

## **Out of the Shadow and Into the Light: New Data Comparing Asexual and Sexual Undergraduates**

Scott S. Hall

Department of Early Childhood, Youth, and Family Studies, Ball State University

David Knox

Department of Sociology, East Carolina University

I. Joyce Chang

Child and Family Development Program, University of Central Missouri

Email: [chang@ucmo.edu](mailto:chang@ucmo.edu)

### **Abstract**

Drawing from a large dataset of over 13,000 college students, this research compared 75 self-identified asexual individuals with heterosexual, bisexual, and gay/lesbian undergraduates. The results revealed that asexual individuals were less likely to have engaged in sexual behaviors (oral sex, anal sex, friends with benefits, sexual intercourse, hooking up) than heterosexual, bisexual, and gay or lesbian individuals. Asexual and heterosexual individuals were similar in endorsing absolutist sexual values, having a lower willingness to cohabit, and reporting less likelihood of having masturbated. Asexual individuals were similar to other sexual minorities in being less religious and having more positive attitudes toward LGB issues. A multinomial logistic regression analysis using all the variables with significant differences at the bivariate level revealed similar findings, though asexual individuals differed most dramatically in their lower levels of sexual experience when compared to gay/lesbian individuals. Future researchers are encouraged to consider reframing asexuality as more sex positive so as to recognize diversity and empower asexual individuals.

### **Introduction**

In recent decades, the concept of asexuality has increased in visibility and scientific legitimacy (Cerankowski & Milks, 2014). However, defining and identifying asexuality continues to be a challenge, particularly since concepts of sexual identity, sexual behavior, and sexual attraction can diverge (Foster et al., 2019; Geary et al., 2018). Most commonly, asexuality has been framed as an absence of sexual attraction to others, relatively low sexual behavior, or declaring one's sexual identity as asexual (Gupta, 2017; Poston & Baumle, 2010). Asexuality has also been thought of as being on the low end of a sexual desire spectrum. Despite an increase in social visibility, asexual individuals generally report feeling isolated and disconnected as they struggle to relate to others who experience sexual attraction (Carrigan, 2011; Gupta, 2017).

Some scholars have suggested that America is a sex-negative society and that sexuality related concepts are frequently associated with negative connotations (Williams et al., 2016). Yet, asexuality has long been framed from a deficit or pathological perspective (Flanigan &

Peters, 2020). Many asexual individuals feel stigmatized and experience pressure to engage in sexual behavior (Carrigan, 2011; Gupta, 2017; Rothblum et al., 2020). This negative view fails to capture the fact that asexual individuals often see themselves as normal even though their sexual frequencies are lower when compared to heterosexual, bisexual and gay/lesbian individuals. Nevertheless, the process of asexual self-definition is frequently unique and challenging (Foster et al., 2019), and merely recruiting self-identified asexual participants may not be the ideal vehicle to conduct research on this topic (Van Houdenhove et al., 2017).

Asexuality can be conceptualized as a sexual orientation. While heterosexual and gay/lesbian individuals are attracted to other and same sex individuals, asexual individuals often report little or no sexual interest. However, in a study of 1,093 persons on the asexual spectrum, 30% of asexuals, 56% of graysexuals (the person only rarely experiences sexual attraction), and 62% of demisexuals (sexual attraction if in love) reported having had sexual intercourse (Hille et al., 2020). When asexual and graysexual individuals consented to engage in sexual behavior, their motivation was primarily to please the partner. The current study sheds light on variations in sexual behavior among asexual individuals.

Acquiring data on asexual individuals can be challenging. The few nationally-representative samples indicate that up to about 1% of populations from select Western countries identify as asexual (see Bogaert, 2004 for the United Kingdom; and Richters et al., 2014 for Australia). A national sample in the United States for which asexuality was indirectly measured resulted in a similar estimate (Poston & Baumle, 2010). Thus, generating samples with significant proportions of asexual individuals that are conducive to statistical comparisons with other groups requires special effort. The data from nationally representative samples typically lack a broad range of specific items that help investigate the unique relational and sexual lives of asexual individuals.

Convenience samples often lack comparison groups and include only a handful of asexual individuals, or have focused on only certain elements of the lives of asexual individuals, such as stigma or mental health. However, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) is a large sample of asexual individuals from which a number of studies have sampled, but such research is limited by a significant reliance on snowball sampling and includes no comparison groups. In light of such sampling challenges, much of the research on asexuality is qualitative and focuses on the lived experiences of coming to terms with and navigating one's sexual self. In short, various efforts to analyze and compare asexual individuals have faced multiple tradeoffs as they balance their unique shortcomings with their distinct contributions that collectively add to an understanding of this frequently overlooked population.

The current study included a unique approach by assembling data from a substantive number of asexual individuals. Though not a national sample, the strength of this approach allowed for statistical comparisons with other sexual orientations. The focus of the study included variables related to relationship and sexual values, intentions, and experiences that extended beyond what has been statistically tested in prior investigations.

