“When we talk about gender we talk about sex”: (a)sexuality and (a)gendered subjectivities

Abstract:

Gender diversity is seemingly prevalent amongst asexual people. Drawing on qualitative research, and focusing on agender identities in particular (which have received very little sociological or queer scholarly attention), this article explores why this might be the case. I argue that previous explanations which centre 1) biologistic understandings of sexual development, or 2) the liberatory potential of asexuality, or 3) psycho-cognitive conflict, are insufficient. Instead, I offer a sociological perspective in which participants’ agender subjectivities can be understood as arising from an embodied meaning-making process where gender was understood to fundamentally be about sexuality. I emphasise the importance of understanding asexuality and agender in the broader structural context, as particular subjectivities were shaped and sometimes necessitated in navigating hetero-patriarchy. However, these entangled understandings of (a)sexuality and (a)gender were sometimes rendered unintelligible within LGBTQ+ discursive communities, where there is often a rigid ontological distinction between gender and sexuality arising from histories of misrecognition and erasure. The article is therefore an attempt to complicate this distinction, as I argue that already-invisible subjectivities may be made even more invisible by this distinction. The article serves as an illustration of the need to empirically explore meanings of the categories ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’, and the relationship between them, rather than siloing them in our methodological and conceptual frameworks.

Asexuality, which has been dubbed the "invisible orientation" (Decker 2014) is arguably becoming less so. Not only can we find the existence of some asexual characters in mainstream entertainment (Todd in the Netflix series *Bojack Horseman*, Liv Flaherty in the UK soap *Emmerdale*), but these characters are also portrayed as complex and nuanced, rather than one-dimensional stereotypes. The US clothing retailer Hot Topic sell Asexual Pride t-shirts (Hot Topic 2019), and asexual terminology such as ace and aromantic were added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2018 (OED 2018). Asexual is increasingly included in official governmental research (e.g. in the findings from the UK government's National LGBT survey in 2018) and there are plans to include asexual in the 2021 UK census (ONS 2018). We may well be seeing an asexual 'tipping point'.

There has also been a small but growing body of scholarship on asexuality for a decade and a half, ranging from the positivistic, to textual explorations, to the sociological. Not only is asexuality of interest as a social phenomenon in and of itself (especially given the increased visibility demonstrated above), but those working in asexuality studies have pointed out that should be interested in asexuality because of its potential to inform our understandings about society and social organisation more broadly – for example, about the compulsory nature of sexuality (Gupta 2015); about the possibilities for conducting relationships in new ways (Scherrer 2010); and even about what it means to be human (Gressgård 2013).

This article contributes to debates both within and beyond asexuality studies. It is a qualitative empirical investigation of the gender diversity that is seemingly prevalent amongst asexual people (Bauer et al. 2018), and it represents a challenge to some of the proposed explanations for this. I argue that explanations that posit gender diversity as 1) arising from the (a)sexual development process, or 2) related to asexuality's liberatory potential or 3) as a strategy for managing psycho-cognitive dissonance, do not adequately reflect the experiences of my participants. Asexual-agender subjectivities instead emerged much more complexly

through how participants made sense of concepts like gender and sexuality, and how these meanings were dynamically understood and experienced through the lived body. Crucially, these subjectivities were also situated, formed, and shaped in the broader socio-structural context of hetero-patriarchy, as participants - especially those who were read socially as women - had to find ways to navigate aggressive (hetero)sexualisation. This can be read as a sociological intervention to the debate, as I centre participant's own meaning-making, their embodiment, and their emplacement within wider social structures. However, these subjectivities were often rendered unintelligible by dominant LGBTQ+ discourse, since they resisted the ontological separation of gender and sexuality common to much scholarship and activism. The article therefore speaks to broader issues about how gender, sexuality and the relationship between them is conceptualised, and how mobilising them in particular ways may mean marginalising particular subjectivities. Overall, the article highlights the need for empirical engagement, as gender and sexuality might come together or diverge in different ways at different empirical sites (Richardson 2007).

SEXUALITY AND GENDER

Theorising sexuality and gender (and the relationship between the two) has a long and multi-faceted history, and I can only give a partial overview here (see Richardson (2007) and Valentine (2007) for fuller accounts). Victorian sexological discourses of inversion tied gender and sexuality together in a determinate and pathologising fashion, where same-sex attraction was understood as a kind of gender atypicality (Devor and Matte 2006). These discourses came to be challenged by the newly mobilising gay and lesbian movement in the mid-20th century (Valentine 2007, 54). In particular, the characterisation of gay men as effeminate was seen as a barrier towards sexual citizenship, and so conformity to gender

norms was strategically emphasised (2007, 54). Valentine argues that this move had two effects: firstly, as gender non-normativity became unstuck from homosexuality, 'trans' emerged as the kind of container vessel for this; secondly, it instated an ontological separation of gender and sexuality. Today, while gender and sexuality are still frequently conflated (e.g. Zaslow 2018), the separation of gender and sexuality has become almost orthodox in "much grassroots political activism" and "contemporary social theory" (Valentine 2007, 15), as it seen as a matter of respecting self-determination. Bettcher (2014, 618) suggests that "a central assumption in transgender politics" is that "gender identity is entirely distinct from sexual orientation", whilst Jourian (2018, 362) speaks of an "overemphasis on distinguishing gender from sexuality" in academia. Hines (2010) also shows how this separation is codified into certain legal frameworks, such as the Gender Recognition Act in the UK. This separation model is also becoming increasingly visible within popular culture (e.g. Mannion 2015; Adams 2017).

