

Running head: CONTEXTUALISING AN ASEXUAL COMMUNITY

Making Sense In And Of the Asexual Community:  
Navigating Relationships and Identities In a Context of Resistance

[**Formerly titled:** Amoeba in Our Habitat: Contextualising An Asexual Community]

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### **Abstract**

Despite some increased visibility in recent years, the asexual community and asexuality generally remain largely unknown. Aiming to demystify asexuality, this paper discusses the context of anti-asexual animosity in which the (largely American) asexual community is situated. Specifically, the asexual community constructed itself in response to hostility, including explicit anti-asexual discrimination, homophobia against asexual people perceived to be lesbian or gay, and the negative impact of (implicit) pathologising low sexual desire. This theoretical paper outlines some of the unique challenges asexual people face negotiating identities and relationships; the collective sense-making strategies they use (generating language and discourse) to do so; and why these things are central to understanding asexual people's experiences. This is accomplished through a purposeful review of literature and a case study of the Asexual Visibility & Education Network as an asexual community space. Understanding the challenges asexual people face and the resources they invoke to overcome them helps applied psychologists develop the cultural competence they need to work effectively with the asexual people they will encounter.

**Key words:** asexuality; asexual community; online community; sexual minority; sexual orientation; sexual identity; LGBTQ; discourse; relationships; cultural competence

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### **Legend of Changes**

***The section entitled: “Introduction”:***

- the introduction was completely re-written

***The section entitled “Facing Social Resistance” was considerably expanded and clarified:***

- ***Under heading “Asexuality and Discrimination”:*** new sub-headings:
  - *Asexuality as a “missing” sexual orientation category*
  - *Discrimination motivated by anti-asexual sentiment.*
  - *Homophobia and heterosexism acting on asexual people*
    - *(e.g. Added discussion of “asexuality-related homophobia”)*
  - *Transphobia and cis-centrism acting on asexual people.*
- ***Under Heading “Asexuality vs. A Disorder of Sexual Desire”:*** new sub-headings:
  - *Overlapping conceptual territory: Asexuality or/and HSDD.*
  - *Interrogating sources of distress.*
  - *The goal of treatment: Corrective/reparative therapy?*

***The section entitled: “Make Sense of Asexual Identity, Experiences, & Relationships”***

- ***Section was completely restructured. The subheadings in the final version are:***
  - *Negotiating Asexual Identity: Emphasising Self-identification*
  - *Navigating Asexuality Experiences With(out) the Discursive Resources*
  - *Changing the Shape of (Asexual) Social Reality*

### **Introduction to the Asexual Community via AVEN**

The largest hub of the asexual community, the Asexual Visibility & Education Network (AVEN), defines asexuality as a *lack of sexual attraction*, and many others in online asexual spaces use similar definitions. Many asexuals experience romantic attraction and/or desire, and pursue romantic relationships, even in the absence of sexual attraction and desire for sexual contact. The sexual/romantic distinction has been prominently featured both in educational materials made by asexual people (e.g. AVEN pamphlets and brochures<sup>1</sup>) and in academic writing about asexuality (e.g., Bogaert, 2006; Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes, & Erskine, 2010; Brotto & Yule, 2011; Hinderliter, 2009; Prause & Graham, 2007). For many people, asexuality is a positive way of being human and relating to other people—featuring significant diversity—just like sexuality.

Asexual people are relatively rare, with an estimated approximately 1% of people who do not experience sexual attraction (Bogaert, 2004); however, awareness of asexuality is still, unfortunately, considerably less common. Given that meeting local asexual friends by chance is unlikely, and asexuals are difficult to identify by sight, the asexual or “ace” community is largely an online community. This paper explores the asexual/ace community surrounding AVEN from a broadly ecologically-informed perspective—namely accepting that people and their actions exist in a multi-dimensional context, and “make sense” only within that context (Kelly, 1987). Accordingly, I focus on asexuals *making sense* out of *being asexual* in the context of a culture that is far from asexual-friendly. Psychologists working in research, clinical and community settings are likely to encounter asexual people and would therefore benefit from considering some of the mundane struggles facing asexual community members within a social context that is far from asexual-positive. As an asexual person, and a graduate student in applied social psychology, I am routinely struck by the absence of asexual people in the writings of my

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<sup>1</sup> Printable versions of AVEN pamphlets are freely available online at: <http://www.asexuality.org/wiki/index.php?title=Pamphlets>

discipline—it is as though we simply do not exist, and many studies and social intervention programs are designed as though we do not. I hope this paper will help render asexuality both more visible and accessible.

