A Multidimensional Approach to Homosexual Identity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 42(2), 1-19.
- McRuer, R. (2006). Queer/Disabled Existence. *The Disability Studies Reader*, 301-309.
- Morgan, E.M. (2013). Contemporary Issues in Sexual Orientation and Identity Development in Emerging Adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood*, 1(1), 52-66.
- Morris, J.F. (1997). Lesbian Coming Out as a Multidimensional Process. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 33(2), 1-22.
- Munley, P.H. (1977). Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development and Career Development. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 10(3), 261-269.
- Przybylo, E. (2011). Crisis and safety: The asexual in sexusociety. *Sexualities*, 14(4), 444-461.
- Przybylo, E. (2012). Producing facts: Empirical asexuality and the scientific study of sex. *Feminism & Psychology*, 1-19.
- Ritchie, J. (2003). The Applications of Qualitative Methods to Social Research. In J. Ritchie and J. Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (24-46). Sage.

- Rust, P.C. (1993). "Coming Out" in the Age of Social Constructionism: Sexual Identity Formation among Lesbian and Bisexual Women. *Gender & Society*, 7(1), 50-77.
- Salamon, G. (2010). *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Scherrer, K.S. (2008). Coming to an Asexual Identity: Negotiating Identity, Negotiating Desire. *Sexualities*, 11(5), 621-641.
- Scott, S., & Dawson, M. (2015). Rethinking asexuality: A Symbolic Interactionist account. *Sexualities*, 18(1-2), 3-19.
- Snape, D., & Spencer, L. (2003). The foundations of qualitative research. In J. Ritchie and J. Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (1-23). Sage.
- Van de Meerendonk, D., & Probst, T.M. (2004). Sexual Minority Identity Formation in an Adult Population. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 47(2), 81-90.
- Van Houdenhove, E., Gijs, L., T'Sjoen, G., & Enzlin, P. (2015). Asexuality: A Multidimensional Approach. *Journal of Sex Research*, 52(6), 669-678.
- Van Houdenhove, E., Gijs, L., T'Sjoen, G., & Enzlin, P. (2015). Stories about Asexuality: A Qualitative Study on Asexual Women. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 41(3), 262-281.
- Vitulli, E. (2010). A Defining Moment in Civil Rights History? The Employment Non-Discrimination Act, Trans-Inclusion, and Homonormativity. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 7(3), 155-167.
- Waterman, A. S. (1988). Identity Status Theory and Erikson's Theory: Communalities and Differences. *Developmental Reviews*, 8(2), 185-208.