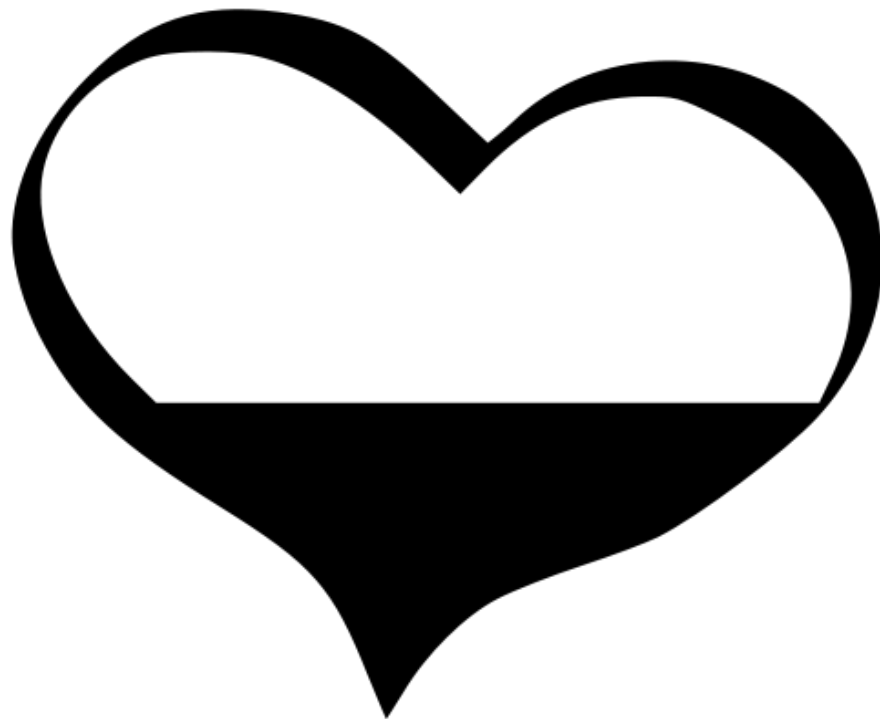


“We have a name for something I’ve felt all my life”

Discovering and explaining asexuality



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Bachelor Thesis: SOCK01, 15 credits

Spring semester 2010

Supervisor: Malin Åkerström

Abstract

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Title: "I realized that here we have a name on something that I have felt my whole life"

Asexuality – a small study about living as an asexual.

Bachelor Thesis: SOCK01. 15 credits.

Supervisor: Malin Åkerström

Department of Sociology, spring semester 2010.

Problem/ Background:

The purpose of this study was to investigate three aspects of asexuality. This was achieved through conducting six interviews with self identified asexuals, an observation on a meeting for asexuals, an analysis of what functions the two organisations for asexuals, Nätverket Asexuell and AVEN have, and a content analysis concerning how people talk about a lack of sexual lust on the internet. The conclusions are that asexuality for my interviewees is about not wanting to have sex and not experience sexual lust. They had a number of medical explanations for their asexuality, even if they added that they were not sure why they were asexual. They had always, or for a very long time, known that they were different from others when it came to sexual lust, but when they found the term asexuality they found an explicit identity. The organisations Nätverket Asexuell and AVEN, Asexuality Visibility and Education Network, two main functions is to be a political organ for making asexuality more known, and a place where asexuals can meet and exchange experiences and knowledge. This seem to have similarities with for instance lesbian and gay movements.

Purpose: To investigate three aspects of asexuality.

Key words: asexuality, asexual, sexual norm, social movement, medicalised discourse, psychological discourse.

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| | |
|--|-----------|
| INTRODUCTION | 5 |
| RELEVANCE | 5 |
| PURPOSE | 5 |
| RESEARCH QUESTIONS | 5 |
| DISPOSITION | 6 |
| BACKGROUND | 7 |
| PREVIOUS RESEARCH / LITERATURE REVIEW | 7 |
| THE ORGANISATION NÄTVERKET ASEXUELL | 8 |
| THE ORGANISATION AVEN – THE ASEXUAL VISIBILITY AND EDUCATION NETWORK. | 8 |
| METHODOLOGY | 10 |
| FINDING INTERVIEWEES - CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEWS | 10 |
| THE USE OF THE INTERVIEWS | 11 |
| CONTENT ANALYSIS | 11 |
| ETHICS | 11 |
| ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK | 12 |
| SOCIAL NORMS | 12 |
| FINDING A LABEL | 12 |
| MEDICALISED / PSYCHOLOGISED SOCIETY | 12 |
| ORGANIZATION THEORY; SOCIAL MOVEMENTS | 13 |
| CONTENT ANALYSIS | 15 |
| “NO SEXUAL LUST” | 15 |
| “I HAVE NO SEXUAL LUST” | 16 |
| “DO NOT WANT TO HAVE SEX” | 16 |
| OBSERVATION | 17 |
| INTERVIEWS | 20 |
| FINDING AN IDENTITY AS AN ASEXUAL | 20 |
| EXPLAINING FINDING THE LABEL | 21 |
| REASONS FOR ASEXUALITY – THE INTERVIEWEES OWN EXPLANATIONS | 22 |
| THE MEANING OF BEING AN ASEXUAL | 23 |
| THE FUNCTION OF THE ORGANISATIONS NÄTVERKET ASEXUELL AND AVEN | 25 |
| COMBINED ANALYSIS OF CONTENT ANALYSIS, INTERVIEWS AND OBSERVATION | 25 |
| CONCLUSION | 26 |
| REFERENCES | 28 |

