



Transcending sexualisation:

A constructivist grounded theory study of asexual self-identity

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Publications and Conferences

Publications

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Other

November 2018: How healthcare practitioners can better understand asexual identities and offer culturally competent care. Evidence Based Nursing Blog.

<https://blogs.bmj.com/ebn/2018/11/04/how-healthcare-practitioners-can-better-understand-asexual-identities-and-offer-culturally-competent-care/>

Jones C, Hayter M, Jomeen J (2018) What asexuality can teach us about sexual relationships and boundaries. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/what-asexuality-can-teach-us-about-sexual-relationships-and-boundaries-94846>

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the asexual community members who shared their stories with me. Without their dedication and support, this project would not have been possible. I also dedicate this work to the memory of Anne Lister who across the popular literature is known as a '19th century lesbian role model'. On 22nd June 1824 Anne Lister wrote in her diary about her 'oddity', as she lived in a time where there was no language for her to use to explain her sexuality to herself or to anyone around her. Similar to some of the participants of this study, Anne did not have a framework for talking about her identity, and she lived in an era where her sexuality was regarded as an aberration. Thankfully today, for some sexual minority groups, this is slowly shifting, which means that in many parts of the world, more people are able to openly identify as an alternative to the dominant discourses of heterosexuality. Identifying as an alternative to sexuality however, is more of a challenge. My take on this fascinating character is that, like some of the participants in this study, she was someone who did not bend to gender or sexual norms, she was a pioneer, in that some 200 years ago she created her own language to match her model of attraction and relationship formation. Finally, this work is dedicated to my three year old daughter Claudia, born between the development of Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis! May you always be a free-spirited individual – and enjoy the peace of mind and liberty to express yourself and your identity in a way that feels right for you.

Abstract

Introduction and background

There is an expectation that everyone feels sexual attraction and sexual desire and that these feelings begin in adolescence. This is called the sexual assumption (Carrigan, 2011). Sexual attraction and desire are perceived to be the norm. These universally felt experiences are thought to be a precursor to engaging in sexual behaviour and they form an intrinsic part of a person's sexuality. There is, however, an emerging movement that challenges the sexual assumption based on the recognition of a lifelong experience of the absence of sexual desire. This is driven by a community of people who self-identify as asexual.

Research suggests that individuals who embrace an asexual identity do so because of a number of factors relating to their absent or lowered levels of sexual desire and/or attraction (Bogaert, 2004; Prause & Graham, 2007; Scherrer, 2008; Brotto, et al., 2010; Scherrer, 2010; Poston & Baumle, 2010; Carrigan, 2011; DeLuzio, 2011). The asexual community is reportedly amongst the most poorly understood sexual minority populations (Pinto, 2013). This study aims to fill a gap in the literature on the overall construction of asexual identity, which is captured, by interview through the perspectives of people who self-identify as asexual. It will unpack asexuality and propose new ways of understanding how asexuality is negotiated and self-interpreted.

Aims and objectives/research questions

There are six areas of interest based on gaps in the existing literature. In order to address these, an overarching research question of 'What are the social processes involved in constructing an asexual identity' has been identified. Social processes represent the ways in which individuals and groups, interact, adjust, readjust and establish relationships and patterns of behaviour. This research question can be broken down into a number of specific objectives, which are detailed below:

- To establish how people who identify as asexual define their asexual identity.
- To understand the processes that inform the (development) construction of the identity.
- To understand how the asexual identity impacts upon relationships with others.

- To understand how embracing (or just the asexual) identity impacts upon health and wellbeing.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were considered to be the most appropriate method of collecting data for this study.

Sample

The data for this study was based on interview data from 21 participants who self-identified as asexual. Participants were recruited through a number of asexuality forums: AVEN (The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network), asexuality.livejournal.com, asexuality.org, asexuality Facebook and Twitter pages, Craigslist UK, and Craigslist US community pages. This study was also advertised through existing contacts, including: The Hull and East Riding LGBT Forum, the LGBT Foundation in Manchester, Stonewall, the University of Hull's LGBT society, and the University of Hull e-Bulletin.

Data analysis

In order to gain an understanding of the social processes that inform asexual self-identity and to derive a theory of asexual self-identity, constructivist grounded theory (CGT) was used to analyse and interpret the data.

Findings

The process of self-identifying as asexual was informed by a central premise of transcending the sexualised world, represented by a core category of transcending sexualisation to fulfil a need to belong. Three conceptual categories were identified: (1) Becoming, (2) Resolution, and (3) Consolidation. These conceptual categories underpin the core category. Data indicates that individuals enter the becoming stage having already encountered the term asexuality, but having limited understanding of what it means to be asexual. The stage of becoming continues in a straightforward way for many, for some, however, an event, or a number of events occur resulting in the individual finding themselves in a situational bind: this is a critical juncture in their sexual and social lives where there is a level of risk to their ability to form meaningful relationships: their sense of belonging is potentially compromised. These situations, or events constitute a crisis of internal conflict, and something has to be done to rectify it. Those who decide to rectify it move on to the resolution stage. Some individuals reframe their experience of

