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A Rethinking of Gray Asexuality: What do we Learn from an Undefinable Identity?

Jason M. Gurevitch

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A Rethinking of Gray Asexuality:
What do we Learn from an Undefinable Identity?

Jason Gurevitch

Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program
Colby College
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Introduction

“isnt it when your kinda ace kinda not.”

– Please let us establish a strong definition for Graysexuality, AVEN Forums

The goal of this project is to use Gray-Asexuality to look at a way of reorganizing how we ought to understand Asexuality. First, I will show its absence in previous research about Asexuality, and then, using the frameworks of that research, my own data analysis, and close readings of the forums to, I will propose new understandings of Asexuality. I believe that each of these three pieces offers us an incomplete narrative, and that only by looking at them all together can we begin to understand Asexuality, and from that understanding we can point towards new topics of research, both within, and outside of Asexuality. Past research not only ignores Gray Asexuality, but also some of the research has been inherently tied to Asexual projects of definition and acceptance, while others have been outright rejected by the Asexual community. However, within these spaces there has already been much theorization of, and engaging with Asexuality, so there is plenty of important information within. The Asexual Community Census data cannot be looked at as a complete representation of Asexuality, nor can we get to understand how people come to the answers they do. Instead it can be used to check the pulse of the Asexual community, to look at 10,000 individuals who identify as Asexual and see what really matters to them. And lastly readings of the forum cannot begin to propose a complete picture of Asexuality. Without digging deeply into the forums, most of these conversations will be more recent, and cannot be assumed to represent the entire Asexual community. Yet, these forums have been one of the most important places in construction of Asexual identity, both on the individual, and cultural level. By reading these forums, I can see how individuals see their

Gray-Asexuality, and also more generally how some of these narratives can be understood together as part of a larger mode of interacting, and identity. By engaging these three pieces with each other, we can understand the historical contexts of Asexuality, trust that the statements we are making are applicable, and also get into a deeper level of understanding about Asexuality, and the interactions that constitute it.

Feminist understandings of sexuality, identity, and individualism also underpin every aspect of this project. Asexuality, as it comes to be an identity in the 2000s, cannot be understood without the its political and social context. This is the moment when the Gay and Lesbian movements are pushing for a “just like you” narrative. This is a moment about individual identification, not just about sexuality but also about the desire to categorize, and identify oneself. A moment of understanding oneself through an internal identity, which presupposes that identity categories are also coherent. But at the same time this project is informed by queerness. Queerness as a frame offers us a lens to question – to question assumptions, boundaries, borders and identities. It pushes us to ask why, and how, particularly of social interactions and fundamental assumptions about what is socially mediated, and what is essential. But queerness as a sexuality also is about questioning, it is about grayness, unknowing, and living in that unknowing. Queerness is about capturing that which cannot be captured. And in many ways, Gray Asexuality is about the story of trying to capture, that which refuses to be captured.

Background

Asexuality, as a sexual orientation was introduced into the realm of public sexuality in 2002 by David Jay through his creation of Asexuality.org, which has in turn has evolved into the

center of the modern Asexual community. Likewise, research into asexuality¹ is also only a recent phenomenon. It is rooted in psychological analysis of UK national identity survey that was done in 2004. While doctors may have used terms like asexuality or hyposexuality to pathologize individuals who had no interest in sex, there was not any proper research done into this prior. However, this research in 2004 was based people who reported being attracted to neither men nor women, rather than people who identified as Asexual. While this research, and the field of research into asexuality that has followed has helped remove stigma around asexuality, and given insight to false stereotypes, it has not yet been able to capture the Asexual community as it sees itself. Furthermore, it is still looking into asexuality as a fixed category rather than through a feminist perspective of a dynamic sexual orientation based on self-identification and social factors – which are how the community sees itself. While some research has begun to analyze Asexuality from a feminist perspective, beginning with Cerankowski and Mills in 2010, they still theorize asexuality as a black and white category of people who are interested in sex or not, doing important work into what it means if sexual attraction is not a fundamental assumption.

However, within the Asexual community there is a distinct set of people who identify within the realm of “Gray-Asexuality,” meaning they experience sexual attraction but only in rare cases or in specific situations, such as Demisexuality, where an individual does not experience sexual attraction without a close emotional bond. Although these identities are significant enough to be included within the Asexual Community Census (The four options for identification are Asexual, Gray-Asexual, Demisexual, and None of the Above), little work has been done surrounding them in the academic realm. They have instead been treated like many of

¹ Note that I differentiate from Asexuality as a sexual orientation and asexuality as a category of people that researchers defined based on acts (or rather a lack thereof) by using capitalization.

the other sub identities within Asexuality and Gray-Asexuality, rather than acknowledging their significant role within the Asexual community.

Problem + Methods

For this project I will investigate the murky category of Gray-Asexuality (including the subgroup who identify specifically as Demisexual), and how these categories may change the way we view research on Asexuality, both from a methodological perspective and a theoretical one. I engage with research deemed as empirical from the field of psychology and theoretical from feminist fields and look into how their models of Asexuality can accommodate people in this Gray area, and hopefully synthesize a framework of (A)sexuality that does not fail to capture the people whom it is supposed to be identifying. Although people who identify within Gray-Asexuality struggle to find a consensus about what that umbrella term means, they are sure that it exists, and that they are a part of it, not only based on how they feel, but also based on their interactions with (allo)sexual friends and (allo)sexual partners. I hope to argue that this undefinability is not only a key feature of Gray-Asexuality, but also bring into question many of the underlying assumptions about Asexuality as a whole, such as the fact that it should be studied based on acts rather than identities.

Additionally, I would like to look into why and where previous research has failed to capture people in this Gray space and the potential mismatch between how the Asexual community sees itself and how researchers have attempted to capture it. This will get into not only underlying assumptions about where the source of truth (if any) lies, but also what assumptions we make about the purpose, and use of social categories for ourselves. Furthermore, this will hopefully open up new questions about how we view sexuality, and where that has struggled to capture Asexual people, and how it may still fail to capture Gray-Asexual people.

This will question assumptions about sexuality, dichotomies, and data that previous researchers have made, which is important not only because previous research has failed to adequately include Gray-Asexuality, but also because much of this research began with underlying assumptions and stereotypes that researchers had about Asexual people, rather than from within the community.

For this project I aim to synthesize information from a numerous of different sources to push forward an academic understanding of Asexuality, and self-identity within sexual orientation as a whole. I wish to use previous work on Asexuality as the basis of my work, from both the psychological and feminist perspectives to lay a groundwork for how to theorize and understand Asexuality. I would then like to look at these, and Asexuality as a whole, from a Sexuality Studies perspective, bringing in the work of Michel Foucault, and Eve Sedgwick to look at how sexuality functions, is defined, and where a canon has been created and (mis)defined when it comes to (A)sexuality. This part of the project is in part an epistemological critique of current Asexual research based on how this research misses, and in many ways fundamentally cannot capture Gray-Asexuality. I also aim to use my own data analysis of the Asexual Community Census, using my Computer Science background to try and see what the key and important aspects of the Gray areas of Asexuality are. However, because of the potential pitfalls of data analysis, and because I will argue that data has been used poorly in many cases as it relates to Asexuality, I make sure to contextualize this data, and explain what it can, and cannot tell us. Rather than using the lens of survey data as an empirical source of undeniable truth, I intend to look at it as a flawed conglomeration of how people see themselves. And lastly, I want to draw in knowledge about Gray-Asexuality from personal accounts from the Asexual Forums, and make sure that these are in communication with any theoretical work about community that I

may be doing. I will use these readings through parts of the vast Asexual forums to find insight into to specific questions that I have, and also to follow the paths that they lead into questions that may remain open.

Definitions – introduction to asexuality

Although one of the aims of this project is both to destabilize definitions within Asexuality, and also show how those unstable definitions are important to understanding Asexuality, I believe it is useful to begin with a section on definitions, as I will show that much of the history of Asexuality is that of a definitional project. These definitions will come from sources that claim to be codifying the discussions about Asexuality into an accessible form, namely the wiki pages associated with Asexuality.org (AVEN), and Julie Decker’s book *The Invisible Orientation*.

AVEN:

The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network, which is located at Asexuality.org. I will use these two terms interchangeably

The AVEN Triangle:

AVEN proposes asexuality as another axis to sexuality, along with the Kinsey Scale. The axis along the top is the Kinsey Scale, while going down the gradient is a scale from Allosexuality to Asexuality, with the middle sections being “Gray-Asexuality.”



image taken from AVEN’s twitter logo

Cake

Cake has become a symbol of the Asexual community because of the joking statement that “cake is better than sex.” From this, cake became a symbol of the Asexual community,

where people would “offer” cake to new members of the forum as a way to greet new people in the community. The origin of cake as a symbol is not exact, but it became a symbol fairly early on, with discussions of codifying cake as a symbol as early as 2004

(<https://www.asexuality.org/en/topic/3513-what-aven-needs-most/>)

Asexual(ity):

On large letters at the top of Asexuality.org, next to the symbol that says Asexuality Visibility and Education Network, is the statement: “*An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction*”

While this statement is a common one used to describe Asexuality, and is very similar to the one found in *The Invisible Orientation*, further information contradicts this easy statement, particularly discussions about romantic vs sexual attraction within the Asexual community, discussions about Asexual people enjoying kink and or fetish play, and also just the existence of people who identify as Asexual but also claim to experience sexual attraction, such as if they are Gray-Asexual or Demisexual. It also contrasts with the statement made by the AVEN triangle that Asexuality exists along a spectrum. Because of this a common change to this definition is “*An asexual person is someone who experiences little to no sexual attraction.*” To the Asexual community, there is a division between romantic, and sexual attraction, which is sometimes subdivided further by separating out sensual, and aesthetic attraction.

For this reason, the pages of AVEN propose multiple different definitions, or “models” of Asexuality to try to give more robust definitions:

Dual Definition Model:

The dual definition model states that “*An asexual is someone who experiences little to no sexual attraction and calls themselves asexual.*” This model both claims that Asexuality is not stable, as the line between “Allosexual” and “Asexual” is blurry. For this reason, self-identification is an important marker of determining if someone is Asexual.

Collective Identity Model:

The collective identity model states that “*an asexual person is anyone who uses the term “asexual” to describe themselves.*” This model of Asexuality sees sexuality as purely socially constructed and therefore sexuality is not something innate, and also states that community and communal identification are the most important parts of Asexuality. This model was proposed by David Jay, the creator of AVEN.

Ace:

A shortening of Asexual, it is often used as an umbrella term, and is sometimes seen as being less strict than Asexual.

Allosexual:

Allosexuality (literally “other” + “sexuality”, meaning interested in sexual activities with other people) is proposed by the Asexual community to be the opposite of asexuality, just as Straight was created as the opposite to Gay. While many Asexual people use the term “Sexual” instead, I prefer to use Allo because it approaches all sexuality as requiring marking, rather than having a marked and unmarked category. Furthermore, “Sexual” is sometimes used in mocking, and or derogatory ways by parts of the Asexual community, and its use is sometimes criticized since Asexual people may be misunderstanding how others are engaging in sexuality.

Gray-Asexuality:

Gray-Asexuality which is also known as Gray-A, Gray-Ace or Gray-Sexuality refers to the area between Asexuality and Allosexuality. It is often used as an umbrella term for many different types of more specific Asexualities. As I will discuss later there are serious questions and discussions about trying to actually put a definition to this category, but the most common ones are “*someone who does not normally experience sexual attraction, but does sometimes*”. The reason I am choosing to use the term Gray-Asexuality, rather than Gray-Sexuality is because people who are Gray-Asexual see themselves as Asexual, and although their identity might be more easily understood using a strong definition of Asexuality and then claiming they exist in the gray area between Allosexuality and Asexuality, this would erase the significant role they have in the community, and the importance of them identifying within Asexuality first. While many definitions of Gray-Asexuality explain them as the area between Asexuality and Allosexuality, uses of Gray-Asexuality almost exclusively treat it as a subsection of the Asexual community.

Demisexuality:

Demisexuality is an identity within Gray-Asexuality, and one of the most common identities within Gray-Asexuality. Demisexuality refers to *A person who does not experience sexual attraction unless they have a close emotional bond.*

So What About Gray-Asexuality

There are multiple reasons to study Gray-Asexuality, ranging from theoretical to practical ones. From the most basic level, Gray-Asexuality ought to be studied because it has not been studied yet. There has been little research done that has specifically focused on Gray-Asexuality, and some of what has been done, such as McClave’s work, does not use self-identification as the basis for Gray-Asexuality, but rather defines individuals as Gray-Asexual if they are Asexual and

have sex. Other, more general, work on Asexuality, rarely discusses Gray-Asexuality, and when it does it only dedicates a small section to it. This would not be an issue if Gray-Asexuality were just a small community or identity that has been created more recently by the asexual community since they would either be very specific, or have not had the time to get onto the radar of researchers of Asexuality. Yet neither of these have been the case with Gray-Asexuality, which has both been in use on since the creation of the Asexuality.org, and also has been decided to be of significant enough importance to highlight on the AVEN wikis. This is to say that Gray-Asexuality has been deemed of importance to the Asexual community, but not yet to researchers, and I would like to change that. Furthermore, there is another significant reason to study Gray-Asexuality, which is from a more theoretical perspective, to look into what understanding it can mean for understandings of sexuality as a whole, and also for a greater academic understanding of Asexuality.

There has been almost no dedicated research into Gray-Asexuality, in the psychological field or feminist studies. Even general resources on understanding Asexuality, such as in Julie Sondra Decker's guide to Asexuality, *The Invisible Orientation*, only about 5 pages to discussing Gray-Asexuality. This gap in literature on Gray Asexuality has been noted, such as in CJ DeLuzio Chasin's 2011 essay *Theoretical Issues in the Study of Asexuality*, yet there has still only been very minimal research since then into the topic, with the only major piece dedicated to Gray-Asexuality that I have been able to find being the master's thesis of Caroline McClave.

McClave's work on Gray-Asexuality does great work to argue for a more expansive definition of asexuality, yet it does so using the same tools of the past psychological research that I am critiquing. Namely that the two studies it focuses on are from before the formation of the modern Asexual community (1990 and 2000) and do not use people who self identify as

Asexual. Furthermore, this study defines Gray-Asexual people as those who experience sexual attraction, but also claim to “prefer to have no sexual activity” (22). While this definition does include more Asexual people, particularly people who may be Gray-Asexual, it does not capture the multitude of definitions within Gray-Asexuality. Furthermore, some of the conclusions that McClave finds by using this definition, such as there being more Gray-Asexuals than strict Asexuals, are at odds with representation within the online Asexual community. While this can point to the fact that Gray-Asexuals may not have as strong of a need to interact with the Asexual community because their Asexuality may not be as big of a factor in their life, or are less likely to find it, or just haven’t found it yet. But I do believe these differences pose a challenge for how representative this can be for understanding people who identify as Gray-Asexual, since it is not about people who identify as Asexual in the first place. It is of significance that McClave uses the exact same studies (NASTAL I and II) that Bograet and other psychological researchers have looked at, as she is revealing other forms of Asexuality could potentially be found in them and introducing the subject of Gray-Asexuality into an academic field. This is her grounding point, and her point of entrance to give significance to Gray Asexuality. Yet I believe that these projective definitions of Asexuality, especially when the studies come from a time before the work of the construction of Asexuality as a sexual orientation occurred, means that they cannot be sufficient in understanding Asexuality, as they are fundamentally studying a different group of individuals than those who identify as Asexual as CJ DeLuzio Chasin explains in *Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential* .

Furthermore, Feminist studies has also not dedicated much work into the radical potential of Gray-Asexuality. While both Megan Milks and Karli June Cerankowski do both claim to be close to Gray-Asexuality in their Introduction of *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*,

it barely shows up again within the anthology (5-6). When Gray-Asexuality or Demisexuality are brought up, they are just for quick definitions or part of other points. While I do believe that tackling Asexuality from queer perspectives by its nature does include these gray areas, since the point of queerness as a study, as opposed to Lesbian and Gay studies is to engage with contradictions and blurry areas, I also believe that Gray-Asexuality deserves more scholarship, to make explicit the ways in which Asexuality engages with these messy blurry areas, rather than leaving room to allow others to narrowly define it as something that exists outside of it.