### *Asexual Individuals and Sexuality*

Asexual individuals tend to share certain characteristics in regard to sexual behavior, intentions, and attitudes. As one might expect, previous data has confirmed that asexual individuals are less likely to report having experienced sex, to report less frequent sexual activity, and to report fewer sexual partners than others (Bogaert, 2004; Prause & Graham, 2007; Rothblum et al., 2020). However, it is not uncommon for asexuals to report having had sex (Ginoza et al., 2014; Rothblum et al., 2020), though some describe their experience as repulsive (Ginoza et al., 2014). Asexual individuals may also report sexual arousal and being stimulated to orgasm, usually without having associated feelings of emotional arousal or affection (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). More typically, they experience little if any anticipation toward having sex and subsequent closeness to a partner that is common among more sexual individuals (Brotto et al., 2010). Agreement to participate in sexual behavior can be motivated by the desire to please a partner (Ginoza et al., 2014). Alternatively, sexual behavior may occur out of curiosity, especially for one's first sexual experience (Van Houdenhove et al. 2015). Masturbation is also less common among asexual individuals and is also less likely to be associated with sexual fantasy (Brotto, et al, 2010; Yule et al., 2014).

The intersection between asexuality and gender has been noted. Past research has found asexual people are more likely to be women (Bauer et al., 2020; Bogaert, 2004; Greaves et al., 2017). This gender effect could be a manifestation of societal expectations that can minimize female sexual expression and elevate male sexual expression (Rothblum et al., 2020). In regard to thoughts toward sexuality, in one study, asexual women evidenced higher rates of sexually conservative beliefs and negative beliefs about aging and sexuality compared to other women; asexual men reported more conservative beliefs and were more likely to believe in gendered sexual stereotypes compared to other men (Carvalho et al., 2017). Such sexual beliefs have coincided with a tendency in some studies for asexual individuals to report being more religious than other groups (Bogaert, 2004; Poston & Baume, 2010), though research on this association is inconsistent (Aicken et al., 2013). The current study investigated similar associations and beliefs while analyzing other relational and sexual variables (e.g., defining sex, hooking up) to expand scientific knowledge about the undergraduate asexual population.

There is also ambiguity about whether asexuality is an orientation similar to other sexual minorities. Some asexual individuals have reported that they initially thought they might be gay because of no sexual attraction toward the other sex, but eventually identified themselves as asexual once they learned more about this concept/orientation (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2018). Other individuals sometimes assumed asexual individuals were gay and even questioned the reality of the concept of asexuality (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2018).

Asexual individuals commonly feel an affiliation with the larger LGBTQ community (Rothblum et al., 2020) and, therefore, could share similar values and perspectives and have generally sympathetic views toward LGBTQ issues. However, some asexual individuals have reported feeling excluded by this community (Ginoza et al., 2014) which has resulted in them feeling less sympathetic. Some research also indicates a greater propensity for asexual individuals to report being non-binary or gender fluid (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Rothblum et al., 2020). A non-binary orientation could contribute to more openness toward diverse forms of

sexual identity and expression (Chasin, 2011). In short, consensus is lacking as to whether asexual individuals belong to a specific orientation and how they fit within conventional classifications of sexuality and gender, at least for some cases (or subsets of asexual individuals).

Sexual attraction and desire, however, are only part of the identity equation. Though less likely to be in a romantic relationship (Bogaert, 2013; Brotto et al., 2010), it is common for asexual individuals to report some romantic attraction and to desire a romantic (yet nonsexual) relationship (Ginoza et al., 2014; Gupta, 2017). Conversely, some individuals, including those who identify as asexual, report having no romantic feelings toward others regardless of whether they engage in a sexual relationship (Antonsen et al., 2020). Some asexual individuals report having romantic attraction toward same sex individuals while others report attraction toward different sex individuals (Ginoza et al., 2014). Scholars have argued that some level of independent functioning of romantic and sexual attractions exists, suggesting that the targets for both attractions do not always align (Diamond, 2003; Scherrer, 2010); this creates some ambiguity about sexual orientation, or at least suggests a general oversimplification of how we tend to categorize people.

An important consideration in research on potentially unique aspects of asexual individuals is the group to which they are compared. Sometimes asexual individuals have been compared with all sexual individuals as a single group, sometimes they have been compared with straight individuals, and sometimes with other sexual minorities. The current study compared undergraduate asexual individuals with three groups: those who identified as heterosexual, those who identified as bisexual, and those who identified as either gay or lesbian. Thus, in addition to investigating a wider array of relational and sexual behavior, values, and intentions variables for asexual individuals, the current study focused on the overarching question as to the unique characteristics of these asexual individuals as a group.

