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Rethinking asexuality: a Symbolic Interactionist account

Susie Scott and Matt Dawson

Abstract

This paper aims to contribute a Symbolic Interactionist approach to the study of asexuality. Previous research in psychology, sexology and sociology has had an individualised focus, which has downplayed the interactive and relational dimensions of asexual identities. In order to capture such elements we demonstrate the relevance of some key Symbolic Interactionist concepts: meaning, negotiation, social selfhood and trajectory. In doing so, we suggest it is possible to see asexual identity as a process of becoming within the context of negotiation with intimate others.

Keywords: asexuality; identity; intimacy; selfhood; Symbolic Interactionism

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Asexuality is defined by a lack of sexual desire and/or attraction, but this does not necessarily mean a lack of interest in intimacy or its component factors (love, sociability, emotional depth) that help build close relationships. Yet the meaning of intimacy to asexual people, the ways in which this is practised, and its connection to identity, have remained under-researched. In contemporary Western cultures, where sexuality is assumed to be the normal, natural way of being, 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. Against this cultural backdrop, actors navigate and negotiate the expectations and demands of others in their attempts to develop a meaningful asexual identity, and to achieve the forms of intimate togetherness they desire.

In this paper, we argue that, contrary to the individualised models prominent in the existing psychological, sexological and sociological literature, our understanding of asexual experiences should recognise these relational aspects of *becoming* asexual, which emerge out of social interaction and are negotiated in relationships. Key Symbolic Interactionist concepts, such as negotiating meaning, career trajectories, social selfhood and pragmatic social action, can provide refreshing new insights into asexual identities and practices of intimacy. Since Symbolic Interactionism is concerned ‘with meanings, process, interaction and a grounded familiarity with everyday life’, it is ‘a prime tool for approaching all aspects of social life as they emerge and transform. This is no less true for its study of the erotic and the sexual’ (Plummer 2003a:528). In advocating this approach, we do not dismiss the existing literature on asexuality, but rather seek to complement and expand upon it by highlighting additional dimensions of asexuality.

Individualized Asexuality

Existing literature on asexuality can be divided into the psychological (including sexological) and more recently, the sociological. We regard both of these bodies of research as epistemologically limited because of their individualistic approaches, which treat the individual as the prime, unit of analysis and neglect the wider social context. While there has been some recent acknowledgement of the ‘individualising tendencies’ of asexuality research, this has been attributed to the choice of research methods (Carrigan, Gupta and Morrison 2013:117), whereas we suggest it is also due to claims of ontology. We begin with an overview of these two bodies of literature and their deficiencies in this regard, then move on to suggest how Symbolic Interactionism might help to overcome them.

Psychological and sexological theories

This first body of literature has depicted ‘the asexual’ as an essential type of person, and his or her lack of sexual desire/attraction as a curiosity to be explained. This is problematic because it keeps the analysis at the level of individual thoughts, decisions and behaviours, while neglecting to consider the social context in which these are negotiated and the cultural discourses through which they are given meaning.

Historically, it is likely that asexual practices have always existed, but have only comparatively recently emerged as subjectivities (cf. Foucault 1973; Weeks 2003). Their existence, and the identities that are extrapolated from this, can be seen as discursively constituted, though nevertheless subjectively real and meaningful. Like homosexuality in the eighteenth century, asexuality has become socially visible as a new ‘problem’ to be explained, by the growing willingness to recognise and talk about it, in both academia and

popular media (Bottle 2009, Wallis 2012). Previously, people may have practised asexual relations but not been defined, or defined themselves, in such terms. The most prominent example of this is the ‘Boston Marriages’ of the late nineteenth century (Rothblum and Brehony 1993), in which women cohabited for the sake of emotional intimacy and companionship but not sex.