Gray-Asexuality has not only been discussed since the origins of Asexuality.org, the epistemic center of the Asexuality community, but it also represents a significant part of the Asexual community. Various surveys of the online asexual community have found that over a quarter of the people identify within Gray-Asexuality, either as Gray-Asexual or Demisexual, which is itself a significant subcategory of Gray Asexuality. In the 2015 Asexuality Community Census, 6226 (72.47% of those who identified as Asexual) people identified as Asexual, while 2365 (27.06%) identified within the Gray-Asexuality umbrella (1419 as “Gray-A” and 946 as “demisexual”). Demisexuality in itself probably also deserves research, as similar numbers of people identify as Demisexual as do the more broad Gray-Asexual, but I will focus on Gray-Asexuality because of its enigma of being undefinable yet significant, and also its importance as *the* main umbrella subcategory.

But these surveys, and the AVEN wikis point to a more significant reasons why Gray-Asexuality ought to be studied. The fact that Gray-Asexuality and Demisexuality are the only other options in these surveys, next to Asexual and Other, and that the AVEN forums have a dedicated forum called “The Gray Area,” points to an understanding within the Asexual community that Gray-Asexuality is of importance. By codifying only these two subidentities, the

asexual community makes an epistemic statement that these subcategories, and Gray-Asexuality in particular is of a unique importance to Asexuality that it deserves to be highlighted in a way different from other Asexual identities. This points to a division between how the Asexual community views Gray-Asexuality – as a significant subcategory that is central to Asexuality as a whole – and how research into Asexuality has treated it – as a small fraction of the community that is part of a larger identity creation process. Akinosexuality, Fraysexuality, and the vast number of other more specific identity groups within Asexuality do deserve to have research look directly at them, particularly for their active role in creating new definitions to help people better understand themselves. But Gray-Asexuality is more pressing than “just another sub identity,” because of how many people use it within the Asexual community, its dedicated significance within the Asexual community, and the radical potential that is allowed to thrive in a space that refuses definition.

Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks first propose the potential of Asexuality to feminist studies in their 2010 essay *New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice*. In this piece, they do not attempt to theorize Asexuality, but rather want to pose a series of questions that arise from Asexuality to the fields of Women’s Studies, and Sexuality Studies. In the first of these sections *Asexual Feminisms, Feminist Asexualities*, they look into how Asexuality can challenge norms of feminist views on sexuality always being positive, and also the ways that Asexuality can be part of a feminism that rejects male sexuality and the heteropatriarchy. Yet it is their second section, *Is Asexuality Queer?*, that I want to build off of to theorize the potential offered by Gray-Asexuality. In this section they “suggest that asexuality as a practice and a politics radically challenges the prevailing sex-normative culture” (661). While there is an ongoing debate both within and outside of the Asexual community of whether

Asexual people are queer, this section analyzes the ways that Asexuality challenges us to rethink our ideas about sexuality.

While they do not address Gray-Asexuality directly, much of their analysis and potential they offer for Asexuality allows room for it within their analysis. Yet I think focusing directly on this Gray zone forces us to acknowledge these questions and contradictions in our analyses of sexuality. Attempting to theorize Gray-Asexuality poses multiple interesting questions regarding how sexuality is theorized. It pushes boundaries between Asexuality and Sexuality, it forces Asexuality to be seen as not just some outside group, but as something that intersects with, and informs other sexualities. Gray Asexuality can offer a way to rethink queer space in, as much of queer space has been focused on sexuality in the past. It offers us other ways to view not having sex, or having less sex that aren't moralistic, but are instead based on desires. But Gray-Asexuality isn't just some radical new potential that opens questions that have never been asked, but rather it forces us to face questions that can be pushed aside when thinking about other sexualities, and even Asexuality. Medicalized work on Asexuality, and strict definitions of Asexuality analyze it as if it is an enigma that falls outside of the realm of sexuality, into its own, weird, pathologized field, that asks the question "what is wrong with these people [Asexuals]?" Gray-Asexuality, not only is part of a larger claim that Asexuality and Allosexuality all exist within the contexts of each other, but the process of people questioning if they are Gray-Asexual, or Asexual enough on the forums I will also argue poses the question "what is up with these [Allosexual] people?," forcing us to take a greater look at normative sexuality.

Acknowledging Gray-Asexuality as something that is between Asexual and Allosexual, yet also is identified with Asexuality poses a fascinating question about the theorization of Asexuality, and the spectrum of Asexuality. On the one hand it makes a claim that the experience

of sexuality is along a continuum would be radical to many people, since it sees Asexuality not as an enigma that is different from normal people, but rather as people along a spectrum of (A)sexuality. Yet at the same time, the fact that Gray-Asexuals are within the Asexual umbrella, or even the fact that most people are not Gray-Asexual, means that one end of the spectrum is the normative end, while the entire rest of the spectrum is within Asexuality. In this sense Gray-Asexuality, and its implications for definitions of Asexuality, such as the “Collective Identity Model of Asexuality” proposed by David Jay that states that “Asexual people have something in common because they have all chosen to actively disidentify with sexuality,” places Asexuality into a socially defined notion of sexuality. Furthermore, just as queerness has become to be defined as a disidentification with heterosexuality, asexuality can be seen a parallel in a sense, but along a different spectrum, because of its disidentification with Allosexuality.

Gray-Asexuality offers us a paradox in understanding sexuality, since while it is posed as a middle ground between Asexual and Allosexual, it is also solidly a category of Asexuality. This poses the question of when does someone become Asexual and if they are ever interested in sex why are they not just Allosexual? While understandings of Asexuality that have excluded the Gray-Asexuality can ignore this question, including it requires asking this question, which not only requires defining Asexuality, but also more importantly requires a naming of what normative sexuality is (this will be explored more when I look at the AVEN forums to see how Gray-Asexuals theorize the line between themselves, their identity, and Allosexuality). Within these contexts people who are Gray-Asexual engage in a well played out question and answer where they introduce themselves into the AVEN forums, explain their experience of sexuality, and ask if they are Asexual enough. I will explore this call and response in depth in a later section, but it is interesting because the answer to this question is almost always yes, as if asking

the question is a defining aspect of Gray-Asexuality itself. This means that this knowing ambiguity, which is evident to both the person posing the question, and those on the forum who arbitrate over, and then accept them into Asexuality, is accepted, and even expected within the Gray-Asexual community.

Literature Review + Epistemic Critique

The goal of this literature review is twofold. Firstly, I intend to lay out the current research and understandings of Asexuality in order to show how it has fundamentally missed Gray-Asexuality. Secondly, I intend to show how research has dealt with, and struggled with the impossible question of defining Asexuality, and also the ways in which the research has not been neutral in many cases, and has in fact been part of a larger Asexual political narrative in search of recognition, acceptance, and awareness. There has already begun to be significant critique of methods within studies of Asexuality, such as Jacinthe Flore's work critiquing the fundamental assumptions that psychological research had been following surrounding Asexuality up to 2010. Additionally, in *Reconsidering Asexuality and its Radical Potential*, CJ DeLuzio Chasin provides a critique of both feminist and psychological research into Asexuality, and claims that all of these works privilege an allosexual perspective, and that in creating an Allo/Ace divide, and looking for strict lines between them, end up creating a good Asexual subject which separates others from considering Asexuality, and pressures Asexuals into how they should feel. However, this critique, as well as my own do not serve to discredit research, instead they intend to both show the underlying frames that created the research and the implications of those, as well as reframe the questions, to use past research as a basis for new work, using newer research and methods to continue the parts and questions that have previously been discussed.

In this section I will lay out understandings of Asexuality as follows: First I will begin with the origins of Asexuality, and Asexual research. I will then follow that with research that was attempting to refine these understandings of Asexuality, accept critique, and work with the Asexual community in order to destigmatize Asexuality, and help them seek acceptance. Secondly, I will explain the points where Asexuality is made public. Asexuality has its own unique contact points, because it is so often deemed invisible or private, and therefore many of the fights around Asexuality have not only been through attempting to control the narrative of the research, but also particularly in the realm of the medical. Lastly, I will show the ways that feminists are beginning to understand Asexuality, as it relates to feminist studies, and looking at what it may offer. These three categories are not exclusive, and I will show that they are often in conversation with each other, and build off of each other in attempts to better understand Asexuality, and in attempts to understand what Asexuality may offer.

Attempts to understand Asexuality are a relatively recent phenomenon. Asexuality has only begun to be seriously researched in 2004, and the modern online community and current definitions have only emerged from the creation of Asexuality.org in 2002. While there has historically been a pathologization of asexuality that predates these dates, there was not a historically contiguous understanding or research into this field. It was instead treated as an isolated sexual disability, known as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD). Modern understandings of Asexuality have all been attempting to fit it within other understandings of identity politics and sexuality, moving from this previous individualistic pathologization. For this reason, even if there were research from these previous understandings of Asexuality, they are only relevant in so far as they have created terminology within the DSM for current understandings of Asexuality to react to.

Research into asexuality really began with Anthony Bogaert's *Asexuality: prevalence and associated factors in a national probability sample* in 2004. Although Bogaert himself ties his research to previous related work (which he does also admit is scarce), all following asexual research poses itself either directly or indirectly in response to him. The following work can be split into two categories, those who attempt to refine Bogaert's work on asexuality within the field of psychology to greater understand it, and depathologize it, and those who believe that asexuality can offer a greater fundamental shift in how we view sexuality, and approach it from a feminist (and interdisciplinary) perspective. The first of these, being a direct continuation of Bogaert's research, continued to look into this field of Asexuality that he revealed was much more prevalent than previously thought. The second of these arose from an essay by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks called *New Orientations: Asexuality and its Implications for Theory and Practice* in 2010 which called on feminist studies to explore the possibilities of asexuality. These two categories are often quite porous, as the work attempting to refine and define understandings of asexuality can, and often does include feminist critique of previous methods, or even the epistemological practice as a whole. Much of this work is then published through the field of psychology because that has been where the field has been situated, and where much of the research has been done.

We can see these two parallel threads through the two anthologies that have been made attempting to codify understandings of Asexuality. The first anthology *Asexuality and Sexual Normativity* is a collection of essays that were originally published within *Psychology and Sexuality* in 2010 and 2013, and compiled by Mark Carrigan, Kristina Gupta and Todd G. Morrison. This anthology, although it follows Bogaert's work within psychology does not only contain psychology based research. While it contains some work trying to "understand"

asexuality from that perspective, it also contains essays that refine, critique, and question fundamental assumptions from the field, making a claim for an expansive understanding of asexuality that is based, but not limited to psychological research. The second anthology, *Asexualities Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, compiled by Cerankowski and Milks in 2014, expands on the questions asked by their 2010 essay by bringing together researchers from many different disciplines to approach Asexualities from an interdisciplinary approach, filling in a void that they saw in Asexual research.

While these two anthologies do not capture all of the work that has been done in Asexuality, they show us a codification of different ideas about how to approach the subject, and its work. Since the study of Asexuality is so new, each of these anthologies show a political belief as to where Asexuality as a subject of study stands, and where it should go. One is attempting to continuously refine past understandings of Asexuality, and another is attempting to push the boundaries of what Asexuality could mean. Despite these differences, I want to stress again how porous these two threads are. They exist at the same time, and researchers are not limited to one thread or the other, as evident by the feminist critiques within *Asexuality and Sexual Normativity*, or even more simply the fact that Kristina Gupta, one of the editors of that work, who has a graduate degree within Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, also contributed an essay for the other anthology. My personal goal with this project is in many ways, to synthesize these two narratives. I wish to look towards what Gray-Asexuality can mean, for both people who identify as Asexual, and what attempts to create definitions can mean when they fail, as they do for Asexuality. However, this also pushes for a further refinement of research on Asexuality, as it is a project whose goal is in part, to understand what Gray-Asexuality means.

Understanding Asexuality: usage of Data and Politicization of Asexuality

Research into asexuality has been dominated by data. This is because of the ways in which Asexuality has entered the realm of research, particularly through an analysis of national surveys. Unlike other sexual identities which faced many battles within the legal realm, Asexuals were in many cases studied from the medical realms of psychology and general health. These researchers questioned whether asexual people were unhealthy, unhappy, or mentally ill. While the current understanding of asexuality rejects these notions, it is still dominated by the conventions of the fields it grew from, and data. Yet none of these data are able to capture asexuality from all the perspectives the researchers would like to see. This is because data on asexuality is either of a general large population and not aimed at explicitly addressing Asexuality, and therefore gets very few asexual respondents, or because it is a study only of the asexual community, which is usually recruited online through the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), who are not necessarily representative of Asexuals as a whole, and are also very active in research.

The issue with data around asexuality, and a general issue within the study of asexuality is a definitional one. There is no good tool to measure Asexuality. There is no objective definition that can be used to observe Asexual people. No marker at any one point in someone's life that screams "Asexual." How does one measure an act of not doing something? How does one understand their (A)sexuality, when sexuality is socially defined, mediated, and yet its details are hidden behind masks of normativity? These are all questions that researchers have struggled with. Either they have chosen strict, narrow definitions of asexuality such as people who report experiencing no sexual attraction (with no definition of sexual attraction), or select self identifying asexual people from an online community. Yet neither of these approaches

address the definitional question. And researchers may use self identification of asexuality not because they view self identification as a gold standard of understanding sexuality, but rather because they do not have a “better” tool by which to identify Asexuals. (Yule, et al. 27, within Corrigan et al.)

This use of data in Asexuality is also informed by the work that the field has grown from, not just within Psychology, but Bogaert’s 2004 essay which began to look into Asexuality. In his essay *Asexuality: prevalence and associated factors in a national probability sample*, Bogaert looks at a British dataset from 1994 and analyzes the factors correlated with the 195 (out of 18,000) people who described their sexual attraction as “I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all.” It is important to note that this study was conducted before the formation of a major Asexual community through AVEN, and also using vastly different, and much stronger definitions for Asexuality. In addition to trying to see what categorized people whom he identified as Asexual, Bogaert compared what factors differed between Asexuals and those he defined as “Sexuals.” In addition to categories such as age of first sex, number of partners, and how often they have sex, Bogaert compared age, gender, education, race, religiosity, as well as height, weight, age of puberty and “health problems.” These categories encompass factors that are directly related to Asexuality, but also data that posits Asexuality as being both socially constructed (age, gender, education, ethnicity, and religion) while also being biological roots (gender, onset of puberty, height, weight, and “health problems”). In this preliminary work on trying to understand what factors lead to asexuality, Bogaert concluded that gender, height, low education and socioeconomic status and poor health are all related to Asexuality. This view of Asexuality being both socially constructed and also biologically essentialist is consistent with

ideas of modern identity politics, and is something that has continued to be used in research trying to posit Asexuality as a sexual orientation that follows Bogaert's work.

The essays within *Asexuality and Sexual Normativity*, as well as the documentary *(A)sexual* by Angela Tucker in 2012 summarized the early work on Asexuality from 2004 to 2010 in a comprehensive way. Both of these provide different lenses into the research, and are produced for different reasons. The summaries within *Asexuality and Sexual Normativity* are provided as a basis for their work, but also are viewed as preliminary work that due to the age of the field was not complete, or not completely accurate. For these reasons they must be explained not only to provide a basis for the research set out in the anthology, but also a point that they are trying to turn away from, to try and incrementally refine and redefine to produce more accurate descriptions of Asexuality. The summaries within *(A)Sexual* exist within a documentary that was crowdfunded for the purpose of exploring issues of inclusion, belonging, and political identity within the LGBT community for Asexuals. This work exists within the relationship between members of the Asexual community and researchers, and also highlights the work done by these two parties together for these political purposes. This does not devalue the documentary, but rather it highlights the politicization of research within Asexuality, particularly as it relates to identity, community and sources of knowledge. Asexual people are actively engaging with researchers for their own political needs. They are directly interacting with, and shaping studies in an attempt to correct researchers, and advocate for a depathologization of Asexuality, following the lessons learned from liberal Gay and Lesbian narratives, and interactions with psychological research.

