


Asexuality — an attempt to critically review the concept of a fourth sexual orientation

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Abstract

Asexuality, as a research phenomenon, was shed light on in 2004 thanks to a study by Anthony Bogaert. The results of the survey, carried out as part of it, showed that about 1% of people in the population have never felt sexually attracted to anyone. However, asexual persons declare that they do not feel in any way deficient or disturbed because of that. On the contrary, they fully accept this situation and treat their lack of sexual attraction as an integral part of their Self. This would suggest the possibility of treating asexuality as a new sexual orientation, but such an idea is highly controversial and is the subject of intense discussion — both among researchers, and in the public discourse. This article analyzes the issue of asexual orientation based on reports from relevant publications. At the outset, the origins of perceiving asexuality as a sexual orientation are indicated, as well as a review of the arguments for and against the concept. The following part of the paper presents a deeper reflection on the current definition of sexual orientation, and thus the possibility of adding a new — asexual — form of it. The article concludes with a consideration of the concept of asexual identity, which, according to researchers, is a more accurate term in the context of asexuality, as it emphasizes the subjectivity of the individual.

Key words: asexuality; sexual orientation; sexual identity

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Introduction

The history of research on human sexuality shows that until the beginning of the twenty-first century, the issue of asexuality has been practically omitted in the literature. The topic of asexuality usually appeared coincidentally during research on sexual orientations, and even when it was explored it was usually quickly abandoned in favor of more interesting topics [1–4]. The indifference and disregard of researchers caused this period to be known as prehistory in the context of knowledge about asexuality [5]. The situation changed in 2004 thanks to Anthony Bogaert, who published the results of a large-scale survey of over 18,000 Brits aged 16 to 59 in the *Journal of Sex Research*. In this study, the respondents had to finish the sentence ‘I feel sexual attraction towards...’ with six answers to choose from. The results showed that around 1% of respondents had never felt sexual attraction to anyone [6]. This new phe-

nomenon became known as asexuality, and Bogaert himself emphasized the emergence of another sexual minority within society, one that had so far remained hidden and somewhat invisible to the researchers [7].

Since then, research on asexuality has gained momentum, and asexual people themselves have found their online niche in the form of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) founded in 2001. The main goals of AVEN are to create an atmosphere of societal acceptance and forum for discussion, to provide information about asexuality to members of the community and their families, and to inspire the academic community to conduct research on asexuality. Interestingly, AVEN has become a refuge and a reference group for all those who have difficulties defining their own sexuality. People who struggle to define their orientation or gender are met with full understanding and acceptance, because the AVEN community emphasizes the diversity of human sexuality and respect for individuality above all else. Asexuality itself is thus understood as a meta-category characterized by a continuum of various ways of feeling sexual attraction, and members of the community adopt additional terms to

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better identify themselves [8]. According to AVEN, an asexual person is someone who does not feel sexual attraction but is capable of romantic feelings (asexual romantic), or someone who does not feel sexual or romantic attraction (asexual aromantic), as well as someone who feels weak, periodic sexual attraction (so-called greysexual) or towards a specific partner (so-called demisexual) [9]. All of these people also declare that they fully accept themselves, do not need or want any interference into their sexuality, as they do not perceive it to be a disorder or a defect. Such a diverse community is therefore united by one fundamental feature — they recognize this state of things as normal and do not want to change it [10].

Almost from the very beginning, when asexuality first emerged in scientific discourse, researchers have been naturally drawn to formulate the question whether asexuality is or can become a form of sexual orientation. In light of current knowledge on what is and is not considered an orientation, the answer to this question is not simple. Treating asexuality as an orientation seems to cause a lot of controversy and objections. This article presents the summary of the discussion around this topic, which is taking place both in the public discourse and in relevant literature.

Asexuality as a sexual orientation — position sources

Although in literature attention is drawn to the diverse use of the concept of asexuality [10, 11], the most common definition is still the one created by Bogaert, who defines asexuality as the permanent lack of sexual attraction to any gender. Sexual attraction itself is understood in terms of the cognitive component and the subjective way of erotic perception of another person [12]. Using this approach, it becomes something superior to the desire for sexual activity, which is rather an expression of the fact that a given individual is sexually attracted to someone. In other words, it would be impossible to feel desire for another person without first feeling some form of sexual attraction.

