

# Reflections on defining asexuality

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## *1. Introduction*

The definition of an asexual person given on the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) is "a person who does not experience sexual attraction." This is not the only possible way of defining asexuality, and it is not the only definition used in asexual discourse. Embedded in this definition is a simultaneous drive to use a broad definition for asexuality and a narrow one. A drive to broaden the definition seeks include people who do not experience sexual attraction but do or feel things generally associated with sexuality. A drive to narrow the definition is used to sharply differentiate asexuality from celibacy—people who experience sexual attraction but do not have sex are celibate, not asexual. In this essay, I examine the drive to broaden the definition of asexuality, the drive to narrow the definition of asexuality and alternate ways of defining asexuality.

## *2. Broadening the definition*

The drive to use a broad, inclusive definition can be seen in two important features of the asexual community. First, there is a taboo against telling others that they are not really asexual. Secondly, there is another definition used in asexual besides addition to the definition on AVEN's mainpage: asexuals are people who call themselves asexual.

### *2.1 "You're not a real asexual!" Resisting pressure for a narrow definition*

"No one can tell you if you're asexual or not. You have to decide for yourself." Variations of this are regularly said to people new to asexuality who ask others the question "Am I asexual?" However, if it is taken as absolute, there is no way to say that people who do experience sexual attraction are not asexual.

In my own model for defining asexuality, I argued that 'asexual' really has two separate

meanings—one is a sexual orientation and the other an identity based on that sexual orientation. I defined the sexual orientation as "a person who experiences little or no sexual attraction," and I defined the identity as "A person who experiences little or no sexual attraction and calls themselves asexual." One implication of this is that it is possible to say that people who do experience non-negligible amounts of sexual attraction are not asexual. This seemed appropriate as it is how most people use the term 'asexual', including those who strongly adhere to the claim that everyone must decide for themselves if they are asexual.<sup>1</sup>

If this understanding of asexuality requires us to relax somewhat the ban on telling others that they are not asexual, it makes sense to take a look at the motivation for this prohibition.<sup>2</sup> In asexual discourse, there is a drive to expand and narrow the definition of asexuality—expand it to include people who do not experience sexual attraction, but feel/do other things generally associated with sexuality. This is done in conscious resistance to pressure to exclude these people from the category asexual.

Pressures to narrow the definition of asexuality come from two sources: from those within asexuality and those without. Let's start with pressure from within. One model for defining asexuality given on the AVENwiki is [nonlibidoism](#).

"A nonlibidoist is a person who does not have a sex drive and has never had one, and hence does not experience sexual urges or desires (and in particular, does not masturbate.)

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<sup>1</sup> <http://asexystuff.blogspot.com/2008/09/defining-asexuality.html> The example I give there is that if someone becomes celibate and explains it by saying, "I've decided to become asexual," many asexuals would likely object to this. Also, in media articles, sex-therapists will sometimes talk about their experience with "asexual" people, who they generally describe as people quite unhappy about the fact (presumably why they are going to a sex-therapist), but their meaning of "asexual" is generally left unclear and likely rather different from how the term is used in asexual discourse, with the result that those "asexual" experiences are unlikely to be generalizable to the experiences of asexuals, as the term is used in asexual discourse. This equivocation is a fundamental part of such therapists establishing their own authority on "asexuality", when they are really quite ignorant on the fact, to cast suspicion on asexuality, as the term is used in asexual discourse. Being able to assert our definition of asexuality is essential to combating these pathologizing efforts.

Nonlibidoism is a much more stringent definition than AVEN's standard description of asexuality. A large percentage of asexuals do have sex drives, but still lack any sexual attraction...Some nonlibidoists, such as those at the (now defunct) Official Nonlibidoist Society, consider that nonlibidoism is the only valid form of asexuality. Due to the popularity of a more inclusive definition of asexuality, the Official Nonlibidoist Society has ceased to use the term 'asexual' for its members, believing that it has 'by now become almost synonymous for solo-sexual [or] masturbator.'"