The anthology *Asexuality and Sexual Normativity*, like much of the other Asexual research I have seen, treats Bogaert's research as the starting point for Asexual research. While I

have not been able to find work that predates it, I want to emphasize the origin myth perpetuated by this statement, as it claims a researcher happened to look at an old survey and found a bunch of people that had never been studied before. This is one of two origin myths within Asexuality. While Bogaert is the origin myth of the study of Asexuality, David Jay has become the origin myth of the Asexual community. This myth, as described in *(A)Sexuality* posits that Jay created this space on the internet, and once he named it thousands of people found it and realized that it explained them too. While it is true that Jay did create Asexuality.org in 2002, which has become the largest space dedicated to discussing asexuality, this was not the first ever discussion of asexuality, it just so happened to be the one that has caught on, and became a political movement. Additionally, I do not want to take away from the affective power of people seeing themselves explained for the first time, especially because prior to the internet, there was not pervasive language for people who are Asexual to connect to each other, and figure out they were not alone, either socially or medically. Some narratives of Asexuality do exist from before these, yet they have not caught traction within the public imagination.

Although these two origin myths are framed to have occurred around the same time (2004 vs 2002) they are completely unrelated. Bogaert's work makes no reference to Jay, Asexuality.org, or AVEN, and although it is possible that these online materials were what inspired him to look at the data, he does not include any evidence of that in the paper. By placing these myths next to each other, even though there can in fact be many "starting points" for research into Asexuality, such as past work on Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder, or later work that began to work with online Asexual communities, this narrative encapsulates a political narrative that researchers "discovered" Asexuality, and then later found real Asexuals who could be researched. Yet this research did not only go one way. Psychological researchers and

members of AVEN were working together towards a political goal of moving Asexuality from a pathology and into an identity (Gressgard and Randi, within Corrigan et al.). Not only were the researchers working directly with members of the online Asexual community, but according to a researcher within the documentary *(A)sexuality*, AVEN knows more about asexuality than the researchers. This posits research not as discovering something new, as Bogaert is framed, but rather as refining that understanding to codify as truth that is known among people who identify as Asexual. I point these out because all of these statements are political and making claims to where knowledges is located. These concurrent origin myths both paint Asexuality that has always existed, but was never acknowledged, and then turn towards the Asexual body. Thus, research into Asexuality is framed as researchers continuously discovering something new about Asexuality, which Asexual individuals already knew about themselves, which in turn becomes a justification for Asexual existence.

In their introduction to *Asexuality and Sexual Normativity*, Carrigan et al. describe the previous research into asexuality, both as an important historical contextualization of their work, but also as necessary context for it. Here I will quickly summarize some of the research, as both their methodology and their findings are of importance. Carrigan et al. describe that Prause and Graham were the first people to study people who identified as Asexual in a 2007 study. They conducted interviews with 4 people who identified as Asexual, and had 41 participants in a survey, and found that Asexual people both had lower ratings of sexual desire and sexual arousal. Scherrer recruited 102 people from AVEN to participate in a study and found that asexual people often narrowly defined sexual activity in terms of intercourse. He also concluded that asexuality should be seen as a sexual orientation, and that many asexual people desire romantic relationships, and that because of a lack of terminology, they did not have the language

to describe their ideal relationship. Brotto, Knudson et al. surveyed 187 people from the AVEN forums, and then interviewed 15 people. They found that there were low levels of sexual desire and attraction among Asexuals, and that most had never engaged in sexual intercourse. They also found that Asexuals masturbated at similar rates to people who are not Asexual, but that they do not see doing so as a sexual activity. This is a common fact that researchers of Asexuality like to focus on, partially because it complicates traditional views of sexuality, since this notion transforms what many see as a sexual act to one that others view as mundane or just something that needed to be done (or “cleaning out the plumbing” as described by someone in *(A)sexual*). This fact however, points towards another common trend among many researchers of Asexuality, which is that in many cases researchers are surprised with their findings about Asexuality, and that some researchers are coming into research about Asexuality trying to find an underlying reason for Asexuality, such as mental illness (Tucker). Particularly, this shows the ways in which online surveys hold importance within Asexual research, due to their ability to actually recruit Asexuals, and also the ways in which research into Asexuality turned from using prescriptive definitions of Asexuality, to working with people who self-identify as Asexuals, yet are still trying to understand what Asexuality means.

Additionally, Brotto et al. found that many people defined asexuality for themselves as a lack of sexual attraction and defined themselves as feeling different from other people. This not only meant that they defined their sexuality within normative ideas on sexuality, but also that because of this difference, those in relationships with people who are Allosexual (not Asexual), had difficulty navigating sexual activity because of this difference. Brotto and Yule did a comparative study of Heterosexuals, Homosexuals, Bisexuals and Asexuals to see how they responded to erotic films. They found that although “objectively” they did not observe

physiological differences in arousal, people who were asexual didn't report feeling aroused by the film. This provided the basis for them to argue that Asexuality was not a disorder of an inability to be sexually aroused, but rather acted more similar to a sexual orientation of self-identity. This also suggests that Asexuality is not about an underlying physical difference, but rather Asexuality as an identity, a social understanding a way of interacting, and seeing the world that is shared between Asexuals, and unique from Allosexuals. The last "background" study they point to is an interview of 8 Asexuals and a survey of 174 conducted by Carrigan in 2011. In this survey he found that asexual people do not all have the same views of their own sexuality, and that there was a variety of responses among people who are Asexual. Although there are all of these different views and identities around sexuality, they all also shared a strong identity to Asexuality, and specifically the definition of Asexuality given by AVEN. Additionally, many of them claimed a similar life story and relationship with Asexuality. They claimed to have felt different from others, then had a process of self-questioning where they considered a pathological explanation for their difference. Then they described discovering the asexual community online, which was soon followed by them adopting an asexual identity, which in many cases helped with self-acceptance and clarified some of the difference that began them on this track. This frames this anthology as recognizing Asexuality as both a social category and a sexual identity, similar to views on Gays and Lesbians, but within its own unique markers. Although it is framed within essentialist and rigid lenses of Asexuality, that work is being used as the basis for a more nuanced, socially mediated understanding of Asexuality. These works further complicate the frame of identity within Asexuality. Rather than just being a lack of attraction, here we see not only the importance of self-identification within Asexuality, but also the ways that social interactions, particularly around AVEN are important for Asexuality.

This anthology contains a combination of specific empirical analysis into Asexuality that in many cases is quite similar as that which is outline above. However it also includes essays such as Jacinthe Flore's *HSDD and asexuality: a question of Instruments*. This essay highlights many of the issues I have with much of the research that has been done, by criticizing both the DSM and the ways that it has privileged sexuality over Asexuality, but also criticizes much of the empirical research into Asexuality by questioning its "instruments." She points out that there is no specific way to quantify desire, and that because Asexuality is so tied up in norms, that it should not be on psychologists to attempt to "cure" people of Asexuality through HSDD, because it falls on the individual to say what amount of sexual desire is considered reasonable. For this reason, she emphasizes that if HSDD is to be in the DSM, it must be differentiated from Asexuality by the personal distress clause, as has been suggested for other queer identities that have been pathologized. The personal distress clause states that something is only considered a disorder if it causes personal distress, and therefore Asexuality itself is not in itself a pathology. She also criticized researchers for not engaging with the Asexual community to try and understand the epistemological work they have been doing to create new vocabulary, and instead are focusing on their own assumptions about Asexuality for questions. She argues that because of this, researchers are poorly defining Asexuality in their studies, such as by conflating sexual attraction and desire, and by ignoring self identity completely. This poses a significant critique of much of the earlier research into Asexuality, which I intend to carry forward. This is as much a critique of the biases that went into work into Asexuality that privileges Allosexuality over it, and also of the "empirical" methods used to try and understand Asexuality. By pointing out that attempts to quantify desire can never truly be accurate, she challenges the ways in which sexual

identity, and Asexuality can ever be studied as objective, and rather shows that we must always look at the cultural contexts behind these questions and answers.

The only work that has been dedicated specifically to Gray Asexuality that I could find was Caroline McClave's Master's thesis *Asexuality as a Spectrum: A National Probability Sample Comparison to the Sexual Community in the UK*. In this work she attempts to expand Asexuality's definition to seeing Asexuality as a spectrum, and that previous work has completely ignored Gray Asexual people because of this. She also challenges much of the previous research into Asexuality, by stating that much of the psychological research into Asexuality is often based on assumption about Asexuals, such as the obsession with the research question of whether Asexuals masturbate, and also assuming that Asexuality is a disorder. Using these criterion, she attempts to look back at the UK based probability studies that Bograet used with a wider lens of who may be Asexual. However the definition she uses for Gray Asexuality within this data is people who have experienced sexual attraction, but prefer no sexual activity. This definition is different from that which is used by the Asexual community, and is also aiming to retroactively define people as Asexual based on surveys from 1990 and 2000, which were taken before the modern Asexual community had formed. For this reason, her project is of relevance to mine not because of her results, as they are looking at a completely different population, but rather because of her framing of her project. She does show that Asexuality cannot be looked at as just a binary, and encourages empirical research to try and do the same. Yet her definitions of Asexuality leave out visibility and self-definition, which are often viewed as some of the most important aspects of Asexuality, at least according to the community, which pushes us towards still needing work on Gray-Asexuality that focuses on people who identify as Gray-Asexual.

Contact Points and the Medicalization of Asexuality

Psychological research into Asexuality had the goal of countering a misconception that Asexual people are just repressed (Tucker). Despite this however, Tucker also accidentally revealed that researchers initially played into another misconception – that being that there is a pathological reason underlying asexuality. The film (A)sexual uses a combination of psychological research as well as following prominent members of Asexual communities such as David Jay to try and show that Asexual people are normal too. It shows the alliance between Asexuals and researchers for the political goal of not being pathologized, by using tactics that have been paved by other LGBT communities. This is in a large part because of where the fights were taking place for Asexuality (Aicken et al. within Carrigan). While Asexuality was not criminalized, it has been medicalized. Not only was Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder the most widespread sexual “dysfunction” as defined by the DSM, but many psychologists also described it as one of the hardest to “treat” (Flore, within Carrigan). Attempts to “treat” Asexuality are seen as harmful to Asexual people, and has been likened to conversion therapy, and yet have been common in the past, but has remained a common refrain not only from friends and family, but also from therapists for people when they reveal their asexuality (Gupta 2017). Because the contact point for Asexuals was within the private sphere of the medical, and therapeutic realm, rather than police, the law, or public violence, it makes sense that the battles would be fought in the realm of clinical psychology and for the DSM. For Asexuals the threat of violence occurs through moments of visibility, such as coming out to family, friends, partners or medical professionals, and this violence is not only on the epistemic level or denial of possibilities. People who are Asexual are at a higher risk of corrective rape, and then being denied that it was rape for various reasons that relate to their Asexuality (Decker, 61-62). For this reason Visibility

and Education have become the key goals for the Asexual community, visibility and normalization for social support, and working with researchers to show them that Asexuality is a sexual orientation and not a disability as a basis for protection from those who are medical professionals and also those who are not.

Yet this medicalization also points to why online communities were so important to Asexuals. As described in *(A)Sexual*, the online forums were the first place where Asexuals got to define themselves in public, rather than being defined in private and being isolated by psychologists. Yet this formation through an online community affects who has access to Asexuality, and the Asexual population tends to be younger, better educated, and Whiter than the general public because of this. As explained by Michael Paramo, the creator of *The Asexual Journal*, a mixed medium journal that contains both artistic and academic views on Asexuality, White people have more access to the community because of this, and because the conversations are happening in White spaces it can be more alienating, and less visible to people who are not White. Additionally, significantly more women identify as Asexual than men, which people have not really come to a consensus about its relevance or importance. Multiple possible answers have been posited to this question, such as that men simply have not found it, or that men might be more discouraged from being asexual, or even knowing about it, or just that people labeled as men and women have vastly different interactions with sexuality. These conversations rarely ask the question why more so many women and nonbinary people identify as Asexual, but rather ask the question “where are the men.” Lastly essentialists have also made a claim to this disparity, using it to point to gendered differences of sexuality and Asexuality as being rooted in the body.

We can see this motive of visibility and self-definition as evident in the types of knowledge produced by Asexuals for a larger audience. In addition to Tucker’s *Asexual*, and

work that psychologists have done, Julie Decker's book *The Invisible Orientation: an introduction to Asexuality* captures this intersection of knowledge and visibility about Asexuality. In the book she describes (as well as her production of the book proves) the value of visibility for people who are Asexual, and the importance of basic definitional work that still needs to get done, not just for the general public, or researchers, but also for people who are Asexual but have not realized it yet. This book uses the psychological research that has "proven" Asexual people are not "broken," as well as what is said to be common knowledge within the Asexual community to help normalize, and raise visibility about Asexuality. This issue of visibility is a one that I would like to focus on within Asexuality, because of the double meaning of invisibility within Asexuality. Not only is there relatively little visibility or information about the Asexual community, rendering it invisible, but a fundamental feature of Asexuality is its apparent invisibility. In an age of sexual liberalism, where people are expected to be having sex and also identifying it, Asexuality becomes something that is required to be made visible, not only because of the definitions of Sexuality, but also because it goes against what is expected of liberal sexual individuals. Through defining Asexuality as a lack of sexuality, it is not made visible until it reaches a contact point with sexuality, because people who are Allosexual are not constantly being sexual throughout their lives. This makes the contact points themselves oftentimes invisible, since sexuality has been relegated to the private sphere, until the internet "gave" them a place to make this private public. However, we can also see that there is an imperative to make this invisibility visible both because there are contact points that are harming Asexuals, and because of our modern sex politics, according to Milks and Cerankowski "Gayle Rubin famously wrote, 'The time has come to think about sex.' ... but now the time has come, we suggest, to also think about asexuality."

Feminist Asexualities

As a response to the growing amount of research into Asexuality in other fields, and its growing presence as a social movement, Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks published an essay called *New Orientations: Asexuality and its Implications for Theory and Practice* in 2010 to ask how Asexuality can fit into feminist theories. This essay pushed for an understanding of Asexuality outside of psychology, and also proposed to feminist studies ways that Asexuality could potentially fit into feminist theories and queer theories, but also add new dimensions to them. These feminist understandings of Asexuality are occurring at the same time as attempts to redefine Asexuality within Psychological research. Not only was this essay released before any of the work in the other Anthology, but some of the work on Asexuality within psychology is heavily critical of the epistemological implications of studying Asexuality from within the framework of Psychology (Flore). Rather we can see these as parallel conversations about Asexuality with different goals, one being to use this moment of the politicization of sexuality to help Asexual people face less discrimination, both from themselves and others, while the other has the goal of looking into the endless possibilities that Asexuality can provide that have been ignored within our understandings of sexuality.

Cerankowski and Milks created their anthology *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* to expand on the work that they called to be done in their initial essay. Again I point out that this anthology was published in the same year as the other, just to stress that these are parallel and intertwined understandings of Asexuality being formed, created, and curated at the same time. Additionally, this anthology does include medical analyses of Asexuality, such as the use of brain imaging to analyze asexual people while they watch porn (another common theme in sex research). I do not intend to say that either of these anthologies offer a better understanding

of Asexuality, but rather that they each are part of different conversations of Asexuality that are happening at the same time, yet were clearly interacting with each other. This anthology was created following their 2010 paper as an attempt to broaden the research into Asexuality through feminist lenses, and many different disciplines within the humanities. Additionally in the introduction to this anthology Cerankowski and Milks feel the need to justify their personal connection to the field, as they got some negative responses from the Asexual community in response to their work, where bloggers speculated on their (A)sexuality, and critiqued them for being Allosexual, as they had never stated otherwise. Because they realized that the Asexual community actively engages with academic work on Asexuality, they give their stories about their relationship with Asexuality, and how they have both considered using the term to describe themselves, to prove that they have “Personal, political, and scholarly investments in this project.”