Articulating gender and sexuality's relationship has also been a central plank in both queer (and) feminist theory (Richardson 2007). Rather than as attributes of the individual (e.g. how one's sexuality might be connected or not to one's gender), feminist and queer theorists have considered gender and sexuality in their more systemic and institutionalised forms, including how the relationship between the two have contributed to women's oppression and/or heteronormativity. Theorists have differed on the mechanics of this relationship (which Hines (2010) deems a "chicken or the egg" situation). For example, Catherine MacKinnon (1989) argued that gender and gender inequality are created through (hetero)sexuality; similarly Wittig (1992) and Ingraham (1996) also prioritise sexuality as an explanatory framework, arguing that categories such as woman would have no meaning if not for the heterosexual regime. Conversely, Jackson (1999) argues that heterosexuality (based as it is on

the idea of opposite sexes) itself only makes sense because of pre-existing gender divisions; Richardson (2007, 466) also argues that whilst we can "think about gender without invoking sexuality" it is perhaps more difficult to think about sexuality "outside gendered discourses and scripts" (i.e. gender might be more independent than sexuality). In contrast, some queer feminist theorists have sought to untether gender from sexuality entirely, such as Rubin (1984) and Sedgwick (1990). Commenting on this impulse, Butler (1994, 11) suggests that this is in part down to a desire to liberate sexuality: if sexuality is tied to gender, then sexuality can only be a site of oppression, rather than a source of transgression or pleasure. Indeed, Martin's (1994) depiction of a "queer utopia" is one which has "sexualities without genders".

Empirical sociological research shows us how gender works through sexuality and vice versa, and how together they shape behaviours, identities and relationships. For example, scholars in a number of empirical contexts have shown how a performance of a particular kind of heterosexuality is crucial if one is to be recognised as 'properly' masculine or feminine (Connell 2005; Renold 2005). Researchers have also shown how experiences and expressions of sexuality are unequally structured by gender, with girl's and women's bodies, desire(s) and agency policed and constrained in multiple ways across the life-course (e.g. Carpenter 2010; Miller 2016; Tolman et al. 2016). In this work, the structural, relational and subjective elements of gender and sexuality are in continuous dialogue, as the social system of hetero-patriarchy is traced through individual identities and inter-personal interactions.

Some researchers within trans studies have built on this work on 'gendered sexualities' and 'sexualised genders' by illustrating the lived inseparability of these categories. Distinguishing

between gender and sexuality often does not make sense in the lifeworlds of many trans and/or gender non-conforming people, particularly for trans and gender non-conforming people of colour (Valentine 2007), where identities such as 'stud' and 'ag/gressive' can fuse gendered, sexualised and racialized subjectivities (Kuper et al 2014; Jourian 2015). Research within trans studies has also emphasised the importance of embodiment in understanding the lived interplay of gender and sexuality. For example, Latham (2016) discusses how trans men "achieve maleness" through assemblages of sexual practices, pleasures and embodiments. Schilt and Windsor (2014) demonstrate how for the trans men in their research, changing gendered embodiment often changed (or disrupted) their sexuality, whilst Doorduin and van Berlo (2014) discuss how for some of their trans participants, desire for changes in gendered embodiment were themselves often motivated by sexual subjectivity. These accounts speak to a "feedback loop, underscoring the dynamic and dialectical relationship between gender and sexuality" (Schilt and Windsor 2014, 733); yet research also points to the ways in which these subjectivities are denied credibility or intelligibility in institutionalised settings, such as the gender clinic (Whitehead and Thomas 2013).

(A)SEXUALITY AND GENDER

I now turn from looking at the relationship between sexuality and gender, to the more specific relationship between (a)sexuality and gender. Research on gendered experiences of asexuality is in its infancy, as scholars are only beginning to think about asexuality intersectionally rather than as a single homogenous phenomenon (Cuthbert 2017). Przybylo (2014), Vares (2018) and Gupta (2018) have made great initial strides in exploring gender and asexuality empirically, beginning to unpack how constructions of masculinity and femininity clash with or alternatively cohere with asexual identities and subject positions (Przybylo, Gupta), and how asexual men and asexual women have very different gendered

experiences of dating and relationships (Vares). These studies highlight the ways in which asexuality is an inherently gendered phenomenon, as it involves understandings and practices of sexual desire, sexual activity, and agency, all of which are intimately tied to gender.