## **Facing Social Resistance**

### **Asexuality and Discrimination**

Asexuals and people on the asexual/ace spectrum (e.g., including “demisexuals” and “grey asexuals” who experience some degree of sexual attraction in certain contexts) face several sites of (often unintentional) resistance. These include other people (e.g., family, friends, professionals) not understanding or believing that we actually are asexual; people undervaluing our friendships and other significant relationships; and for those who date, trying to navigate the dating world from a nonsexual perspective (often when dating a sexual person). Just like members of any other marginalised sexual orientation group, asexuals (and people on the asexual/ace spectrum) face issues of being closeted, or coming out of the closet. Many of these issues are either uniquely asexual or affect asexual people in unique ways. While strong analogies can be drawn linking anti-asexual discrimination and the treatment of sexuality as an unacknowledged and natural norm (i.e., *sexualnormativity*) with homophobia, heterosexism and heteronormativity, these analogies are not perfect.

To date, little academic research has been conducted on the topic of direct anti-asexual discrimination. MacInnis and Hodson (2012) explored how willing participants were to endorse wanting to explicitly discriminate against members of “Group X” who were not interested in sex (i.e., asexuals, not named as such). They found people more likely to report being willing to discriminate against hypothetical members of “Group X” than against gay and lesbian hypothetical individuals. Another study began exploring the discrimination that asexual-identified people, themselves, report facing (Gazzola & Morrison, 2011). Gazzola and Morrison used a modified version of a scale that was originally designed to measure discrimination against

lesbians. While this work is very important, and adapting existing measures is a reasonable starting point, it is only a starting point. For example, finding that few asexuals reported experiencing direct discrimination be artefactual of the questions posed. Not surprisingly, few participants reported discrimination based on their *asexual appearance*, whereas the kinds of (direct) discrimination that asexual people do face may simply have been missing from the measure. Their findings illustrate that the kinds of discrimination faced by lesbians might not be equally or similarly relevant to asexuals; moreover, their results reflect the limitations of existing measures and their insensitivity to the diverse kinds of discrimination specific and most salient to asexuals. Carrigan (2011) illuminated some of these issues indirectly, drawing on interview data from self-identified asexual people talking about their decisions to “come out” about being asexual, or not.

Understanding asexuality means seeking out and carefully considering actual experiences of actual asexuals, and not merely extrapolation from lesbian, gay and bisexual experiences or narratives. For example, there is currently no way to *seem* or *pass as* asexual per se, whereas there are ways to pass as gay, lesbian, straight and to a much lesser extent bisexual. Even wearing a t-shirt reading “asexual” or “I am asexual” typically proves insufficient. From personal experience, this seems to have a greater chance of leading passers-by to offer to have sex with the shirt-wearer than to accept the shirt-wearer as genuinely asexual.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, asexuals frequently come off as lesbian or gay (or occasionally bisexual) by simply acting genuinely asexual, and are therefore subject to homophobic and heterosexist responses in those instances *as though they were lesbian or gay (or bisexual)*. Furthermore, many asexuals are *also* lesbian, gay, biromantic or otherwise queer-identified and therefore face the issues of homophobia along

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<sup>2</sup> I encourage anyone interested in learning about people’s reactions to asexuality to navigate a crowded public space while wearing a shirt with the word “asexual” clearly visible—provided asexual shirt-wearers are prepared to explain their experiment where appropriate, and to discuss asexuality openly and respectfully. It would also be very helpful to have pamphlets on hand in order to direct people to other asexual resources (e.g., AVEN), because many people who have never encountered asexuality will ask about it.

side their sexual counterparts in addition to other forms of asexuality-specific discrimination which may intersect in complex ways.