The anthology aims to locate Asexuality within 6 frames. Firstly to theorize asexuality from a feminist perspective. This set of essays looks at the failures of medical models to capture Asexuality, and also attempts to theorize the self identification and the creation of the Asexual identity through a lens that combines Freud, Lacan, Foucault, Edelman and Zizek. Attempting to bring all of these theorists into Asexuality answer’s the original call of Cerankowski and Milks, and pushes Asexuality into multiple interdisciplinary studies. The next section of the anthology covers the politicization of Asexuality. This includes essays that look at how Asexuality fits into a politicized narrative of identity politics, and also how it has used the framework of sexual liberation as applying to asexuality, challenging the ways in which sex positivity may conceive of liberation, if Asexual people are liberated sexually through their Asexuality. This section also includes a chapter on the racialization of Asexuality, which focuses on the ways in which

Asexuality has been placed onto peoples of other races, particularly black women through the Mammy stereotype, as part of white supremacy. Yet when applied to white people Asexuality has been seen as a thing of virtue. Because of this raced history of sexuality, and because the Asexual community is already so white, Ianna Hawkins Owen warns that interactions with the public that seek acceptance for Asexuality must not play into white supremacist ideals of virtue and love when they discuss Asexuality. These two in particular recontextualize Asexuality both as a project of sexual identity that fit within greater discourses on sexuality, from both feminist and cultural lenses. Yet with this there is also the risk of sexualities of creating hierarchies. In understanding Asexuality, we must be aware of the ways in which calls to purity for acceptance can fall into racist narratives, and we also must seek to understand Asexuality in ways that do not further these hierarchies.

The other sections of this anthology cover media analysis, the medicalization of Asexuality, and particularly how that has been misapplied to disabled people, and literature analysis. There is also a section within this anthology about masculinity as it relates to Asexuality, which both aims to show examples of male asexuality in history through media analysis, and also another chapter which interviews Asexual men. This chapter aims to interrogate hegemonic masculinity, and the ways it affects Asexual men because of the ways in which sexuality is so inherently tied with “successful” masculinity. This chapter does not however, aim to ask any questions about the role of masculinity within the Asexual community, or address the gender divide within it, where there are significantly fewer Asexual men who interact with the community than Women, or even people of other genders.

Another prominent feminist scholar in the field of Asexuality is Kristina Gupta. She has written multiple works on Asexuality from a feminist perspective and she, along with CJ

DeLuzio Chasin have really been pushing the field towards a nuanced understanding of Asexuality that focuses on Asexual individuals, but from a feminist and queer perspective. In her work *“And Now I’m Just Different, but There’s Nothing Actually Wrong With Me”: Asexual Marginalization and Resistance*, Gupta aims to understand Asexuality through interviewing 30 different Asexual individuals. She advocates for moving away from strong identities that divide between Asexual and Allosexual, and also within Asexuality, as they fall into the trap that Foucault describes of identity formation leading to self policing. Instead, she focuses on the ways that Asexual people feel different, and their value instead of friendship and being alone, and also the importance of finding others like them. However, Gupta is trying to analyze Asexuality from a universalizing perspective, using Sedgwick to try and argue that asexuality should matter to more people than just those who use its identity. Using this framework, while still respecting the importance of community and Asexual identification, Gupta points out the ways that many of the questions raised by interviewing Asexual individuals about their Asexuality can question compulsive idea about sexuality, and also compulsive ideas about categorizing people based on their sexuality in the first place.

The research into Asexuality teaches us many of the questions and struggles that exist within understanding Asexuality, as well as where the holes are in the research. We can see many different attempts to grapple with how to study Asexuals, when there is not a good way to quantify who is Asexual. Each researcher has their own reason for picking their methodology, although I intend to use self-identification as a metric, because these researchers also show the ways in which prescriptive definitions of Asexuality cannot exist. This is not just that research such as Bogaert’s which identifies Asexuals as people who say they are attracted to no gender, but also as CJ DeLuzio Chasin explains in *Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential*,

many of the feminist understandings of Asexuality often use definitions that do not challenge fundamental ideas about Asexuality. From these, I also intend to use self-definition without having a goal of creating a “good” definition of Asexuality or Gray Asexuality, rather I intend to show how that identity functions within a social group, and why those functions are relevant and important. The history of these contact points in itself explains why Asexuality has become something which is worth studying now, and why it is becoming public now, and I believe, these contact points push us towards requiring us to reconceptualize how we view sexuality, because of the fundamental flaws that are exposed by considering Gray-Asexuality.

Data Analysis of the Asexual Community Census

Who is taking the Survey?

In addition to working with other scholarly material on Asexuality, I also did some of my own data analysis on the Asexual community census from 2015. This Dataset had 9162 respondents who were collected via the “snowball” method over various social media channels. This “snowball” method means that the creators of the survey spread it through several important Asexual media channels, where the survey was then reshared. This means that the people who are responding to it are not necessarily representative of all asexual people as a whole, but rather those who have a connection to the Asexual community, and also those who are willing to take the survey. Furthermore, although allosexual people were allowed to, and did take the survey, these answers cannot be taken as indicative of all allosexuals, but rather a subset who for some reason would have a connection to the asexual community. For the purposes of this project I split the data by asexual orientation to compare answers

We can see from the Figure 1 how people found the survey The largest number found it through Tumblr, followed by Facebook, reddit and then Asexual forums. People of different

Asexual identities came to the survey in similar ways, although people who were not Asexual were significantly more likely to find the survey via word of mouth. This again reminds us that this is not a representative sample, but that everyone taking it has some connection to Asexuality already. Even the Non-Asexual people who took the survey had some sort of connection to the Asexual community, many of which were personal connections. Of the people who took the survey, 6284 chose the option “Asexual” to best describe their “AceID,” 1427 used “Gray-A,” 952 “Demisexual,” and the other 499 chose “None of the above.”

Methods of analyzing survey

As shown in the figures, one of the most useful means of analyzing this data was just graphing it based on the category and asexual orientation. I split the data based on given asexual orientation, but for parts of the data analysis I analyzed if these self-identified categories could be found through the other responses. For some of these sections I combined the Demisexual and Gray-Asexual categories, as Demisexual is a subset of Gray-Asexuality, and because there were significantly more people who identified as Asexual, some data analysis worked better with more evenly sized categories. In addition to histogram analysis, I also did covariance analysis and clustering analysis to see which survey responses were correlated and bunched together. Once I had confirmed that according to these survey results there were strong clusterings of Asexual people, Asexual people who had sex, and people who were not Asexual, I created an Artificial Neural Network(ANN) to see how obvious these categories were, to see how well an algorithm could be trained to discern how someone identified based on these survey results, and then which answers mattered to that result. The goal of this was to try and capture non linear relationships between categories, because ANNs have the advantage of learning complex relationships between multiple categories that are not just based on a Euclidean distance metric, which is only

based on subtractions, and therefore linear relationships. These are all different ways of attempting to get useful information out of the data which offer us different possibilities. Particularly with ANNs, I hope to see look at the data as having a complex relationship between the different survey responses, rather than just simpler direct connections that earlier research has attempted using multiple linear regressions.

It must be noted here that the correlation of results does not point to an essentialist Asexual set of features, but rather speaks to how the survey was made, and who was taking it. For this reason, it is a useful tool to see how Asexual people describe themselves in a way that allows me to analyze more subjects than just reading through forums, and a useful way of seeing how people answer questions as they relate to how they see their Asexuality. Questions such as “Sex Drive,” which asks people to rate their sex drive on a scale from 0 to 4, cannot be used to say that Asexual people have a lower sex drive, but rather from this survey can only show that Asexual people report having a lower sex drive. However, even non subjective results have to be viewed from a lens of scrutiny. When we are looking at questions such as “when did you first identify as Asexual,” we need to both look at it through the lens of people who have a connection to the Asexual community, and also through the lens that “Asexual,” as a sexuality, was not a widely used term prior to 2002, as well as the fact that the majority of the respondents found the survey through Tumblr, and almost all of them through online means. This means that there wasn’t a significant possibility of identifying as Asexual prior to 2002, but also that because of the ways that people have discovered Asexuality that many of the respondents to this survey are pretty young. Furthermore, this again reminds us that this survey is only of self-identified Asexuals, who have access to the Asexual community, and neither people who “may be Asexual

but don't know it" nor people who identify as Asexual, but do not interact with these online spaces.

While analyzing this dataset I ran into a few issues that required interesting solutions from a technical perspective. Part of analyzing any data set is "cleaning the data," or taking the raw data and fixing any issues it may have so it may be used. Here I will explain some of the main issues I ran into with my data, and the technical solutions I used to solve them. Since many sections were not filled out, I had to figure out what to do with them. For the histograms I could just ignore whichever data did not exist for that category, but for cross correlation I needed to figure out how to fill data in. I could not just throw away data, as only about a quarter of the respondents filled out when they first had consensual sex. Getting rid of this category would not only get rid of a significant number of the respondents, but it would also get rid of any Asexual individuals who did not fill out a given category, such as those who had not had sex, an important demographic. To solve this I took two approaches. First I filled in any blank data with the average value of that column. I tried setting it to the maximum or minimum or an arbitrary number, and while that did not have a significant effect, setting it to the average value made the most sense, because it effectively says that number does not have an impact. Furthermore, it would mean something very different if the first age someone had consensual sex was 0, or 50, if the respondent was 18 years old, which is to say that picking any arbitrary number could have a wrong meaning, so I picked the average for these values, which should have the lowest impact on the results. I then added a bit of randomness to the value based on the standard deviation, so there would not be overfitting of my models to that one exact number. The second way I dealt with this is by adding additional columns. Next to each category I added a feature that said if the value was empty or not, I hoped that this would give the important information to my models

so they would know whether or not to look at the actual value in the column. Additionally, I used a similar technique to convert the categorical data into data my models could use. Because there were multiple options that did not have a linear relationship with each other, such as if people are partnered (with the options, of not filling it out, if they're engaged, if they're in one or more significant relationships, or if they are single), I used a technique called one hot encoding to turn this categorical data into numeric data. One hot encoding is a technique that creates a different column for each category, and then fills it in with a 1 if it is that category, or a 0 if it is not. While this creates a lot more features, it allows me to not add linear correlation where it does not exist, and turns my data into a form that I can use.

Relevant results

Histogram Analysis

Although I have discussed the ways in which data analysis has been used poorly as it relates to Asexuality, particularly when it is used in an attempt to essentialize Asexual identity as it relates to specific acts, there were still numerous results which are both interesting, and are relevant to the questions I am asking. Because these questions are all based on self reporting, we can not trust them as objective sources of truth, rather we must look at them as ways that people see themselves. One example of this is the results of the question asking how participants would rate their sex drive on a scale from 0 to 4 (Figure 2). While this statement seen as making an objective claim about sex drive, there is nothing objective about it. How does sex drive map onto a scale from 0 to 4? Who counts as which category? How do you know where you fit, and how do you determine how others fit? These sort of questions shows why this question cannot tell us about actual differences in how much sexuality the survey respondents experience, but only rather how they view themselves compared to others. In the responses to this question we do see

clear divisions between people who identify as Asexual, those who identify within the gray area (Gray-ace and Demi), and those who do not identify as asexual, but there are also clear overlaps. Typically, people who were Asexual had the lowest responses, followed by people in the gray area, and the highest by far were the non Asexual respondents. But if people knew their identity ahead of time, does that beget these answers, or are these “objective” values the basis for that identity. This question alone questions many assumptions of previous researchers about Asexuality, particularly if there are some Asexual people who say that have a “sex drive” of 4. If Asexuality cannot be boiled down to a simple category of those who *experience* sexual desire or not as stated by both the Asexual community and researchers, then, what is a better way of understanding the Asexual community? These are the sort of answers I do not look to find from data, and will instead be interrogated through my later section on reading the AVEN forums, where I can not only see how people feel, but also their explanations behind it.

Another interesting correlation I found through just plotting the data was the relationship between when people first participated in the Asexual community, when people first had sex (if they did) (figure 4), and when people first began to identify as Asexual (figure 3). These questions lets us answer specific questions about the ways in which people interact with both the Asexual community, as well as outside of the Asexual community. We cannot necessarily assume that “first identification” is accurate because it will always be in the retrospective. Likewise, we must also be very careful when trying to use data to prove an essentialist viewpoint about sexuality, as shown by Siobhan Somerville in her work *Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body*. Data analysis, as it relates to sexuality has often been used in racist ways, and even when it is not, many of the origins of attempting to understand sexuality, or in many cases categories, have a history of being used for, and in order to reproduce a racist

narrative. However, by contextualizing these data together and acknowledging the easy pitfalls of the questions we can still get valuable information from this data. One of such simple points is just answering the question when people first started identifying as Asexual. Here we can see that although there is a wide range of when people first identify as Asexual, the most common age is centered around 16 for people who identify as Asexual, and around 18 for people who are Gray-Asexual and Demisexual. While these numbers may at first appear to be different from people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual, due to the prominence of the “born this way” narrative, it is actually quite similar to what a 2013 Pew survey found². I point to this similarity because it can suggest multiple different reasons as to why people first identify when they do. This connection can suggest that this is either when people are really first interrogating their own sexuality, or are seeing people around them engaging in sexuality for the first times. One can also make more biologically based claims about why this is the time when people first identify as Asexual (or LGB too), such as changes happening due to puberty.

What the rest data in the Asexual Community Survey can add to “first identification,” are when people first participated in the Asexual community, to understand how identification and community may be connected, and also when people had consensual sex for the first time, if they have ever had sex. This second datapoint can also be used to show that people who are Asexual and those who are not first have consensual sex at around the same times. Furthermore, this is happening at a similar time to when people first identify as Asexual, being around 18. This tells us two things. Firstly, it tells us that Asexual people have consensual sex, even after they have identified as Asexual. It is important to note that only 20% (1252/6284) of people who identified as Asexual have ever had consensual sex, while 42% (613/1426) of those who

²A Survey of LGBT Americans <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/chapter-3-the-coming-out-experience/#fn-17196-16>

identified as Gray-Asexual, 47% (453/952) of Demisexuals, and (53.1%) 265/499 of people who are not Asexual have ever had consensual sex. People who identify as Asexual, rather than within the gray areas of Asexuality are significantly less likely to have sex than allosexuals, but people who are Gray-Asexual (Gray-A and Demi) are similarly likely to have sex as allosexuals, at least according to these samples. This complicates many of the claims that researchers have made about Asexuals, if many Asexuals would not be caught under survey based data asking if people have ever had sex, and using that to determine if someone is Asexual, and also because there are a significant number of allosexuals who have not had sex. These ratios, however, do need to be taken with a bit of skepticism, because of the age of the respondents. The majority of the respondents to this survey were born in the late 90s, and people who identified as “Asexual” and “None of the Above” tended to be younger than people who were “Gray-A” or “Demisexual” (Figure 5). Since this survey is from 2015, that means that most respondents would be in their late teens or early twenties, which means that the ratios could change significantly if the population were a different age, or of a different generation. This means that on the one hand Gray-Asexuals may have at least tried having sex just as much as Allosexuals. However, it also gives us no information into if those ratios change as people get older, nor how often they have sex. For this reason we cannot assume that Asexual people do not have sex, but it also does not have enough context to tell us that Gray-Asexual people are actually having as much as their allosexual counterparts. Because of this, we need more specific discussions about Gray-Asexuality, particularly from the forums to help understand this question.