Defining asexuality based on sexual attraction has clear consequences. In literature, sexual attraction is the basis and main factor determining sexual orientation [13]. Understanding asexuality to be a form of sexual orientation is a natural consequence of this way of thinking. Bogaert is a proponent of this approach, who expressed this by writing that sexual attraction is the best way to capture the psychology of sexual orientation, and its absence indicates the need to treat asexuality as a new, atypical form of sexual orientation, and not a disorder [12]. It is worth noting that the perception of asexuality as a norm is a result of a specific narrative and defining it in a specific way.

This position is shared by Andrew Hinderliter [14], who has tried to determine the reasons for this through his research. He categorizes certain concepts, at the same time emphasizing the non-clinical historical background of asexuality. The author points out that alongside the notion of a norm (and the associated idea of sexual attraction) there is the concept of a pathology or a disorder, and that desire is the complementary term for it. In direct opposition to clinical tradition, which has focused on categorizing the lack of desire as a form of dysfunction (mainly Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder, HSDD) since the seventies, the phenomenon of asexuality stems in his opinion from a social tradition, which uses the concept of sexual attraction, thus also treating its absence as part of a sexual norm [14]. According to Hinderliter, it is these different traditions from which both phenomena originate that determine the different ways of defining them.

Hinderliter's conclusions are confirmed by AVEN's activities. The concept of asexuality as a sexual orientation was promoted by the network almost from the very beginning, and became one of its main educational goals. A good example of this is the open letter addressed to scientists, where the asexual community emphasized the importance of research about asexuality, especially in the context of recognizing asexuality as a fourth orientation. We want to understand ourselves and be understood by society. We believe that scientists play an invaluable role in this, and we support all kinds of research, from biological studies exploring the causes of asexuality to sociological studies illustrating the emergence of asexuality as an orientation [15]. As Hinderliter points out, AVEN's various initiatives significantly contribute to the fact that society begins to consider asexuality in terms related to understanding, respect, and acceptance, and so terms reserved for orientations, especially non-heteronormative ones [14]. In this sense, AVEN's activities draw from the traditions of the LGB movement, which become a kind of inspiration for asexual people. Just as it was a great success for LGB people to remove homosexuality from the DSM criteria in 1973, it would be a success for asexual people to clarify the symptoms of HSDD and maintain the criteria in opposition to asexuality [14]. So far, it has been successful, given the most recent DSM-5 diagnostic criteria [16]. Despite the fact that the boundary between asexuality and HSDD is still not very clear [8, 17], DSM-5 emphasizes the distinction between sexual dysfunctions and asexuality, mainly due to the unfulfilled criterion of suffering. The latest version of the classification of mental disorders states that a lifelong lack of sexual desire is better explained by asexuality, and should not be diagnosed as a disorder in either men or women [16].

This distinction between asexuality and dysfunction completely changes its status in the eyes of society, thus legitimizing its existence. Bogaert has already written about this mechanism of de-pathologization, emphasizing that the existence of asexuality in the public realm would translate into an improvement in the social assessment of asexual people, who often face various forms of discrimination and stigmatization [18–20]. As a result, treating asexuality in terms of sexual attraction, drawing on the issues of sexual orientation, avoids the overtones of pathological behavior and is safer [14].

Biological basis for recognizing asexuality as a sexual orientation

Although drawing a clear distinction between dysfunction and asexuality would be the first step to recognizing it as a new orientation, the problem that arises is the lack of convincing arguments that asexuality can be treated similarly to heterosexuality or homosexuality. Scientific discourse cannot rely only on social beliefs, solid evidence has to be provided by empirical research. It seems that one solution could be reports about the biological basis of asexuality, i.e., the biological determinism argument, which often gets invoked in discussions about sexual orientations.