Introduction

My interest in this topic has to do with my commitment in the student association Projekt Sex (P6) whose main aim is to encourage students at Lund University to have safe sex. The organisation also works for sexual health and for the acceptance of different types of sexuality. During the autumn of 2009 we discussed that we never reach people who are asexual. This was an inspiration for me to choose the subject asexuality. In this paper I have interviewed six self-identified asexual people, and from this data I have hopefully reached a deeper understanding of this phenomenon – one that is still fairly unnoticed and has not been extensively researched. Sexual lust cannot be measured. That leads to problems when it comes to diagnostics. I have talked to persons who have identified themselves as asexual, and this is the term I will use throughout this paper; “self-identified asexuals”. When investigating the question how and when the persons in this study realised that they were asexual, I will also look at why they are willing to use the term asexual to describe themselves.

Relevance

When examining asexuality we can find clues as to why sex is so important to many people. By looking at the dichotomy of having sex versus not having sex and at what this means to the people that have no interest in sex and how that affects them, those clues can be found. Sexuality and sex is especially interesting: even if we think that sex and sexuality is something that is very private, we still have influential norms and structures in our sexual lives. Regarding how often we should have sex, in what way, with whom and more importantly, with whom not to have sex with. What happens when sex is taken out of the relationship and everyday life thinking? This is a good question that I will not be able to answer in this thesis, but I will definitely think about it! Sexuality and sex is often left out in analysis, even if sex, or the lack of sex, may break families, play important roles in crimes and in how we perceive ourselves.

Purpose

To investigate three aspects of asexuality

Research questions

- When and how did the participants in this study realise that they were asexual?

- How do the asexual persons in this study explain the reasons for their asexuality?
- What does it mean for the participants in this study to be asexual?

The scope of this study is limited by these research questions. The interviews were the point of departure, and I choose these particular research questions because they should give a good start when it comes to studying asexuality from an asexual perspective.

Disposition

In the background chapter I will shortly describe previous studies about asexuality, and also the two organisations that I refer to throughout this thesis, namely AVEN (Asexuality Visibility and Education Network) and Nätverket Asexuell. In the methodology section I will discuss why I chose qualitative method, how I found the interviewees, how I conducted the interviews, the content analysis and a little about ethics. In the analytical framework I will present a set of theoretical ideas that are important for my later analysis. Then I will move on to the content analysis, the observation, the interviews and the analysis of the two organisations AVEN and Nätverket Asexuell. After this I will analyse the material I furthermore collected. Finally, I will conclude my findings and provide answers to the research questions.

Background

Previous research / Literature review

According to the reviewed literature the term “asexual” first showed up in the scientific literature in the book section “asexual and autoerotic women: two invisible groups” in 1977, in the sense as it is used below (Jonson 1977).

The most common definition in organisations for asexuals is: “A person who does not experience sexual attraction towards other persons”. This definition is used in AVEN (AVEN 2008).

The body of research that has been conducted on this subject is fairly thin. I will present a selection of the articles relevant for this study. Andrew C. Hinderliter wrote two articles, “Methodological Issues for Studying Asexuality” (Hinderliter 2009) and “Reflections on defining asexuality” (Hinderliter N.D.). Hinderliter’s articles have been useful as a framework for this study, as they pinpoint some of the questions that are important in conducting research regarding asexuality, such as: “How to think about defining asexuality?”

Another article on the subject is Kristin S. Scherrer’s “Coming to an Asexual Identity: Negotiating Identity, Negotiating Desire” (Scherrer 2008). Scherrer starts the article with a quote from Foucault, saying that “sexuality is not only something one *does*, but an identity, or something one *is*, usually biologically” (Foucault 1978). The research questions for this study are “What are asexual identities? How do individuals come to identify as asexual? How is asexuality relevant to LGBTQ identities and communities?” (LGBTQ; lesbian, gay, bisexuell, transsexual, queer) (Scherrer 2008:624). The conclusion in this article is that internet communities for asexuals have a lot in common with other sexual minorities, although asexuals have been more unnoticed compared to for example lesbians and gays (Scherrer 2008:636-638).

Sandra Linnell’s study (2008) “Den märkligaste böjelsen – att inte ha någon” is a content analysis of how asexuality is discussed in media. How is asexuality presented? And who has the authority to talk about asexuality? What assumptions and conditions are present in the discussion about asexuality? Linnell shows that the asexual discourse in media is

medicalised¹, asexual persons tell their story about their asexuality, but, as a complement, there is always a doctor or psychiatrist or another kind of medical “expert” that has her/his say about asexuality. Asexuality is described as something one is and often always has been.

Lars-Gösta Dahlöf has written a chapter about asexuality in the book “Sexologi”, in which he gives an overview of research, and also some short conclusions about relationships, attraction, sexual arousal, identity and parenting (Dahlöf 2010).