The second thing these data tell us is that Asexual people are figuring out they are Asexual around, or even before they have choose to have sex (Figure 6). This fits in with a narrative that these ages are when people are figuring out their sexuality, and thus it could mean

that Asexual people are having sex as part of that. However, we can not conclusively say that, as there is only correlation between those, and because the data is skewed based on who the participants are. What we can see, rather than just look at charts comparing populations, is taking advantage of having individual data, and looking at when individual people first identify vs when they first had consensual sex. We can see more detail in Figure 6, showing that people whose values are positive identified as Asexual before first having consensual sex, and people whose values are negative had sex, before they identified as Asexual. We interestingly see that this is still centered around 0, but with significantly more people who had sex before identifying as Asexual. We can only draw correlations to this data, because as I have mentioned before it is not necessarily representative, but this point goes to show again that of Asexual people who have sex, many Asexual people have sex before they realize they are Asexual, a significant portion first have sex around the time they identify, and others have sex after they identify as Asexual. This does, however, help us frame Asexuality within information that other researchers have told us, and one I will continue to explore with the forums. Particularly, the narrative that Carrigan tells us of Asexual people first feeling different, and then questioning their identity, before coming to understand themselves as Asexual. By viewing Asexuality under this frame, it makes sense why Asexual people do have sex and pushes us away from the question “do Asexual people have sex?” Instead, it begs the question of what meaning sex has to Asexuals, particularly Gray-Asexuals, which I intend to explore more through the AVEN forums.

Another important thing that that these data tell us is when people first participate in the Asexual community. I used the same comparison for first participation as I did for when people first had consensual sex, compared to when they first identified as Asexual (figure 7). The results here are not surprising, as they show that most people identify as Asexual at the same time, or

before they participate in the community, which fits into a narrative of people figure something out for themselves, before they go to participate in the community. This is contrary to the narrative told within (A)sexual, of Asexual individuals first going to the forums, and then identifying as Asexual occurring, but these two understandings can be brought together through interrogation of the words participate and identify, through my later readings in the forums.

Now, it is important to note that participate is a very vague term here. Does this mean that people are identifying as Asexual and then seeking out information on Asexuality? Or does this mean that they only choose to participate, rather than observing or learning after they begin to identify as Asexual. For this reason the results of this question end up not being particularly informative, aside from the fact that “participation,” often occurs around the same time as identification. As I will show from the forums later on, Asexual individuals, particularly Gray Asexual individuals, in many cases may enter the AVEN forums with some understanding of Asexuality, but then either through observing or participating they may refine that identity, or figure out how it applies to them. Since Asexuality by definition does not require participation, this does tell us that there is something important about participating in the community, particularly as it relates to identifying as Asexual. These two conflicting narratives, with a fuzzy understanding around identification and participation can explain these two contrasting results, as they all do point to participation often being connected to identification, although not necessarily in a neat way.

Furthermore, these results again tell us something about the participants of this survey’s age, because there was no Asexual community to participate in before 2001. This reminds us that the people who are taking this survey may not represent all people who are Asexual, but we also should not assume that any sexuality is evenly distributed across the population, especially if participation to some extent is so tightly tied to an Asexual identity.

There were a few other results which were important enough to require mentioning. The first of these, is the gender breakdown of those responding to this survey (Figure 8). Of the respondents whose identities fall within Asexuality, about 55% of them identified as women, almost 30% of them identified as non-binary, and only 15% as men. We cannot just overlook this as sampling bias due to the spaces that asexuality is discussed (Tumblr, the forums, etc) are predominantly spaces for people who aren't men, because of the significant difference between the gender breakdown of those who identify as not Asexual. Ignoring this would need to be justified with a bold assumption about the people who are taking the survey, such as assuming that non Asexual men are taking it because they are in a romantic relationship with someone who is Asexual, or some other assumption about gendered relationships between the Asexual (women) taking this survey, and the allosexual men who are also taking it. While this is a question that asks to be interrogated, it is not something I will focus on. Prominent sources within the Asexual community such as Asexuality Archive³ and Julie Sondra Decker's book *The Invisible Orientation* which claims to be an introductory work explaining Asexuality, claim that social factors are preventing men from realizing their Asexuality, such as expectations of sexuality of men, or a flattening of sexual function with desire. This claim frames Asexuality as an essential sexual orientation, that is evenly distributed among the entire population, but is only available for identity for certain populations, due to access (the spaces Asexuality exists on the internet are whiter and have more women and nonbinary people), and social pressures that shame those who consider Asexuality, and suppress the ability to even conceive of one's own sexuality. These sources do not try to explain why there are more women who are Asexual, and rather only frame it as a problem of missing men. Another perspective can be given within feminist

³ <http://www.asexualityarchive.com/on-the-existence-of-asexual-men/>

scholarship such that Asexuality can be a result of gender, and is therefore it could make sense for in a society where heterosexuality is so persuasive, identifying as Asexual to escape heterosexuality similar to Adrienne Rich's proposal of women joining the "Lesbian Continuum" as their only way out of compulsive heterosexuality in her work *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. Other feminist scholars, such as Cerankowski and Milks have posed feminist Asexualities, that they argue could use this radical feminist discourse to not only make the claim of Asexuality as an escape from (male) sexuality, but also as something that can be a temporary sexuality, as "[someone] who is sexually inactive, whether short-term or long-term, not through a religious or spiritual vow of celibacy but through feminist agency" (New Orientations , 699). However, as they note, the Asexual community rejects this claim, as AVEN states that Asexuality is biologically determined, and furthermore members of the Asexual forums vehemently reject this claim. In an example I will return to later, in my discussion of the Asexual Forums in how the thread attempting to define Gray-Asexuality was a failed project, the member of the AVEN forums derail the thread by critiquing Breanne Fahs's 2010 paper *Radical Refusals: On the Anarchist Politics of Women Choosing Asexuality* for making this statement.

Gender remains an open debate within Asexuality, and between Asexuals and researchers. One cannot analyze this survey without acknowledging it. But through highlighting these debates I also show why I do not believe it is a fruitful conversation to continue with, at least not with the methodology I am using. It can be an overcentralizing debate about Asexuality that will not reach a consensus, and can and does instead derail other conversations about Asexuality. As I am focusing on the ways in which Asexual individuals produce identity together, whether or not Asexuality is essential, or mapped onto femininity due to heterosexuality is not a question that I will be focusing on. Instead, these conflicts inform us of

the ways in which Asexual people wish to formulate their identity and the ways that they engage with research, particularly with the goal of furthering a political narrative seeking of acceptance as liberal LGBTQ+ subjects.

Covariance Analysis, Clustering, and Artificial Neural Networks

For the second section of my data analysis I used a few more complicated techniques to answer two particular questions – what features are connected, and how distinct are the categories of identification. While doing this sort of work I want to make it very clear that I am not saying that answering certain ways on a survey mean that someone has one identity or the other, as all of these survey questions are subjective, rather than objective data. This means that this sort of analysis instead asks questions of what ways that people see themselves in similar ways to each other, and how that is connected to how they identify. But knowledge of histories of sexuality, as well as histories of racism also tell us that no data on sexuality or identity can truly be objective. To try and assume objective data about sexuality would be to ignore both the research showing it is not true, and also the harm that has been done by projects attempting to claim objective truths about identity for racist purposes.

For this analysis I needed to make sure all of my data was in numerical space, rather than categorical space I cleaned the data in the way I mentioned earlier so I could do these analyses. This made it so there were 129 different features for each response, so I will be summarizing my of the visualizations and including key datapoints, but will not be able to clearly fit the charts onto these pages. For this reason I have removed the labels from Figure 9, and will instead explain the key regions. Firstly in the upper left corner there are a few values that are correlated together, these are negative correlations between the year people were born in, and the age that

they first had sex, identified as Asexual or other “firsts.” This means that the older people are in this survey, the later they were to do any of these things. The other features in this corner, are correlated to each other, as it would make sense for many of these firsts to occur at similar times. The other sets of strong correlations, which are in the places the colors are the darkest, are either along the diagonal of the one hot encoded, which is where there were negative correlations between the different options, as it should be, and among a series of questions that related to who people are out as Asexual to. The strongest correlations between all of these questions was actually between people who were not asexual, as they filled out “Not Applicable” for all of these questions, but there were also strong correlations between people who were out as Asexual to most of their coworkers, and out to most of their family, etc.

Other than these obvious correlations raised in the covariance matrix (Figure 9), I decided to see if I could summarize the data in a better way using clustering. I chose to use K-means clustering as it would try and group datapoints together to form clusters without the advice of the user, so I could see what the “natural” clusters of data are, rather than summaries of the ways in which I, as a researcher would be interested in grouping the data. This does not remove bias, as it may implicate, but instead offers an analysis based on the biases of the survey and the types of questions it asked, rather than my own personal biases. Once I clustered the data, I looked at what the centers of each cluster were, to see what sort of information it deemed important. However, as there were 129 features, I will again explain the important ones. I first started by clustering the data into 4 categories, where the categories ended up being those who are not Asexual, those who are Asexual and do not have sex, those who are Asexual and do not have sex, and those who are Asexual and see a mental health professional. This speaks to how each feature is weighted the same, and thus if there are numerous questions about a specific topic it

can become of importance. Because of this, I removed some of the features about mental health, as that was not a topic of my study, removed a few of the features about who asexual people are out to, as the results were mostly the same, and created 3 clusters (Figure 10). This resulted in the three clusters discussed earlier, but without the one that relates to mental health, and is shown below. The middle row is that of Asexuals who are older, have a higher sex drive, are more likely to be Demisexual or Gray-Asexual, and are more likely to have had consensual sex and almost all of them have had partners of some sort. This row contained 3768 of the respondents. The bottom row is that of Asexuals who have not had sex, and their results are very similar to those above them, except for the features listed. For example almost none of them have ever had sex or romantic partners and it contained 4707 of the respondents. The top row was that of people who were not Asexual, and it can be clearly seen that their results stand out even from a small chart. However, it is important to note that especially with this last category, it is heavily based on the structure of the questions, as they all had the same responses to many questions that were only relevant to Asexual individuals, and therefore we cannot assume that this data analysis is essentializing these differences, but rather tells us about how people view themselves, and also how the survey is structured.

Lastly, I decided to use an Artificial Neural Network to try and see if an algorithm can “learn” which identity people had, based on these features. The main reason I wanted to do this is because unlike covariance or clustering, ANNs are nonlinear functions, so I could use it to make more accurate and targeted predictions of how people identified, rather than clustering which showed us that in fact there were two different subsets of Asexuals. Using ANNs, I could also see which features were important using sensitivity analysis, where I set the values of a certain set of columns to 0, and see how much the results change. To do this, I split the data into

two thirds of the data that I will use to train the model, and one third to test how effective the model is. I then fed it into a deep neural network, with 6 layers of hidden layers with 500 nodes each, followed by 400, 300, 200 and then 100 that would then classify it into one of the identities. When I first tried running the network it classified everyone as either Asexual or not Asexual, not guessing for anyone to be in the gray-area. However, this was due to the fact that there was such a large disparity between the number of datapoints, so I combined the “Gray-A” and “Demisexual” into a Gray Asexual category, and my network was somewhat effective at determining who was Asexual, who was Gray Asexual, and who was not, based on these survey results (figure 11). However, it did guess a significant number of people were Gray Asexual who were just Asexual, and vice versa. This could be because we saw in the clustering and covariance analysis that there are a wide range of Asexual experiences, with many people who identify as just Asexual having sex or having partners. The sensitivity analysis showed that no one individual column was the one that the network used, and rather that it instead used a combination of all of the features together. However, there was one column that did have a significant impact, which was how willing they were to have sex. While this is not surprising, I did find it surprising that that other features, such as what their sex drive was did not seem to be as much of a determining factor of this data.

Doing my own analysis on the Asexual Community Census helped reveal different aspects I should focus on for analyzing Asexuality, and particularly Gray Asexuality. In looking at this survey data as non-objective, and therefore about the ways we see ourselves I aimed to do this data analysis without falling into some of the pitfalls I have pointed out in psychological research such as treating subjective data as objective, and also avoids essentializing statements that Sommerville warns us of when trying to objectify sexuality. As shown, there are numerous

things that using modern data analysis techniques can provide, such as showing which features are important, and pointing out trends that I will dive deeper into when I look into the forums in a later section. This data shows us that many of the most important aspects towards differentiating between Asexualities are subjective, such as some tangible, but minor difference between sex drive. However, this also brings up the question of what is “sex drive,” we cannot look at it as an objective feature, but as a value that informs, and is informed by the identity that people already have. Additionally, the other category of importance for this differentiation is if they are willing to have sex. This is a key difference between Gray Asexuals and those who are just Asexual. But this willingness to have sex leaves many questions open, what conditions is this under, how is this negotiated within Asexuality. These sort of questions can only be interrogated with more personal accounts, as I aim to do in the forums. Lastly, I believe having some sort of large data provides a framework to help us understand more personal, and individualized accounts. This data pushes us towards what factors do constitute people’s Asexual identities, and what sort of questions to ask, but we cannot view these features as objective. Data can rather be used to summarize answers of a lot of people, so if the data and personal accounts are telling the same story, it tells me I am not trying to extrapolate too much from a few personal examples, and also that my data didn’t over-generalize, or project too many assumptions on individual, real people.

Theorizing Asexuality through the AVEN Forums

Importance of the Asexual Forums

Forums hold an important space in the Asexual community. The Asexual forums serve as the mythical origin point of Asexuality, a nexus of Asexual information that was codified into the ones and zeros of the internet the moment someone was brave enough to declare themselves

Asexual. They have served, and continue to serve as a place where people declare truths from their bodies and turn them into knowledge that is accessible to the public. While the AVEN forums may not necessarily be the place on the internet, or the world, with the largest conglomeration of people who identify as Asexual – based on where people found the Asexual Community Census that would likely be Tumblr, followed by Facebook and Reddit, and only then the Asexual forums – yet their importance cannot be overstated. These Asexual forums are connected to the official site of Asexuality – AVEN, and therefore they have been the space that Asexual identity was first discussed in a place solely dedicated to Asexuality, and they also position themselves as having authority, being connected to THE official site of Asexual knowledge. In addition to their importance for having created the “Asexual community,” these forums continue to serve as an important cultural center of Asexual knowledge, and continue to serve as a place to sort, store, and discuss new information as they relate to Asexuality, or Asexual individuals. For this reason, I approach the Asexual forums to get a glimpse of how this definitional project is constructed. Not to get to truths about Asexuality, but rather to show how Asexual individuals constitute their Asexuality through their interaction with these forums, and then how their processes of understanding their Asexuality bring insight into what are made to be more stable definitions of Asexuality.

Definitional projects

The Asexual forums, and their connected site Asexuality.org (also known as AVEN) have always been part of a definitional project. The goal of these sites were to name, codify, and spread awareness about information as it related to Asexuality. We can see from the statement about AVEN on the AVEN website, that it has always served two purposes, to build community and to create, and disseminate new information:

The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) was founded in 2001 with two distinct goals: creating public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community. Since that time we have grown to host the world's largest asexual community, serving as an informational resource for people who are asexual and questioning, their friends and families, academic researchers and the press. AVEN members throughout the world regularly engage in visibility projects, included but not limited to distributing informational pamphlets, leading workshops, arranging local meetups and speaking to interested press. The AVEN community centers around the web forum, which provides a safe space for asexual and questioning people and their partners, friends and families to discuss their experiences.

This statement frames the forums as the place where information is created. It claims that the core of AVEN, the (Asexual) community, is centered around the forums. The website around the forums is just a place to store the creations of those discussions on the forum in a neat way. Or more, that the website surrounding them exists as an entrance into these forums. Either as individuals wishing to learn more about, and then discuss their, or their family, friends, or partners' Asexuality, or for researchers or the press who need to learn more about Asexuality. To AVEN, this isn't just a new aspect of Asexuality, this is a core aspect of Asexuality. And it always has been, since the very creation of AVEN, which in itself is seen as the creation of the Asexual subject, who is able to choose their own Asexuality, and is looking for acceptance.

Everything about AVEN shows its dedication to knowledge production. This begins with its name, The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network, which states that the two central issues related to Asexual community are visibility and education. By framing the origin point of Asexuality – both historically and as a center of knowledge – as knowledge, it frames the history of Asexuality as that of producing knowledge. That the story of Asexuality was that individuals had to name Asexuality for themselves to be able to have an identity, and for others in order to find acceptance. The other factor that shows AVEN's commitment the production of knowledge is its logo – the AVEN triangle. As discussed earlier, this triangle aims to expand the discussion of sexuality by introducing the axis of Asexuality onto the ways we discuss sexuality.