The AVENwiki has a link to an archived version of the nonlibidoist website. One page of that site is called [What Nonlibidoism is NOT!](#), where they exclude people who masturbate. Another page insists on excluding people who used to have a sex drive but no longer do, stating that nonlibidoists "were born that way." This is a claim that is not found, as far as I know, in the main AVEN static content.<sup>3</sup> Nonlibidoism functions on the AVENwiki as a foil for AVEN's more inclusive approach. I do not know what the motivations were for the founder of the Official Asexual/Nonlibidoist Society to prefer her more stringent definition to AVEN's.

Among seasoned veterans of asexual discourse there is generally a desire to avoid asexual elitism, to not make claims that "I'm a real asexual; you're not." I think the main motivation for avoiding talk of who are 'true' asexuals and who are not is that such claims do not foster a safe space for people to talk about things and try to understand themselves. People who insist that they (unlike others using the term) are real asexuals tend to do so from negative views of sexuality—people who are too close to sexuality are still tainted by it and thus not as "pure" or

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<sup>3</sup> On the forums, many asexuals will claim that they were born that way, following a common understanding of sexual orientation frequently promoted by some people doing gay and lesbian identity politics. However, the [Overview of Asexuality](#) linked to on AVEN's mainpage states, "Most people on AVEN have been asexual for our entire lives. Just as people will rarely and unexpectedly go from being straight to gay, asexual people will rarely and unexpectedly become sexual or vice versa. Another small minority will think of themselves as asexual for a brief period of time while exploring and questioning their own sexuality." This situates "most asexuals" as generally fitting dominant ideas of sexual orientation as being fixed and lifelong while at the same time challenging them by recognizing the possibility of fluidity.

"true" asexuals as those untainted by nasty sexuality. The intent is to create a "purer," more narrowly defined asexuality, and the means to do it is delegitimizing the asexual identity of those that evidently are not asexual enough. This fosters an us vs. them mentality which helps reinforce people's anger and sense of moral superiority, but it does not help trying to understand other people's perspectives, encourage critical thinking or self-reflection. However, many asexuals do not possess these sorts of negative views of sexuality and do not want others to either. Additionally, presenting ourselves as having a positive attitude towards sexuality is an important part of legitimating ourselves to nonasexuals. An example of this can be seen on [Apositive's FAQ](#), which says that one reason for that website's name is that it reflects, "our feelings towards sex. Orientation notwithstanding, we are sex-positive, or at least sex-double-negative." This can also be seen on a blog post on Apositive, which was titled [Why I'm a sex positive asexual](#).

There are also pressures to narrow the definition of asexuality from outside the asexual community. Again, the goal is to delegitimize the asexual identities of people who apparently are not asexual enough, but the motivation is the reverse. Rather than being driven by negative views of sexuality, negative views of asexuality are the driving force. Because sexuality is assumed to be a fundamental part of being human—at least for the vast majority of people—asexuality can be ignored if the experiences and identities of a large portion of self-professed asexuals are delegitimated, making 'true' asexuals a small minority in the already small group of people calling themselves asexual. As an example, in an article about asexuality in the New Zealand Herald, they included an opposing view from a sex-therapist. They paraphrased her as saying, "some people who call themselves asexual still masturbate regularly – 'which isn't asexual to me.'" Sex therapists would call that auto-erotic - that is, enjoying their sexuality themselves - rather

than asexual" ([Bridgeman 2007](#).) This sex-therapist rejects the identities of asexuals and insists on giving them an alternate categorization created by a subsection of the medical establishment. At least in how her views are presented in the article, by rejecting the identities of a large part of asexuals, she feels free to be dismissive of all of them

The main goal of telling people who consider themselves asexual that they are not really asexual is generally an attempt to delegitimize their asexual identities on the grounds that they are not asexual enough—this can come from anti-sexual perspectives within the asexual community, or it can come from sexualnormative perspectives from without. As a whole, asexuality wants to avoid both of these and allow people to freely identify as asexual if they want to. This, however, has problems of its own.