Consistent with previous research, it was expected that asexual individuals in this sample would report less sexual experience. The rest of the associations were more exploratory. It is possible that asexual individuals have intentions, beliefs, and values that are less relationship oriented, at least compared to some sexual identity groups. However, sexual values and beliefs are influenced by the larger culture shared by those of all sexual identities, yet individuals may process them according to their personal relevance. Thus, it would not be surprising if asexual individuals were quite similar or different in such regard.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The sample for this research was drawn from participants who completed the “College Student Attitudes and Behaviors Survey” (developed by the first and third authors). The survey consisted of 100 questions including sexual orientation, demographic characteristics, sexual values and behaviors. This data set has been the source of several published articles, though the exact samples used have differed depending on the study objectives (e.g., time span of sampling, age range of sample, sexual orientation—those who identified as “other” for sexual orientation may have been excluded). Over 13,000 undergraduates completed the survey from 2004 to 2019

from two large universities in the United States, one in the Southeast and the other in the Midwest. Students at the two universities were emailed a link to an anonymous online questionnaire and asked to participate. Participants were provided no compensation. Students were oversampled from courses pertaining to marriage and family. The extended time span for the sample allowed for data to be gathered from a substantial number of individuals who identified as asexual, as well as other minority sexual identities.

Participants were categorized based on what they considered their sexual identity from the following options: heterosexual, bisexual, gay male, gay female, or other (followed by an open space for explaining “other”). Those who selected “other” and subsequently declared themselves to be “asexual” (or a comparable description such as experiencing only romantic attraction but not sexual attraction) were coded as asexual. All individuals coded as asexual or who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual were retained in the sample, while a comparable number of individuals who identified as heterosexual were randomly selected for comparison (using the “select cases” command in SPSS).

This survey was not designed to be particularly sensitive to assessing asexuality, hence “asexual” was not offered as an option, nor were students able to select multiple identities. Some research suggests that listing “asexual” as an option can identify individuals who might be overlooked when only given the option to write in their sexual identity (Prause & Graham, 2007), so it is possible that other individuals with low sexual attraction were classified differently. Furthermore, those who identified as asexual might be more secure and conceivably more insightful about their identity by virtue of assigning it a specific label, thus possibly representing a subset of asexual individuals who might be distinct from a broader group of individuals.

The total sample included 2,631 undergraduates (76.1% female and 23.9% male). The racial identity was predominately white (81.4%) with approximately two-thirds being first- or second-year undergraduates. Just over half of the participants (56.7%) were emotionally involved or in a romantic relationship with one person, 34.6% were not dating, and 8.7% were casually dating. Sexual identity groups consisted of the following numbers of participants: 1,193 identified as heterosexual, 1,004 identified as bisexual, 432 identified as gay or lesbian, and 75 identified as asexual. Sexual identities were not split by gender to avoid dividing up the modestly-sized group of asexual individuals, 81% of which identified as female and the rest as male.

## **Measures**

### *Background variables*

Background variables were coded for the participants, including the four types of sexual identity (heterosexual, bisexual, gay/lesbian, and asexual), sex (male, female) and race (White, Black, Hispanic, other). Current relationship status (e.g., not dating or involved with anyone, casually dating more than one person, emotionally involved with one person) was dichotomized to “in a relationship” and “not in a relationship.” Being religious consisted of a single item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all religious” to “very religious.”

### *Relationship perspectives and intentions*

Several survey items were created to capture beliefs and intentions related to love and relationships. The following items were responded to with a 5-point agreement scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree): “I am a jealous person” and “I would live with a partner I was not married to.” Sexual values were assessed by an item in which respondents chose one of three choices: “The sexual value which best describes me is...” Options were, “absolutism - intercourse before marriage is wrong,” “relativism - if you are in a loving relationship, intercourse is ok even if not married,” and “hedonism - if it feels good, do it - being in love or being married don’t matter.” An additional dichotomous variable (dummy coded, 1=yes, 0=no) was as follows: “If I ‘hooked up’ with the right person and felt good about our interaction, I could have sexual intercourse, cunnilingus or fellatio the first time I met someone.”

### *Beliefs and behaviors related to sexuality*

A dichotomous variable (dummy coded, 1=yes, 0=no) was as follows “Having sex is having sexual intercourse, not having oral sex.” Three items were created that focused on sexual identity issues (5-point agreement scales, 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The first addressed the belief that children raised by a same-sex couple would more likely become gay; the second was about being comfortable when around someone who is gay; the third was the belief that it is better to be straight than gay. Seven dichotomous items (no/yes) focused on sexual behavior, namely whether the participant had “hooked up (sex upon first time meeting each other),” been in a “friends with benefits” relationship, masturbated, given oral sex, received oral sex, had anal sex, and had “intercourse (penis in vagina).”