The essentialist approach assumes that a person's sexuality and sexual attraction (and its direction) is not a choice, but a kind of necessity dictated by nature [21]. This argument, often used in case of homosexuality, justifies treating it as an orientation, and favors a more positive social assessment as well as counteracts homophobia (to put it simply – a person does not choose homosexuality, but is born with a specific predisposition just like a heterosexual person) [18]. Discussions of this type are also becoming visible in the context of asexuality and consequently translate into more and more frequent, albeit timid, attempts to search for biological determinants of asexuality. The importance of biology is primarily highlighted by Bogaert, who in one of his earliest studies, mentioned biological correlates and predictors of asexuality (late menarche, body type, etc.) and suggested they might have some significance in the development of mechanisms related to sexual orientation [6, 12]. He also indicated that 'there may be biological predispositions to lack of sexual attraction towards other people, which in this case may mean a fundamental predisposition to an asexual orientation' [12]. Bogaert's approach is to some extent confirmed by conclusions from the available literature. The research carried out by Morag Yule, Lori Brotto and Boris Gorzalka is particularly significant here [22]. They measured biological markers such as right and left-handedness,

the number of older siblings, and a specific ratio of selected finger lengths, i.e., characteristic featured formed as a result of hormonal influences in the prenatal period, which differentiate sexual orientation, according to the researchers. Indicators such as left-handedness, a higher number of siblings in homosexual men, and a smaller ratio of index and ring finger length in lesbians when compared to heterosexual women were examined by the researchers in a population of asexual people (325 subjects) compared to a population of heterosexual (690 subjects) and non-heterosexual (285 subjects) people. According to the authors, the results of the study indicate a different prenatal development period, partially justifying the biological hypothesis about the lack of sexual attraction, and thus pointing to the possibility of treating asexuality in terms of a new sexual orientation. Left-handed people with a larger number of siblings were two and half times more likely to be found among asexual people when compared to heterosexual people. Asexual and non-heteronormative men usually had younger siblings, while asexual women had older siblings when compared to heterosexual women. There were no statistically significant differences in finger lengths.

Although the above studies shed new light on the issue of asexuality, they are currently a very small part of research on its causes, and are currently only the beginning of our understanding of this topic. Moreover, according to Kristin Sherrer, the relationship between biological essentialism and asexuality has some consequences [23]. On the one hand, evidence for the biological determinants of asexuality is an argument in favor of treating it as an orientation, and on the other hand, it questions the essentialist understanding of human sexuality as a whole. It is worth noting an orientation becomes not only a biologically determined sexual attraction (directed at a different or same gender) but also a biologically determined lack of it. This is how a biologically determined asexuality would question the commonly held traditional belief in human nature, shedding completely new light on it, as emphasized by Randi Gressgard [24].

(A)sexual orientation and associated definition issues

Therefore, it seems that the discussion on whether asexuality can be considered a sexual orientation will not only be about whether it is biologically determined (as is the case with homosexuality and heterosexuality), but also (and perhaps above all) about the way orientation itself is understood, and the question whether an orientation can be used to describe a state where

sexual attraction does not exist. It is worth examining the current position of researchers and ask: what is considered a sexual orientation and how is it currently defined?

The Dictionary of Psychology defines orientation as an 'awareness of a situation one finds oneself in, discernment of the situation [...] both literally and in relation to physical space and time, and more broadly, in relation to a place in a figurative sense, in terms of social, interpersonal and conceptual frameworks', as well as 'leaning towards something or focusing on something' [25]. Following this lead, it can be said that the concept of sexual orientation will therefore indicate and enable a person to orient or discern their own sexuality based on a 'dominant liking or inclination' [26]. This inclination towards a certain person is both sexual and emotional. Fritz Klein pointed this out, back in the 80s when he attempted to characterize sexual orientation and used the concepts of sexual attraction and emotional preferences [27]. It is worth noting that this approach is still valid. The contemporary understanding of sexual orientation is consistent with Klein's views and is based on two terms: sexual attraction and emotional attraction (also known as romantic attraction). This definition of orientation is used by the Polish Sexological Society, which indicates that sexual orientation is built by erotic and emotional attraction to men, women, or both genders [28]. The emphasis on both the sexual and romantic components (and especially the use of the term sexual or emotional attraction) also refers to the concept and research on orientation conducted by Lisa Diamond [29], who created a biobehavioral model of attraction and love. According to Diamond, sexual orientation should be considered in dimensions: sexual and emotional. Both systems are relatively independent, because they are founded on different social and neurobiological processes. While sexual response and desire are based on an evolutionary need for reproduction, romantic affection is associated with a need for a stable relationship between partners, which increases reproductive success but probably evolved from the system of offspring care and the emotional bond that was established at the time. In other words, romantic feelings between partners are an adults version of the feeling between an infant and its caregiver [29]. This concept of orientation is based on the assumption that all humans are oriented both sexually and emotionally.