## 2.2 *"You're asexual if you say you're asexual" The ultimate attempt at an inclusive definition.*

While the dominant view of the asexual community (at least the moderators of AVEN) is to allow people to identify as asexual if they want to, not everyone will always follow this. If someone is told that they are not asexual, there are generally two ways this can be interpreted. It could be understood as a clarification of the definition, in which case it will be perceived as being fairly benign, or it could be interpreted as an attack on part of someone's identity, attempting to delegitimize it, in which case it will be seen as less-than-benign. The fundamental issue is who has the right to define asexuality. Does each person define it for themselves? Does the asexual community decide as a whole? Does each person decide for themselves based on the general framework set early in the asexual community's history? Does some person—either inside or outside—take it upon themselves to define it for everyone and then feel it is their right to enforce that definition?

Perhaps the broadest and most inclusive definition of asexuality is that an asexual is someone who calls themselves asexual. This definition prohibits people from enforcing their own personal definitions of asexuality on everyone else, and it seems to be a necessary consequence of granting everyone the right to self-identify as they choose. However, this definition has a serious problem: it makes no sense without another definition and is mutually incompatible with any other definition.

Suppose I were to invent a new word (and identity) called Kleeda: “A Kleeda is a person who calls themselves a Kleeda.” Am I a Kleeda? I have no idea, but no one can tell me if I am or not; I have to decide for myself. But I have no clue what it is or why I might want to consider myself one. “An asexual is someone who calls themselves asexual” makes more sense than “A Kleeda is a person who calls themselves a Kleeda” precisely because there is another definition of asexual at work that people have to decide if it fits themselves or not.<sup>4</sup> But “An asexual is someone who calls themselves asexual” is fundamentally incompatible with any other definition of the term because it gives each person the right to consider themselves asexual or not based on whatever definition they want to use. The asexual community has constructed a definition and, by prominently displaying it, people are encouraged to use it. But it is impossible to force people to adopt it. Moreover, in saying that anyone who calls themselves asexual is asexual, (if it is interpreted as absolute) we are giving up the right to tell anyone who rejects our definition but still identifies as asexual that they are wrong.

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<sup>4</sup> The situation is actually somewhat more complicated than this: asexual identity could also be possible with a network of definitions all generally based around feeling “not sexual” or “nor experiencing sexual attraction” or “preferring not to have sex,” etc. As I have outlined in, [Asexuality: the History of a definition](#), it seems that the collective-identity model was proposed in a context where the “not experiencing sexual attraction” definition existed but was not standardized. It reflected the fact, obvious even in a very small asexual community, that different people had quite different reasons for choosing to identify as asexual, and no single definition seemed to cover all of them.

Asexuals have created their own definition of asexuality. Since language is not static, we can create new words whenever we want, or we can apply new meanings to old words. There is no absolute authority on what the correct meaning is because the meanings of words change over time and new words are regularly created. Meaning is (largely) determined by usage, and words are valid if there is a common understanding of the meaning between both speaker and listener (or reader and writer.) If I make up a new word, the only way it becomes a "real word" in the language is if a large number of other people adopt it as well. Asexuals have created a word and are trying to get their definition to stick. So far, quite a bit of progress has been made, but at any time, anyone is free to use the word in a quite different way from how I use it or how I, or anyone else, thinks it should be used.

Another issue is that asexual identity and asexual orientation do not completely coincide. Many asexuals feel that they have always been asexual (orientation), but that the asexual identity didn't develop until later. Some have coined the term on their own, others haven't—and even those who did make it up on their own have probably come to have a much expanded and enriched idea of asexuality once they learned about other asexual people. Moreover, some people identify as asexual but then later change their minds, deciding that they weren't asexual after all—rather they simply hadn't understood their own feelings well enough or hadn't been willing to acknowledge them. So even though they had identified as asexual, retrospectively, they feel that they had been mistaken in this—they called themselves asexual, but they were wrong. This is similar to how some asexual people used to think that they were gay on the assumption that if someone is not straight, they must be gay, but later decided that they weren't because they were equally unattracted to the same sex as they are to the opposite one.<sup>5</sup> Not everyone who is asexual

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<sup>5</sup>It is worth noting that it is possible to be gay and asexual, or lesbian and asexual because of non-sexual attraction. Other asexual identify as bi-romantic or bi-asexual.

(orientation) calls themselves asexual (identity), and not everyone who calls themselves asexual (identity) is asexual (orientation.)