## **Results**

### *Unique Characteristics*

To explore the scope of variation within these asexual undergraduates and to test for their unique characteristics, univariate tests were conducted for each variable (see Table 1). Chi square analysis and *t*-tests revealed that on background variables the groups did not differ by race or age, but did differ by sex of respondent, with the gay/lesbian group having a larger proportion of males than the other groups (51% compared to about 20% in the other groups). The majority of asexual individuals (81.3 %) identified as female. The asexual respondents were less likely to be in a current relationship than the other groups but nevertheless included a substantial proportion in a relationship (37.8%). The groups differed on mean religiousness with the heterosexual group standing out as being more religious than the other groups. Regarding relationship perspectives and intentions, the asexual group stood out as being the least jealous and by far the least likely to anticipate hooking up with someone (9.3% compared to 30-55%). They were more similar to the heterosexual group in having a relatively low hedonistic sexual value system and willingness to cohabit with someone, but more similar with the bisexual and gay/lesbian group on having a relativistic sexual value (lower than for heterosexual individuals, about 50% compared to 63%).

Table 1: Bivariate results (chi-square and t-tests) for all variables (N=2,526)

	Heterosexual (n = 1193)		Bisexual (n = 1004)		Gay/Lesbian (n = 432)
<u>Background</u>					
Sex (male)	21.5%		14.5% <sup>a</sup>		51.4%
Race (White)	80.7%		80.6%		84.2%
Age (M, SD)	19.94	(3.34)	19.88	(2.63)	20.31
In a relationship	58.5% <sup>a</sup>		59.3% <sup>a</sup>		48.7% <sup>b</sup>
Religious (M, SD)	3.08	(1.27)	2.10 <sup>a</sup>	(1.16)	2.25 <sup>a</sup>
<u>Relationship Perspectives/Intent</u>					
Jealous (M, SD)	3.36 <sup>a</sup>	(1.02)	3.33 <sup>ab</sup>	(1.22)	3.46 <sup>a</sup>
<u>Sexual Values</u>					
Absolute	15.3% <sup>a</sup>		2.9% <sup>b</sup>		2.6% <sup>b</sup>
Relative	63.3% <sup>a</sup>		47.2% <sup>b</sup>		55.8% <sup>c</sup>
Hedonic	21.4%		49.9%		41.6% <sup>a</sup>
I would cohabit with a partner	78.6% <sup>a</sup>		94.7% <sup>b</sup>		97.2% <sup>b</sup>
I would hook up	29.8%		51.5% <sup>a</sup>		54.5% <sup>a</sup>
<u>Sexual Beliefs and Experience</u>					
Agree oral sex is not sex	57%		41.8%		26% <sup>a</sup>
Same sex parents=gay child (M, SD)	2.41	(1.07)	1.59 <sup>a</sup>	(.82)	1.45 <sup>b</sup>
Comfortable around gay person (M, SD)	4.35	(.82)	4.86 <sup>a</sup>	(.49)	4.9 <sup>a</sup>
Better to be hetero than gay (M, SD)	2.89	(1.22)	1.71 <sup>a</sup>	(.94)	1.72 <sup>a</sup>
I have hooked up	24.6%		33.4% <sup>a</sup>		37.4% <sup>a</sup>
I have had friends with benefits	43.2%		52.4% <sup>a</sup>		51.7% <sup>a</sup>
I have masturbated	75.3% <sup>a</sup>		94.4% <sup>b</sup>		96% <sup>b</sup>
I have given oral sex	74.5%		80.9% <sup>a</sup>		81% <sup>a</sup>
I have received oral sex	77.1% <sup>a</sup>		80.7% <sup>a</sup>		82.5% <sup>a</sup>
I have had anal sex	22.4%		37.5%		46.2%
I have had vaginal intercourse	74.2% <sup>a</sup>		72.3% <sup>a</sup>		23.6% <sup>b</sup>

<sup>abcd</sup> in the same row with the same superscript do not differ significantly

\* = The *p*-value for the respective omnibus Chi-square test or ANOVA.

### *Sexual Beliefs and Experience*

Regarding sexual beliefs and experience, the asexual group stood out by having smaller proportions who reported having participated in sexual activity, especially having hooked up (6.7%), having had a “friends with benefits” experience (12%), giving or receiving oral sex (about 26% each), having had anal sex (4%), and having had vaginal intercourse (about 23%). Nevertheless, nearly 80% had masturbated and, as indicated above, about a quarter reported having had oral sex and vaginal intercourse--thus indicating a substantial level of sexual experience for those identifying as asexual. Hooking up, friends with benefits, and anal sex were rare among these asexual respondents. Overall, the proportions for the sexual behavior variables among asexual individuals tended to be closer to the proportions for the heterosexual group than those of the bisexual and gay/lesbian groups (these latter two groups reported the highest proportions). Conversely, on issues related to defining sex (whether oral sex is considered sex), and especially attitudes related to homosexuality, the asexual group was more similar to the other sexual minority groups.

