

Asexuality: the History of a Definition

1. Sources and methods

There are only a few (three that I know of) places where the history of the asexual community has been outlined. On the AVENwiki, the page about AVEN itself has a short history of the site (AVENwiki.) An early, and very brief, outline is given by AVENguy in an early post on AVEN called “ASEXUAL History?” (AVEN.) The longest description I know of is the podcast titled “history lesson” on the podcast/blog “Love from the Asexual Underground” (Jay 2006a.) These are very interesting and I found them helpful, but there is a much that they do not say. Also a podcast called “Asex 101” (Jay 2006b) from "Love from the Asexual Underground," Asex 101 has some information relevant to the topic, though it is not primarily about asexual history.

In trying to do my own research, there are some important sources that still exist. According to the above mentioned outlines of the history of the asexual community, throughout the 90’s people would occasionally describe something like asexuality on some sexuality message boards, but they weren’t able to connect with other asexuals (Jay 2006b.) In 1997, there came out an article called “My Life as an Amoeba” that allowed people to post to it, and thus allowed asexuals to communicate with each other, creating the first online “asexual community.” This article still exists on asexuallove.net, and the original, with comments, exists on [internet archives](http://internet.archives).¹ The most important early (preaven) asexual community was a yahoo group called Haven for the Human Amoeba (HHA.) This still exists and is the most important source of information on the early asexual community. However, there are a few problems. First, there are far too many posts for a mere amateur historian like myself to read all of them—I’ve read a few hundred, but after a while, I started skipping a lot and relied a fair bit on searches. Another problem is that a good number of the sites that are linked have gone dead, including the earliest version of AVEN. Another important source of data comes from AVEN itself—many early posts still exist. For example, if you go to Q & A on the AVEN forums and go to the oldest posts, you can find some of them (I linked to one earlier.) Using the search tool and going to the older posts is helpful here as well but you’ll need to use the advanced search features. Another important source of data is Internet Archive, which has some old websites (for example the Official Nonlibidoist Society’s now defunct website.) I’ve also corresponded with David Jay, and he has helped fill in a few gaps here and there. As a caveat, because of the way I’ve gone about this, my claims are largely a matter of impression. I’ve tried to find as many posts about defining asexuality, but much of this was done by searching for the words “definition” and “define” on HHA and AVEN, and so I have likely overlooked other posts discussing this issue without using these words. Take my history for what it’s worth.

¹ This page has a table of dates. If you click on a date, you get the article and if you scroll down, there is a link for “comments.” That link has the comments up to the date you clicked. Kudos to the avenite who gave me the link.

2. The creation of the definition

My narrative begins with the yahoo group “Haven for the Human Amoeba.” This group was formed in October 2000 but, other than the introductory post, there was no conversation until Feb 2001 when the founder was curious who the other people who had joined (but not said anything) were. In the following discussion, one person asked what an asexual was and the group founder said that being asexual means being not sexual—with reference to people, this means not being sexually attracted to men or women (or horses, cats, dogs or anything else someone might want to joke about.) What relationship, if any, this group had to the “community” formed around the 1997 article isn’t clear. In April 2001, a link to that article was posted by the group’s founder without indication of how long she had known about it. HHA started out as a very small group.

At first, discussion was pretty sporadic. Sometimes, when a new person would join, they would give some kind of introductory post or two; this would create a bit of discussion, and then it would die out for a while—sometimes a month or two—until a new person came and gave an introductory post. Beginning in July 2007, posts had become pretty regular, probably because their numbers had grown enough to generate sustained communication. In August 2008, things really took off, going from 17 posts from Oct 2000 to June 2001, to 18 posts in July 2001, and 130 posts in August 2001.