Brotto *et al* have conducted two studies concerning asexuality, the first one examined relationship characteristics, frequency of sexual behaviours, sexual difficulties and distress, psychopathology, interpersonal functioning and alexithymia in 187 asexuals, recruited from AVEN. The second study (2010) aimed at expanding the quantitative findings of the first study. For this sake 15 in-depth telephone interviews were conducted. The findings of the second study suggest that asexuality is best conceptualised as a lack of sexual attraction, even if the asexuals varied greatly in their experience of sexual response and behaviour. There was a strong opposition though from the asexuals to view asexuality as an extreme case of sexual desire disorder. The asexuals were eager to work with sex researchers to further the scientific study of asexuality (Brotto, Knudson et al. 2010).

The organisation Nätverket asexuell

Nätverket Asexuell is described as an activist group that started in 2005 during the Stockholm Pride Festival. They are based in Stockholm and have monthly meetings that are open to everyone who feels a need to talk about asexuality. They also have a blog where it is possible to comment on posts, and a discussion board for different questions and thoughts that are related to asexuality, and FAQ about asexuality. According to my interview the reason for having the homepage is to build a network for asexuals so they will be able to talk to other asexuals about how it is to live as an asexual person, and to have others in the same situation to talk to (asexuellt 2005).

The organisation AVEN – The Asexual Visibility and Education Network.

This is the American counterpart to Asexuellas nätverk. Aven is the biggest internet community for asexuals, and they describe asexuality as an orientation, just as homo and bi-

¹ Medicalised refers to a discourse where a medical point of view is favoured as an explanation.

sexuality. Aven was founded in 2001 with two distinct goals: creating public acceptance of and discussion about asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community. Today Aven serves as a resource for people who are asexual, their friends and families, academic researchers and the press. They work with visibility projects, and the web forum exists to provide safe space for asexual people and their partners, friends and families to discuss their experiences. Aven also has links to homepages about sexuality in other languages and countries, Czech, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Turkish (AVEN 2008).

Methodology

I chose a qualitative method, informal interviewing, because I am interested in my interviewee's experiences and explanations. Another reason is that the questions I have seem to be better asked in person, rather than in form of a questionnaire, as the interviewee will be able to explain further what he or she really means; thus enabling appropriate follow up questions (Silverman 2005:7). One of the downsides with interviews is that I may affect the persons I interview, since they may project a certain picture of themselves, because they may have expectations on what I am interested in. However in a quantitative survey, I would have to design a set of questions, and the fixed questions would affect the answers. The persons will not write as much as they will talk in an interview, and the interview will also be more spontaneous and I will see what reaction the person gives when I ask the questions. As a complement to the interviews I have made a small content analysis and a participatory observation at a meeting for asexuals. I chose these varied methods since I wanted to get different angles of the same phenomenon: a triangulation (Mason 1996:25). A quantitative study would have been interesting, as it would have provided an idea of how common asexuality is. Another way of conducting this study would have been to make a content analysis on the organisations and/or the studies about asexuality that have already been made. However the mixed-methods approach that I have used is probably still better since I want to get the person's own experience to answer my research questions.

Finding interviewees - Conducting the interviews

To gain access to the field, I contacted a community for asexuals and found a gatekeeper (a person who gives access to the field by accepting you and letting you in, this person usually helps with contacts), the community administrator. I was invited to a meeting for asexuals, and at the meeting I introduced myself and conducted an observation. This provided me with four of my six interviewees. Five of the interviews were held at cafés, one of the interviews was held in a private apartment. I have met four of the persons once before the interviews and I have talked to the other two via telephone. One concern was whether they would feel safe to talk to me about this topic. Fortunately it was no problem at all for them to open up to me. I think it was due to my confidence in talking about sex and sexuality, something I have learned during my work in the student organisation Projekt Sex.

The use of the interviews

I recorded the six interviews, five female and one male, and transcribed them. Then I compared them to see if there were any similarities to their stories. After this I decided what questions I was going to concentrate on, so I started with my empirical data and from there. I started to look for theories and other studies that would help explaining what I had found.

Content analysis

The content analysis was conducted by collecting material from the internet, in particular the search engine Google. I chose phrases such as “ingen sexlust” (no sexual lust), and “vill inte ha sex” (do not want to have sex), and then I used every fifth hit, ten in total of each search term, and categorised them to see if there were any similarities between them. What I was mainly interested in was how people talk about sex on the Internet, concerning a lack of sexual lust. Is a lack of sexual lust perceived as a problem or not? What are the suggested solutions for the lack of sexual lust?

Ethics

Considering the ethics of research in social sciences I have offered my informants to keep all the data collected from them confidential. One of them asked if she could see what material I wanted to use so she could confirm that she felt comfortable with the interview when it was transcribed. I sent her the parts of the interview that I used and she gave her consent to include it in my paper. None of the names in this study are the interviewee's real names. The interviewee's age is also kept secret for the same reason, as Ryen suggests in her ethics discussion, that data that may lead to an identification of the interviewee should be removed, for ensuring confidentiality (Ryen 2004:162,174).