During the twentieth century asexuality was most commonly seen as a ‘hypothetical’ sexual orientation: recognised only to be derogatively compared to ‘normal’ sexualities. Examples of this can be seen in Freud’s claim of asexuality being a result of repression (Freud 1973) and in Kinsey’s allocation of such individuals to ‘Group X’, to be assigned a true sexuality once it emerged (Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin 1948, MacInnis and Hodson 2012). This reflects a wider tendency in the human sciences of classifying different sexualities within mapped terrains of ab/normality (Foucault 1973). Such techniques also mirror the repressive mechanisms of heteronormativity, whereby non-heterosexual identities have traditionally been marginalised (Butler 1993).

This drive to define, in order to explain, asexuality has often involved seeing it as a symptom or synonym of psychological malady. For example, psychological explanations have tended simply to amalgamate asexuality into other, established categories of presumed dysfunction, emphasising individual pathology. The most common of these has been the oft-claimed affinity between asexuality and Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD) defined as: ‘persistently or recurrently deficient (or absent) sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity’ which ‘causes marked distress or interpersonal difficulty’ (Bogaert 2006:243, see also Prause and Graham 2007, Brotto and Yule 2009:623, Hinderliter 2013). It has also been claimed that, ‘Schizoid Personality Disorder, characterized by emotional coldness, limited capacity to express warm feelings towards others, and lacking desire for close, confiding relationships might be related to asexuality’ (Brotto et al 2010:608). Furthermore, that a third

of asexuals have not been in a romantic relationship suggests ‘atypical social functioning’ (Brotto et al 2010:608). Other attempts to explain asexuality include the claim that some supposed asexuals may in fact have a unique paraphilia termed ‘autochorissexualism’, or identity-less sexuality, expressed by sexual fantasies which do not include those fantasising (Bogaert 2012b). Finally, it has been suggested that ‘poor health might serve as a partial explanation for some asexual behaviours’ (Poston and Baumle 2010:524).

In this literature, three possible measures of asexuality have been suggested: behavioural (a lack of sexual activity); desire (a lack of sexual attraction towards others); and identity (defining one’s self as asexual) (cf. Bogaert 2006, 2012a, Poston and Baumle 2010). All of these reveal an individualistic basis of analysis. Of the three, desire has been the most favoured definition, due to claims that it is ‘stable’, being less likely to change over time than behaviour and/or identity (Bogaert 2012a:22), and that it is closest to the ‘true’ feelings of the individual (Bogaert 2006, Prause and Graham 2007, Brotto et al. 2010). Demographic profiles of the supposed ‘asexual population’ have been generated on this basis, using national probability samples, which suggest prevalence rates of between 1-6% (Bogaert 2004; Poston & Baumle 2010)¹. Meanwhile, statistics collected from the online community AVEN (Asexuality Visibility and Education Network), which use an identity-based definition, suggest that this is a distinct and politically active social group with a strong online presence, although as an Internet-based study, this may over-represent the well-educated and relatively affluent middle classes (Prause and Graham 2007, Brotto et al. 2010). The only shared demographic point of note across these studies is that women are more likely both to self-identify as asexual *and* to be defined as such. A further methodological problem with these studies is that they have tended to use measures that reflect dominant sexualised approaches (Hinderliter 2009). For example, the use of Likert scales to rate levels of sexual desire are largely incomprehensible to those who have never felt such desire (cf. Prause and Graham

2007 and Brotto et al. 2010). This reflects a wider lack of methodological plurality in research on asexuality (Carrigan, Gupta and Morrison 2013:116-117).

Sociological theories

The second body of literature, from sociology and the adjacent fields of gender and queer studies, has two major strands: asexual identity and the politics (often anarchist) of asexuality. Though important, this too retains an individualistic focus and ignores the interaction context of asexual relationships and practices of intimacy.

Methodologically, for example, ‘snapshot’ images of identity at a particular stage in an individual’s life are presented through online surveys, non-biographical interviews, or theoretical models of individualised identity formation (Scherrer 2008, Carrigan 2011). The emphasis is on individual choices or thought processes in reaching a *fixed* or *final* identity; the definitive, authentic ‘experience of being asexual’ (Carrigan 2011:476). This snapshot image of identity as a state of *being* contrasts with the Symbolic Interactionist model of processual *becoming*, as we discuss later.