Despite all of these theoretical problems with the definition "an asexual is someone who calls themselves asexual," these problems do not appear to be particularly important on a practical level. When people come to some asexual site wondering if they are asexual, they are almost certain to come across the "does not experience sexual attraction" definition, which is likely to significantly impact how they think about asexuality and how they choose to identify. Since this has a strong influence on who does and who does not choose to call themselves asexual, it affects who is in the asexual community, who is active on the forums, and who is involved in other places where asexuality is discussed. For many people, the "does not experience sexual attraction" definition is part of the reason they identify as asexual, but an even bigger reason is that as they read about the experiences of people identifying as asexual, they find something that fits their experiences, something they can identify with after such a long time of being bombarded with messages about sexuality that did not fit with their own feelings and no messages even recognizing that there are people like themselves. Reading about the lives of others identifying as asexual provides a sense of validation for such people, and this has a strong effect on whether some particular person, after finding AVEN or some other asexual site, chooses to identify as asexual or not. Thus, the definition puts selection pressures on who identifies as asexual, who identifies as asexual puts selection pressures on who is active in the generation of asexual discourse, and this puts selection pressures on who subsequently identifies as asexual. Within this context, there will be a strong connection between people who call themselves asexual and people who experience little or no sexual attraction, while at the same

time giving each person the right to self-identify as they choose, hopefully without feeling pressured to go one way or the other.

A practical consequence of the definition "an asexual is someone who calls themselves asexual" is that it helps shape the direction of asexual discourse. The intent is to push discussion on the forums in certain directions and away from others. People spending time trying to explore their own thoughts and feelings, thinking about their own experiences, trying to better understand themselves—these are the sorts of things that people think about when trying to decide if they are asexual or trying to figure out what being asexual might mean for their lives. People spending time telling others that they can't be asexual, forcing others into narrowly defined asexual molds, arguing about what real asexuality is—these directions are not as helpful for real people. They seem more about people trying to use a narrowly defined asexuality to inflate their egos than helping people think about their lives.

I once had the opportunity to talk to David Jay about definitions of asexuality and I found his comments helpful in understanding this matter. He said that in the asexual community, there are two ways of defining an asexual person. "A person who does not experience sexual attraction" is the definition that is primarily intended for people outside the asexual community as a way to introduce asexuality to people. "A person who calls themselves asexual" is the definition used inside the asexual community, and these two definitions are framed the way that they are to steer discussions in certain directions and away from others. From a theoretical perspective, the definition "an asexual is someone who calls themselves asexual" has a lot of problems with it, but if we think about it not in terms of theoretical accuracy but practical utility, it makes a great deal of sense.

3. *“Asexual: A person who does not experience sexual attraction”*: Using a narrow definition

In addition to the drive to broaden the definition of asexuality, there is a simultaneous drive to narrow it. One place that this is seen is in the attempt to distance asexuality from celibacy. People who experience sexual attraction but don’t have sex—whether by choice, preference or lack of opportunity—are not asexual. In defining asexuality as not experiencing sexual attraction, there is, at least in theory, a removal from the category people who do experience sexual attraction.

In reality, this isn’t always what actually happens. According to Scherrer (2008)—her data came from answers to open ended questions by people identifying as asexual recruited from AVEN—a large portion of the people explained their asexuality in terms of AVEN’s definition about not experiencing sexual attraction. But not all of them did. At least one person explicitly said that she does experience sexual attraction but has no desire either to have sex or even to do things like cuddling or hand-holding with people. She considers herself asexual and evidently has participated in AVEN enough to volunteer to participate in the study. It makes perfect sense why such a person would want to identify as asexual even though she does not fit the standard (AVEN) definition. She does, however, fit an alternative definition—people who prefer not to have sex. This definition makes sense but is not used as much.<sup>6</sup> Another intended function of the self-identification definition of asexuality is that people like this woman feel free to identify as asexual because it makes sense for them to do so even though they don’t actually fit the AVEN definition.