### *Comparing Asexual Undergraduates with Others*

Regression analysis was used to account for overlapping associations among the variables as they relate to the sexuality groups. This would help identify unique associations from specific variables that would appear to be driving the differences across the sexuality groups. However, given that the grouping variable is categorical (not a scale) but not dichotomous, a multinomial logistic regression was conducted that used the asexual group as the comparison group. This analysis predicts the likelihood that someone would belong to each sexual identity group compared to the asexual group (e.g., someone in a relationship is more likely by so much to be in the heterosexual group than the asexual group; someone in a relationship is more likely by so much to be in the bisexual group than the asexual group). It does not compare every group with each group directly. This analysis is appropriate for models with dichotomous and continuous dependent variables (which is the case with the data for the current study). Only the background variables that were significant at the univariate level were included in the model (Table 2). This set of independent variables explained significant variability in group membership [ $X^2(57, N=2,526) = 1,905.2, p < .001$ ]. Though fewer variables statistically differed among the groups—especially the relationship perspectives/intent, the multivariate findings were similar to the univariate findings. In particular, asexual individuals stood out by being less likely to be jealous, to be less willing to hook up, and to have had a smaller variety of sexual experiences. They were generally more similar to the heterosexual group in their odds of having had various sexual experiences, especially in comparison with the gay/lesbian group. Asexual individuals were generally more similar to the bisexual and gay/lesbian groups concerning the variables about beliefs related to homosexuality.

Table : Multinomial logistic coefficients and odds ratios comparing groups to “Asexual”  
(N =2,526)

	<u>Heterosexual</u>		<u>Bisexual</u>		<u>Gay/Lesbian</u>	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
<u>Background</u>						
Sex (male)	- 0.39	0.68	- 0.83	0.44*	0.79	2.21*
In a relationship	0.02	1.02	0.01	1.01	0.11	1.11
Religious	0.25	1.28*	0.02	1.02	0.10	1.11
<u>Relationship</u>						
<u>Perspectives/Intent</u>						
Jealous	0.11	1.11	0.09	1.09	0.27	1.31*
Relative Sexual Value <sup>a</sup>	- 0.02	0.98	0.15	1.16	0.61	1.84
Hedonic Sexual Value	- 1.15	0.32	- 0.38	0.68	- 0.36	0.69
I would cohabit with a partner	- 0.01	0.99	0.44	1.55	0.86	2.35
I would hook up	1.49	4.42**	1.84	6.31***	1.70	5.48***
<u>Sexual Beliefs and Experience</u>						
Agree oral sex is not sex	0.90	2.46**	0.39	1.48	- 0.71	0.49*
Same sex parents=gay child	0.14	1.15	- 0.15	0.86	- 0.39	0.68*
Comfortable around gay person	- 0.68	0.51*	- 0.16	0.85	0.14	1.15
Better to be hetero than gay	0.59	1.81***	0.07	1.07	0.08	1.09
I have hooked up	- 0.23	0.79	- 0.26	0.77	0.13	1.14
I have had friends with benefits	0.45	1.58	0.61	1.84	1.04	2.84*
I have masturbated	- 0.20	0.82	0.77	2.16*	0.80	2.22
I have given oral sex	0.46	1.58	0.90	2.45	1.21	3.36*
I have received oral sex	0.53	1.71	0.48	1.61	1.29	3.63*
I have had anal sex	0.76	2.15	1.35	3.87*	1.83	6.21**
I have had vaginal intercourse	1.27	3.57**	0.17	1.19	- 2.62	0.07***

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

<sup>a</sup>The reference category is absolute sexual value

## Discussion

### *Asexuality, Relationships, and Sexual Experience*

Asexuality has been generally overlooked in sexuality research and has been ambiguously defined. A focus on sexual behavior has been a common way of defining the term (Geary et al., 2018). The current study provided evidence of a strong connection between describing one's self as "asexual" and reporting relatively minimal sexual experience. In the multi-variate model, asexual individuals did not differ statistically from heterosexual individuals on most sexual behavior, though the coefficients (and sizable odds ratios) trended toward the asexual individuals having less sexual experience and might have reached significance with a larger sample of asexual individuals. Similar to previous research (Ginoza et al., 2014; Rothblum et al., 2020), this research challenged any assumption that asexual individuals as a group completely abstain from sex or are sexually unresponsive. Yet, not all sexual behaviors were equally common among asexual individuals. The proportion of these asexual undergraduates who had hooked up with someone was four to five times smaller than the proportions of other individuals who had done so. Such a difference would be expected if hookups were primarily driven by sexual desire. That nearly seven percent of asexual individuals had hooked up, and over nine percent would be willing to hookup if given the opportunity, suggests that hookups may provide other functions (e.g., curiosity, potential relationship) (Freitas, 2013). Other asexual individuals might hook up out of pressure to conform to the expected cultural sexual norm during college (Reiber & Garcia, 2010).