Moreover, just like non-asexual people, some asexuals are subject to transphobia because they are (or seems) trans-identified, androgynous, genderqueer, agender or otherwise-identified in terms of gender, or may express themselves in “gender non-conforming” ways. Because of the seemingly proportionally large number of asexuals who are transgender or have non-binary gender identities (or both), the asexual/ace community may sustain an especially powerful impact of transphobia and cis-centrism (the often-invisible ideology positioning as norm cis-gender experience, i.e., having a gender identity that straightforwardly matches the gender assigned at birth). Two recent studies with asexual participants suggest that “atypical” (i.e., non-binary) gender identities may be more common within the asexual community than in the population at large. More than 10% of participants in a study by Brotto et al. (2010) refused to provide any gender information when this was asked in a forced choice question even though this decision resulted in (knowingly) cutting short participation in the study; meanwhile, almost 20% of participants in a small study by Gazzola and Morrison (2011) claimed gender identities other than *man* or *woman*.<sup>3</sup> More recently, the Asexy Census project (a grass-roots endeavour by members of the asexual/ace community, Asexual Awareness Week, 2011) found that approximately 80% asexual/ace-identified participants (of more than 3,400) responded that they were *not* transgender. Meanwhile, approximately 10% responded that they did consider themselves to be transgender, and an additional 10% indicated that they were unsure. It is likely that some of this uncertainty results from the ambivalent inclusion/exclusion of people with non-binary gender identities within transgender circles. In any event, psychologists and other service providers working with asexual people should expect to encounter a variety of non-binary gender identities, as well as diverse transgender people, and should be prepared for the gender-related

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss this elsewhere (2011) and explore some reasons why the asexual community might reflect a particularly large proportion of trans people and other people with atypical gender identities.

issues people encounter when deviating from the norm within a strictly gendered, gender-policing social context.

### **Asexuality vs. A Disorder of Sexual Desire**

Unlike lesbian, gay or bisexual people, under the DSM-IV-TR<sup>4</sup> an asexual person (with low sexual desire) can be diagnosed with HSDD *if the asexuality causes personal distress or interpersonal difficulties*. Bogaert (2006) and Prause and Graham (2007) quickly distinguished asexuality from HSDD. Bogaert in particular argued that asexuality (i.e., lack of sexual attraction) and lifelong HSDD (i.e., low sexual desire) were substantively different phenomena. However, unsurprisingly asexual people also often experience low or absent sexual desire (e.g., Brotto et al., 2010; Brotto & Yule, 2011; Prause & Graham, 2007). This means that an asexual *can* be diagnosed with HSDD if this person is made to feel badly about being asexual (in the same way that LBG people might experience internalised homophobia), or if the asexual person is romantically involved with a sexual person who has a problem with asexuality (i.e., if the situation leads to interpersonal difficulties).

Though academics continue exploring where and how to draw lines in the proverbial sand separating asexuality from HSDD (e.g., Gazzola & Morrison, 2011), asexuality and HSDD are two different kinds of concepts with different histories and purposes, as Hinderliter (2013) discusses. Specifically, asexuality was created by and for people building a community for shared experience. Meanwhile, HSDD was constructed by clinicians and pharmaceutical companies working, for profit, to delineate and cure a problem, namely the problem of the HSDD-dominated so-called female sexual dysfunction (Hartley, 2006). For this reason, and since neither asexual people nor people aiming to cure HSDD will likely volunteer to cede conceptual territory, an overlap between asexuality and HSDD should be expected. Furthermore, given that most—if not all—asexuals experience low (partner-focused) sexual desire, and that HSDD is

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<sup>4</sup> The proposed modifications to the criteria for the DSM-5 do not change this situation for asexual people.



defined as low (partner-focused) sexual desire *accompanied by distress*, it is conceptually possible for HSDD to subsume asexuality *to the extent that distress can be imposed* on asexual people. While deliberate attempts to cause distress would be clearly unethical, and (as I have to believe) very unlikely, it is important to reflect on why asexual people may feel distressed about not wanting sex and the impact of the implicit assumption that being sexual is better than being asexual (e.g., [author], in press). This is especially true given the financial incentives endemic in a capitalist system to generate both “problems” and consumer demand for “solutions” that can then be sold.<sup>5</sup> Psychologists run the risk of pathologising the asexuality of asexual people who carry internalised shame or self-hatred, simply by adopting an approach toward mental health and sexuality that was developed without asexual people in mind—in a cultural context where consideration for asexuality is overwhelmingly absent.

General sexual culture is likely to be distressing for people who do not want sex. Przybylo (2011) described the sexusociety as the integration of sexuality and society, as a context that is routinely hostile toward asexuality and difficult for asexual people to navigate without considerable resistance. This is especially so given that it reflects a society organised around the presumption of (hetero)sexuality as the norm, which fails to recognise or accept asexuality, in which nonsexual relationships are routinely undervalued, and where not wanting sex can be considered a diagnosable psychiatric disorder. Allowing asexual people to be diagnosed with HSDD because they are distressed *because they live in a world that is inhospitable to asexual people* is not only complicit in the persecution of asexual people, but actively reinforces it. This is profoundly problematic. One need not be asexual to object to this situation or to believe it needs to change and the values of community psychology call for a solution that is more affirming of the asexual community.