Furthermore, this design is fairly simple, and requires explanation. It has no obvious connection to Asexuality unless explained, in which case it introduces, and defines Asexuality. It frames Asexuality in a specific way, that frames it as a spectrum that builds off of previous knowledges of sexuality. This is not just metaphorical, but also quite literally in the symbol of the AVEN triangle. The axis from left to right represents the Kinsey Scale, while the vertical axis represents the degree of Asexuality. At the same time this symbol posits sexuality as a spectrum, but also that the entire spectrum is Asexual. While this can be seen as a problem with a definition, it actually functions very similar to the Kinsey scale, where almost the entire scale consists of people who are Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual.

The forums continue to serve as part of this definitional project of Asexuality. Although the AVEN forums are no longer the entry point to Asexuality, and thus we can assume they may not be the largest source of Asexual discourse, they are still an active place for people to engage with asexuality. Furthermore, forums serve as an archive in a way that Tumblr and Facebook do not. The forums are the sites where researchers observe, and recruit Asexual individuals in an attempt to understand it. Forums can order and organize themselves in a particular way to store, and preserve certain knowledge, and let other knowledge fade away. There are threads that have continued since 2005 such as “Masturbating A's: what do you think about when masturbating?” While most personal discussions only remain visible for twenty five posts, until there have been new, more recent posts and discussions that take their place. Other posts are pinned, meaning either their discussions have been deemed important enough that they should continue, or because they contain key information that people should read as an introduction to the section. Examples of these within the section on Gray Asexuality include a post called “Kink, BDSM, and Cake.” While this thread makes a statement that discussions of kink and BDSM are not

exclusive from Asexuality, others are more direct about their purpose. Another of these pinned threads is “A/Sexuality & Sexual Orientation Lexicon [READ ME],” where a moderator of the forum compiled a list of definitions and frequently asked questions, and then “locked” the thread, meaning that no one is allowed to respond to it. This thread contains an introduction to Gray-Asexuality, a “master list” of Asexual orientations, containing over 40 different labels and short definitions, and FAQs about Gray-Asexuality, Demisexuality, and an “other questions” section. Formalizing, highlighting, and locking this list, the AVEN forums themselves are making multiple statements about Asexuality. They are making an inclusive statement about Asexuality, claiming that it includes many individual and very specific definitions for people to explore, and by including so many of these definitions which arouse from conversations on the forums and other Asexual spaces, it also does leave open room for more exploring, and creation of identities. It also states the importance of Asexual discourse. By claiming this inclusive list of definitions, it validates the discussions of Asexuality, and claims that these spaces and discussions exploring personal identity are producing real knowledge. However, at the same time it makes another statement by centering “Gray-Asexuality” and “Demisexuality.” As discussed in the previous section, these two identities are the most commonly included next to, and as a part of Asexuality. By including sections dedicated to each of them here, it is another example of the ways in which the Asexual community make statements claiming these two identities are of particular importance.

Definition of Gray Asexuality

The Gray Asexual community, however, fails at this definitional project. The definition of Gray Asexuality I provided earlier, is not a particularly good definition, as it is all relative. It defines Gray Asexuality as referring to “*someone who does not normally experience sexual*

attraction, but do sometimes,” which is absolutely useless in actually understanding an individual who is Gray Asexual and for being part of a community dedicated to creating knowledge, stands out at being incredibly vague. This is not to say that other sexualities are not vague or socially constructed, as attraction and gender are not actually stable categories, but it is much easier to pretend they are, than a definition such as Gray Asexuality’s which is completely based on social norms, and some subjective way of deciding when one does, and does not fit into them, and then poses that as a definition. Yet this remains the best definition of Gray-Asexuality, which I do not see as a failure. Instead, it shows that there may be something more important that is trying to be worked out by this convoluted identity, that relates to how Gray-Asexual experience attraction, which has not been able to be captured yet within the current frames. Gray Asexuality then, sits inside of this enigma within Asexuality. While the creation of Asexual spaces has often come from, and resulted in definitional projects, Gray-Asexuality refuses to be defined. Although there are multiple definitions of Asexuality (see definitions), they can all make the claim to stand on their own, as do other terms such as demisexual meaning people who only experience sexual attraction within a close emotional bond. (Obviously all of these definitions can only exist within their cultural context and definitions of sexuality, attraction, partnering, and for the case of Demisexuality a “close emotional bond”). Yet even Gray-Asexuality’s best definitions frame it as people who are between asexual and allosexual, or more often people who experience sexual attraction sometimes, or only in specific situations. What does this mean? What are enough situations to be gray-Asexual. And yet, despite these questions, it is one of the more important sections on the asexual wikis. It is an accepted term, and an identity that is given space, and gravitas within the Asexual community.

Yet, being focused on definitions people within the forums do not sit comfortably within this lack of a stable definition. People within the forums have tried multiple times to determine a definition of Gray Asexuality, to no avail. This is most evident in the 2017 thread titled “please let us establish a strong definition for Graysexuality.” That began in October 2017. This thread attempts to create a “stable” definition of Gray Asexuality that “does not rely on the person understanding asexuality at all, does not rely on examples to explain it, clearly explains what Graysexuality is, as an umbrella term, and does not imply that sexuals are horny animals.” However, this thread fails to produce any meaningful definition. This thread can be described as having four types of participants, firstly those who are trying to define the term, in many, but not all of these cases these people do not identify as Gray Asexual themselves. These people are either asking the questions or trying to offer definitions. Yet because these definitions are either rejected by Gray-Asexuals as not capturing their identity, or because the definitions remain too broad there is no consensus definition. The next group of people in this thread, are people who identify as Gray Asexual. These people in most cases either gave relational definitions of Gray Asexuality such as “Gray Asexual- An umbrella term used to describe someone who experiences sexual attraction less and/or differently than typically sexual people, but does still experience it at certain points,” or explain their gray identity. In many of the cases where their gray identity is explained, there is a sentiment that the fluidness is helpful both because people didn’t want to be fit into a more specific box, and because they still had questions about their (Gray) Asexuality. There are also people who do not see Gray Asexuality as Asexual. This is either because they see them as being “sexuals” and therefore not Asexuals, or because they think Gray Asexuality cannot be defined, and should not be defined because it is about specific relationships and is therefore personal, as summed up in the quote from the thread that “there are approximately 7

billion different sexualities,” and therefore any category of sexuality cannot be complete, nor stable. Some of these people themselves were Gray Asexual as well, but did not see it as a sexuality or sexual orientation, but instead just a modifier label on top of their sexuality.

The last set of participants are those who moved the conversation away from the initial topic, and into theoretical topics about sexuality and fringe questions about Gray Asexuality. Many of these participants were the same as those who did not see Gray Asexuality as a sexuality, but I distinguish them here because the ways in which they interacted with the thread were different. This began by someone questioning if “true fetishes” where people can only get off to certain things count as Gray Asexuality, since they are conditional. However this conversation becomes not about Gray Asexuality, but rather the definition of fetishes, and is rejected by many people on the forum before it is dropped. But the conversation truly went off topic when someone tried to bring in feminist theory, particularly Kristina Gupta’s 2017 work *“And Now I’m Just Different, but There’s Nothing Actually Wrong With Me”: Asexual Marginalization and Resistance*. The quote that is posed in these forums is

Perhaps it is, in part, a reaction to these limits that the online asexual community has developed the categories of “demisexual” (to describe those who may feel sexual attraction in certain contexts) and “Gray-A/Gray-A” (to describe people who consider themselves to fall in the gray area between sexuality and asexuality), categories that were used by some of the interviewees in this study. Although this may be a positive development (including some who would otherwise be excluded), in my estimation replacing a two-category system with a multicategory system does not eliminate the problems that come from using a categorical system in the first place... This may obscure the possibility that many people experience periods of asexuality at different points in their lives. (Gupta, 1007)

This asks the question of whether or not adding new categories actually changes the system that required those additional categories to be made. This is particularly brought up in terms of a Foucauldian analysis of categories of sexual identity, because as she states that creating categories leads to self regulation and control, through controlling the discourse, and the

production of knowledge. This part is missed in this thread however, as it is seen within that thread through many of the discussions about who does and does not count as Gray Asexual, and if those Gray Asexuals are indeed Asexual “enough.” However, the complaints brought up are not ones relevant to this article, such as the fact that only one of her interviewees was Gray Asexual, and only two were Demisexual, and also that Gray Asexuality is not a new identity within Asexuality, but rather has been proposed as part of Asexuality since the origins of AVEN.

The complaints brought up against this however, are because of her challenging of essentialism within sexual orientations. Part of these complaints are political, because individuals are afraid that theories like this will harm their goal of acceptance. When Asexuals are struggling to have people recognize their identity as valid, they are afraid that feminist statements challenging essentialism can be misconstrued to say Asexuality is a phase or that they will get over it when they find the “right one.” However, another part of these complaints are because she is a feminist scholar. Particular people in this thread is devalued by being called a “wild theory,” and people on the forums reject the ideas behind analyses that have the goal of changing how we interact with the neoliberal state, as shown in the joke “If we stop having these conversations, will that help overthrow capitalism?” when someone tries to contextualize Gupta. From here the thread devolves into members of the forums finding feminist scholarship and radical feminists they disagree with, and stops discussing the original topic, before it is finally locked. The skepticism of feminists can either be based on sexism and a devaluation of the field, but it can also be connected to the unique relationship Asexuality has had with psychological research. They could be so used to having control of the narrative of research about them and trying to understand them, or at least being engaged with it, that feminist theory can challenge AVEN’s

position of knowledge about Asexuality, and the amount that research aligns with their goals for Asexual acceptance.

I bring up this thread because although it fails at achieving its goals, it does give great insight into the Asexual community and Gray Asexuality. The fact that it failed can indeed inform us more about Gray Asexuality, as what does it mean when people use a label that they believe is relevant to them, but can not be defined. Furthermore, this failure did not go unnoticed, as it is referenced again over a year later in another thread, saying that they could not create a good definition. Additionally, some of the joke definitions, and some of the conversations can give us insight into what else may be of importance to Gray Asexuality, and what draws people to it. A new direction can be seen from a user who said “Graysexuality isn't a well-defined sexual orientation like heterosexuality or asexuality. To some degree, it describes a sexual disorientation” which is also summarized nicely by my favorite response to the thread, but also the one I view most helpful “isnt it when your kinda ace kinda not.” Although a disorientation always relies on other definitions, framing Gray Asexuality as a disorientation of sorts allows it to be stable by framing it explicitly as interacting with both Asexuality and Allosexuality.

Another straightforward, but simple takeaway from this thread is that the Asexual community takes an explicitly minoritarian viewpoint on Asexuality. The rejection of feminist scholarship, which is not only discussed in this thread, but also discussed in the introduction to Cerankowski and Milks’s anthology on feminist and queer perspectives on Asexuality, is a rejection of an attempt to make universalist claims about sexuality through understanding Asexuality. Instead they are seeking to politicize Asexuality, as has been done with other LGBTQ movements, such that it can be another essentialized orientation that is biological, innate and relevant to others only insofar as education, awareness, visibility, and acceptance. This is to

say that Asexuality has yet to have a universalizing work on the caliber of Sedgwick's Axiomatic that makes it clear that Allo/Asexual dichotomies, as well as what is revealed about them through understandings of Gray Asexuality, are relevant to almost every aspect of our life, culture, and social interactions. While Gupta does suggest that this work needs to be done, any attempts at it have been rejected by the Asexual community, and have yet not gained particular traction within feminist scholarship.

The last thing we see in this thread, which is one of the fundamental questions that it set out to solve, were Asexual views on Allosexuals. This is most obviously shown in the interaction where one user says "We're trying to find a definition that does not require an understanding of what "typically sexual people" are," to which someone responds "Everyone knows what typically sexual is." However, the people on this thread do not believe that claim as shown by "Honestly, I wonder if most AVENites actually do..." and other responses where people show that people on AVEN assume sexual people are always sexual, and that they only consider physical attraction, rather than many factors. I would argue that this is not just a problem within AVEN, but through Rachel Hills' book *The Sex Myth: The Gap Between our Fantasies and Realities* we can see this as something that everyone struggles with. This book shows that not only do we assume that other people are way more sexual than they are, and that this assumption about how much sex other people are having is a central idea in the ways that we engage our own, and others sexualities. This reading of *The Sex Myth* both tells us that indeed, if they wish to label themselves as different from allosexuals, Gray Asexuals may struggle to find significant boundaries based on actions alone. However, it also lets us use a better term than "sexuals" or "normative sexuality" to describe the assumptions of sexuality that Gray Asexuals are responding to.

A new Understanding of Asexual Identity

Using Foucault's discussion of how "the homosexual was now a species" in *History of Sexuality* and Sedgwick's discussions of the act of coming out of the closet creating a homosexual identity in her introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*, Axiomatic, we can reframe Asexual identification as both being a product of systems of knowledge production and society, and also at the same time producing knowledge, and its own identity, separate from acts. While Sedgwick's Axioms 1, 4 and 5 can help us frame the issues within the debates within the Asexual community in forming a definition, and helps us understand the actions taken in the politicization of Asexuality to essentialize it in order to seek acceptance, it is axiom 3 that I would like to focus on for proposing a new perspective on understanding identity. Axiom 3 states that "There can't be an a priori decision about how far it will make sense to conceptualize lesbian and gay male identities together. Or separately." This is to say that in understanding a unified homosexual identity, we must understand it as culturally and historically produced, and therefore we analyze the ways in which that their identities are created that may be both separate, but also intertwined. Although this axiom is referring specifically to the ways in which we must choose to frame the Gay and Lesbian movements, it also shows us that these identities, and movements are defined by themselves due to their time, such as how lesbianism was able to be seen as an epitome of womanhood, while male homosexuality was not, but also how identities are formed by others, such as how the homophobia that arose from the AIDS epidemic resulted in increased hate towards lesbians, in addition to gay men. For these reasons we can reframe Asexual identification towards that of a question of relationality. What histories do Asexuals place themselves into in order to tell a story of Asexuality? What political and academic

movements inform the ways in which Asexuality are seen and recognized? And lastly how does interaction with the public affect Asexual identity?

I have answered many of these questions already in this piece. Through tracing psychological research I have shown that psychologists are trying to paint Asexuality as an essential sexual orientation, along with the help of the Asexual community. However, psychologists view Asexuality as something that they had somehow missed, and misrepresented through HSDD, while the Asexual community sees it as being formed through David Jay, and the internet. Furthermore, Asexuality is heavily informed by the current, political LGBTQ+ movement, which also takes a minoritarian, and essentializing viewpoint about sexuality. AVEN, and the Asexual community are making a claim that Asexuality is part of this alphabet soup, and are framing their narratives in a similar minoritarian viewpoint.

Yet because of a minoritarian viewpoint of asexuality, and their own identification as Asexuals they are treated as such. This means that the choice of disidentifying from sexuality makes them Asexual, and in using that label creates a difference. We can see this most clearly within Rachel Hills' book *The Sex Myth* with Hills' analysis of Cara. Cara comes to Hills saying she is questioning if she is experience sexuality at all, and tells the story about how she tells a man that she was dating that she may be Asexual. Because of this, the man dumps her, and links her to his blog, where he had posted that he could never date an Asexual (62-66). To this man, it didn't matter that Cara decided that Asexuality did not fit her, even the slightest identification with it made her labeled as such, and caused others to treat her as such. It was the act of labeling herself as Asexual, while having the audacity to date, that made her Asexual, and others interact with her differently as such, that caused her to have the same repercussions that Asexual people face. At this date, she did not say she would never have sex with him, nor was her Asexuality

discussed in the context of sex. Cara's rejection and harassment was not about a refusal of sex, it was about an identification with Asexuality, and whatever that may mean to her Date. By this means, we can see through Cara that Asexuality is clearly not just about having sex, as society has different ways to treat people who refuse sex, but rather that a specific speech act, a specific identification changes interactions for individuals, and in a way creates a community. This act of identification to create a community is not just about adversarial encounters with others due to Asexuality, but also one of the fundamental ideas behind the Asexual forums. By stepping into these spaces, and participating in them, one is joining the Asexual community. Not because of their acts, but because of the ways in which they see themselves, and the ways in which they engage with the world, to produce their Asexuality, just as Sedgwick shows how it is the "coming out" experience that frames a minoritarian, homosexual experience.