Another place where the definitional narrowing can be seen is in defining an asexual person as “someone who doesn’t experience sexual attraction” rather than as “someone who

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<sup>6</sup> In the first academic publication on asexuality (Johnson 1977), asexuality was defined in terms of sexual preference rather than sexual attraction.

experiences little or no sexual attraction.” I have proposed defining it as the latter, but this is nothing new. In fact, the impact of this definition can be seen throughout the AVEN general FAQ, which uses the terms “little or no sexual attraction” and “low or no sexual attraction” multiple times, and similar language can be found on various other places around the internet. For example, [Kinsey Confidential](#), for example, has an article on asexuality in their Q&A in which they say, “[Asexuals] may either experience no sexual attraction, or else very low levels of sexual attraction when compared to most other people.”

Even though I prefer the definition “a person who experiences little or no sexual attraction,” I thought about proposing this change on AVEN’s front page. But then I went to that page, imagined the change, and decided I did not like it. That page needs to have a very clear-cut feel to it—more like a soundbite than a vague, nuanced approach. I once heard someone say of US presidential politics, “Nuance loses elections.” The same is likely true for identity politics. Clear cut descriptions of asexuality in the media lack nuance for the same reason that candidates’ presentation of their policies in the media lack nuance: the general public does not like nuance. They like things to be clear cut, unambiguous, black and white. The official AVEN definition is intentionally narrowed to make things fit a neat asexual-sexual binary, purposefully ignoring the large gray area that exists between them even though within asexual discourse, people tend to be quite comfortable with fuzziness around the edges.

What strikes me about both of these narrowings of the definition of asexuality is that the main intent of each has to do with presentation of asexuality to those outside the asexual community rather than to those inside—more to do with initial presentation than to do with discussions among those who already have a general understanding. Limiting asexuality to people who do not experience sexual attraction (or who experience very little) is important for

the claim that asexuality is a sexual orientation—it makes the definition of asexuality parallel to definitions of hetero/homo/bisexual orientations, and it attempts to tap into beliefs about acceptance of non-heterosexual people. Making asexuality clear-cut and unambiguous makes for better media presentation.

There was another thing that David Jay said in our conversation about defining asexuality that I found enlightening: choosing to define asexuality as not experiencing sexual attraction rather than experiencing little or no sexual attraction is quite intentional. First, he thought that the sort of dialogue generated by the less vague definition would be more helpful for people—he was afraid that the sort of discussion based on the definition I preferred would focus too much on the vagueness inherent in the definition and less on people trying to better understand themselves. The second reason is that the clear-cut definition functions as strategic essentialism.

This is similar to a point made by Scherrer (2008). She argues that asexuality has a complex relationship to dominant beliefs about sexual essentialism—it both challenges the view that sexual desire is an innate property of being human and the belief that certain acts are innately sexual, blurring the line between what is sexual and what is not. However, many asexuals define their asexuality in essentialist terms, and even though asexuality challenges essentialist views of sexuality, essentialist presentation is likely to be a useful strategy in legitimating asexuality as it has been for legitimating gay and lesbian identities.

In election politics—and especially presidential elections—rhetoric lacks nuance. We rarely hear candidates saying, “This is a complex issue and there’s quite a lot to be said for some of the alternatives to my stance. There some genuine concerns about possible unforeseen consequences of it as well.” However, when the election is over and people take office, in order to govern effectively, it is utterly essential for decision makers to have a deep grasp of the

complexities and ambiguities of the issues. Politicians need soundbites to win elections, and, once in office, they need them to gain popular support for their decisions and their policies—but I hope that the true rationale for these decisions and policies is a lot more well-thought out than anything that can be summed up in a sentence or two.

A similar point holds for asexual identity politics: even if it is expedient to present things to the public in black and white terms because this will help us gain widespread acceptance, legitimation, and visibility fastest, it is not helpful to do so within the asexual community. Soundbite presentations of asexuality in the public sphere are no more incompatible with nuanced discussions within asexual discourse than political soundbites in press-conferences are incompatible with detailed and complex arguments in conversations between policy makers themselves.

Still, this unnuanced, narrowly defined asexuality presented in the media is not without its dangers. In many media presentations of asexuality, there are opposing views presented by people portrayed as authorities on matters concerning sexuality who have some rather condescending things to say about asexuality. These are not well received in the asexual community. Asexuals often mock these views as utterly unfounded and blatantly contradicted by the experiences of those in the asexual community. But these critics of asexuality do not have an insider's understanding of asexuality; they do not have the nuanced knowledge of it that people who have spent a large amount of time reading and participating in asexual discourse have. They probably have an understanding that largely comes from the black and white asexual presentations given in the media—people who know a lot about sexuality are likely to be less easily swayed by soundbites.