Meanwhile, in the 2000-2001 school year, there was a college freshman at Wesleyan University by the name of David Jay. David had considered himself asexual since high school, and after going to college, he had gone to the LGBT office trying to find out everything they knew about asexuality. They didn’t know anything about it. During this time, he found the above mentioned “My life as an Amoeba,” and this was the first time he had ever seen the word “asexual” used to refer to people outside of his own writings. This prompted him to create a page about asexuality on his Wesleyan account, calling it AVEN—the Asexual Visibility and Education Network. Before finding that article, he had already been thinking about doing this, but it provided the necessary impetus to get things started. There wasn’t much information on this page—mostly just a definition of the term asexual and his email, asking anyone who knew anything about the subject to contact him. The original definition was something like “a person who is attracted to neither gender.” He then emailed his page to the heads of LGBT groups on college campuses around the US in an attempt to find other asexuals. One of them wrote back to him about the “neither gender” part, informing him about trans issues. In response to this, David modified the definition so that it did not assume a gender binary. This was around March or April of 2001.

This initial definition—a person who is attracted to neither gender—fits well with the (now abandoned) meaning of the AVEN triangle, which I believe was also on the original AVEN page.

The top line is based on the Kinsey scale: one end is other-sex attraction, and the other end is same-sex attraction, allowing for all sorts of combination of these in the middle. The existence of another dimension was postulated —amount of attraction—which formed the vertical axis, bisecting the Kinsey scale. As attraction decreased, gender preference vanishes, making a triangle. After learning about the experiences of other asexuals, this theory didn't last long, but the symbol has survived. In the theory that this symbol represents, the definition “a person who is attracted to neither gender” makes a lot of sense.

In August 2001, the summer after David's freshman year, someone who had joined HHA in July 2001 (and had info about asexuality on her webpage, which is now dead so I have no idea what was on it) found David's site and contacted him, telling him about HHA and asking if he wanted to join a webring she was putting together of asexual sites. It was early August when she contacted him, and a week later he joined HHA. This was shortly after the time that the group had started to get enough members to have sustained conversation. It was also around this time that people began to get an idea of the diversity that existed even within their small group. One person who considered herself asexual said that she masturbates, and another was very confused by this. She thought of asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction (likely reflecting the founder's definition), and thought this was the same as sex drive. (If you don't experience sexual attraction, what's the point?) At this time, the concept of undirected sex-drive was introduced into asexual discourse and several people found it to be useful and adopted it. A couple weeks after David joined, he suggested that the thing that unified people on HHA was not experiencing sexual attraction—this suggests that by this point, he had changed the phrase “attraction/attracted” to “sexually attracted/sexual attraction,” probably on the influence of the founder of HHA's definition and the one or two others who had adopted it. The first instance of the present definition in HHA was in a discussion on defining asexualism (asexualism and asexuality were used interchangeably back then) in a post by David in late September 2001.

In present asexual discourse, one reason the term “sexual attraction” is used in the definition is to contrast it with other kinds of attraction (i.e. emotional/romantic attraction.) When the above definition was proposed, this distinction had not become standard in asexual discourse. As far as I can tell, this issue came up in late December 2001 and was more-or less worked out in January 2002. Interestingly, this requires a change in the meaning of “a person who does not experience sexual attraction” without requiring any change in the language.

Late in 2001, there was a decent amount of discussion on issues involving defining asexuality. The consensus opinion (at least the one expressed the most) was that asexuality is undefinable—each person had their own reason for calling themselves asexual, and there was too much diversity in their (still very small) asexual community for any one definition to cover everyone. However, people also agreed that it would be useful to have a definition that they could give to people—having a definition would be helpful for asexual visibility. This was discussed, and there was no

consensus. David had proposed his definition, but there didn't seem to be any strong support for it or disagreement with it. My impression is that the majority opinion was to think of asexuality not in terms of sexual attraction, but in terms of sexual preference. Seen in this light, the Collective Identity Model makes a lot of sense: No single definition encompasses all asexual people, so the common theme is that asexuals are people who call themselves asexual because they disidentify with sexuality—i.e. they prefer not to have sex, and this affects how they go about forming relationships. (The parts about identity and relationships were particular emphases found in David Jay's writings more than in other members, but by and large, this definition fits pretty well with the early consensus.) In this context, I think the definition "a person who does not experience sexual attraction" was intended to fill the need of a definition to be used for the purpose of asexual visibility rather than as the one that the community was based on.