As expected, asexual undergraduates were also disproportionately (by a factor of about four) less likely to report having had a friend with benefits experience. One possible explanation is that casual sexual behavior, such as hooking up or friends with benefits, is not highly desired by asexual individuals. Asexual individuals may choose to engage in partner sex for relationship stability (Rothblum et al., 2020) but not necessarily feel compelled to participate in sex-focused activities. With the high prevalence of casual sex among emerging adults and our society's tendency to pathologize the absence of sexual desire and motivation, studying casual sexual behaviors through the perspective of asexuality could lend further nuance to our understanding of sexual behavior (Gupta, 2017). It is important to note that the sexual behavior measures only captured whether a behavior had occurred at least once.

While behavior is one key indicator of sexual identity, other factors such as desire, attraction, and self-identification may also distinguish asexual individuals (Geary et al., 2018; Sherrer, 2010). In the current study, the intention to hook up was much less common for these asexual undergraduates—three to five times, proportionally.

Asexual individuals also reported the lowest jealousy scores, especially compared to gay or lesbian individuals. Jealousy is often associated with sexual and reproductive threat, but it can also apply to non-sexual relationships (DeSteno et al., 2006). The sexual elements so commonly assumed about jealousy seem irrelevant to asexual individuals, which could explain the relatively lower propensity of self-reported jealousy in the sample. Additionally, the reported frequencies suggest that a smaller proportion of asexual individuals were in a relationship, which could reflect a lower interest in being in a relationship, perhaps as a means to avoid the sexual demands

of being in one. Or, it may be more difficult to find a romantic partner willing to accept a nonsexual partner. In either case, the lower proportion of asexual individuals being in a relationship could play a role in lowering an asexual individual's potential to be jealous. It is also possible that some asexual individuals were in open relationships, yielding to other sexually active individuals to fulfill their partners, which could be interpreted more as a source of relief than a source of jealousy. However, jealousy was not absent for asexual individuals as a group. It is possible that some of these asexual undergraduates were romantically inclined (Ginoza et al., 2014) and attracted to sexual individuals, in which case they could feel especially threatened by other sexual individuals more willing to behave sexually with the partner. More nuanced measures of relationship circumstances could help clarify differences in jealousy levels between asexual individuals and other sexual individuals and variation within the asexual identity group.

Another subjective element of sexuality stood out for these asexual undergraduates, namely, whether oral sex was to be equated with "sex." Asexual individuals were generally more likely to equate the two, especially compared to heterosexual and bisexual individuals; though in the multivariate model they were more likely to equate the two than were gay and lesbian individuals. This finding might suggest that asexual individual assign some unique meanings to sexual behavior—though perhaps that meaning could be influenced by not having engaged in sexual behavior. The absence of such behavior is likely connected to lesser desire to do so, which could be connected to meanings assigned to sexuality, indicating potential non-linear processes involving meaning, desire, and behavior. Qualitative investigations may be better suited for unraveling and interpreting such processes. Taken together, the findings of the current study support the notion that asexual individuals reported some distinctions in their behaviors, intentions, and views on some issues related to sexuality.

### *Identity Issues*

A focus of the study was related to classifying asexuality as an identity, and more specifically, which identity, if any, is most similar or should serve as a baseline or comparison group for asexual individuals. At the bivariate level, asexual individuals clearly stood apart from the other groups on sexual experience (though at the multi-variate level there were fewer statistical differences) but were also similar to other groups in distinct ways. Asexual individuals were most similar to heterosexual individuals in three ways (endorsing absolutism, less likely to cohabit, fewer have masturbated), were most similar to bisexual individuals in two ways (less likely jealous, less likely than heterosexual but more likely than gay to think gay parents produce gay children), were most similar to gay/lesbian individuals in three ways (less likely to be in a relationship, less likely than heterosexuals but more likely than bisexuals to be hedonistic, less likely to agree that oral sex is not sex), and were most similar to both the bisexual and gay/lesbian individuals in three ways (less religious, more comfortable being around someone who is gay, less agreement that it is better to be heterosexual than gay). By tally alone, these patterns suggest that asexuality is not necessarily a facet of any other specific identity.