Thus when discussing asexual identity, Carrigan (2011) writes of individuals developing a sense of their difference or otherness from their peers while struggling to make sense of this through private self-reflection. Using a realist ontology, Carrigan argues that such self-perceptions of difference arise from ‘actual difference’ (2011: 472) in desires and behaviour, and the material and cultural circumstances that cause and constrain this (cf. Archer 2000). Although Carrigan hints at the Symbolic Interactionist notion of a career trajectory in his account of the process of coming to identify as asexual, he does not envisage this as a socially negotiated process; instead, he takes his analysis in a different direction, focusing on

individuals' reflexive thoughts and choices. Carrigan outlines a sequence of stages: individual difference, self-questioning, assumed pathology, self-clarification, biographical narrativising, and communal identity (Carrigan 2011:471). While we do not dispute the pattern of this trajectory, nor its presence in the lifeworld of asexuals, we argue that it can be more usefully grounded in Symbolic Interactionist concepts, such as social selfhood and negotiated transformations of social identity.

Another aspect of individualised asexual identity is the positioning of oneself as different, in relation to normative cultural depictions of sexuality and romance, as well as established categories of sexual orientation. Here again, we find the implied presence of significant others (Mead 1934), but only as objectified reference points, abstracted from lived experiences of interaction. For example, Scherrer (2008) discusses how asexual people come to identify as such by first grasping the meaning of the sexual, from dominant discourses of essentialism: they position themselves as a 'type' in relation to categories, labels and identifiers, and compare themselves to normative cultural representations of romantic relationships. This can lead to complex forms of identification such as, in one case, a 'hypo-hetero-romantic hypo-sexual' form of asexuality (Scherrer 2008:632).

Consequently, it has been noted how the asexual community is defined not just by commonality, but also by the diverse identities of its members (Carrigan 2011). Individuals will define not just according to the object, or lack thereof, of romantic attraction (e.g. bi-romantic or a-romantic) but also according to their level of sexual attraction. An example of the latter is 'grey-a' or 'demisexual' asexuals who exist 'in the grey area' between asexuality and non-asexuality by feeling sexual attraction in only specific circumstances (e.g. only once a relationship has developed) (cf. Carrigan 2011:470).

The differing components and possible combinations of romantic and sexual attraction mean that ‘while lack of sexual attraction and desire [is] a highly common feature’ of asexual identification, it is not the only definition (Scherrer 2008:626), nor is romance a necessary basis of intimate encounters. If, therefore, asexuality is a meta-category that can encompass many different forms of identity (Chasin 2011:721), then we should consider conceptions of asexual identity as simultaneously about commonality and difference (Carrigan 2011). The term can have multiple different meanings, which have yet to be explored in depth.

Political research on asexuality has been conducted predominantly within the poststructuralist tradition, emphasising how asexual practices may question the discursive terrain of human identity and interaction by negating the ‘sexual assumption’ of wider culture (Carrigan 2012). In doing so, asexuality operates as a ‘non-normative’ sexual orientation (Sanger 2010:23) which, in problematising the dominance of ‘Sexusociety’ (Pryzbolo 2011), brings into question dominant conceptualisations of: sex and sexuality (Pryzbolo 2011); the ‘healthy lifestyle’ (Kim 2010); marriage (Scherrer 2010b); feminism (Cerankowski and Mills 2010); ‘liberal-democratic’ selfhood (Gressgård 2013) and political expression (Fahs 2010). In this sense asexuality is posited as a form of anarchist politics, opposed to all forms of contemporary political domination (Pryzbolo 2011, Fahs 2010) or as a ‘method’ which challenges dominant conceptions of sexuality and intimacy (Pryzbolo 2013).