Analytical framework

The common usage for the term heterosexuality is the desire for sexual relationships with persons of the 'other' or 'opposite' sex. However, the sociological usage is the privileged and dominant expression of sexuality in most known societies, which is often regarded as the 'natural' form of human sexual desire. In western culture, heterosexuality has been normalized and prioritized over all other forms of human sexuality via institutional practices, including the law and social policy (Jary and Jary 2006:266). This, then, touches on the concept of "norms".

Social norms

"Norm; a standard or rule, regulating behaviour in a social setting. Social life is dependant upon shared expectations and obligations" (Jary and Jary 2006:424).

According to this definition of norm, a norm is created in social interaction. Norms regulate our social interaction, and give us ideas and, essentially, a framework for what is acceptable, even expected, behaviour in a particular situation. What do norms have to do with sex, and, more importantly, not wanting to have sex? I will explain this later in my analysis. The interviewees in this study all experienced a sense of being different, of not following the expected norms on sexuality.

Finding a label

The persons in this study are so called self-identified asexuals. This means that they have had the choice themselves to use the concept asexuality to explain how they feel. I will look at how they explain their identity as asexuals by analysing the interviews I have conducted. Finding the label asexuality seems to be very important for the interviewees. When it comes to explaining why they are asexual they tend to use medical or psychological explanations. However, the interviewees did not uncritically accept a medical view. They were supported by the association Nätverket Asexuell to redefine or adjust the explanations for their identities.

Medicalised / psychologised society

Scientist talk about an increased psychologicalisation of society, which means that psychological explanations are favoured. This embodies a discourse with many words like

“self esteem”, “personal trauma”, “self improvement”, “finding yourself” etcetera, which derive from a psychological context. They are a part of everyday life vocabulary, even if the terms themselves have not been present for that long. The psychological thinking has developed from being something that is exclusively an academic subject to spreading to other areas, including other academic disciplines and also popular culture. In popular culture the psychological perspective has become an important part in the creation and reinforcement of what a good life is, and how to achieve this (Eldén 2009:10,39). Nikolas Rose talks about the therapeutic discourse that constructs new ideals and fantasies, and the guaranteed discrepancy between this and the perceived complex reality, as a generator for the psychological expertise. This means that we will never be able to achieve the good life or the good couple relationship, which guarantees the continued search for new methods or theories to implement them. Consequently our dependency on help from the experts remains (Eldén 2009:39-40).

“... sexuality is not only something one does, but an identity, or something one is, usually biologically ...” (Foucault 1978).

This quote is a hint of how our thinking about sexuality has changed. We want to explain things by referring to the individual and furthermore the individual’s nature and biology. A similar thing is that diagnosis like ADHD and the like have been very popular over the last years in Sweden. Hallerstedt (2006), explains this in the book “Diagnosens makt, om kunskap, pengar och lidande” by looking at the cutbacks in the Swedish school, as a structural problem and not an individual problem. This shows that the society is likely to use biological and medical explanations, by using medical diagnosis instead of social explanations. When this merges with the individualisation, it will result in a society where both success and not succeeding will be seen as being the individual’s responsibility. If a person is unemployed, for instance, it is not because there is not enough work opportunities; it is because the individual has not tried hard enough.

Organization theory; social movements

Social movements are often attractive to people because they are flexible and therefore open to individual motives and positions, and at the same time they give the benefits of collective actions. They have shown to be an alternative to organisations when it comes to formulate and manifest political demands on a global level. Social movements can therefore be

comprehended as different kinds of collective actions (Ahrne and Papakostas 2006:110). Social movement's flexibility is illustrated by a lack of discrepancy between what a person does as a part of a movement and what a person does in other situations, the social movement and the person's private life get mixed. Social movements are parts of lifestyles and the participants in the movement share similar lifestyles. Although, the flexibility in the social movement leaves room for variations in how much time and effort the participants invest in the social movement. There is a direct link between participation, effort and motivation, since people stay in the movement only as long as they benefit from it (Ahrne and Papakostas 2006:113-114). It is the collective identity that holds the movement together (Ahrne and Papakostas 2006:117-118). According to Melucci a collective identity is based on the following three elements:

- The first is a cognitive dimension that is about the goal of the movement, and, the resources that are used to achieve this goal. There is also a mutual language that is reinforced by symbols and rituals.
- The second element is that the collective identity is developed when the participants interact in their relationships with each other. The collective identity is reinforced and developed through these collective actions.
- The third and last element is that participants have an emotional involvement as the base of the collective identity, and this binds them together and creates solidarity within the group (Ahrne and Papakostas 2006:117-118).

The possibility of using the internet supports the "globalised identity". This becomes evident in that the Swedish organisation Nätverket Asexuell was very similar in its argumentation to the American organisation.

Content analysis

One of the persons I interviewed said that if you ‘google’ the Internet, you will only get hits that see asexuality as a problem, and something that should be fixed. This gave me the idea to conduct a small content analysis on the Internet. I did this in Swedish, but I will present the results of the analysis in English.

I decided to search three phrases, “Ingen sexlust” (“No sexual lust”), “Jag har ingen sexlust” (“I have no sexual lust”), and “Vill inte ha sex” (“Do not want to have sex”). I took every fifth hit, ten hits per phrase in total, to get a better diversity and not just all the hits from the first page. Then I categorised them. The search engine used was Google.