There is also some limited quantitative data that indicates that gender diversity or gender non-conformity is fairly common amongst asexual people (although cisnormativity is still be found within the asexual community e.g. Sumerau et al. 2018). This has been the case for studies which have recruited within the asexual community as well as studies recruiting on a population-wide basis. The 2016 iteration of the annual Asexual Community Census (Bauer et al. 2018) echoed previous years' results in that 26% of asexual respondents (n= 2420 out of a total n=9294) refused the options of "woman/female" or "man/male" in favour of a "none of the above option". Participants who selected the latter option subsequently went on to identify with a range of different terms, with non-binary, agender, and genderqueer being the three most popular. Likewise, in their New Zealand national probability sample, Greaves et al. (2017, 2421) point to a correlation between asexual identification and non-cisgender identification (although they do not disaggregate this category).

Attempts have been made to account for this seeming prevalence of gender diversity amongst asexual people. Three different explanations have been proposed, reflecting different conceptualisations of what gender is and where it is located. Firstly, the psychologist Anthony Bogaert speculates that exposure to certain combinations of pre-natal hormones may make asexual people develop "brains that are neither masculine or feminine" which may then "cause" asexuality (2012, 79), drawing on particular biological understandings of gender. But this, he argues, could also be a bi-directional relationship: he has a "hunch" [sic] that asexual

persons do not go through “traditional sexual development”, a process which he argues tends to “make females more feminine and males more masculine” (2012, 76). For Bogaert, this process of traditional sexual development involves becoming conscious of oneself as an object-of-desire, and consequently becoming appropriately masculine or feminine in “attire, manner and language” (2012, 76).

Secondly, writing from a queer feminist perspective, Chasin (2011) theorises that “it is possible that sexual attractiveness standards govern gender presentations and behaviours, and that without the desire to attract a sexual partner, asexual people may have more freedom to explore their own genders”. Here the onus is not on a natural developmental path governed by the unquestioned ‘logics’ of cis/heteronormativity as in Bogaert’s account, but rather on heteronormativity as a social system, with certain gendered requirements. This invokes Butler’s (1990, 208) notion of the heterosexual matrix: that is, the “hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility” where bodily sex, gender and sexuality are understood through one another and are required to ‘cohere’ (for example, to be male is to be masculine and to be straight). In Chasin’s account, it is implied that asexuality represents the possibility of escaping the matrix, since there is (ostensibly) no sexuality which acts as a reference point for gender, thus giving asexual people the freedom to do gender differently.

The third explanation comes from the social psychologists MacNeela and Murphy (2015), who suggest that asexuality poses a “threat” to the “self-concept” which is, they argue, governed by heteronormative gender role expectations. That is, there are difficulties involved in reconciling asexuality with normative femininity, or asexuality and normative masculinity. Identifying as non-binary or gender diverse is thus framed as a psychological “strategy” for

dealing with this clash. Here, MacNeela and Murphy do draw on empirical research (a survey with open-ended responses) but the data presented does little to support their theory; it is not at all clear that participants would conceptualise their identities in such a 'rational' way.

Therefore, there is need for empirically grounded research which explores gender diversity or gender non-conformity in the context of asexuality. Gender diversity and gender non-conformity are of course extremely wide-ranging terms, and this article covers only a small subset - agender, non-gendered, and genderless subjectivities in particular – since this is what emerged as most significant amongst my participants. Critical scholarship on gender diversity/gender non-conformity more broadly has a long interdisciplinary pedigree (Stryker and Whittle 2006), and there is a small amount of research beginning to emerge in the context of the recent discursive availability and visibility of subject positions such as non-binary and genderfluid (Vincent 2016; Yeadon-Lee 2016; Nicolazzo 2016). However, the experience of feeling like you have no gender, or are removed from gender in some way (commonly denoted by terms such agender, non-gendered, and genderless) have received very little attention in comparison to the experience of having a gender that is not man or woman. This is perhaps because of a tendency to subsume them under a term like non-binary. But, as Clucas and Whittle (2017, 77) put it, "non-binary gender is still a gender" and for some people who see themselves as agender (or non-gendered or gender-less), non-binary might miss the point. In 1996, Eve Sedgwick, building on the idea of masculinity and femininity as orthogonal axes, made the almost throwaway comment: "some people are just plain more *gender-y* than others –whether the gender they manifest be masculine, feminine, both, or "and then some"". The focus in subsequent scholarship has been on those who are the *most* 'gender-y', reflecting the examples Sedgwick gives ("both" "and then some"), but the experience of being 'less gender-y' (which might manifest itself in the extremes as agender)

remains ripe for exploration. Therefore, whilst this article contributes to asexuality studies, it also contributes to opening up the discursive space around agender.