Other researchers have drawn attention to the unique forms of discrimination experienced by asexuals, which are rooted in ‘an ideological opposition to deviant sexuality’ (MacInnis and Hodson 2012:10, Gazzola and Morrison 2012). This is seen to result from the hitherto invisibility of asexuality, not only against a cultural backdrop of heteronormativity, but also within the wider umbrella of LGBTQ, where asexual voices have until recently been silent. As an ‘emergent’ (Gazzola and Morrison 2012) and poorly understood sexual orientation, asexuality cannot simply be incorporated into dominant and established conceptions of non-

heterosexual being, such as the image of neoliberal homonormativity expressed via consumerism (Duggan 2002) but rather demands an independent platform for its expression in the public sphere of intimate citizenship (Plummer 2003b).

This body of political research strikes us as at best idealistic and at worst, misrepresentative of the complexity and subjective reality of asexuality as something that exists beyond the discursive terrain, at the level of lived experience. Poststructuralist anarchism (Fahs 2010) depicts asexual identity as merely a discursive construct or subject position, divorcing it from the personal, and yet ironically imbuing it with agentic power. For example, Pryzbolo (2011:456-457) calls on asexuality to ‘choose to abandon its reactive, binary-bound sense of itself’ since ‘as a strategy of being’ asexuality ‘must shift from declarations of absence, to an enacting of difference, both linguistically and actually’. Here and elsewhere, asexual identities are imagined as performative and transformative because of the way they subvert the established gender order of society (Butler 1993; Connell 2005) by challenging taken for granted assumptions of heteronormativity, romance and sexual scripts (Jackson 1993). Where individual identity is recognised, it is theorised primarily as a site of ideological inscription or a basis for political action, such as resistance to oppressive discourses. Marginalised in this analysis is the recognition of the lived experiences of asexual people *as people*: what it means to self-identify as such, how this definition emerges through social encounters, relationships and interaction, and how these experiences affect actors’ everyday lives.

In the remainder of this paper, we suggest some ways in which Symbolic Interactionism might compensate for the shortcomings of these individualistic theories, by shedding light on the socially negotiated aspects of asexual identities and practices of intimacy.

Symbolic Interactionism and Asexual Identities

Identities are imagined within Symbolic Interactionism by a shift from the individual to the relational level of analysis. Social identities are viewed as *meaningful* phenomena, and these meanings are not just privately held by individuals but rather shared, defined and negotiated through interaction (Blumer 1969). The appropriate unit of study should therefore be the diversity and mutability of these meanings, and the social processes of their constitution. In this section, we consider some of the key concepts embedded in this perspective, and apply them to the case of asexual identity.

Meanings

Each asexual story will be unique, not just because individuals are different, but because people have different constellations of experiences, relationships and interaction contexts to navigate their way through. For example, the meaning of being an ‘anti-sex’ asexual may be quite different for a 15 year old boy who has never experienced sexual desire compared to a 50 year old woman who has lost that desire, perhaps through a traumatic sexual experience or a ‘disenchanted’ long term relationship, and so ‘drifts’ into asexuality as a new identity (cf. Matza 1964). Similarly, the interactional process of ‘coming out’ as asexual may be an important milestone of identity for the 15 year old, who announces and places himself (Stone 1962) within the gender order as a matter of pride, compared to his older, female counterpart, for whom asexuality may be a secretive stigma that remains ‘in the closet’.

Social selfhood

Agency is also re-imagined in this perspective by a resurrection of the concept of the self, as both the seat of experience and the author of identity. In contrast to individualised theories,

however, this is a *social* self, embedded in the interaction order and linking mind and body to society and the wider environment (Mead 1934). The self is not a site of solipsistic private contemplation but rather a social object, whose form and meaning emerge out of human interaction as a ‘co-operative process’ in which individuals ‘call out a response from other members of the group’ (Mead 1934:194). This takes place in both the immediate contexts of situated encounters, with their dramaturgical significance (Goffman 1959) and over the longer term, as such experiences build up into patterns of interaction (Becker 1963).