However, asexual individuals arguably had more in common with the other sexual minority groups, though that largely had to do with similar attitudes toward LGB issues. It is possible that a shared minority status contributed to sympathetic perspectives, or those who had a clear enough sense of their sexuality to identify as asexual had exposed themselves to more affirming

perspectives that assisted them in the identification process and that also fostered sympathy toward other sexual identities. Overall, some of the shared similarity between the asexual individual and the other sexual minority groups might also be accounted for by a subgroup of asexual individuals who experience same-sex romantic attractions and identify more with someone who is gay or lesbian (Ginoza et al., 2014). This is one example of how classifying and comparing asexuality can be particularly nuanced and challenging. Similarly, by just focusing on sexual behavior, researchers risk conflating deliberate abstinence or celibacy motivated by religious and ideological factors with sexual avoidance driven by lack of desire. Such motives are distinct and likely have different connotations for sexual intentions, meanings, and identity.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The current study confronted challenges similar to other research on asexuality. The convenience undergraduate sample limited broad, demographic generalizability. A larger sample of asexual individuals would allow for testing gender differences that potentially intersect with sexual identity. Some attitudes and circumstances may have changed over the time span used to compose a sample of 75 asexual individuals, but dividing up such individuals to account for significant differences across time would limit statistical power and any meaningful accounting of such change. Larger samples of asexual individuals gathered in each of a series of years could illuminate cohort effects.

As noted, having clearer measures for identifying asexual individuals could also yield a more accurate categorization of groups. Though the analyses included a relatively broad array of variables related to sexuality and relationships, the variables relied on single item measures. Ideally, more comprehensive and nuanced instruments could help further explore any distinctions between asexual individuals and various sexual individuals. The current study, however, allowed for quantitatively analyzing differences across various sexual groups, which contributes to a continual convergence of various research strategies seeking to expand the relatively underrepresented sexual scholarship of asexuality.

Continued comparative research on asexuality should be deliberate about definitions, measurement, and sample recruitment. The current study suggests that simply comparing asexual individuals with sexual individuals in aggregate risks overlooking how asexual individuals uniquely differ from a variety of sexual minority groups in regard to sexual behavior and intentions. Studies might also benefit by including multiple categories of asexuality, though doing so would require especially large samples when statistical comparisons are warranted. Furthermore, as noted by an anonymous reviewer, asexuality research is primarily conducted within the context of sexuality. Studying asexual identity issues within family, educational, employment, and social leisure has the potential to add meaningful understanding to the common and unique aspects of the lives of asexual individuals.

The term asexuality was originally developed from a deficit model and implied abnormality. Indeed, asexuality has been perceived as pathology. The current study provides additional insights to understand asexual young adults' sexual and relational experience as variation, not deficit. Future effort on reframing asexuality from a sex-positive approach may help empower individuals who have been stigmatized.

## References

- Aicken, C. R., Mercer, C. H., & Cassell, J. A. (2013). Who reports absence of sexual attraction in Britain? Evidence from national probability surveys. *Psychology & Sexuality, 4*(2), 121-135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2013.774161>
- Antonsen, A. N., Zdaniuk, B., Yule, M., & Brotto, L. A. (2020). Ace and aro: Understanding differences in romantic attractions among persons identifying as asexual. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-01600-1>
- Bauer, C., Kaye, S. L., & Brotto, L. A. (2020). Understanding Alcohol and Tobacco Consumption in Asexual Samples: A Mixed-Methods Approach. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 49*(2), 733–755. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-01570-4>
- Bogaert, A. F. (2004). Asexuality: Prevalence and associated factors in a national probability sample. *The Journal of Sex Research, 41*(3), 279-287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490409552235>
- Bogaert, A. F. (2013). The demography of asexuality. In A. K. Baumle (Ed.), *International handbook on the demography of sexuality. International handbooks of population* (pp. 275-288). Springer Publishing.
- Brotto, L. A., Knudson, G., Inskip, J., Rhodes, K., & Erskine, Y. (2010). Asexuality: A mixed-methods approach. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 39*, 599–618. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-008-9434-x>
- Poston, D. L., & Baumle, A. K. (2010). Patterns of asexuality in the United States. *Demographic Research, 23*(18), 509-530. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2010.23.18>
- Carrigan, M. (2011). There's more to life than sex? Difference and commonality within the asexual community. *Sexualities, 14*, 462–478. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711406462>
- Carvalho, J., Lemos, D., & Nobre, P. J. (2017). Psychological features and sexual beliefs characterizing self-labeled asexual individuals. *Sex and Marital Therapy, 43*(6), 517-528. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2016.1208696>
- Cerankowski, K. J., & Milks, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Asexualities: Feminist and queer perspectives. Routledge research in gender and society* (Vol. 40). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Chasin, C. D. (2011). Theoretical issues in the study of asexuality. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 40*, 713–723. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-011-9757-x>
- DeSteno, D., Valdesolo, P., & Bartlett, M. Y. (2006). Jealousy and the threatened self: Getting to the heart of the green-eyed monster. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 91*(4), 626–641. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.91.4.626>
- Diamond, L. M. (2003). What does sexual orientation orient? A biobehavioral model distinguishing romantic love and sexual desire. *Psychological Review, 110*, 173-192. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295x.110.1.173>
- Foster, A. B., Eklund, A., Brewster, M. E., Walker, A. D., & Candon, E. (2019). Personal agency disavowed: Identity construction in asexual women of color. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 6*(2), 127–137. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000310>
- Flanagan, S. K., & Peters, H. J. (2020). Asexual-Identified Adults: Interactions with Health-Care Practitioners. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 49*(5), 1631–1643. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01670-6>
- Freitas, D. (2013). *The end of sex: How hookup culture is leaving a generation unhappy, sexually unfulfilled, and confused about intimacy*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Geary, R. S., Tanton, C., Erens, B., Clifton, S., Prah, P., Wellings, K., Mitchell, K. R., Datta, J., Gravengen, K., Fuller, E., Johnson, A. M., Sonnenberg, P., & Mercer, C. H. (2018). Sexual identity, attraction and behaviour in Britain: The implications of using different dimensions of sexual orientation to estimate the size of sexual minority populations and inform public health interventions. *PLoS ONE, 13*(1), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0189607>