METHODS

The data in this article comes from a wider project on asexuality, sexual abstinence, and gender. In this article, I focus exclusively on the participants who identified as asexual (n=21). The research involved semi-structured interviews followed by a notebook element (of which 10 participants out of 21 took part). Participants filled in a notebook (paper or digital) over the course of 4-6 weeks, aided by a prompt sheet which encouraged participants to reflect on gender and sexuality through exploring feelings about the body, moving through the world, relationships, and identity. Partly inspired by Thomson and Holland's (2005) use of memory books, participants were encouraged to use whatever expressive medium felt best for them within their notebooks, with resulting data in the form of diary entries, prose pieces, drawings, photographs and comics. These 10 participants took part in a further follow-up interview to talk through their notebooks. The addition of the notebook element to the research was designed to augment the exploration of participants' subjectivities and understandings, as well as overcome some of the perceived limitations of the interview format (e.g. reliance on speech and words; pressure of face-to-face and immediate communication; potential to forget or dismiss more mundane experiences).

Participants were all based in Scotland or England. Recruitment was via a number of sources: University LGBT+ societies, posters in community centres and libraries, a UK-based website for platonic dating, Gumtree, and advertising on social media. The vast majority of previous

research on asexuality has recruited via the ‘go to’ hub of asexuality on the internet: the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). Because of this over-sampling, I deliberately avoided recruiting via AVEN. This resulted in slightly more diversity than the students and young professionals that dominated previous research – for example, there were more people over 25 who participated (n=11) including four over 40, and whilst a number of participants were still students or in occupations normatively considered professional, there was also some people in low-paid work (such as charity fundraising and care work) or who were unemployed. However, the sample remained overwhelmingly white (n=20). The vast majority of empirical asexuality research to date has been white-dominated; indeed Hawkins Owen (2014) has written about how historically, whiteness itself (as a hierarchical relation to blackness) has been constructed as asexual. Thus, the whiteness of this research is a significant limitation, and there remains crucial work to be done on the racialisation of asexuality (including more concerted attempts to include asexual PoC in studies).

The gender breakdown of participants is difficult to state definitively, since gender identities were almost always complex and belied simple categorisation. 12 out of the 21 participants spoke about terms like agender, gender-less or gender-neutral being terms they felt described them. However, participants varied in how they used and thought of these terms. For some it was their primary gender identity, whilst others retained an (often hesitant) link to man/male or woman/female since they were recognised as such socially, but they had an internal sense of themselves as agender or similar. Participants who used the term agender also differed with regards to whether they thought of themselves as trans (at least three participants were considering the fit of the term, whilst one explicitly stated that they were not transgender). The other 9 participants felt (more) comfortable with terms like man/male (n=1) or woman/female (n=8), although almost always with qualifications (e.g. “I’m a female, but I don’t identify with femininity”). [1]

I re-listened to the audio recordings and read through the interview transcripts multiple times, coding the data for emerging themes, and refining and revising codes each time. I also made extensive use of memos throughout the coding process to note my thoughts and make connections between themes, and constructed narrative portraits for each participant to avoid the fracturing of data. In my analysis, I paid attention to *what* participants' experiences were and *what* they were telling me about their lives. However, I also paid attention to *how* participants put together their narratives – that is, identifying the underlying discourses that both shape participants' accounts, but which are also used by participants in particular ways to claim certain subject positions (Holstein and Gubrium 2011). I also paid attention to how narratives are shaped in the interactions between the participant and myself as a researcher. Mindful of striking the balance between self-disclosure as feminist research praxis (Oakley 1981) and the possibility of self-disclosure being interpreted by some participants as violating the norms of the research encounter (Ribbens 1989), I indicated to participants that I would be happy to answer any questions they had about me and my interest in the research. As a result, I disclosed myself to some participants and not others, as some took me up on this whilst others did not. Undoubtedly, speaking to some participants about being queer, about being moderately femme-presenting but largely agender-identifying, and about my own complicated and shifting relationship to asexuality affected the data we created together (as did, equally, not speaking about these things to other participants). For example, some participants assumed shared knowledge and included me in the category of 'we' when discussing being queer or asexual, whilst in other cases, avenues of discourse were shut down (such as when one participant began to critique make-up and beauty practices before adding "I don't mean *you* though, I'm not saying you're shallow or anything"). Thus, insider and outsider roles as a researcher are rarely clear-cut or binary, with multiple nodes of dis/identification.

FINDINGS

Gender Is Irrelevant

There was a critical questioning of gendered norms in almost all 21 of the participants' narratives. This typically took the form of critiquing narrow and restrictive understandings of femininity and masculinity, or troubling the organisation of gender into binary opposites. But, whilst participants had a keen awareness of the significance of gender in shaping the social world, including an awareness of how their own experiences were shaped by how others gendered them, around two thirds of the asexual participants talked about how gender actually felt irrelevant to them on the most intimately subjective level e.g. "gender just being quite an irrelevant thing to how I think of myself" (Reeta, 19, asexual, aromantic) or "none of it [gender] seems relevant to me, I don't identify with a particular gender but I'm nevertheless aware of gender because I'm definitely not a man and so I don't have the privilege to basically ignore it" (Blair, 20, asexual, aromantic). Participants skilfully deployed different understandings of gender – for example, as both a structural and institutional framework which impacted on their lives, but also as something subjective that related (or in this case, did not relate) to one's sense of self (Jackson and Scott 2010).