Actors orient their own social action towards each other, taking into account the meanings they interpret from the ‘social foundations’ of the ‘conversation of gestures’ (Mead 1934) sustained in interaction between self and other, gradually converging upon a set of working definitions to frame experience. This makes identity an inevitably relational process, whereby actors develop selfhood not only as an individual ‘I’ (subjective thoughts and feelings) but also as a social ‘Me’ (an image of oneself through the eyes of the generalised other). My understanding of who ‘I’ am is dependent on who others believe ‘Me’ to be, and how I imagine myself from their perspective.

Negotiation

Whatever meanings are attached to a particular identity, such as asexuality, will be important to not only the individual so labelled but also to the significant others (Mead 1934) who surround him or her and whose attitudes constitute their local social world. We might even talk not of ‘identity’ as a final state to be achieved, but rather a process of *identification* (Williams 2000) through which actors associate or dissociate with different reference groups and navigate the boundaries in between. Intimate citizenship (Plummer 2003b) refers to a unison of public expressions of political action and the micro-politics of identity as

something that is ‘negotiated in, and emergent from, the mundane social interaction through which each of us makes sense of our own and others’ gendered and social lives’ (Jackson & Scott 2010:91). The emergence of asexual spaces, for example online communities such as the AVEN website (Scherrer 2008:626), has created additional forums for such negotiation.

In the case of asexuality, these significant others may include the peer group, but also – and more importantly insofar as this has been under-researched – intimate partners. An individual’s understanding of themselves as asexual is not something that they simply ‘have’ and bring with them to a relationship, but also something that emerges and changes throughout the duration of that relationship, and whose meaning is redefined and negotiated within it. Indeed, the meaning of ‘being asexual’ may change from something that had been thought of as a private and personal matter to something that suddenly has implications for the significant other, as well as for the terms of the relationship. Partners, who research indicates are unlikely to identify as asexual themselves (Carrigan 2012), will have to adapt to the identity presented to them, and consider how it will affect the way they relate to one another. In this case a greater application of the work of Symbolic Interactionism, notably the understanding of the importance of the ‘Me’ as well as the ‘I’ to identity formation, allows us to see the complex social negotiations implied by a seemingly individual identity.

Identity trajectory

Over the life course, Symbolic Interactionism views identities not as static but as processual: constantly unfolding and perpetually unfinished, subject to continuous reflection and revision. This may take the form of a socially negotiated status passage (Glaser and Strauss 1971), involving key moments of epiphany or turning points (Strauss 1969), or a longer term career trajectory (Becker 1963) whereby an old identity is gradually transformed into a new

one, though this process is never complete. We should then talk about asexual identities as socially mediated experiences of *becoming* (something different to that which one thought one was or that which others had perceived one to be), rather than as a fixed, essential state of *being*. Whether and to what extent an individual comes to identify with a particular label or category – not only as ‘asexual’ or not, but also within the diversity of asexual identities – is not a matter of pre-determined fate, but rather just one of many paths that their life course may take, depending and contingent on the experiences of interaction that they have.

Identities emerge as this open-ended process begins to consolidate and converge towards an integrated set of meanings, especially when these can be linked to a particularly dominant master status (Hughes 1945). Certain role performances may become more salient than others and lead to greater levels of commitment (Stone 1962), and where this is met with social reactions of disapproval, result in the attribution of deviant or stigmatising labels that may prove to be ‘sticky’ or fateful for interaction (Goffman 1967). This in turn will inform the biographical identity work actors do to make sense of their lives retrospectively, and the way they narrate these experiences through (a)sexual stories (Plummer 1995). However, of course every narrative is only a snapshot interpretation, a situated performance (Denzin 1989), and an individual may tell several asexual stories over their life course.