Once when talking to David Jay about defining asexuality, he said that "A person who does not experience sexual attraction" is the definition used outside the asexual community. "A person who calls himself asexual" is the one used inside the asexual community. Reading the history this way, this makes comment makes perfect sense.

3. The standardization of the definition

Having seen how one person came up with the definition "A person who does not experience sexual attraction," the question becomes how this definition became the standard one in asexual discourse. Once it came to be the definition (prominently displayed) on one asexual website, I think that there are two main questions to address. The first is why AVEN came to be the main asexual website. The second is why AVEN's initial definition continues to be its definition today. I'll start with the first part.

Early in the asexual community, there were some other asexual websites that are linked in HHA, but these have gone dead. In terms of asexual community—places where asexuals can gather and converse with each other—I am aware of three places online that existed early on. The first, HHA, isn't very active anymore. The design isn't particularly good for large groups and other sites do things much better. AVEN first started its forums in May 2002. However, there was one other important site which continues to be active—the asexual community on LiveJournal was formed in April 2002, about a month and a half before the AVEN forums began. If we look at the "about" section of its profile, it says, "This is a community for asexual people to discuss living without sexuality. We welcome anyone with no or very little sexual attraction to others, people with low or no libido, and their allies." One thing you will find is that "a person who does not experience sexual attraction" does not appear. The community was created because the community "asexuals" was considered too judgmental and was generally celibate people (termed "lifestyle asexuals") rather than people with little or no sexual attraction ("classic asexuals") and they spent a lot of time criticizing the sexual behaviors of others. The language that is used on

the asexuality community on LJ's profile is the same sort of language that can be found on the AVEN forums by the founder of asexuality on LJ. (For example, on the [introductory post](#) of the founder of the Official Asexual Society. LJ's founder is paranoidgynandroid on that post.)

The founder of this community on LJ was perfectly aware of AVEN's definition, and in fact, was heavily involved in redesigning AVEN in March 2002, including writing AVEN's general FAQ and creating AVEN's present color scheme (this explains why terms like "little or no sexual attraction" are used in the FAQ, and also why asexuality on LJ's profile links people to AVEN's FAQ for more information.) Perfectly aware of AVEN's definition, no need was felt to adopt it. Given this person's role in early AVEN, I imagine that no important conflict between LJ's definition and AVEN's was seen.

The reasons AVEN has risen to prominence are listed in the above linked "History Lesson." The domain name, asexuality.org, was easier to remember than other asexual sites, the graphics were better, the software was better, David was a better webmaster, and the forums enabled there to be multiple conversations going on at the same time. He also mentions AVEN's inclusive approach, though I'm not really convinced how important this is. The less inclusive sites seemed to me to be somewhat at the fringe of asexuality. (For example, the Official Asexual Society/The Official Nonlibidoist Society's design made it largely a one-woman show and didn't give people much of a chance to communicate with one another the way AVEN or LJ did, meaning that it could not be the basis of enabling large numbers of asexuals to connect with each other.) If you read the early LJ posts, you'll find that in several key aspects, it actually has a more inclusive approach than AVEN (LJ's definition includes people who experience very little sexual attraction, people who experience sexual attraction but have such a low sex-they feel no desire to act on it, and a sharp distinction between asexuality and celibacy is not made.) My suspicion is that AVEN's inclusive approach was a necessary condition for its rise to prominence, but not a particularly strong factor since other sites also had inclusive approaches.

Another important factor is that once AVEN started to be an important site, this created positive feedback--whenever it was mentioned in an article about asexuality, it's the page that people would go to for more information, increasing its traffic and membership. One big advantage of having the asexuality.org site rather than the HHA yahoo group, is that it was findable on google, so that people who typed in asexual came to be able to connect with other asexual people.

My intuition tells me that the main reason for AVEN's success is its superior design, especially with the forums, which enables it to do a lot more than LJ can. (Which LJ has no problem with because it's close connection with AVEN predates its founding. Also, in July 2002, the founder of asexuality on LJ directed people over to AVEN, highly recommending it, especially because they were having more discussion than on the LJ community.) Because of AVEN's forum design, people are able to participate in the discussions and feel like they have a place in the asexual

community—this is important for keeping them involved. More than this, as the site grew, there came to be more work to be done than any single person could do. By including additional people in having key roles—key roles in maintaining the site, moderating the forums, doing visibility and education work, talking to people in the media, etc.—this makes those people more involved and have a greater sense of investment in the asexual community. In order for the asexual community to grow, this is necessary. It cannot be just a one-person show (like the Official Asexual Society had been.)