Furthermore, for more than half of the 21 participants, this sense of the irrelevancy of gender had also translated into an understanding of themselves as agender, gender-neutral or gender-less. Figure 1 is Dylan's (26, grey-A, queer) self-portrait, with the caption 'this is what agender looks like?'

[FIGURE 1]

Participants who described themselves using these terms also connected this to their asexuality. They spoke about how gender is essentially about sexuality, and because they had a lack of interest in sex or did not feel sexually attracted to others, gender (their own and others) became much less important to them. Heather (21, asexual, panromantic) said the following:

> I kind of find gender an unnecessary question…it just doesn't matter to me, and in some roundabout way I feel like that's probably connected to my asexuality. When you have no interest in one [gender or sexuality] there's not very much reason to find interest in the other I guess. We define, conventionally, sexual attraction as being like heterosexual or homosexual, if you take it in its most basic forms, and that's always related to your own gender. Homosexuality and heterosexuality are defined by the existence of gender. So if sex wasn't a thing there would be no need to have that separation [of genders] at all. For me my lack of interest in either is exemplified by the other, and if I felt very strongly that I was female, for example, I would probably be more inclined to find out more about my sexuality, and if I was convinced that I was heterosexual, or even bisexual or whatever, I might be more interested to find out about my gender and how I slotted into other people's sexualities. But as it is I have no particular interest in either, and neither really inclines me to find out about the other, because I don't really see the point.

Heather felt that the *raison d'etre* of gender is to organise and regulate our sexual relations, given that our sexuality is defined by the gender of the person we are attracted to. This is similar to Chrys Ingraham's (1996) argument that the only reason for the separation of humans into two genders/sexes is because of the existence of (hetero)sex(uality). Gender, for

Ingraham and for Heather, only makes sense through the framework of sexuality. For Heather, who does not feel sexual attraction, gender is not a meaningful way for them to organise their relationships, or orient themselves to the world. Oran (26, asexual, panromantic) also felt that gender became less meaningful in the context of asexuality:

> If heterosexuality, or sexuality in general, isn't something that you really value then also you should take a look at your gender identity and say, well, is that something that's really important to you? Because yeah I do think they're intrinsically linked because when we talk about gender we talk about sex. Like if you look in a textbook about animals for example, like that's what you're talking about. It's like reproduction and sexual activity, or like how [laughs], asexual in plant life or like animal life is just about not needing a partner and stuff like that. So yeah I do think it's all interlinked and I do think like if you start to identify as asexual then there's probably part of you that thinks about gender as well. It's almost easy to think of yourself as agender when you start to realise that those binary ideas are only there to serve heterosexuality, sexuality, in a way.

Although the biologistic understanding of asexuality as self-reproduction is usually dismissed in asexuality discourse (hence Oran's self-conscious laughter), Oran strategically uses it here to make the point that sex and sexuality are fundamentally defined in relation to gender (both yours and your sexual partner's) whereas asexual organisms (who do not have sexual partners) are not typically gendered. Tobi (53, asexual, heteroromantic/aromantic) also felt her lack of affinity with gender was related to her asexuality:

> If I'm not identifying strongly as female, feminine, whatever you want to call it...then that would seem to go along with it [being asexual]. Identifying with a certain gender also seems to me to be about identifying with sexuality...so most of the people I know seem to perform their gender in the context of their sexuality.

Tobi went on to discuss how different sexualities often had different gendered aesthetics attached to them (e.g. the idea of looking straight or lesbian or gay) and it was in this referential context that Tobi felt most people understood their gender. Without experiencing any kind of sexual attraction, Tobi was indifferent to being a woman. For Tobi, her gender and sexuality made sense in light of one another. Similar to Tobi, Kai (26, asexual, aromantic) said:

> I don't have a defined thing [meaning they lack sexual attraction] because I don't participate in that game. The gender game. And I don't participate in the gender game because I don't feel the need to get a sexual partner.

Kai talked about how they had, in effect, dropped out of gender, because gender was so intrinsically linked to sexuality and sexual relationships. This quote also highlights the circularity of the relationship – for Kai, it was not a case of linear causality, but rather more of a sense of mutual reinforcement. For some participants, such as Jeffrey (53, asexual, heteroromantic), they even saw their asexuality and their gender neutrality as one and the same:

> I: How connected do you think your asexuality and your gender neutrality are?

J: They are more or less the same thing [long pause] I suppose there's not much more that I can say about that. They're the same thing basically.

While Jeffrey went on to acknowledge that it was possible for someone to be gender neutral and sexual, for him, they were conceived of as so similar that he struggled to articulate the difference between them.

These accounts call into question MacNeela and Murphy's (2015) claims that asexual people might strategically identify as agender or non-binary in order to side-step the ostensible challenge posed by asexuality to normative understandings of masculinity and femininity. They disrupt the implicit rational actor in MacNeela and Murphy's theory, as participants' understandings of themselves as agender or gender-neutral or a similar term were not ways to manage asexuality, but were rather materially entangled with and inextricable from participants' asexuality.