One criticism of asexuality is that there are some people who feel very little interest in sex but in the right sort of situation find that they can enjoy it or they can learn to enjoy it. Such individuals, some fear, may label themselves asexual when such a labeling may be premature and could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Many asexuals scornfully respond to such criticisms, pointing to many asexuals who feel that they have come to understand themselves much better through learning about asexuality—many asexuals say they have learned far more about sexuality after identifying as asexual than they ever did before. Moreover, some people who identify as asexual find that they can enjoy some aspects of sexuality, but still consider themselves asexual because they enjoy them in very different ways than their partners do, or than what their friends describe.<sup>7</sup> These sorts of discussion about asexuality could potentially go a long way in reassuring some critics that this criticism is unfounded. However, these sorts of asexual experiences are intentionally removed from standard asexual presentation. Clear cut, unnuanced presentations of asexuality may be the most effective means of convincing the general public of asexual legitimacy, but for some people, it may be precisely the nuance and acceptance of fuzzy boundaries in asexual discourse that would persuade them to accept asexuality as a healthy identity and a part of the normal variation in human sexuality.

#### *4. Alternate ways of defining asexuality*

So far, two main definitions of asexuality have been examined: “a person who doesn't experience sexual attraction,” and “a person who call's themself asexual.” The latter of these, however, fundamentally requires another definition in order to function. I have also discussed my own preferred definition, "A person who experiences little or no sexual attraction," and I briefly mentioned another: "A person who prefers not to have sex."

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<sup>7</sup> Two threads on Apostive are relevant here: [Enjoying sexuality asexily](#) and [Don't knock it till you try it!](#)

Excluding identity, there are generally three main options for defining asexuality: in terms of sexual attraction, sexual desire, and sexual preference. Then, for the first two, the definition can be framed as being absolute (i.e. no sexual attraction) or gradient (i.e. little or no sexual attraction.) All of these three options make sense, but all have their problems as well.

#### *4.1 Asexual: a person who has (little or) no desire to have sex.*

The biggest problem with this definition is that “sexual desire” difficult to characterize because there are a large number of reasons people have sex.<sup>8</sup> Would desire to have sex out curiosity or social pressure disqualify someone from being asexual? In the asexual community, there are some people who identify as demisexual—they usually experience no sexual attraction, but sometimes, after knowing someone for a while and developing emotional attraction toward the person, they do feel some amount of sexual attraction towards that person. Depending on how much sexual desire they experience in those situations—and how frequently they occur—it may or may not make sense for such a person to identify as asexual. For people who have long periods of no sexual desire, and some periods of some sexual desire, are they asexual?

Another problem with defining asexuality in terms of sexual desire is that there is an ambiguity in the meaning of “sexual desire” especially relevant because many people who do not experience sexual attraction do experience some sort of “sex-drive,” but feel that it isn’t directed towards anyone. They may be completely satisfied (or even prefer) to deal with these desires by themselves, and so this desire is some sort of sexualish desire, and yet not desire to have sex.<sup>9</sup> But for people who are not asexual, the experience of sex-drive that is often the motivation to masturbate is frequently closely connected with their desire for sex.

#### *4.2 Asexual: A person who prefers not to have sex.*

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<sup>8</sup> One study listed 237 reasons people have sex (Mestern and Buss 2005,) although many of these reasons are very similar to other reasons.

<sup>9</sup>e.g. [The Masturbation Paradox](#) by David Jay.

For this definition, the absolute version works, but it seems the gradient one does not.<sup>10</sup> One problem with this definition is that there are quite a lot of reasons to prefer not to have sex. In addition to choosing to be celibate for religious or moral reasons, some people choose to be celibate because, even though they do have sexual desires, after a long string of bad relationships, they feel that sex is not really worth it. Others choose to be celibate because it grants a level of autonomy not possible to those in a long-term sexual/romantic relationship and they are not interested in short-term sexual relationships. Others choose to be celibate for a time in order to focus the time and energy on other things. People in both of these groups may feel sexual desire and may enjoy sex, but they prefer not to because they do not think that it is worth the cost. But this does not seem to be who we want to call asexual. Johnson (1977) defined asexuality in terms of sexual preference, and to do so, had to discount a wide range of possible reasons for preferring not to have sex.