However, literature indicates that it is emotional involvement and not sexual interest that will be a more important factor for many people [30] — this approach to sexual orientation is not entirely sufficient in terms of asexuality. The very construction of the definition

of sexual orientation and its use of 'and' become problematic. According to the rules of logic, it clearly indicates the inseparability and necessity of both emotional/romantic attraction and sexual attraction. This excludes asexual people who lack sexual attraction, despite the fact that the emotional aspect is of great importance to them. Although this seems to be a foregone conclusion, there has been a recent change in the way we think about human sexual nature, as evidenced by one of the definitions of orientation on the American Psychological Association (APA) website. Heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality are still the three main categories of orientation, but the way sexual orientation is defined is decidedly less radical. According to the authors, 'sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community [...] people express their sexual orientation through behaviors with others, including such simple actions as kissing or hugging. Thus, sexual orientation is closely tied to the intimate personal relationships that meet deeply felt needs for love, attachment, and intimacy. In addition to sexual behaviors, these bonds include nonsexual physical affection between partners, shared goals and values, mutual support, and ongoing commitment' [31]. It is clear that this extensive definition emphasizes the emotional-romantic component first before the sexual aspect. What is more, attention is drawn not only to the aspect of romance (more precisely, the term romantic attraction) but above all the subtle difference in how the definition is phrased — the addition of and/or conjunctions — which translates into interpretative possibilities in terms of both elements that make up the definition. This indicates that the two systems are distinct (as suggested by Diamond) and that an orientation is a situation in which a person is attracted to someone only romantically and not sexually. It is therefore clear that the latest concept of sexual orientation indirectly takes into account people who do not feel sexual attraction, and the flexibility of the definition opens up a wide range of interpretative possibilities and becomes an entrance point for asexual people. If so, why is there still no official fourth category? It seems that this decision has not been made because the creation of another category is associated with a range of issues and controversies.

One argument in favor seems to be the universal identification and association of sexual orientation mainly or exclusively with sexual attraction. From a scientific standpoint, it is now believed that when it comes

to orientation, it means both romantic and/or sexual attraction (which highlights the possibility of solely romantic attraction in the absence of sexual attraction), while the common understanding of orientation seems to be inextricably linked to sexual orientation. In other words, the social interpretation of, for example, homosexual orientation is that it is a man who feels sexual attraction to other men, and not just romantic attraction. The current three categories of orientation (homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality) by definition include those who feel only romantic attraction, but are at the same time insufficient and could be misleading. This is confirmed by Lisa Diamond, who states that the construction of the concept of sexual orientation essentially indicated only the sexual aspect and that is how it is commonly understood. According to Diamond, the term sexual-romantic orientation should be used, or more broadly a so-called partner orientation due to the wide range of uses of the term sexual orientation in scientific literature and it being irreplaceable; it should be noted that it has a broader meaning, aside from the sexual one [29]. While this is understandable for most sexuality researchers, a person without profound scientific knowledge will tend to understand sexual orientation in a narrower sense. In light of this, the proposed category of asexual orientation would mainly emphasize the lack of sexual attraction, highlighting the romantic component. In view of the above suggestions, it is not surprising that asexual people use specific terminology (also used by researchers such as Lori Brotto et al. [32], referring to Diamond's ideas) when talking about asexuality, and use the term asexual orientation to mean romantic orientation, creating further terminology, for example, homoromantic or heteroromantic, to illustrate the direction of their sole romantic attraction.