“No sexual lust”

I got 58 700 hits on this phrase. I decided to put it in no less than six categories:

- Pregnant/ gave birth
- I have no sexual lust
- Menopause
- Birth control pills
- No sexual lust, in general
- Diet that gives more sexual lust

I got hits in a great number of different categories using this phrase. In the first category, pregnant/gave birth, three of the hits were persons who asked other in internet communities for help. The communities are for parents and the main problem is that the woman have lost their sexual lust sometime in their pregnancy or after they gave birth. In the first hit the answers to the question are roughly that there is no need to have sex. People can cuddle instead, and some tips about how to turn the partner on were given. Answers in the other hit also suggest different ways to ‘kickstart’ the sexual lust, by using creams, try to have sex more often, see it as a ‘treatment’ etc. Some people suggest that it is just about waiting for the sexual lust to come back. One of the hits is ‘ask the expert’, where an expert gives his/her answer, and the expert gives the answer that it may have to do with that the mother does not have enough time for herself, since the couple already has a child and one more is on its way.

She also suggests that the couple should talk about it and see it as an opportunity to “get to know each other better”.

“I have no sexual lust”

The problem is that there are persons who do not have any sexual lust. This is a problem, because for example one of them is in a relationship where the partner wants to have sex, and the other is a woman that is single, but loses her sexual lust three months after entering a new relationship. The first question is posed on a homepage about sex and sexuality. A sexologist answers the question by saying that it may have to do with that the first crush is over and that the person maybe has a problem to be loved, also that sexual lust has to do with well-being in general, and that she should go and see a counsellor that can help her with these questions. The other person’s question is answered in the community by someone stating that it may have to do with taking birth control pills. The third category is about menopause, and a couple of women confirm that they have also lost their sexual lust when menopause started. One suggests that it could have something to do with hormonal contraception. All the women see it as a problem and want their sexual lust back. Category four is about birth control pills and is an ‘ask the expert’-question. The person has problem with lack of sexual lust, PMS and depression and sees a correlation with her birth control pills. The mid-wife just says that there are other ways to treat PMS and depression than changing birth control pills. Category five is about no sexual lust in general. It is from a clinic specialized in youth and sexuality. It says that different persons have different sexual lust over time and that sexual lust can correlate with health in general. If there often is a lack of sexual lust, it can be completely normal, but it can also be a signal that something is wrong. The passage about lack of sexual lust as something normal is really short, just one sentence. The remaining three pages are about all the things that can explain a lack of lust. The last category is about a diet that is supposed to give you better or more sexual lust.

“Do not want to have sex”

I got 2 130 000 hits on this phrase, a great deal more than in “No sexual lust”. Although there were more hits on this phrase, I only needed three categories for it. Why so few? My answer would be that maybe because the phrase is more exact, and the other phrase is more general less categories were needed.

- My partner does not want to have sex/ almost never wants to have sex
- I do not want to have sex with my partner

- How can we regain that “spark”?

The first category encompasses questions where the partner does not want to have sex, and what to do about it. Five of them are ‘ask the expert’, and one is a more general article about when the man does not want to have sex. The answers are that they should talk about it and see if there are any problems in the relationship that can be the answer to the lack of sexual lust. One of the questions is about a woman whose man is abusing alcohol, and she is recommended to break up with him. The article suggests that women should break up if they are not ready to live without sex. One of the hits was unfortunately not serious, and therefore I excluded it from the analysis. Category two is about people who have a disturbed personality or have been sexually abused, and therefore do not want to have sex. Here, answers are not really concrete, but more like “you should focus on your good sides”, and practise to be able to feel safe and relaxed with the partner. Category three is also about a person that got a child and then lost her sexual lust. Same tips as in the other category about parents occur.

Something that all the answers have in common is that not a single one of them mentions asexuality. The “partial” asexuality is also considered a problem that is supposed to be fixed in several ways. When it comes to parents that recently got children, there are some suggestions to be patient. Otherwise there are fairly concrete tips how to excite your sex drive. Nobody suggests that it would be normal, or at least okay to not feel sexual lust. It is all about targeting a problem that needs to be fixed, according to this content analysis. This suggests a context where sex is important, and that a relationship without sex is an imperfect relationship. As Linnell suggests, the discourse is very medical/ psychological, where private persons search help from experts (Linnell 2008). There seems to be no problem asking private questions on the internet, this probably has to do with the anonymity that it grants.

Observation

The observation was conducted at a monthly meeting for asexual. There are mainly two persons who take care of facilitating the meetings. This meeting had seven participants, a fairly high number according to the leader; three men and four women. In the beginning the atmosphere was quite nervous and a bit shy. It was how I would have imagined a meeting for alcoholics anonymous to be. And in fact the participants actually joked about just this kind of meeting, one of the persons suggested that they should call themselves “asexuals anonymous”. The facilitator told us how it all started, afterwards a presentation round was

conducted, where the participants also shared how long they had come to the meetings for asexuals. Two of them had been going to the meetings for two or three years, four had been coming around a year, and the last one was there for the very first time. One of the men told us that he did not feel any attraction to women, and therefore assumed to be homosexual. He also had lived as a homosexual for some years. He said that it was really fun to be gay, except from the sex part, which he was not interested in at all. After a while he found the term asexual and realised that he was not gay, but that he was asexual.