“There appear to be relatively few appropriate words in the English language to describe the individual who, regardless of physical or emotional condition, actual sexual history, and marital status or ideological orientation, seems to *prefer* not to engage in sexual activity. There appear to be relatively few appropriate words in the English language to describe the individual who, regardless of physical or emotional condition, actual sexual history, and marital status or ideological orientation, seems to *prefer* not to engage in sexual activity.” (p. 97).

#### *4.3 Asexual: A person who experiences (little or) no sexual attraction.*

This also has its problems: many people who identify as asexual do experience some

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<sup>10</sup> “A person who prefers to have little or no sex” is ambiguous because it could mean someone who does not like sex and wants little at most, which would mean the absolute version is also true for that person, but it could also mean someone who would prefer to have some sex, just not that much. The former seems to fit with what we want to mean by “asexual” but the latter does not.

kinds of attraction, and if they have never felt sexual attraction, they do not know what sexual attraction feels like, so it is difficult to know whether they do not experience sexual attraction or not. One of the ways that some asexuals express their lack of sexual attraction is by noting that even when they are attracted to someone, they either a) still have no desire to have sex with that person or b.) would still rather not have sex with that person. In these cases, lack of sexual attraction is expressed in terms of sexual desire or sexual preference.

Even though the sexual attraction definition is the most commonly cited one in asexual discourse, it is not the only one that's used by people in the asexual community. In section 3, I mentioned a woman who identifies as asexual who said she does experience sexual attraction but feels no desire to have sex with anyone. According to the sexual desire and sexual preference definitions, she would be asexual, but based on the sexual attraction one, she is not. This highlights one of the key problems in deciding among the various definitions: each deals with the grey area between being sexual and being asexual differently—each excludes some people who would be included by another definition.

Some people who do not experience sexual attraction feel more or less indifferent about sex. They do not necessarily prefer not to have sex, but neither do they really prefer to have sex either. Some people who do not experience sexual attraction find that they can enjoy some partnered sexual behaviors—sometimes they find that they enjoy giving their partner pleasure even though they are not experiencing sexual desire themselves.<sup>11</sup> For such people, they may be asexual in terms of sexual attraction and sexual desire, but it is unclear how to characterize their sexual preference. Still, identifying as asexual makes a lot of sense because their sexual

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<sup>11</sup> Scherrer (2008) gives an example of a man who enjoys pleasuring his wife but, it seems, does not want to be sexually stimulated himself.

experience and feelings completely fail to conform to societal expectations or models of sexuality they find around them.

One advantage of making the definition about sexual attraction rather than sexual preference is that people are given more freedom to explore themselves and try different behaviors while still being allowed to identify as asexual. This may make asexual identity more helpful for real people's lives, especially those in the gray areas. In making asexuality about attraction rather than preference, it enables asexuality to be more descriptive in how people think about ourselves rather than prescriptive, use to an idea from a blog by the AVENite Shockwave.<sup>12</sup>

The right to identify as asexual is important for many people. They sense that their own feelings completely fail to conform to images of sexuality presented in TV and movies, talked about by their friends and peers, even what is acknowledged to exist in sex education. In identifying as asexual, there is a sense that people are not alone, that they are not broken. Their experiences are valid, and they are no longer an inexplicable anomaly among the human population whose very existence is unacknowledged. For many people, a sense of belonging, a feeling of fitting in is important. A sense of being normal. Identifying as asexual grants this to many people.

Still, as much as people may want asexual identity to be a tool for thinking about their lives, an identity to insist that they are not broken, a means for communicating their selves to others, it is doubtful that it could be used entirely descriptively. There will probably always be a temptation to use it prescriptively in order to help people feel a part of a group rather than an isolated anomaly with no one like themselves telling them that it is okay to be themselves. In

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, this idea in [Shockwave](#)'s post is one he borrowed from linguistics, which sharply contrasts its descriptive approach to language to prescriptive ideas that are commonly taught in school. This emphasis in linguistics of being descriptive rather than prescriptive plays a key role in linguistics' attempt to justify itself as a science.