Symbolic Interactionism and Asexual Intimacy

Turning to the question of how asexual people experience and practice intimacy, some of the same themes arise: meanings (what does intimacy mean to those who do not associate it with sexual desire and/or attraction?), negotiation (how do partners negotiate these meanings, accommodate their different needs and establish the grounds of the relationship?), selfhood (how do asexual identities change or get changed over the course of a relationship?) and its

relation to social action (how do actors demonstrate intimacy to one another, and interpret it in each other's gestures?). Let us discuss each of these.

Meanings

The meanings of intimacy for asexual people, like anyone else, emerge from the emotionally charged processes of entering, maintaining and leaving intimate relationships. Much of the existing research into romantic intimacy presumes that it coexists with sexual desire, as either a cause or a consequence, and this is implicitly built into accounts of why people seek out relationships. Dominant representations of romantic intimacy either subsume sexual attraction within romantic emotions (Jackson 1993) or see lust as central to the modern concept of romantic love (Evans 2003). Once we remove sex from the equation, however, we are left with a wider conception of intimacy that may be based upon many different things, such as emotional closeness (Simmel 1950), sharing and disclosing (Jamieson 1998) or platonic friendship and companionship (Spencer and Pahl 2006).

Meaning is of course tied to action, and as such may be read from the symbolic gestures (Blumer 1969) and reflexive acts (Holmes 2010) that partners use to demonstrate intimacy and its semantic correlates: trust, confidence, vulnerability and dedication (Simmel 1950). These can be understood as what Jamieson (2005) calls the 'practices of intimacy': concrete and tangible instances in which intimacy is shown or enacted in the course of everyday life. This of course fits neatly with Symbolic Interactionism's devotion to pragmatism, and its emphasis on empirically observable applications of theoretical ideas. It has been suggested that asexuals engage in 'ongoing and creative' attempts to develop alternative practices of intimacy (Carrigan 2012:14), although research on what these practices entail is still somewhat lacking.

Nevertheless, the question lends itself easily to social research influenced by Symbolic Interactionism and we can find some indicators. For example, take the case of a newly wed couple who use their honeymoon suite to play Scrabble with their friends (Cox 2008); intimacy to them meant being best friends, within a wider group of close friends, and this privileging of companionship as the defining criterion of intimacy meant that it could be extended beyond the boundaries of the dyadic relationship. This in turn suggests how studying asexual practices of intimacy can reveal what (sexual) others take for granted about this construct, and the ‘seen but unnoticed’ rules that are embedded in it (Garfinkel 1967). Recognising the presence of norm-breaking practices, and the boundaries or limits they make visible, promises wider insights, since ‘to closely describe these limits is to closely study the social relations of the people who draw them’ (Goffman 1983:46). Newmahr (2011) elaborates on this when she argues for a Symbolic Interactionist analysis of intimacy at the ‘edges’ of social acceptability:

Intimacy can instead be viewed as a social situation, with a focus on the moments in, through, and by which people construct intimate experience, regardless of the nature of the relationship, or of the emotional experience of the intimacy. (Newmahr 2011: 169)

Negotiation

A Symbolic Interactionist reading of intimacy places itself within the connectedness thesis, in its attempt to ‘understand how association remains both possible and desirable, as well as how it may take different shapes at different times’ (Smart 2007:189). This is shown by the way that rather than assuming the precondition of a ‘rationalized’ intimate sphere inhabited by individuals, we recognise this to be essentially an interaction site, wherein relationship partners must negotiate the contextual and contingent elements of intimacy (Jackson and

Scott 2010:69-71). At a practical level this means taking as the unit of analysis not individualised reflexivity, but rather the shared (and disputed, redefined and emergent) understandings, emotions and meanings attached to the *relationship* by its participants. Such negotiation:

is not simply a rational calculation of the amount of satisfaction an aspect or way of life brings, but is infused with feelings about how it fits (or does not) with others and what they think, feel and do. (Holmes 2010:148)

The complexity and diversity of asexual identities, as noted above, means that intimate relationships involving one or more such people would themselves take multiple forms. Lacking any established cultural scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1973), asexual individuals may engage in ‘life experiments’ concerning the nature of intimacy as they see it and the extent to which this is practically achievable. This is a common strategy for those who have been ‘historically consigned to the margins of cultural life’ (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001:1).