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<sup>5</sup> See *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf (2002) for a thorough discussion of this process as it relates to cosmetic industries and expectations governing women’s physical bodies, focused in 20<sup>th</sup> Century North America.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that people seeking to increase their level of sexual desire because they really do *want to want* more sex (or sex more) should be denied treatment. Instead, I believe that clinicians should consider *why* someone is distressed about not wanting sex before diagnosing a client with HSDD and working to increase their level of sexual desire. Another therapeutic outcome more appropriate for many clients—for asexuals and perhaps some non-asexuals too—is to eliminate the distress surrounding low sexual desire without attempting to change the level of sexual desire itself.<sup>6</sup> Some (not necessarily asexual) clients would undoubtedly prefer this approach if it were offered. While many clinicians undoubtedly already do engage in those kinds of considerations, this is not required of them, and many simply are unaware that they are possible (and/or that asexuality exists).

If a gay, lesbian or bisexual individual who is distressed about being gay, lesbian or bisexual seeks clinical help from a psychologist, according to the American Psychological Association's Resolution on Appropriate Affirmative Responses to Sexual Orientation Distress and Change Efforts (APACR, 2009), the psychologist should help the client resolve issues of distress without trying to change the client's sexual orientation. Additionally, the Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Clients affirm psychologists' ethical obligations to oppose ideas of lesbian, gay and bisexual people as mentally ill because of their sexual orientations. These further require that psychologists strive to understand the stigmatisation and prejudice lesbian, gay and bisexual people face and the impact on mental health (APACR, 2010). Unfortunately, asexuality is not included in sexual orientation, and psychologists currently have no articulated obligation either to accept asexuality or to avoid trying to "cure" it.

Asexuals face a world so ignorant about asexuality that even the mental health professionals who are supposed to value being lesbian, gay or bisexual, and who support LGB rights, often fail to acknowledge asexuality's existence—whether in clinical or community

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<sup>6</sup> Brotto and Yule (2011) have made similar recommendations although those are limited in scope to the treatment of (self-identified) asexual clients.

settings, or even research. This is the context in which the asexual community exists. Though the asexual/ace community and awareness surrounding asexuality have been growing significantly in recent years, this growth has occurred within an environment that remains hostile. Much of the hostility is implicit—often out of ignorance—arising simply because general (i.e., sexual) culture is designed for sexual people. However, that does not alleviate its impact: sexual-centrism, just like hetero-centrism, need not be deliberate to be alienating. Nevertheless, with increasing awareness of asexuality, some of this cultural resistance is becoming more explicit, for example, with specifically, deliberately hateful messages posted in response to online news stories about asexuality, in the “comments” sections. After all, before anyone can be deliberately hateful toward asexual people, they need to know that asexual people exist. The increased possibility for explicit anti-asexual sentiment is something that psychologists can look out for, and address in the diverse settings of psychological practice.

### **Making Sense of Asexual Identity, Experiences, & Relationships**

#### **Navigating Asexuality Experiences With(out) the Discursive Resources**

Asexual people face certain challenges constructing their relationships and identities. Many of the cultural resources (i.e., expectations, ways of talking, cultural scripts, familiar stories, etc.) that *non-asexual* people use to talk about themselves and their relationships simply do not apply to asexual people, or may apply in different ways. For example, since people employ the expectation of sexual contact in romantic relationships to distinguish romance from friendship (Chasin, 2009), and if asexuals are not able to do this, then asexuals need either to find new ways to make this distinction or change how they form relationships so that the distinction no longer matters. As it turns out, romantically inclined asexual-identified people do have unique (shared) ways of making sense of their romantic relationships. Exploring how asexual-identified people make sense out of their romantic relationships, Haefner (2012) discovered the central role

played in these negotiations of a) acknowledging how those relationships differed from a (sexual) norm and, b) naming the asexuality in those relationships.

Additionally, the asexual/ace community has developed a number of unique words, phrases, ways of talking about identities and relationships, familiar stories of identity-formation and coming out. For example, non-romantic “crushes” are routinely classed “squishes” and queerplatonic relationships (i.e., non-romantic significant-other relationships of “partner status”) are sometimes referred to as zucchinis.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, within the asexual/ace community, being *asexual* is contrasted with being *sexual*, or even *non-asexual*. The asexual identity becomes relevant in a highly sexualised society where being (hetero)sexual is the invisible norm. It is in response to and in contrast with the ubiquitous sexual norm that other identity labels such as *demisexual*, *hyposexual*, *romantic and aromantic asexual*, *straight-A*, *gay-A*, *bi-A*, *grey-A* etc. take on meanings. The asexual community generated these new terms as they were required. Collectively, these comprise asexual discourses. Taking these discourses seriously is crucial to respecting and understanding asexual/ace people.