Shockwave's post, he wants to use an asexual identity descriptively precisely because he had been succumbing to the temptation to use it prescriptively and found this distinction helpful for thinking about how not to do that. This temptation is likely unavoidable and the only way to deal with it is simply to be aware of it, and for people always be willing to reflect on their lives and reevaluate their ideas—something of value regardless of how they identify. Still, if asexuality were defined in terms of sexual preference—what kind of behavior we prefer (not) to do—the temptation to use it prescriptively to retain that sense of validation would likely be stronger than it is now. It might not allow people as much freedom to experiment with sexuality (for those interested) while still retaining an asexual identity.

Still, whichever way asexuality is defined—in terms of preference, desire or attraction—the definition will always exclude some who do not fit the chosen definition but do fit one or two of the others. It is possible to define asexuals as people who fit any one (or more) of these three, and something in me likes this and something else recoils at it. The scientist in me does not like disjunctive definitions, but, on the other hand, if we think of asexuality primarily as an identity, the science becomes less relevant. On the other, other hand, the study of asexuality will be an important part of our future visibility and acceptance, and any researcher using self-identification as asexual as an operational definition must be aware of this problem—especially if they want to do a quantitative study. (If they're studying asexual identity, this is not really a problem.) Moreover, one major benefit of the “Asexual: A person who does not experience sexual attraction” definition is that it is short, concise and easily remembered. A definition incorporating sexual desire, attraction and preference would lack this essential quality.

Still, if we look at what actual asexual people say, we can find people defining their asexuality in terms of any of these three things. The standard AVEN definition uses sexual

attraction, but other people conceptualize it differently. For example, even on the AVEN static content, we can find some variation. In the [top ten responses to asexuality](#) the author says her asexuality can be summed up in one sentence. “I don’t want to have sex. Plain and Simple.” She then expands on this: “It is not a case of avoiding sex out of fear, or as a result of a perceived moral obligation, or out of disinterest in starting a family. I just seem to have been spared the development of sexual inclination--maybe I have a biologically nonexistent libido, or maybe I have a psychological disinterest in physical intimacy, or maybe some of both . . . but the end result is simply that I have no interest in sex, and I like it that way.” She does not define her asexuality in terms of sexual attraction. She defines it in terms of sexual preference, and then explains this in terms of sexual desire. This isn’t at all uncommon. Lots of asexuals explain their asexuality in terms these.<sup>13</sup>

Each asexual person is different and has a somewhat different idea of what being asexual means to them. There is no need to stick stringently to the standard AVEN definition or to any other. That really is not what the definition is designed for anyway. It’s supposed to me more of a guidepost for people, something to help people think about their lives and something to be useful in presenting asexuality to audiences unfamiliar with it.

#### *4. Conclusion*

The front page of asexuality.org gives a definition of asexuality in large purple letters near the center of the page: “Asexual: A person who does not experience sexual attraction.” Underlying it is both a drive for a narrow and a broad definition. The drive for a broad definition can be seen in what is omitted: by defining asexuality in terms of sexual attraction, people who feel or do a variety of things typically associated with sexuality can still fit under this definition.

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<sup>13</sup> Googling either one of the following phrases, in quotes, along with the word asexual provides more evidence for this: “I’m not interested in sex.” “I have no desire to have sex.”

The drive for a broad definition can also be seen in an alternate definition found on AVEN: “An asexual is someone who calls themselves asexual.” This definition is theoretically problematic, but pragmatically, it makes a good deal of sense. The drive for a narrow definition can be seen in defining asexuality as “no sexual attraction” rather than “little or no sexual attraction.” This use of a sexual-asexual binary functions as strategic essentialism and is more important for presenting asexuality to people than for conducting asexual discourse.

In addition to these definitions of asexuality, there are alternate definitions that can be used, namely in terms of (little or no) sexual desire or in terms of sexual preference (for no sex.) These definitions are not used officially, but when people explain their asexuality, they sometimes are intermingled with other definitions. At only nine words, the AVEN definition is short, and it is deceptively simple.

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