This suggests an ongoing process of negotiation concerning the behaviours that develop and maintain practices of intimacy. Since asexuals predominantly enter into intimate relationships with those of a different sexual orientation, the role of sex in such a relationship must be established. Intimacy can be ‘framed’ differently by actors (Morgan 2011), but whatever definitions they agree on will shape the course of the relationship and determine its parameters. Most commonly, an asexual person in a relationship with a non-asexual partner must negotiate with them whether and to what extent sexual acts will be part of their repertoire of intimate action. The asexual person may accommodate to his or her partner’s desire for sex, or agree with them (sometimes explicitly) an alternative way of demonstrating intimacy. The varying and carefully differentiated nature of sexual practices are suggested by Scherrer’s participants, one of whom claimed: ‘I enjoy cuddling, and kissing and even

pleasing my wife, but I don't desire sexual intercourse' whilst another said 'I am sexually attracted to men but have no desire or need to engage in sexual or even non-sexual activity (cuddling, hand-holding, etc.) with them' (Scherrer 2008:627).

Selfhood in social action

Asexual pursuits of intimacy involve negotiating expectations, not only with relationship partners but also with wider cultural values and normative conventions. Drawing on Mead's concept of the generalised other, we suggest that asexual people may orient themselves towards an internalised representation of what such others expect. Thus dominant conceptions of how intimate relationships *should* be conducted 'enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking' (Mead 1934:155). Here we can see that intimate relationships including asexuals must also negotiate the meanings attached to intimacy by the generalized other, as a 'normative point of comparison' (Holdsworth and Morgan 2007:410-411). For example, this might involve encountering cultural representations and dominant discourses about love and romance (Jackson 1993, Evans 2003). It may mean positioning oneself within conventional frameworks as one who is different, deficient or a subordinate 'other', as Scherrer's research demonstrated, but it can also suggest the potential for more positive social action. This is where many of the claims that asexuality is intrinsically 'anarchist' have emerged (cf. Fahs 2010), but a Symbolic Interactionist analysis would ground this in the pragmatic choices and acts asexual people make in the course of their everyday intimate lives.

When romantic intimacy amongst asexuals has been discussed, it has been in terms of individual reflexivity, such as the ability to maintain 'ontological security' (Giddens 1984:50) both within and outside a relationship, rather than how partners might tackle the issue

together. This can be seen in Carrigan's discussion of 'intimate relationality' as defined by an individual's level of commitment to sexual monogamy (Carrigan 2012:15) and in Scherrer's discussion of romantic relationships emerging from an individualised consideration of the self (Scherrer 2008:632-635).

Instead, we argue that the asexual self is relationally embedded. Like any social self, it is not something that actors bring to a relationship but rather something that emerges out of it. Dramaturgically speaking, the partners constitute a performance team (Goffman 1959), who as we have seen, construct frameworks of definition and meaning around the relationship and the parts they will play in it. As team-mates, their collaborative practices of intimacy serve to uphold this reality through 'reciprocal familiarity' (Goffman 1959:88) and make the relationship 'work' pragmatically on a day-to-day basis. The participants' understanding of themselves will be shaped by their experience of the relationship, which takes on its own identity as a reified social object. In negotiating their roles and repertoires of action, partners take into account not just what they each desire (or not) independently, but also what the *relationship* 'needs' to survive. This suggests the possibility of distinctively asexual practices of intimacy, performed as collaborative ventures.

Asexual life experiments may challenge or subvert conventional myths and idealistic representations of love, such as romantic heteronormative scripts (Jackson 1993) or the magical uniqueness of exclusive insularity (Simmel 1950). Examples of this can be found in the claim that asexual relationships, by 'blurring' the lines of romantic and friendship relationships may 'rewrite language' to better describe their relationships (Scherrer 2010b) or even to transform the discourses of love (Carrigan 2012:16) by presenting alternative definitions of it. In Mead's terms, this is to use the creative 'genius' potential of self-identity (Mead 1934:217): to daringly vocalise the unique and authentic wishes of the 'I' in an attempt to reform the 'Me' available to the 'wider community' (Mead 1934:217-222).