One of the women, in the following she will be called Maria, stated that she knew from her early teenage years on that she was not interested in sex. Later on she figured that she was asexual. Lovisa had had a partner for ten years, but she had never been really interested in the sex, she had only consented to do it because it was expected from her, and to please her partner. Kim says that she found the term asexual when she was forty, and that was a revelation. She used to have sex, but not because she wanted to, but because she needed the acknowledgement “someone actually *wants* to have sex with *me*”.

This conversation led to a discussion about what love is, and what sexual attraction is. Someone said that the feelings were only in her brain and heart, (she showed this by using gestures), and I understood this as there is nothing happening in her genitalia even when she gets attracted to someone. The new member asked how it is with being close to someone, like hugs and kisses. The facilitator answered that it is very different from person to person, some people have a big need to be physically close, but others do not have that need at all. The next subject that was brought up is that it is hard to find a partner, since most persons are sexual and want to be sexual. This leads to problems when it comes to relationships. Many persons from the group expressed a longing for having a partner.

I asked if someone had substitutes such as pets, and the facilitator said that she had a very beloved dog that unfortunately died that autumn. Several of the persons missed someone to belong to, someone to share everything with. One of the persons commented that shared problems are double problems, but the others do not seem to agree with this. Maria said that she was not sure what she would be interested in though, since she likes women that are masculine and men that are feminine, and in between. And, the person also had to be able to cope without having sex, and preferably be asexual. This narrows down the people to choose from.

Kim said that when she was around twelve, she asked her mother if she could have a family but not live together with the partner. She thought that it would be perfect to have lots of children, but different apartments in the same house, so the children could run between their mom and dad, but she would not have to live together with the dad. She also said that she nowadays has roommates, and that they are very important to her and in her life. Lovisa, the new member, asked what reasons there are for asexuality. The answer she got was that it could be due to medications, disease, trauma, but in some cases, there is no explanation for it. Some persons *just are* asexual. The next discussion was about some people having sexual lust, but that they feel no need to share it with someone else and that it is an important distinction between having the sexual attraction and the will to have sex with someone else. Kim told us that she was in an investigation to do a sex change, and that the persons there say that “just wait, when you get the testosterone, then you will feel sexual attraction”, but she felt that she will not. She got really irritated when being repeatedly told that she will get the sexual lust once she get her sex change and that she will start to feel that her body has the same sex as she feels at home with. She expressed her disbelief with that she will become sexual after the sex change, since she had been asexual her whole life, and that they are wasting her time when they talk about it over and over again.

Next subject that was discussed was if you want a partner, when it is the right time to tell that you are asexual? Should you say it along with your name the first time you meet? Or after a week? Kim said that she knows someone who never tells that she is asexual, and this leads to the end of every relationship. This person gets more and more sad and frustrated.

What was the meaning of this meeting? For the new member, it was obviously to get a chance to ask those questions that she has been thinking about. For the other participants? I think it had to do with the opportunity to be there for a new member, to be able to answer those questions that they probably had themselves when they started going to the meetings. One of the members confirmed in an interview that it is very important to be able to see how happy new members get when they can meet others who share the same feelings and thoughts. It is probably a way to socialize as well. One of the persons said later that she had met a partner at the meetings, and, another person said that she would like to meet someone there. As Scherrer suggests in her article, the asexuals seem to have a lot in common, with the early homosexual- clubs and meetings as regards grouping. People from both groups probably have

a lot in common concerning why they go to meetings like this- to find other persons to talk to who share the same experience.

Interviews

A very exciting part of this study was conducting the interviews. I got a lot of data since I had no less than eleven questions for my interviewees, and therefore I had to choose the questions that would best answer my research questions when I analysed my material.

Finding an identity as an asexual

There seems to be a difference for the interviewees when it comes to knowing that they are different, and the day when they found the term asexual. Three people stated that they have known a long time that they are different from others when it comes to interest in sex/sexual lust, and two people said that they knew that they were different but they really tried very hard to fit into the sexual norm. Something that is shared by all five is that finding the term asexual was a relief.

Laura:

“Karin: When did you realise that you were asexual?”

Five: em... about three years ago maybe

Karin: okay, so it is not that long then?

Five: mm... But I have always known it.”

Martha:

“I knew it already as a teenager when I made up this word nonsexual, even if I never told anyone”

Both of them described that finding the label asexual and finding others who define themselves as such people through the organisation Nätverket Asexuell (or AVEN) was a relief.

Martha found out online about a group that had meetings for self-identified asexuals:

“I had my whole life since I was thirteen believed that I was alone [...] I wish that I had known this when I was thirteen and not had to think that I was the

only one in the whole world who didn't want to have sex so it was a relief to know that there were meetings [for asexual]”

Laura also found the term asexuality on internet:

“I realised that there were people like that [yes] and I realised that here we have a name on something that I have felt my whole life but that I have been thinking that, been thinking that well it is really easy as a woman because there is so much talk about that women have less sexual lust than the men and then you end up in a relationship and you have less sexual lust than the man – surprise!”