Asexuality And Agender As Embodied

Asexuality also impacted on how the body was experienced. Some participants talked vividly about the kinds of embodied gendered discomfort that being asexual could invoke. This was often due to a (cultural) consciousness of particular body parts or physiological functions as 'sexual' – for the purposes of having sex, or expressing sexuality – and thus was experienced as something 'alien' to themselves. This is not to say that these participants were repulsed by sex and all manifestations of sexuality – some (such as Jeffrey) were – but most others expressed generally 'sex positive' views. [2] Figure 2 is an illustration from Oran's notebook:

[FIGURE 2]

Here, Oran uses the metaphor of the fairground game "Whack-A-Mole" to describe their experience of getting unwanted erections. There was a frenzied attempt to manage these physiological responses, as Oran is left feeling "gross" and with a sense of self-loathing as these bodily transformations are at odds with their sense of themselves as asexual/not feeling sexually attracted to others. The moles (manifestations of a particular gendered-sexed-sexualised bodily configuration) are externalised from Oran's core conceptualisation of self, providing a recursive feedback loop through which Oran could come to an asexual/agender identity. Jeffrey too spoke of his gendered and sexed body as something alien from his "true self". In his notebook, Jeffrey wrote of 'The Beast Within' which caused nocturnal emissions and spontaneous erections:

> There's this disconnect within me. My monster from the id, my primal beast within, goes rampaging about in the world of my dreams, causing havoc in the 'pyjama area'. Or at least it used to. I've pretty much got it under control nowadays by no longer sleeping in a bed. If I sleep in a bed, if I get all comfortable and snug, that's when The Beast strikes. So I sleep propped up in a chair…This is how I'm made aware of and feel sexuality in my body, and I don't like it one bit.

Jeffrey experienced his gendered and sexed body as betraying him, if he did not take requisite steps to keep it under control. Blair's notebook also illustrates how their asexual/agender subjectivity affected how they felt about their gendered body:

> And most of the time I don't really think about my breasts but sometimes I'm like, these are weird? What's the point of them? I'm glad I have small breasts,

> and I like wearing a sports bra partly because it's comfy and partly because it makes them even flatter. I don't know if this is because breasts are soooo sexualised and I'm not interested in looking sexy so they're…not really doing anything for me.

Blair's asexuality means they are not interested in being or looking sexual, and because women's bodies in particular are heavily sexualised, Blair experiences alienation from their own body ("sometimes I'm like, these are weird?"), and from being a "woman". This was not about a desire to be differently gendered, or to have a more masculine embodiment (they write: "while I don't feel strongly like a woman, I do feel strongly not-a-man"), but to be untethered from gender more completely, because gendered embodiment was so associated with sexual embodiment, and thus seemed irrelevant.

Participants also spoke about how asexuality, in a way, necessitated a gender-neutral or agendered embodied presentation. Significantly, only those participants who had been assigned female at birth spoke about this, as it became clear that being asexual in the socio-structural context of heteropatriarchy when one was read by others as a woman presented particular challenges, since femininity was so aggressively heterosexualized and structured around male sexual desire (Radner 2008). Participants spoke about objectification and sexualisation, for example: "men thought that I was sexually available just because I was wearing a dress" (Cass, 21, demisexual, panromantic); "I found I got unwanted attention while wearing feminine clothes" (Pippa, 28, asexual, homoromantic). This is of course not just an issue for asexual people – within rape culture, it is seen as a woman's responsibility to modulate the way she looks in order to avoid unwanted sexual attention. However, whilst acknowledging this broader context, participants felt that being asexual added an additional layer to this in that they felt particularly averse to being seen through a sexualised lens. Reeta

wrote in their notebook “especially as being asexual, I’m VERY uncomfortable with any sort of objectification because its so far removed from what I want to be”, and Sam (23, asexual, queer) said “I was very disgusted with the idea of anybody being attracted to me, I don’t want people to sexualise me in their heads”. Cass also talked about how she was perhaps even more uncomfortable at being viewed as sexually available because of the kinds of relationships she wanted to forge: “I wanted people to feel connection with me not on a physical level but on different levels…I don’t want people to find me cute and attractive”. The result of this was that most participants had adopted a more gender-neutral appearance in order to navigate this: “I wear quite neutral clothes as a signal that I’m not interested” (Pippa), “I’m not interested in people finding me sexually attractive, I don’t want to advertise myself in a sexual way…so I’m always just in jeans and t-shirts, I don’t dress in a conventionally female way. That makes people more wary” (Heather). For some, such as Cass, being gender neutral equated to appearing more masculine:

> I had people thinking I was male and ran with it, cos I was more comfortable, because if they perceived me as male then I wouldn’t have the problems with being female and they wouldn’t be interested in me, they wouldn’t make moves on me.