However, contrary to the idealism of poststructuralist anarchism, dominant discourses may not simply be rejected, but rather retained as meaningful by those in the relationship. For example, an asexual-non-asexual relationship may still involve sex (albeit perhaps motivated by altruistic love rather than physical lust), children and other components of heteronormative expectations, indicating that a desire for, and choice of, 'tradition' and/or 'convention' can still play a central part of asexually intimate lives (Smart and Shipman 2004, Gilding 2010). Consequently, asexual people may be as prone to conservatism or pragmatic compromise in intimate relationships as they are to radicalism. As Craib (1994) argues, human nature and social identities are messy, complex and often contradictory; it is common to hold two opposing views (of a cultural ideal, or an intimate other) simultaneously, and to feel ambivalent towards them.

In summary, there are two key Symbolic Interactionist contributions to the study of asexual intimate relationships. Firstly, in contrast to individualised conceptions of asexuality, our relational approach encourages a more pragmatic focus on the negotiated and contingent nature of intimacy as a set of co-operative practices. These practices of intimacy emerge not from individual decisions but from the conditions of the relationship as a unit. Secondly, Symbolic Interactionism claims that dominant discourses, expressed via the generalised other, are also part of this negotiation. However, as opposed to the political perspective of seeing these discourses as conservative or repressive, and therefore contested by an innately critical, even anarchist, asexuality, our approach recognises that these representations may instead be accepted and valued as meaningful to the relationship. These two contributions are united in their goal to see intimate relationships as not simply reflecting individualised decisions and/or forms of identity, but rather as contingent practices, emerging from everyday forms of negotiation and meaningful attachments.

Conclusion

Previous research on asexuality has been limited by two things: an over-reliance on individualised explanation and a conflation of a normative political position with empirical experience. By looking at two key elements of asexual experience – identity and intimacy – we have argued that a Symbolic Interactionist analysis can help to overcome these shortcomings.

To conclude, we highlight three key research questions a Symbolic Interactionist researcher may wish to ask when studying asexuality². Firstly, what are the key social processes involved in becoming asexual? This might involve the study of how experiences of interaction lead (some) people towards ‘coming out’ as asexual, and the biographical identity work they use to make sense of this trajectory in conversation with significant others. By seeing asexual identity as a process of negotiation rather than a state to be achieved, we can achieve a greater understanding of how asexuality is experienced and practiced. Secondly, how do asexual people’s identities shape, and get shaped by, their different understandings of intimacy in relationships? What are the meanings attached to being asexually intimate, and how are these negotiated in everyday interaction? Thirdly, are there any distinctively asexual practices of intimacy? How are these actions performed and how are relationships involving asexuals ‘done’ as collaborative ventures? How do asexual partners navigate the limits, edges and boundaries around culturally normative frameworks?

And so we call for an appreciation of, to paraphrase Plummer (1995), asexual stories. Qualitative research of this kind can help us to redefine asexual identification and intimacy as embedded within meaningful social practices. Asexuality is not just a state of being, achieved through individual reflexivity, but also a life-long process of becoming, developed via meanings that are negotiated through interaction (cf. Blumer 1969). Symbolic

Interactionism's conceptual tools elucidate this process, promising a deeper sociological understanding of asexuality.

Notes

1. It has been claimed that the preference for demographic data drove the widespread acceptance of a desire-based measure, given its availability in pre-existing datasets (Aicken, Mercer and Cassell 2013).
2. These inspired the research questions for a project we are conducting with Dr Liz McDonnell at the University of Sussex, UK. 'A Qualitative Exploration of Asexual Identities and Practices of Intimacy' is funded by the Leverhulme Trust (grant code RPG-2012-575).

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