“I just thought that I was an average woman with very low sexual lust”

Explaining finding the label

Some of my interviewees have definitely tried to compare their own sexual lust, or lack of it, with other peoples' sexual lust, just as the parents in Åkerström's study (2004) that compared their disabled child with other children when searching for a diagnosis. A difference is that the parents had people to talk with, for example other parents, but the persons in my study probably had a harder time to find persons to talk with, especially if all the others were very 'sexual'. A thing that they have in common with the parents is that the persons in my study found the term asexual almost by accident, and then realised that the term fit them very well, and that this was a relief. Some of the mechanisms in finding the diagnosis seem to be the same for both the parents and asexuals, even if there is a question whether to call it a diagnosis when it comes to the asexuals. I do not think that for example homosexuals consider homosexuality a diagnosis, since the word diagnosis is clearly a word from a medical context. I think that the use of “asexual” and “homosexual” is more for fitting in a category and to explain preferences.

The persons in this study explained that they benefited from finding the concept and category asexual, it gave them a rational explanation for who they are and what their sexuality is. Asexuality is an interesting concept since it is not depending on any expert providing the label. One of my interviewees confirmed this by saying that all people that find the term asexual useful should use it. It is up to every person to decide if the term will benefit them emotionally. However, it is a choice that one should consider carefully.

“I’ve been able to call myself asexual since I first read the AVEN FAQ [at] age 20. I didn’t call myself asexual for several months because I needed to have a good long think about the whole matter. I concluded that I’d always been asexual, even if I didn’t have a handy label to stick on” (Scherrer 2008:630).

This quote from Scherrer’s article is similar to what I found in my study; that there is a difference between knowing that one is not interested in sex, and then finding the term asexual.

Reasons for asexuality – the interviewees own explanations

The interviewed persons explained their asexuality with medical and psychological reasons, such as not feeling at home in one’s own body and not having an identity as a woman or man. Other accounts referred to a childhood with weak contact with the mother, a mother that does not encourage the child’s development, a father who is violent and abusing, a family where most of the persons has Aspergers syndrome and similar psychological themes. One persons said that she had Aspergers syndrome and that some people that have Aspergers also are asexual and she wondered if there could be a correlation? There are also explanations that are more medical such as hormone imbalances, biological heritage and other medical/ biological explanations.

The childhood is used as a possible explanation by many of the persons and even the one person who thinks of more medical/ biological reasons is eager to point out that she had a good childhood with no abuse. I would say that the medical explanations are so popular because the discourse we live in nowadays has a big impact when it comes to explaining people’s behaviour. Another interesting thing is that both the Swedish community and the American community AVEN have the same type of approach to explaining asexuality. The main explanation for asexuality is that it just exists. People simply *are* asexual.

Others explanations that are mentioned are sexual abuse, trauma and illness, but they are not as favoured as the first explanation. I think this has to do with the fact that the communities want to have the same legitimacy and non-medical context that for example gay, lesbian, transsexual- and queer-communities already have. In Sweden homosexuality, for example, is not considered to be an illness, and the asexual persons will probably not be considered

having an illness or explain it in terms of a “difficult childhood” or alike. Even if asexuals may have medical or psychological explanations for their asexuality, it would probably not be wise to highlight this in the communities, since one of the ideas with the communities is to make asexuality more known and accepted. It would probably be counterproductive if they would talk about it as a “fault”. The Brotto *et al* study shows the same result regarding what approach asexuals seem to prefer to explain asexuality (Brotto, Knudson et al. 2010). On Aven’s homepage, asexuality is referred to as a sexual orientation. The informants however also had several potential medical and psychological explanations for their asexuality.

Martha:

“Karin: What do you think is the cause for your asexuality?”

Martha: I actually don’t know either it could have something to do with the traumas that I experienced in childhood that I had a feeling that I wasn’t allowed to become older than ten years old that it happened some things then [okay] so either I have still not entered puberty yet and I’m still on a ten year olds level or that maybe it is congenital [m] I don’t know”

She said after the recorder has been turned off that her father abused her when she was very small, and that the mother brainwashed her and stood in the way of her development by not encouraging it. She also stated that she does not identify herself as neither man nor woman, but something in between.

Laura:

“...Hormones and such I really don’t think that I have been abused, thinking of what life I have lived, but absolutely biological reasons, heritage probably there is probably relatives of mine that have less sexual activity than others (...) my mothers aunt (...) who said that “you do what you have to do until you get the children you want and then you stop”.

The meaning of being an asexual

What does it mean for the participants in this study to be asexual?

Four of my participants shared pretty much the same idea about what it means to be asexual. This had to do with not feeling interested in sex, not having the desire to have sex, not feeling sexually attracted to anything. Lisa says:

“For me [asexuality] is about thinking that... sex does not seem to be appealing. That I have a body that does not answer to... [sighs] well that I don't sexually respond to people that I find attractive even if I feel very strong when I am attracted to someone but it is never in a sexual way [mm] and even if I feel that I want more and more and more of this person... that it is not sex that I want.”

Laura described her asexuality by saying that she can think that sex can sometimes be fun, but that she does not really understand the meaning with having sex the following day, when you have done it, it is sort of taken care of. She describes it like watching a movie, and then the next day watch the same movie again. She continues by saying that the next question would be how she defines sex, and she gives me the following answer:

“For me, sex is, em, body fluids, penetration, em sweaty gymnastics, something like that [mm] so hugging, kissing, be close, lean on to each other, doesn't matter if it is in a bed or standing or being at the supermarket, but that is not sex”

The interviewees seem to have reflected a lot on what it means to be asexual, and they seem to have distanced them from themselves to make this kind of reflection.