Now that we've seen how the present definition came to be the one on AVEN's mainpage and how AVEN came to be the main asexual site, the question is why the definition hasn't changed during AVEN's rise to prominence. I think the first major reason is definitional inertia—once a definition is there on the main page, it's going to be harder to change than if there was no “standard” definition and people were trying to hammer one out in a discussion somewhere. Not just that, but the way it is portrayed is significant. LJ more or less has a definition, but it isn't clearly stated in an easily quotable form and you have to read through the page a bit to get to it. But on asexuality.org, “Asexual: A person who does not experience sexual attraction” is in big letters right in the middle of the screen so that it stands out and is one of the very first things people see when coming to the site.

The issue of defining asexuality didn't come up much in early AVEN discussions. There was one thread, several months after the forums were created where David opened up the question of whether anyone wanted to change the definition of asexuality. (The context, as it turns out, was making T-shirts. If people are going to buy asexual T-shirts, is there a different definition they would rather exhibit via their clothing?) One person suggested saying that asexuals are people who have little or no sex-drive, but this was rejected because of the fact that some asexuals have an “undirected sex-drive.” Other than this, no one else proposed any alternatives. In response to the “little or no” part of the rejected alternative, David mentioned a couple possible modifications: “experiences little or no sexual attraction” or “experiences negligible sexual attraction.” He acknowledged these to be more accurate but was afraid that they would be confusing. No one else commented on this, and no other definitions were proposed.

There was one thread I've found in 2002 in which one person tries to attack AVEN's definition, but the arguments don't make a lot of sense. The majority opinion on that thread indicates that most people were perfectly aware of problems with the AVEN definition—it has difficulties dealing with the gray areas—but people didn't seem to want to change the definition because they recognized that any definition is going to run into similar problems. There is no perfect definition of asexuality.

From time to time, there have been some people proposing alternative definitions, but these tend to have even bigger problems than the standard definition, and none of these proposals has

managed to gain widespread support. The longer the standard definition is on AVEN's frontpage, the more inertia it gains. As AVEN became larger and was managed not by a single person, but by a group of admods, this makes changing the definition even harder. Also, people have become used to the definition "a person who does not experience sexual attraction," and for many it is an important part of their decision to identify as asexual, so this adds to the definitional inertia. Another reason the definition has persisted is that a lot of people find that it makes sense to them—it is sexual attraction that they don't feel.

4. Consequences of the definition

The standardization of this definition has had significant consequences, some of which were unforeseeable and unintended.

In the early asexual community, many people came with preconceived ideas of what asexuality was, but after they came to have a better understanding of the other people identifying as asexual, there came to be a general consensus that the term was undefinable. However, it was also recognized that having a definition would be important for explaining asexuality to people. The definition that came to dominate was the one presented on the main page of the asexual site that came to be the most important one in the asexual community. That site came to dominate primarily because of its superior design, and its definition persisted because most people didn't object to it, and the few times that there was serious advocacy for an alternate definition, the proposed alternatives tended to have even more problems than the (now) standard definition.

In effect, it has come to be the definition primarily because it is the definition authoritatively presented to newcomers to asexuality and is quoted frequently on the forums, especially to questioning people, who can then be referred to static content on the site. Because parts of the static content (especially the parts that aren't ascribed to anyone) are interpreted as being the official view of the asexual community, and they, in effect, become the official view—the understanding of asexuality that AVEN gives plays a fundamental part for many people's decisions of whether or not to self-define as asexual. The AVEN definition has a strong influence on whether or not someone identifies as asexual. In a sense, the asexual community did not create the definition; the definition created the community.