Altogether, these accounts illustrate how asexuality’s entanglement with a/gender also happened on a visceral and embodied level, rather than (only) the ideational. They also highlight the importance of situating any understanding of asexuality and a/gender in wider socio-structural contexts. Doing so disrupts some of the existing theorisations as to why gender diversity is common amongst asexual people. As we have seen, Bogaert suggested that asexuality stymied the process of becoming conscious of oneself as an object of desire (and therefore becoming more masculine or feminine) but the accounts of participants in this section who had been read as female by others show a hyper-awareness of how their bodies

are objects of desire. Bogaert's hunch about the developmental process that asexual people supposedly go through is ironically ungendered in itself: he does not acknowledge the socio-structural context of patriarchy and the coercive power of the male gaze which forces those read as female into an often painful self-awareness. Iris Marion Young's statement that "I cannot see myself without seeing myself being seen" (2005: 63) seems particularly apropos to the accounts of these participants. Indeed, some participants were so aware of themselves as objects of desire that they deliberately cultivated a more gender neutral embodiment in order to shield themselves from the violences of objectification. This should not be read as a strategy in the way that MacNeela and Murphy suggest, but rather as something necessitated by the realities of hetero-patriarchy.

The accounts here also perhaps complicate Chasin's suggestions about the liberatory potential of asexuality with regards to transgressing the gender binary. Whilst it is true that over half of the participants in the research had a gender identity that was not man or woman, and that this was related to their asexuality, there was little sense (for these participants at least) that this was liberatory or about feeling free to transgress gender. Rather, participants had agender or gender neutral subjectivities because it simply made sense when gender was understood as being about sexuality. Furthermore, the agender or gender-neutral embodied presentations of some participants came about precisely because of socio-structural restraints (rather than a freedom from those restraints). Dawson et al's (2018, 388) critique of some of the bolder proclamations of the asexuality literature is perhaps applicable here: "the pragmatic adjustments of individuals to their social situation are overlooked in an attempt to identify a 'vanguard'" –in this case, asexuals as transgressing gender norms. We might also see some parallels with how trans identities have been posited as de-facto deconstructing gender, and the resultant critiques made of this (Prosser 1998). As calls have been made

within trans studies to ground any theorising in the lived experiences of trans people, the data presented in this section has highlighted the need to do similar in the case of asexuality.

The Unintelligibility Of Entanglement

These self-understandings where (a)gender and (a)sexuality were entangled were not always affirmed in the wider discursive communities of which participants were a part of. As discussed earlier, a separation model of gender and sexuality often dominates within some scholarly and activist spheres, including in LGBT+ communities. A number of participants alluded to this, and three (Blair, Frankie, Oran) made specific reference to the Gender Unicorn, a popular graphic resource circulating in LGBT+ communities. Here, gender identity, gender expression, sex assigned at birth, physical attraction, and emotional attraction are conceptualised as independent dimensions. Within each of these dimensions are further scales to indicate relative strength and directionality of identity, expression or attraction. The idea is that a person can locate themselves at any point on each scale without affecting the other scales – so for example, if someone is assigned male at birth and positions themselves as having strong physical attraction to men and no physical attraction to women, then nothing is assumed about their gender identity or expression. The rationale for such a model is clear, but insisting on separation also meant that the subjectivities of some of my participants who experienced their gender and sexuality as entangled were rendered unintelligible. Referring to both LGBT+ and asexual communities (which often overlap but are not the same), Dylan said: “sexuality and gender are the two things that are significant in my identity and I haven’t heard anyone talking about the two in combination, they’re always separated out”. Sam went further in this. In the interview, they spoke about how they were reluctant to say (their) gender and sexuality were connected, because they were aware of the political efforts within

the LGBT+ community to disentangle the two, and didn't want to "shit on" work which they recognised as important. A year and a half after the interview took place, Sam also attended a presentation I was giving about my research findings. Afterwards, they approached me, and referring to my discussion of how some participants felt their gender and sexuality were connected, Sam told me they were relieved to hear that they were not the only one who felt this way. There was a sense from Sam's story that articulating the connectedness of gender and sexuality (even when speaking solely of personal experience) felt somewhat clandestine. Sam thus found themselves in a difficult position where they held a particular understanding of self that did not accord with how gender and sexuality were conceptualised within LGBTQ+ communities, and yet were also appreciative of how and why this conceptualisation had emerged in the context of progressive gender and sexual politics.

The prevalence of such a discourse could also impact on some participants' own self-understanding. This was the case for Frankie (18, asexual, heteroromantic) who said in our first interview:

> There possibly is a link in that… I don't have a defined attraction and because of the way that I experience romantic and platonic attraction…I think for me gender is a lot less important than it might be for others.