The information I got from the observation was similar to the one I found on Närverket Asexuell's and also on AVEN's homepage. The interviews and the observation mostly showed the same image of asexuality, with the discrepancy that the information from the interviews was more personal. Furthermore, the persons opened up and talked about possible explanations for their asexuality, which they did not do at the meeting. I think that the persons may have been keener on conforming to the norm of the group at the meeting, a norm that seems to be much inspired by AVEN and Närverket Asexuell's homepage. When the interviewees were on their own, they could formulate their own thoughts more, without having other persons in the same situation that may complain if they did not replicate the “true story of asexuality”. Mixing the observation with the interviews provided a better picture of asexuality than if I had just done the observation.

The function of the organisations Nätverket asexuell and AVEN

The organisations Nätverket asexuell and Aven are both social movements, since they are flexible, they are built on an identity (the asexual identity), and have a uniting will and a primary group. They are built on networks and the form of the organisations is flat when it comes to formal power (Ahrne and Papakostas 2006:114). What I learned from this study is that the movements have two main functions; the first is to be a political organ that works for getting asexuality more known and accepted, the second function is to be a forum for asexuals to meet and discuss similar experiences, such as the identity as an asexual. Just as described in the base of the collective identity, the participants in Nätverket asexuell and Aven have an emotional involvement in the movements, since the movement is about their sexual orientations. The participants seem to share a mutual language, since some of the explanations and ideas are favoured over others and frequently used, both on the homepages and when I talked to my informants. They are striving for the same goal, and this means that they fulfil all the three base elements of Melucci's collective identity. This means that my informants go from being alone and outsiders because of their lack of sexual lust, to becoming a part of an identity as an asexual within the asexual movement. Even if the Swedish Nätverket Asexuell is still a fairly small movement, it shares the same fundamental ideas as its counterpart Aven.

Combined analysis of content analysis, interviews and observation

The first assumption concerns the idea of a sexual norm. Thinking that sex is something people do in the shelter of the home, in privacy, does not go all the way, metaphorically speaking. The asexuals are aware of that they do not conform to the sexual norms. The persons that have a period of less sexual lust are also aware of a sexual norm that is about having sex often enough, experiment, try different ways of having sex etcetera, and when they do not conform to this, they try to find a way to yet again conform. The norms are important and present for both asexual and sexual persons.

The idea of not conforming to the norm would explain both the reasons for the importance of internet communities and the meetings for asexuals, homosexuals and similar groups. Heterosexuals do not have the need to form groups for heterosexuals, since being heterosexual is the common norm. A heterosexual person does not have to 'come out' as a heterosexual since heterosexuality is the expected scenario. A search for an identity starts when the persons are realising that they do not conform to the norms. The first question may

have been “who am I?”, and that there is a feeling of deviance since the person does not feel as s/he is supposed to. Then they find the label “asexual” and with the help of a community or meetings for asexuals, they will find their identity, an identity as an asexual . With the help from the group, the identity will grow stronger and the persons will conform to a set of norms within asexuality.

Conclusion

- There is a discrepancy between knowing that one is different from others when it comes to sexual lust and actually finding the term asexual.
- The meetings for asexuals seem to have the same functions as meetings for – say - homosexuals. People that have similar experiences can meet and share their thoughts and questions, and also put themselves in relation to others with the same kind of sexuality.
- All my interviewees have tried to be sexual according to norms concerning how a relationship should be. This has led most of them to have sex even if they did not want to, because they felt that they should have sex. The option to not have sex was not really an option to consider, since it was so deep rooted in them, that sex should be part of their life.
- Sex is considered to be an important part of a people’s life and if the sexual lust is not there, you as an individual should get it fixed. The interviewed persons confirm this and the content analysis suggests this. If sex was not considered to be that important, there would probably be no need for having internet communities and meetings for asexuals.
- Self-identifying as an asexual is an important decision that has led to a lot of relief for the persons in this study. This probably has to do with not conforming to the sexual norms, and that it is a relief to get the norms of asexuals, instead of having the feeling of loneliness.

The purpose of this study was to investigate three aspects of asexuality. The research questions were the following:

- When and how did the participants in this study realise that they were asexual?
- How do the asexual persons in this study explain the reasons for their asexuality?
- What does it mean for the participants in this study to be asexual?

The answer to the first question is that the participants have always or for a long time known that they were different from others regarding sexual lust and interest in sex, even if they were not able to put a name on what they felt. When they found the term “asexuality” they felt relieved, and some of them started rethinking their lives and how they would like to have it. Most of them found the term asexuality accidentally on the internet.

The answer on the second question is that the interviewees explain their asexuality by using different kinds of medical and psychological explanations, such as having Aspergers, a problematic childhood with weak or bad relations to the parents, not feeling at home in the body and the own sex. The use of these medical and psychological explanations is probably due to a discourse in which medical and psychological explanations are favoured.

The answer to the third question is that being asexual is about not feeling interested in sex, not having the desire to have sex and not feeling sexually attracted to anything or anyone.

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