Questioning Asexuality

On the AVEN forums we can look into the ways in which Asexuals, but specifically Gray Asexuals interact with each other to produce their identity. Within the section dedicated to Gray Asexuality, something immediately stands out: almost every other post is posing a question, asking where they fall within Asexuality. Examples of these include "I might be demisexual?" "Figuring out my sexual orientation," "How did you know you were gray romantic?" and "Saying I'm ace when I'm not." All of these threads are just on the first page of this sections as of April 16, 2019, and are not even all of them where people ask for help understanding their sexual orientation. Of course, if someone is asking for help with their sexuality online in an Asexual forum, this ask is not a question that just randomly happens to occur here. It is an informed question, informed both by their previous knowledge of Asexuality, and the ways in which they

entered this specific area to the forum, but also informed by the repeated actions that happen in this forum, the patterns that occur over and over again in the discussions of Gray Asexuality.

Almost every single one of these threads follows the same format, but I will use the example of a thread called “Recently came across "gray-asexual"” which was posted on January 10th. In this thread the author first begins by describing their personal situation, and why they are asking the question, for this poster it is because their boyfriend mentioned imagining having sex with other people, which caused the author to realize they might see sex differently. They then go on to give their whole sexual history, explaining all of their important relationships also giving intimate sexual details such as being bored during sex. In addition they trace these experiences throughout their whole life, and claim that they have always been confused by how others experience sexual attraction, such as being confused by other people staring at shirtless firemen. In response to the post, first a moderator welcomes the new person by offering them cake, a symbol of welcoming someone into the Asexual forums, and provides information for them to help figure out their sexuality. Then other people explain how their situation is similar, and deliberate on the author’s sexuality, and if they may be Asexual, and in this case, as well as most others I have come across, the consensus has been that the author is in fact, some sort of Gray Asexual.

Reading this as a pattern that keeps on happening within the Gray Asexual area of the forums requires us to read this not just as something that happens innocently just because people have questions about their sexuality, but rather as a means of communication and welcoming that is important to, or at least telling of Gray Asexuality. If we are instead to understand this questioning, deliberation, and acceptance as part of the Gray Asexual identity, what else can we understand about Asexuality, and sexual orientations as a whole? Does using this frame fit in

with the narratives and existing data we have about Gray Asexuality? This thread that I examined has a response that embodies these ideas: “if you're not sure if you're feeling sexual attraction...you're not.” This claim frames Asexuality not as not experiencing sexual attraction, because due to our cultural circumstances and The Sex Myth we have misconceptions about sexual attraction, but rather as a questioning, and therefore realization that something is different. This frames Asexuality as a disidentification with Allosexuality, rather than an orientation that explains a set of acts.

But Gray Asexuality in particular reveals this more than the rest of the Asexual forums. These introductions that involve questioning differ greatly from the introductions within the rest of the AVEN forums, particularly in the “Welcome Lounge.” In this area, most Asexuals introduce themselves, and lay claim to their Asexuality, announcing their label for others to understand. While there are some threads where people are trying to figure out their (A)sexuality (although many of these people fall within the gray area of Asexuality), these posts are more spread out.

For this reason we again must focus on the multiple conflicts with stability within Gray Asexuality, and the ways in which they are able to produce a stable identity together. If we view Asexuality as first a disidentification from Sexuality, and then Gray Asexuality as a second disidentification on top of that, it can sort out many of the seeming paradoxes of Gray Asexuality. It explains why a stable definition cannot be created, because it is a label that is contingent both on understanding our current views of sexuality, and also our current views on Asexuality. It also frames Gray Asexuality as an internal experience, in relation to assumptions about others’ internal experience, because disidentification is something that cannot be explained to others, because it is based on how you feel, and how you feel “different”. This can explain

why people can be so passionate about knowing they are Gray Asexual, without being able to define it. However, this internalized experience of sexuality we know does not exist in a vacuum, and therefore the shared language of the forums creates its own culture, and the knowledge that they produce so others can find them informs their discussions as they enter the space. Any entrance into the Asexual forums first requires some sort of contact and knowledge about Asexuality, and therefore we know that anyone asking if they are Asexual, has probably encountered similar knowledge, words, and ways of thinking. For this reason we can understand why people go into such depths to explain their past sexual experience, so others can know their internalized sexuality, and also why they are framing the questions as they are, because they know enough about Gray Asexuality.

I want to end this section on the AVEN forums with a quote that encapsulates this double disidentification model of understanding Gray Asexuality, from the thread discussed earlier about trying to create a strong definition for Gray Asexuality:

The thing about graysexuality, I guess, is that one feels too detached from the majority of the population to have a conventional/regular sexual relationship. It's that detachment, the feeling of being different because of their sexual orientation, that sets both grays and aces apart from sexuals.

This quote captures not only the disidentification that is happening with Gray Asexual from Allosexuals, but also from other Asexuals. This detachment, or disidentification is significant enough to be able to create a strong identity for many individuals, who are continuing to try and make space to understand themselves, and make claims about what ties them together. Not having a definition is not a problem of Gray Asexuality, because disidentification cannot be defined. Instead, we can best understand the definition of Gray Asexuality as that of shared practices, and shared (dis)identification, where people whose feelings align understand, but because of their alienation from a sexual culture, refuses to be tied down into a definition.

In her conclusion Hills proposes that if she had understood “The Sex Myth,” then she would have been far less insecure in her own lack of sexuality at the time. Asexual people, particularly Gray Asexual people also engage with this Sex Myth, but perhaps we can look at it as affecting them in a different way. Asexual people are the ones who have a different reaction to the Sex Myth. While Asexual people may claim to “just not get it,” Gray Asexuals are in somewhat murkier territory. On the one hand they clearly show that they feel like there is something different about them than what is expected from within The Sex Myth. Yet on the other hand they feel the need to ask questions about Asexuality, ask where they fit into the Sex Myth and define themselves in terms of it. Using Hills’ framework, and the model of double disidentification for understanding Gray Asexuality, we can reframe conversations about sexuality, and understand what value there is in this identity. Unlike Hills who feels insecure because of her apparent lack of sexuality Asexual people feel different from others who are insistent on discussing, and appear to be engaging in sexuality. Gray Asexuals then, clearly feel different, and their insecurity is framed in terms of them figuring out their identity. Asking questions about how they fit in, and what is normal isn’t the entrance to Gray Asexuality, it is the thing that ties many of them together. They are trying to figure out how their sexuality can exist, if it is not represented by this Sex Myth, and that is through first realizing that it does not encompass them (Asexual identification) and then also realizing again that there are points where they may wish to engage with sexuality, on their own terms (Gray Asexual identification). It isn’t that Gray Asexuals, or even Asexuals will never have sex, but rather that sex is different to them, and that they see themselves as occupying a different space in relation to, and in response to “normative sexuality,” or The Sex Myth.

Conclusion: Understanding Grayness and Living in its Uncertainty

Gray Asexuality cannot be used to produce new feminist knowledge without understanding these three sections. If we were only looking at the forums, the story of Gray Asexuality would just be the story of people talking about themselves and their sexuality on the internet. While this would still be an interesting project, it needs academic and historic knowledge for it to be useful in understanding why these people are talking about themselves on the internet, and what it means. Although I approached the histories of Asexuality from a critical perspective, these works were not only part of the narrative of understanding Asexuality, but they are also that of Asexuality itself because of their unique relationship with the Asexual community. Asexuality, as a sexual identity is about more than just the lack of sex, but rather about a cultural formation shared by a significant group of individuals about sexuality. We can see this not just from the history, or the dozens of individual accounts I read in the forums, but also from the thousands of respondents in the Asexual Community Census. These data showed us not only that Gray Asexuals have a different relationship with their own sexuality than both Allosexuals and Asexuals, but also that they are Asexuals, and that they are a significant portion of the Asexual community. This significance is not just in terms of numbers, but also the inclusion of Grey Asexuality and Demisexuality in the survey in the first place.

From all of these sources together, we can propose that the definition of Gray-Asexuality is in fact captured by its inability to be defined. This is not just because it is an umbrella identity containing multiple more specific identities, but because it is part of an acceptance of questioning what sexuality means. Gray Asexuality is constructed through this questioning, through asking where one fits in when Allosexuality doesn't fit, but there is sometimes this weird relation with it. Definitions then attempt to explain this feeling, but they cannot capture it. Yet

we know, both from accounts, and from looking at the data that this is a coherent category. There does exist stability within Gray Asexuality because they see themselves as sharing the same terms, the same questions, the same experiences, even without a shared definition. They all see themselves as Gray-Asexual for their own reasons, but they position themselves as having this commonality. This is not something we only see from the forums, but also something we understand from previous research on sexuality in the modern age, and something we also see with how coherent the results are within the data. This is to say that this coherence and shared histories do not necessarily preclude identity, but that they may be formed culturally as part of the process creating identity and identification. Gray Asexuality forces us to have to blend the lines that many wish to create between Allosexuality and Asexuality. Gray Asexuality takes a minoritarian perspective of itself, yet at the same time it pushes fundamental questions about sexuality. It destabilizes static distinctions in its refusal to have a definition, which is in contrast to its minoritarian identity. In this, we can see the implications of Gray Asexuality, it pushes the boundaries it breaks and then sits in them. It is Asexual, while still being willing to have sex. It separates sexuality from compulsive sexuality. So, when Gray Asexuals say they're Asexual, but also may have sex sometimes, it begs these questions, it pushes our ideas of sexuality and it asks for more.

Figures from Data Analysis

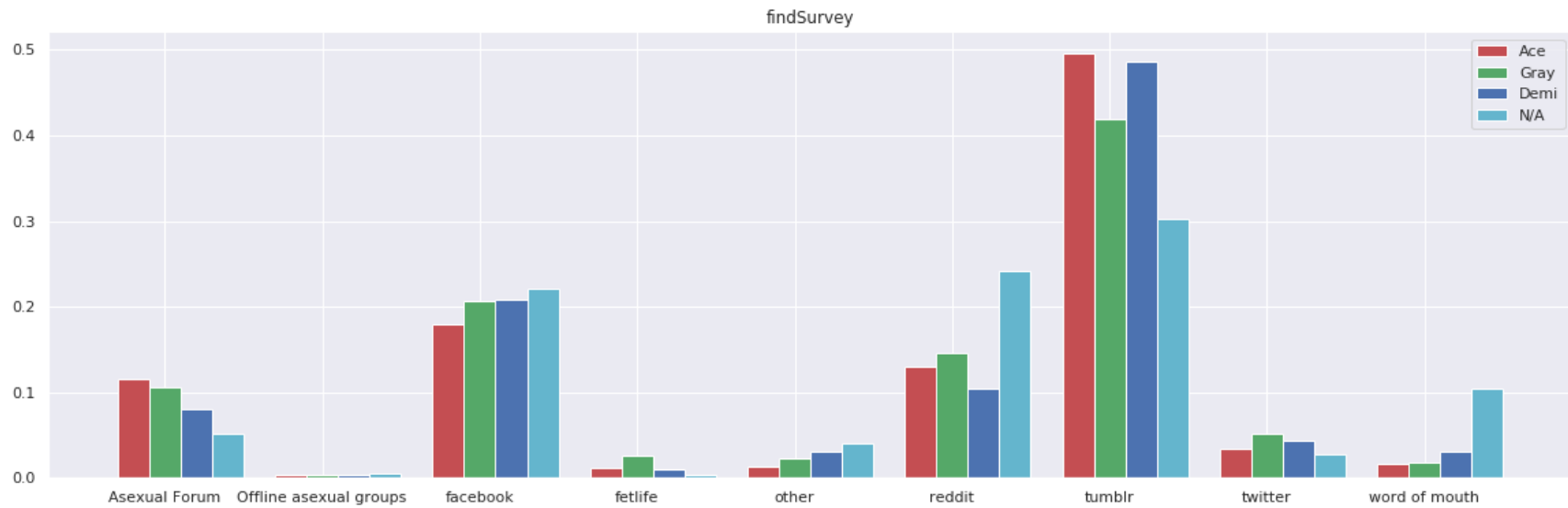


Figure 1: Find Survey based on Ace Id. Data is normalized such that each category adds to 1.0

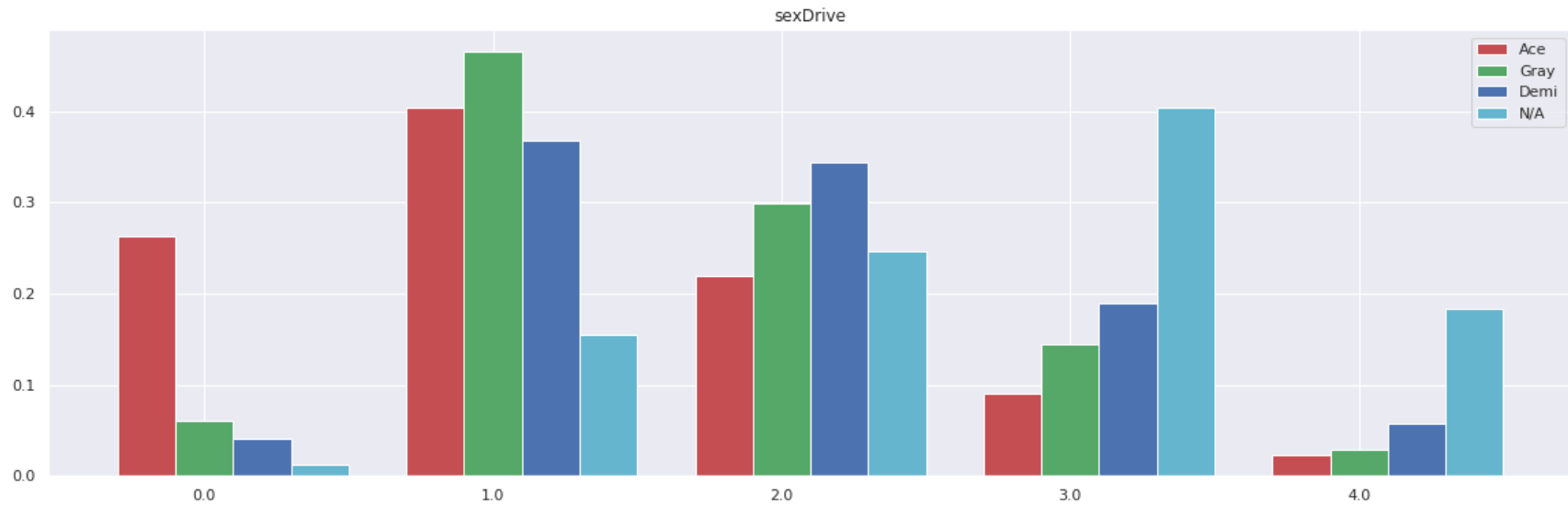


Figure 2: Sex Drive based on Ace Id. Data is normalized such that each category adds to 1.0



Figure 3: Age of First Identification as Asexual compared to Ace Id, cut off to be from 0 to 40. Data is normalized such that each category adds to 1.0