- Ginoza, M. K., Miller, T., & AVEN Survey Team. (2014). The 2014 AVEN Community Census: Preliminary findings. <https://asexualcensus.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/2014censuspreliminaryreport.pdf>
- Greaves, L. M., Barlow, F.K., Huang, Y., Stronge, S., Fraser, G., & Sibley, C.G. (2017). Asexual identity in a New Zealand national sample: Demographics, well-being, and health. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 46, 2417-2427. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-017-0977-6>
- Gupta, K. (2017). "And now I'm just different, but there's nothing actually wrong with me": Asexual marginalization and resistance. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64, 991-1013. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1236590>
- Gupta, K. (2019). Gendering asexuality and asexualizing gender: A qualitative study exploring the intersections between gender and asexuality. *Sexualities*, 22 (7-8), 1197-1216. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1363460718790890>
- Hille, J. J., Simmons, M. K., & Sanders, S. A. (2020) "Sex" and the Ace Spectrum: Definitions of sex, behavioral histories, and future interest for individuals who identify as asexual, graysexual, or demisexual. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 57 (7), 813-823. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2019.1689378>
- MacNeela, P., & Murphy, A. (2015). Freedom, invisibility, and community: A qualitative study of self-identification with asexuality. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 44, 799-812. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0458-0>
- Mitchell, H. & Hunnicutt, G. (2018). Challenging accepted scripts of sexual "Normality": Asexual narratives of non-normative identity and experience. *Sexuality & Culture*, 23, 507-524. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-018-9567-6>
- Prause, N., & Graham, C. A. (2007). Asexuality: Classification and characterization. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 36, 341-356. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-006-9142-3>
- Richters, J., Altman, D., Badcock, P. B., Smith, A. M., de Visser, R. O., Grulich, A. E., Rissel, C., & Simpson, J. M. (2014). Sexual identity, sexual attraction and sexual experience: The Second Australian Study of Health and Relationships. *Sexual Health*, 11, 451-460. <https://doi.org/10.1071/SH14117>
- Reiber, C., & Garcia, J. (2010). Hooking up: Gender differences, evolution, and pluralistic ignorance. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 8, 390-404. <https://doi.org/10.1177/147470491000800307>
- Rothblum, E. D., Krueger, E. A., Kittle, K. R., & Meyer, I. H. (2020). Asexual and Non-Asexual Respondents from a U.S. Population-Based Study of Sexual Minorities. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 49(2), 757-767. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-01485-0>
- Scherrer, K. S. (2010). What asexuality contributes to the same-sex marriage discussion. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, 22, 56-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720903332255>
- Van Houdenhove, E., Gijs, L., T'Sjoen, G., & Enzlin, P. (2015). Stories about asexuality: A qualitative study on asexual women. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 41(3), 262-281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2014.889053>
- Van Houdenhove, E., Enzlin, P., & Gijs, L. (2017). A positive approach toward asexuality: Some first steps, but still a long way to go. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 46(3), 647-651. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-016-0921-1>
- Williams, D. J., Christensen, M. C., & Capous-Desyilas, M. (2016). Social work practice and sexuality: Applying a positive sexuality model to enhance diversity and resolve problems. *Families in Society*, 97(4), 287-294. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.2016.97.35>
- Yule, M. A., Brotto, L. A., & Gorzalka, B. B. (2014). Biological markers of asexuality: Handedness, birth order, and finger length ratios in self-identified asexual men and women. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 43, 299-310. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-013-0175-0>
- Warren, F. (2005). *PostSecret* [On-going community mail art project]. Laguna Niguel, CA. <https://postsecret.com/>
- Williams, D. J., Prior, E. E., & Vincent, J. (2020). Positive sexuality as a guide for leisure research and practice addressing sexual interests and behaviors. *Leisure Sciences*, 42(3-4), 275-288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2020.1712276>

Williams, D. J., Thomas, J., Prior, E., & Walters, W. (2015). Introducing a multidisciplinary framework of positive sexuality. *Journal of Positive Sexuality*, *1*(1), 6–11.  
<https://doi.org/10.51681/1.112>