In many cases, asexual/ace people are simply not able to draw on the same cultural resources that other people use to construct their close personal relationships. Consequently, the asexual community is one place where people are actively involved in creative discussion (Jay, 2007), figuring out how to make sense of the experience of being asexual and relating to other people from asexual perspectives. In practice, trying to make sense out of our asexual selves and relationships sometimes requires inventing new discursive “tools” (i.e., generating new words and ways of talking about relationships) or adapting pre-existing tools to new situations. Since “whatever we might say (and think) about ourselves and others as people will always be in terms of a language provided for us by history” (Edley, 2001, p. 210), we are limited by what is possible within the discourses we can access (Shotter, 1997). These new discourses literally *make*

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<sup>7</sup> The collaborative AVEN wiki maintains a list of terminology used specifically within the asexual community (Lexicon, n.d.): <http://www.asexuality.org/wiki/index.php?title=Lexicon>

the unique and often confusing relationships asexual people engage in *make sense*, that is, they render otherwise non-normative relationships intelligible.

Asexual people are forging our own discourses and ways of being, resisting against the dominant societal context organised around the (hetero) sexual partnership. For example, some (asexual) people who organise their social lives around highly-valued friendships instead of romantic relationships have created the possibility (i.e., through inventing the label and concept) of being *friend-focused* (Jay, 2007). Similarly, the normative prioritising of (presumed sexual) romantic relationships above friendship is the topic of many discussion threads on the AVEN forums, where people propose alternatives. As asexual/ace people, we are subject to other people systematically devaluing our most important relationships or failing to recognise them altogether. Given these experiences, it is not surprising that the static “About Asexuality” content on AVEN (i.e., the primary asexual information resource for non-asexual people) prominently asserts the centrality of relationships in asexual people’s lives. Not only are relationships the first sub-topic addressed in the “Overview”(AVEN, 2008c), discussed throughout the “General FAQ” (AVEN, 2008a) and mentioned again in the “Family/Friend FAQ” (AVEN, 2008b), but relationships also have their own dedicated “Relationship FAQ” section (AVEN, 2008d).

### **Negotiating Asexual Identity On AVEN**

Asexuality is not only about the kinds of relationships that asexual people *do not form*, but is more importantly, about the *kinds of relationships that do constitute asexual people’s social lives*. For those asexuals who might not necessarily have a strong sense of *being not sexual* (despite lacking a strong sense of *being sexual*), empathising and identifying with the stories and perspectives of other self-identified asexuals leads them to consider themselves as asexual/ace. AVEN is this first and often only point of contact many people have with the asexual/ace community. As evidenced by accounts on the forums, AVEN is where many people

realise that there are people with whom they share an (asexual/ace) experience—a way of being (asexual/ace)—that they might not have otherwise considered, or considered possible.

What becomes apparent when perusing the Welcome Lounge and the Asexual Q&A sections is that many people who post on AVEN are initially<sup>8</sup> trying to puzzle out whether they may be asexual themselves. Although AVEN broadly defines asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction, people are left to decide for themselves whether to call themselves. The standard “party-line” routinely voiced by respondents—that no-one can tell you if you are asexual and people must decide this for themselves—reflects AVEN’s philosophy of self-identification. This is further illustrated in the static content of the website, in the General FAQ section. The philosophy is stated explicitly in response to the question “Am I asexual?”:

The definition of asexuality is "someone who does not experience sexual attraction." However, only you can decide which label best suits you. Reading this FAQ and the rest of the material on this site may help you decide whether or not you are asexual. If you find that the asexual label best describes you, you may choose to identify as asexual (AVEN, 2008a).