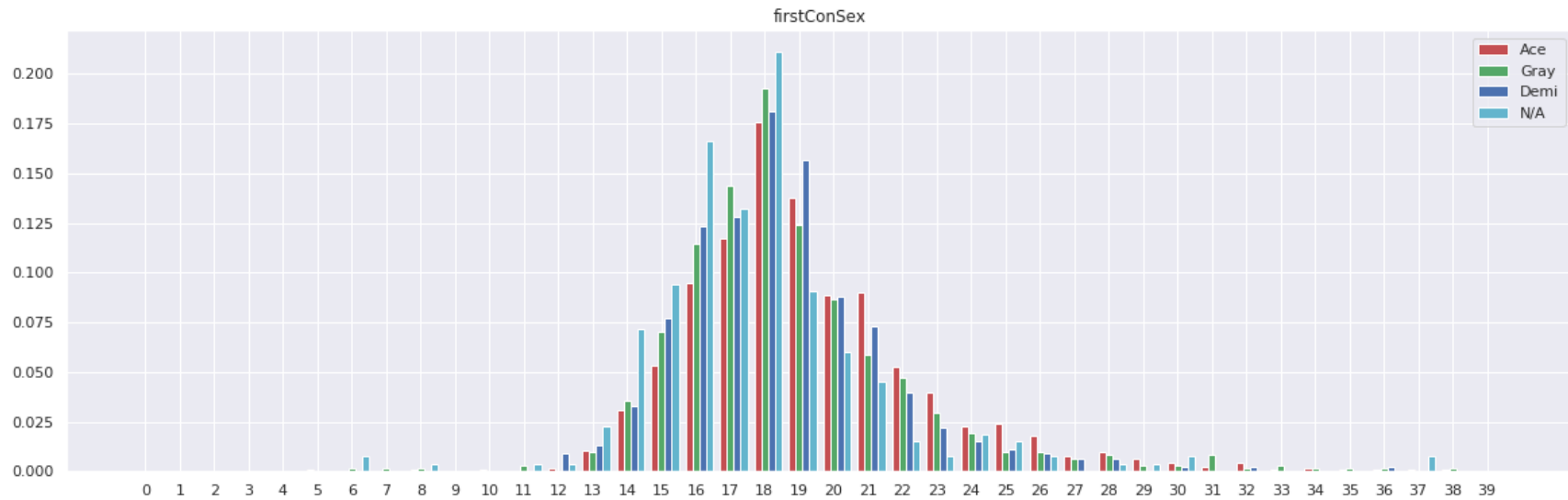


Figure 4: Age of first consensual Sex by Ace Id, cut off from 0-40. Data is normalized such that each category adds to 1.0. note that 1252/6284 Ace people filled this question out, 613/1427 Gray-A, 453/952 Demi and 265/499 N/A filled this out

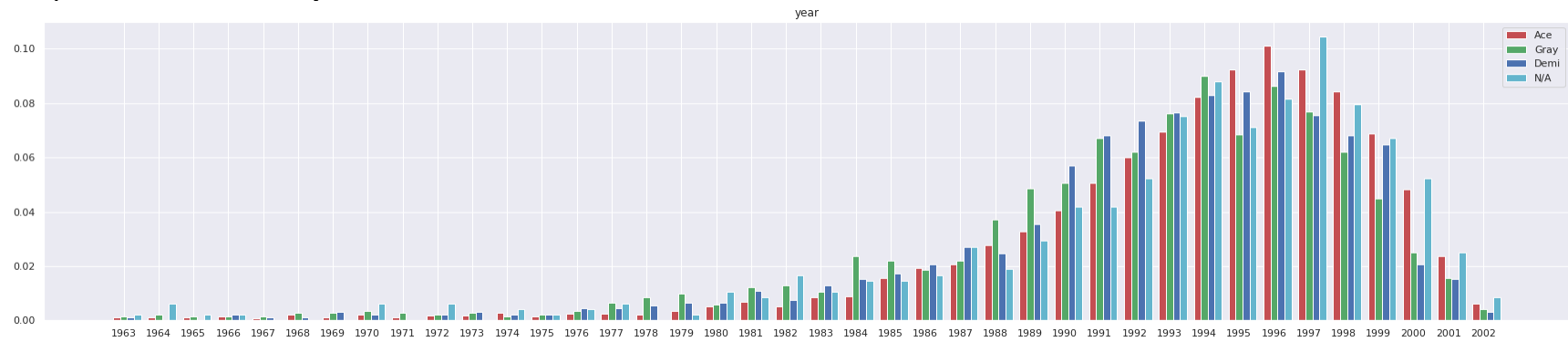


Figure 5: Year of birth by Ace Id, starting from 1963. Data is normalized such that each category adds to 1.0

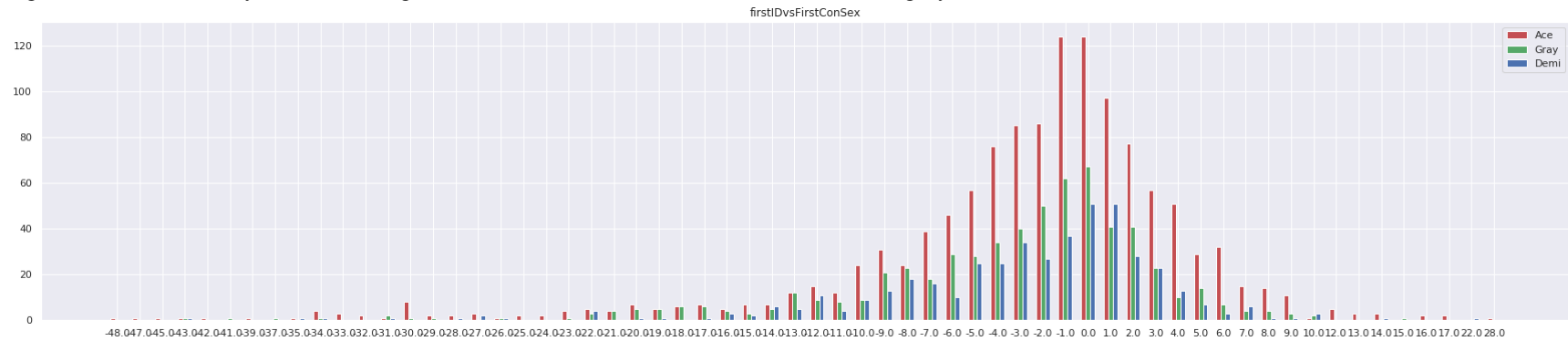


Figure 6: Age of First Id – Age of First Consensual Sex

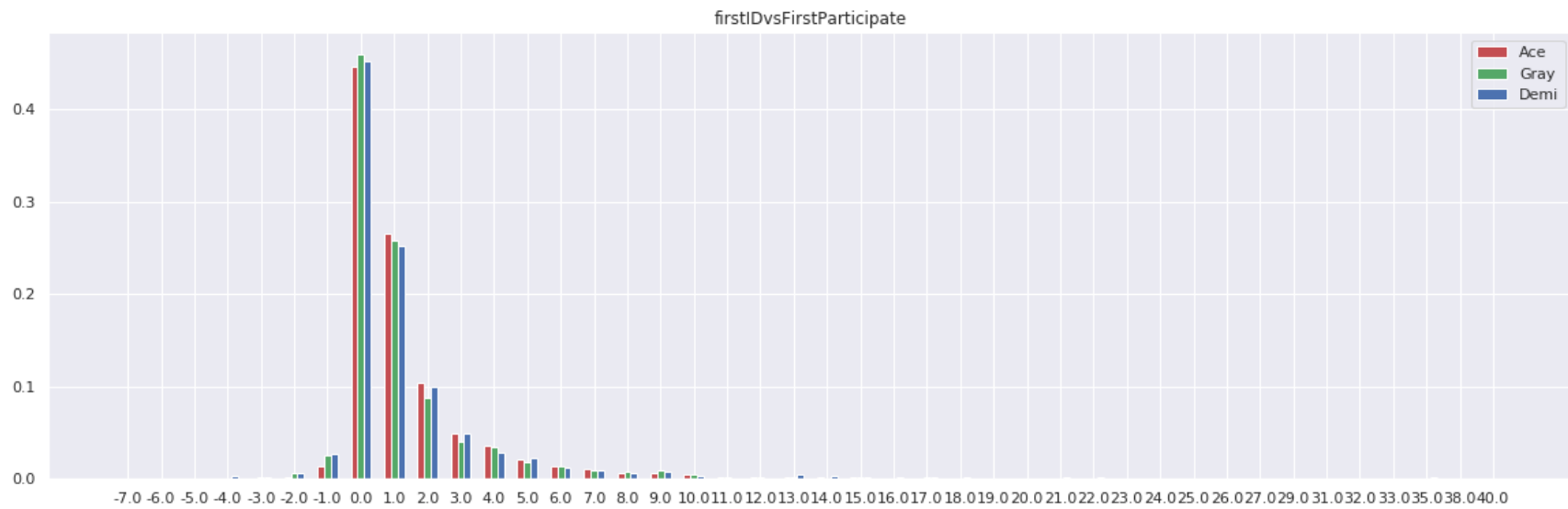


Figure 7: Age of First Id – age of first participate. Data is normalized such that each category adds to 1.0

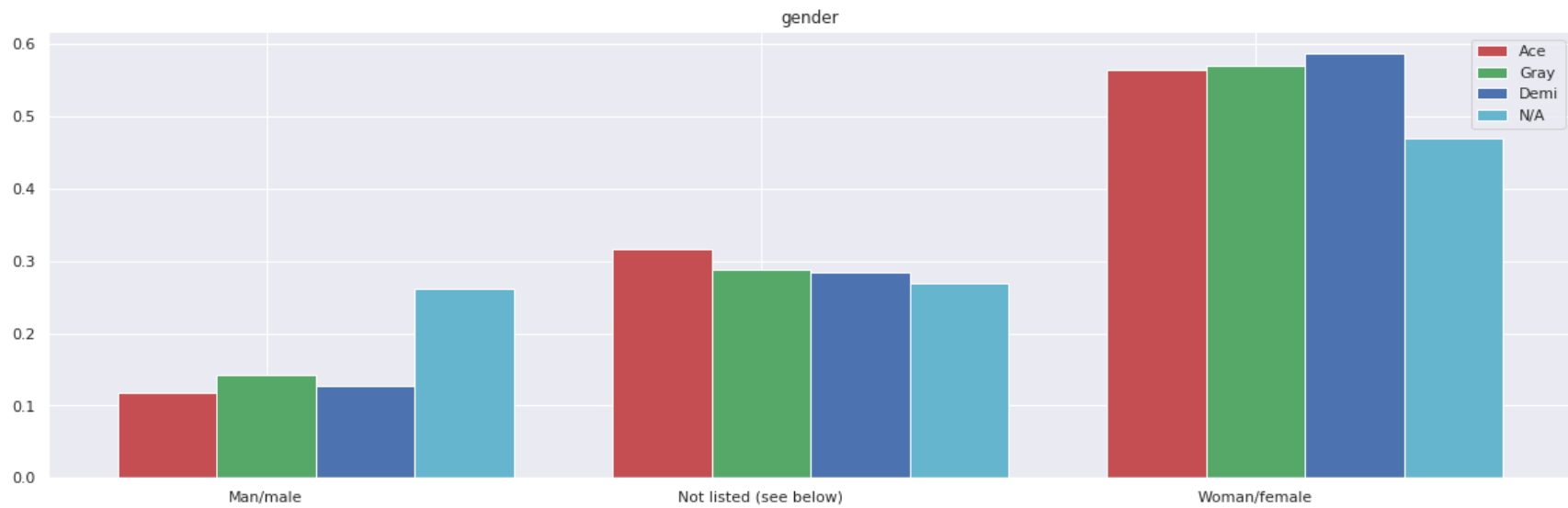


Figure 8: Gender by Ace Id

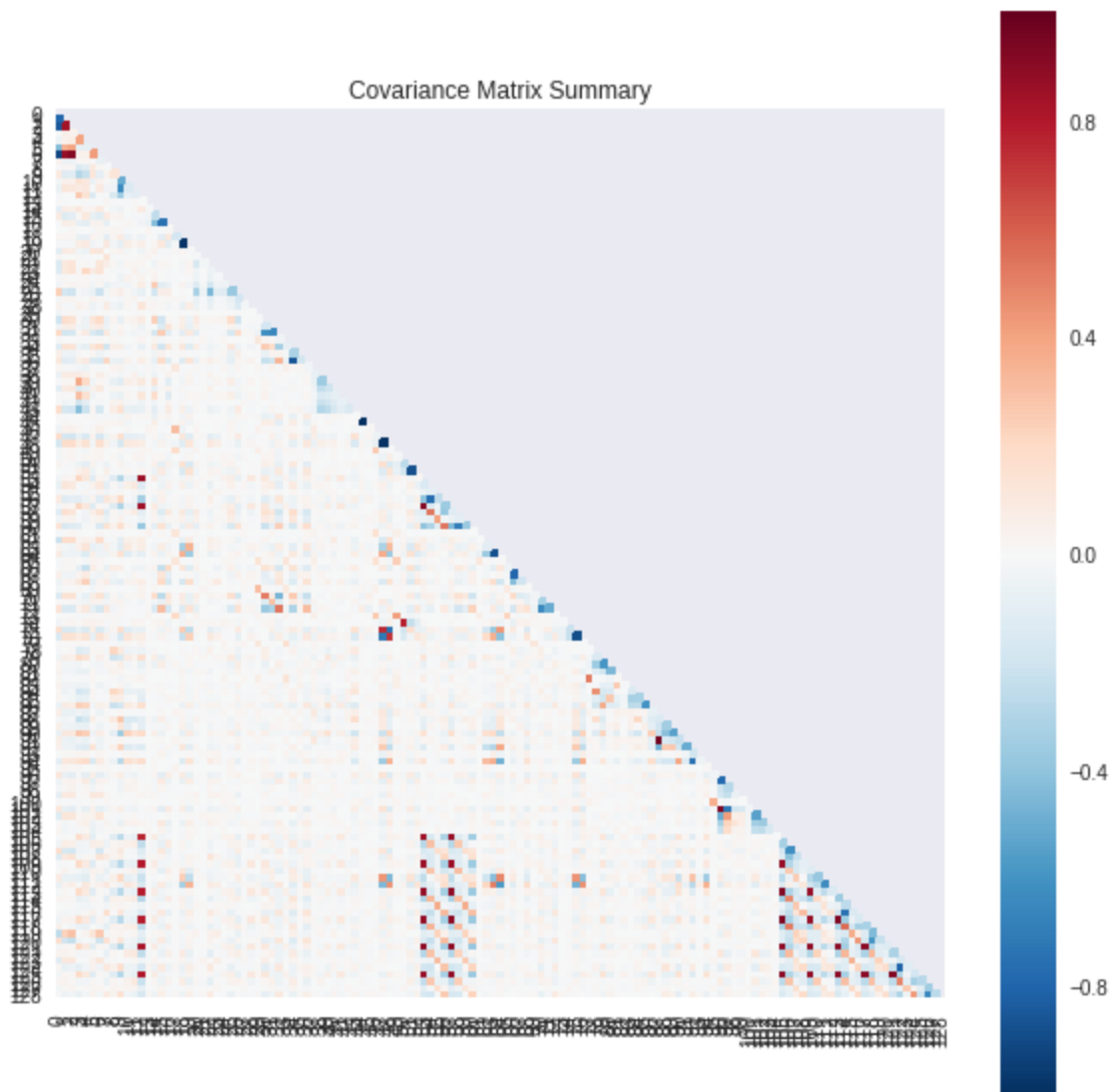


Figure 8: covariance matrix of all 129 features. Specifics that are relevant are explained in paper, instead just pay attention to patterns.

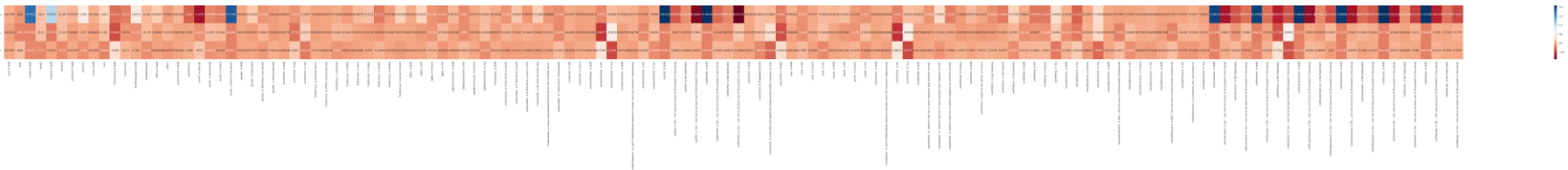


Figure 9: Graph showing the cluster means of each of the 3 clusters. Again, it is too small to actually read here, but again just pay attention to patterns, and important features are explained in the paper.



Figure 10: Result of ANN on predicting Asexual identity based on all other features, 33:66 test train split

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