However, in the follow-up interview, roughly two months later, we returned to this question:

> The thing I said the last time, about how I don't really care about gender; I don't really feel one way or the other… I think I sort of pushed that as being part of my asexuality. And when I actually started doing a bit more research, it came to me

> that – maybe it's not part of my sexuality, maybe it's something else. Umm… I think that might have slowed me down on that bit and I thought it was just part of me being ace [asexual], and not really being interested that much. But it was just sort of talking about it to other people who are lot better informed. And they said 'Have you looked up this or that?' and I ended up looking and, sort off, finding all of these non-binary resources, reading through it, finding out all of this stuff – and it made a lot of sense when you start getting through that.

At this point, Frankie now felt that being agender and/or non-binary was something separate from their asexuality, and they felt that they might identify as such regardless of whether or not they were asexual. Significantly, this new understanding of self emerged from Frankie's new engagement with LGBT+ discursive spaces, both online on places like Tumblr and offline in LGBT+ groups. Frankie's understanding of their gender and sexuality may thus have shifted in this context, especially as they cede expertise to "people who are a lot better informed". This is not to deny Frankie's self-understanding or to insist on a more authoritative reading of Frankie's account or to say that one understanding is better than the other, but to recognise the widespread acceptance and indeed effect that this discourse might have.

CONCLUSION

This article has added an empirical grounding to speculations as to why many asexual-identified people might have diverse gender identities. In doing so, it has challenged existing explanations that focus on 1) an aberration in the "traditional sexual development" process

(Bogaert 2012) or 2) asexuality as freeing people to transgress gender norms (Chasin 2011) or 3) asexual people adopting non-normative gender identities as a "strategy" for resolving purported internal conflict (MacNeela and Murphy 2015). Of course, that is not to deny that elements of some or all of the above may be true for some asexual people at some points, but engaging with the subjectivities and lived experiences of participants, as well as locating these in wider social structures has allowed for a more grounded and textured understanding of why identities such as agender or gender neutral might be common amongst some asexual people.

Many participants in the research understood gender to be fundamentally about sex. Due to their disconnection or disaffiliation with sex and sexual attraction, many asexual people experienced a simultaneous feeling of alienation from gender, with some going on to find recognition in identities such as agender. This was not a strategy, or an act of gender transgression, but rather something which just made sense. A disconnect from gender was inextricable from their asexual subjectivities, and this was also felt viscerally, at an embodied level, as some participants spoke of disgust or alienation from their sexed and gendered bodies. Furthermore, for those participants who had been assigned female at birth, or were read socially as female, asexuality also necessitated a level of agendered or gender-neutral embodiment, due to the relentless sexual objectification and aggressive propositioning experienced under hetero-patriarchy. This was not something that was experienced as liberatory, but rather something that was necessary as an asexual person read as female moving through the world.

However, some participants were aware that talking about their (a)gender identity and their (a)sexuality as connected went against the discursive currents of some LGBT+ communities, where a separation model was emphasised. Some participants spoke about feeling like their experiences were not reflected in the things they saw and read, or that it was a risk to

articulate these feelings due to what was at stake politically; these discourses could also have a significant impact on participants' self-understandings.

Whilst directly relating to debates within asexuality studies, the findings of this article also have broader resonances for gender and sexuality research. It opens up discursive space around experiences of being 'less gender-y' (to paraphrase Sedgwick, and under the aegis of which we might consider agender), which have not received as much attention as the 'more gender-y'. The research on which this article was based began with the idea of asexuality, through which agender became important, but research specifically centred on agender is needed. A question directly arising from this research is how agender people who are *not* asexual understand gender – how might agender subjectivities come to form when one does experience sexual attraction towards others? Is gender still conceptualised as being 'about' sexuality, as for the participants in this research, or is it (and the rejection of/disaffiliation with it) understood and made sense of in different ways? Asking such questions is also about de-essentialising gender (and sexuality): the 'object' becomes not so much the already-gendered subject, but the constitution of the category itself.

Taken together with some work within trans studies (e.g. Valentine 2007; Schilt and Windsor 2014; Latham 2016), the findings also point to how, for some subjects, gender and sexuality are not as easily separable or distinguishable as suggested by some activism and scholarship. Therefore, methodological and conceptual frameworks which attempt to silo them may be unable to capture the complexity of some subjectivities- and indeed, the subjectivities of those who are often already most at risk of marginalisation and erasure within *both* heteronormative and LGB discourse (trans people, and particularly trans people of colour; asexual people who are usually invisible). Opening up space to empirically explore the meanings of gender and sexuality and their relationship, including how gender might *be* sexuality (and vice versa) in some contexts, is therefore also possibly a way of de-centring

the cis-genderedness, compulsory sexuality, and whiteness of our research praxis (rather than a regression to conservative models of inversion).

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[1] The over-representation of asexual women compared to asexual men is found across much asexuality research. This may reflect the actual demographic make-up of asexual people (see Gupta (2018) for how asexuality particularly fits with dominant constructions of white middle-class femininity), and/or it may be an artefact of the sampling and recruitment process.

[2] There is enormous heterogeneity beneath the label of asexuality. This includes a huge amount of variation with regards to how asexual people feel about sex, as well as variation with regards to sexual in/activity (Decker 2014).