The second question emphasises this further (AVEN, 2008a): Q “I don't find anyone sexually attractive.<sup>9</sup> Does that mean I'm asexual?”; A “By the definition, yes. Again, only you can decide to use asexual as a label for yourself.” There is clearly a strong resistance or hesitation within the “official” AVEN discourse against telling people whether or not they are asexual. If the asexual/ace identity and community is predicated on a sense of shared experience and sympathy, then it makes sense that community membership (i.e., asexual identity) should be left for the individual to determine—and should not be a matter of blindly applying a definition. It also makes sense that this membership/identity may be potentially fluid, as experiences can change over the course of a lifetime. People can participate in the asexual/ace community for either a

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<sup>8</sup> A rough idea of poster experience/newness can be gauged by looking at how many times the users who start threads have posted previously. On January 12, 2011, I calculated median post counts for the initiators of the most recent 10 threads in these sections, revealing that threads in Welcome Lounge (M=14) and Asexual Q&A (M=4) were started by considerably less experienced members than threads in Asexual Relationships (M=264) and Asexual Musings and Rantings (M=493). The AVEN forums are accessible at: <http://www.asexuality.org/en/>

<sup>9</sup> The AVEN homepage prominently features an attraction-based definition of asexuality. “Asexual: A person who does not experience sexual attraction,” available at <http://www.asexuality.org/home/> .

limited or extended period of time, depending on the salience of their identification with asexuality (or their disidentification with sexuality) in their current experience.

This standard of self-determination also makes political sense in the context of talk-show psychologists condemning the asexual community for convincing people that they are asexual and, in doing so, preventing them from having healthy sex lives (e.g., statements in a 2006 interview on ABC's 20/20 by Dr. Joy Davidson<sup>10</sup>). Even though these very public accusations are entirely unfounded (and sometimes the people who make them later change their positions), they do place asexuals and the asexual/ace community in a defensive position. The asexual/ace community has responded by making clear that there is no agenda to convert anyone to asexuality, for instance, by insisting that *nobody can tell you whether or not you are asexual*. This mandate of self-identification also provides a non-threatening option for young teenagers wondering about asexuality, and for people who are going through an asexual period in their life, because it allows individuals to consider themselves asexual as long as this is helpful to them, and is not theoretically challenged by anyone changing their mind.

Asexuality as a possible social identity is a relatively recent phenomenon, and the prolific vocabulary and related predicating ideology even more so. The power of words and discourses should not be underestimated. The words that people use to talk about relationships and identities can change the discursive landscape of those relationships and identities, altering what they mean and therefore what they are all about (Bradac, 1983). In generating *new* discourses of relationships and identity, people self-identifying as asexual are making it possible to *make sense* as asexual people. These new asexual/ace discourses are making *being asexual/ace* possible in a very real sense, in ways that were not possible a short time ago and which extend beyond the ability to merely independently describe oneself as *asexual/ace*. To be unintelligible (i.e., beyond

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<sup>10</sup> The blog *Asexual Curiosities* by Slightlymetaphysical hosts a discussion of this interview and a related article, and includes Dr. Davidson's response and updated position from 2009: <http://asexualcuriosities.blogspot.ca/2009/12/q-with-joy-davidson-part-1.html>

the realm of possibility) is to be positioned as an outsider to humanity, against which human subjects are formed (Butler, 1990). In generating asexual/ace discourses, the asexual/ace community is making it possible for asexual people to be possible and to live the possibility of asexual lives. In *Gender Trouble* (1990, p. 219), Judith Butler proclaimed, “For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity.” While she was referring specifically to gender, the sentiment applies equally to asexuality. It is through prolific discussions and emerging asexual discourses that asexual people are making ourselves possible, by constructing our relationships and identities. Psychologists engaging with sexually diverse populations can help this process by familiarising themselves with asexuality and asexual/ace discourse, and by taking asexual people's accounts of their own experiences seriously. Afterall, asexual/ace experiences cannot make sense without the discursive tools of this sense-making.

### **Conclusion**

While few applied psychologists aim to work with asexual people directly, it is likely that most already have done so, often without knowing it. Lack of awareness of asexuality is a significant barrier facing the asexual/ace community. Within the medical and mental health domain in particular, lack of consideration for asexuality has resulted in a situation where practitioners can easily *inadvertently* perpetuate the marginalisation of asexual people. It is therefore important for psychological practitioners and researchers to stop ignoring asexuality, and to begin operating as though asexual people exist (and are present in small, yet important numbers, in most target populations). Moreover, the deliberate and explicit processes that asexual people must engage in of negotiation relationships and identities may offer exciting models of mindful social organisation that could ultimately influence non-asexual communities in positive ways. It is time to pay attention to asexual people and the struggles faced by asexual/ace community members. Asexual people exist and deserve practitioners and researchers



who have the cultural competence to work with them—and asexual people will not be the only ones to benefit.

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