Although this argument seems valid, the issue of introducing a fourth category is a bit more complicated and seems to be primarily pragmatic in nature. First of all, there is disagreement among researchers about who can be called asexual and whether the asexual category would reflect the actual diversity of interpretations of the word asexual. To put it simply, who should be considered asexual: those who do not feel any long-term sexual attraction (Bogaert's concept), or those who do not feel sexual attraction but differ in the way they define themselves, as for example, asexual aromantic, demisexual, or greysexual (AVEN's approach)? In case of asexual aromantic people, there is the question whether the absence of both romantic and sexual attraction can still be considered an orientation at all, or whether it should be considered a lack of one. In case of demisexual and greysexual people — is asexuality the appropriate term here and would it not

be better to use existing categories (heterosexual, homosexual, etc.) because of the periodically felt sexual attraction, or whether this category could be abused when in certain cases these could be libido disorders and not asexuality. On the one hand, an asexual orientation category would be useful in practice (clearly indicating sexual differences to a potential partner), but on the other hand the above comments suggest that introducing it could lead to even more confusion and/or would entail the need to create further sub-types.

From orientation to identity

When analyzing the above-mentioned issue, it is impossible to ignore the significance of the increasingly frequent criticism of the very concept of sexual orientation. This has been brought up by Prof. Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz, who emphasizes that for many researchers the term is rather unfortunate, without clear criteria, and it is above all insufficient, because it is the product of a simplified categorization of social phenomena. Consequently, researchers often prefer to use the term sexual identity, which stresses the role of subjectivity in defining one's own sexuality and gender [33]. John Bancroft, one of the most respected sexologists, is a supporter of this approach, and points out that the main advantage of the term sexual identity is its neutrality. In contrast to sexual orientation, which is often politicized and marked by biological determinism, the less radical concept of identity emphasizes the importance of the social context in searching for an answer to the question of who am I sexually? [34].

This may be why the more flexible and broader term of asexual identity is more frequently chosen and used by researchers in the context of asexuality [18, 20, 23]. Treating asexuality as a form of identity, and not strictly an orientation, becomes safer in a sense. Magdalena Mijas aptly summed it up [35] by emphasizing that although the issue of recognizing asexuality as a sexual orientation is still in the conceptualization phase, there is no doubt that in the available literature, there is a general acceptance of asexual identity involving recognition, identification and acceptance of one's own sexual preferences (or lack thereof) (Mohr, 2002; Brotto et al., 2008). Taking into account that defining one's own identity is the basis of self-expression and is associated with satisfying important needs related to functioning in the modern world, it is impossible to deny such a possibility to asexual people. Specific constructs of asexual identity have already undergone some studies and seem to attract more and more attention from researchers [35]. Mark Carrigan, an asexuality researcher, is one of the proponents of this

approach and uses the concept of identity whenever talking about asexuality. It is understood in two ways — on the one hand, as a personal identity, on the other hand, as a social identity built with the participation of a specific reference group [24].

Conclusions

Taking all of the above considerations into account, it seems that using the term asexual orientation is a rather risky position at the moment (hence the preferred term of identity). Due to the fact that there are few studies on asexuality (including its biological basis), and above all the multitude of proposals as to what asexuality is and who can truly be called an asexual person, there is currently no official category of asexual orientation. This stance is consistent with APA's position, which does not include asexuality in its definition of sexual orientation, although it also suggests the possibility of a lack of sexual attraction while feeling romantic attraction. Therefore, it seems that the introduction of an asexual orientation is currently a process rather than a fact. This process is happening here and now, and treating asexuality as an orientation is a change that is yet to come (also in terms of concepts). Professor Starowicz points out that an asexual orientation category will most likely become official in the future, and adds that although the causes of asexuality itself are currently not known, there is a need to differentiate it from libido disorders, sexual desire, disappearance or lack of sexual needs, and sexual aversion [33].

The introduction of another orientation also seems to be inevitable due to social influences, especially because of AVEN and its activities, analogous to historical LGBT movements. AVEN is now becoming a collective voice of the asexual community, working for a positive perception of asexuality, thus reminiscent of the homosexual activists of the 1970s, whose activism led to sociopolitical changes in the context of homosexuality. Although it is very possible that a future definition of sexual orientation will consist of four categories (including asexuality), at the moment its inclusion seems to raise to many objections and controversies. The question of the existence of an asexual orientation remains open, and asexuality itself is treated as an identity rather than another orientation.

Article information

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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