My impression from the early dialogue that I've read is that, by and large, the AVEN definition *was not* adopted by people who first came to the asexual community before AVEN's forums came to dominate asexual discourse. But they generally didn't object to it either. Each person came up with their own definition, if they bothered with one at all. However, once AVEN became the place that the majority of people new to asexuality went, AVEN's definition came to be the first introduction to asexuality people had—especially because of its prominent display on the main page—and it came to be more influential in asexual discourse.

One consequence of the standard definition is the creation of the category “Gray A’s” and the like. Since the official definition of an asexual is a person who does not experience sexual attraction (categorically), this creates a group of people who identify with asexuality and who come close to the definition but don’t quite fit it, but they still want to be part of the asexual community even though the definition technically excludes them. The standard definition was never intended to exclude these people (recall that the AVEN triangle was equipped, from the beginning, with a gradient between asexual and sexual.) Combined with an inclusive approach that discourages strict readings of the definition and prohibits attempts to enforce it, there became a need to understand how to categorize these people. As a result, all sorts of typologies have been created. My suspicion is that if a definition like the one used by the founder of asexuality on LJ had come to dominate (asexuals are people with little or no sexual attraction or people who experience sexual attraction but have low or no sex drive and thus are unmotivated to act on that sexual attraction), there would be no reason to create such schemas.

I also think that the standard definition has made the understanding of asexuality underlying the collective identity model obsolete. That model, much more than the standard definition, represented a consensus view in the early asexual community—each person had their own reason for considering themselves asexual (that is, not sexual,) and no single definition could cover everyone. The main thing that united people was a sense of being “not sexual” or a disidentification with sexuality. Several people thought of asexuality in terms of sexual preference rather than sexual attraction. The people involved in HHA were almost entirely people who had somehow managed to find the group on their own—possibly by just wandering in or by searching yahoo groups for the term “asexual” or something along these lines. There was not a lot of information for newcomers, (it seems that one of the early asexual sites had an FAQ, but I don’t know what it said,) and there were not a lot of stories that were posted (a few, but they were pretty brief.) As a result, the sorts of people who would have managed to find the site and decide to call themselves asexual probably differ (in the aggregate) a fair bit from people who now manage to find one of the main asexual sites and decide to call themselves asexual now that there is a lot more asexual visibility. I would expect that the people in the gray areas—now they often take a long time to decide if they are asexual or not—would have been much less likely to find HHA and if they did, less likely to identify as asexual than similar sorts of people today.

In the present asexual community, there are a lot of people who did not think of coming up with the term asexual on their own and when first hearing/reading it, didn’t think it really fits because they don’t think of themselves as being “not sexual.” However, later they go to some asexual site, read about it and decide that they are asexual. When these people decide this, it is not from having a strong sense of not being sexual but because they feel they fit the definition or they feel they can relate to the stories of other people calling themselves asexual. In my case, I had a

strong sense of being different in a way I couldn't put my finger on, but I didn't think of myself as being "not sexual." I identify as asexual because I feel that "experiencing little or no sexual attraction" fits and helps me to make sense of that difference that I hadn't been able to figure out what it was.

Likely the biggest unforeseen consequence of defining asexuality as not experiencing sexual attraction is that there are people who feel this definition fits them but don't "disidentify with sexuality" or who are not clearly asexual with respect to sexual preference. There are people who identify as asexual who find that they can enjoy some aspects of partnered sexuality, even though they don't feel sexual attraction. There are also people who don't experience sexual attraction who are at least curious about what sex would be like. They may feel no motivation to do anything about this curiosity but consider themselves open to the possibility in the right circumstances should such a situation present itself. For such a person, their sexual preference is difficult to characterize, but they may have perfectly good reasons to identify as asexual. I think it is these consequences of the standard definition of asexuality that make the collective identity model (in its present formulation) obsolete. Redefining asexual identity would be an interesting (though difficult) thing to do, especially since what creates asexual identity is a common matrix of effects of little or no sexual attraction within present day social contexts—no asexual person experiences all of these effects, but most members experience several of them in overlapping ways, and thus in the creation of the identity "asexual," centered around not experiencing sexual attraction, people are able to find others among the group "asexuals" who report things that sound very much like their own experience—especially in a context where the person had previously never heard of anyone else sharing that experience.

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