the situational bind, and by doing so, they by-pass the opportunity to contemplate their identity as anything other than sexual. When a stage of resolution follows a stage of becoming, individuals make a stand by disengaging from the cultural norms of sexuality/heterosexuality and begin consolidating their asexual identity. Ten subcategories represent the three conceptual categories: assimilating, connecting, experiencing situational binds, reframing, disengaging, searching for explanations, embracing the nuances, critiquing sexuality, and identifying as essentially asexual. The basic social process reflects a pattern of progression that may or may not be linear. Bourdieusian social theory, namely doxa, habitus, field, and capital offer a lens through which the collective action of participants and their interactions, adjustments, readjustments and patterns of behaviour during asexual self-identity formation can be appreciated in more detail. Whilst the core, conceptual, and the subcategories represent important aspects of progression towards self-identity, the application of Bourdieusian social theory has provided a framework to illustrate the social processes in action, by illuminating the structures of sexuality, gender, medicalisation, patriarchy and religion and demonstrating how their process dimensions become enmeshed within the progressive stages, and thus inform the process of asexual self-identity.

Implications for practice and research

Relationship education, as well as relationship and sex education, should be directed towards encouraging a culture that values lasting positive and significant interpersonal relationships with or without sexual behaviour. Alternative models of relationship formation that are not intrinsically bound to sexual attraction do exist and relationship education should encourage individuals to think more broadly about relationships and how they could be constructed in more meaningful ways.

The findings from this study have significance to the field of mental health. A significant percentage of the sample (38%) engaged with psychology, counselling, and/or antidepressant medication. The emotional wellbeing of people who identify with an asexual narrative should be a matter of concern for health and social care professionals and researchers.

There are significant gaps in the literature about individuals who reject a centralised model of sexuality and do not fall into a white middle-class category. Research is required

in relation to this group, particularly, regarding their experiences of relationship formation and belonging, and how they navigate the sexualised environment.

Finally, this work has implications in relation to the education of society. Given that asexuality is largely shrouded in misunderstanding and negativity, as well as being met with doubt and questioning (Conger, 2012), how non-asexual members of society consider asexuality is important. This study makes a significant contribute to our understanding of contemporary sexual norms. It challenges existing ideas which associate asexuality with an absence or lack of sexuality and presents an alternative framework for considering the decisions made by self-identified asexuals to adopt the identity. In relation to healthcare, anecdotal evidence, taken from one of the largest asexual online forums, suggests that a number of self-identified asexuals choose not to disclose their identity to healthcare professionals through fear of their asexual status being pathologised, problematises or judged. Given that asexuality has been identified through studies as a poorly understood concept, this may be due to lack of understanding on behalf of healthcare providers. The work provides health professionals and practitioners working in clinical settings with some insights of the social processes which inform the identity as well as the features of an asexual identity to facilitate culturally competent care.

Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Publications and Conferences	ii
Dedication	iii
Abstract	iv
Contents	viii
List of Figures	xiii
List of Tables.....	xiv
Glossary of terms	xv
Chapter 1 Introduction chapter	1
1.1 Asexuality and sexuality.....	1
1.2 The importance of research on asexuality	2
1.2.1 The contributions of this research.....	2
1.3 Introducing the researcher.....	3
1.4 Organisation of the thesis	6
Chapter 2 Historical and contemporary contexts of sexuality	8
2.1 Introduction.....	8
2.2 Essentialist notions of sexuality.....	8
2.2.1 The implications of essentialism.....	9
2.2.2 Challenging essentialist notions	10
2.3 Social construction and the operationalisation of sexuality.....	12
2.3.1 Foucault and the deployment of sexuality	13
2.3.2 A hysterization of women’s bodies.....	14
2.3.3 A pedagogisation of children’s sex	16
2.3.4 A socialisation of procreative behaviour	17
2.3.5 A psychiatrization of perverse pleasure	19
2.4 The development of the sexual.....	22
2.4.1 Regulating sexual behaviour in the modern age.....	24
2.4.2 Reshaping the sexual.....	25
2.4.3 Changing constructions of the sexual self in contemporary society.....	27
2.4.4 The history of asexuality.....	28
2.5 Criticisms of Foucault.....	30
2.6 Conclusion	31
Chapter 3 Concept analysis and thematic synopsis	32
3.1 Introduction	32
3.2 Systematic search of the asexuality literature.....	32
3.2.1 Data selection.....	32
3.2.2 Results	34
3.3 The use of concept analysis.....	37

3.3.1	Morse et al (1996) framework.....	39
3.3.2	Application of the framework.....	40
3.4	Presentation of the core findings.....	41
3.4.1	Definitions of asexuality	41
3.4.2	Characterisations of asexuality.....	42
3.4.3	Process	47
3.4.4	Outcome.....	49
3.4.5	Model of the concept.....	52
3.4.6	Similar constructs and boundaries	54
3.4.7	Quality appraisal.....	56
3.4.8	Critique of the CA methodology.....	58
3.5	Thematic synopsis of the qualitative research	59
3.5.1	Inclusion criteria	60
3.5.2	Process for thematic synthesis.....	62
3.5.3	Results	63
3.6	Conclusion and foreshadow questions.....	69
3.6.1	Definitions of asexuality	70
3.6.2	Pathology and distress.....	70
3.6.3	The romantic dimension of asexuality.....	70
3.6.4	Discrepant levels of interest in sexual behaviour	71
3.6.5	The role of AVEN	71
3.6.6	Asexuals in healthcare settings	71
3.6.7	Research aims and objectives.....	71
	Chapter 4 Methodology.....	73
4.1	Introduction	73
4.2	Research rationale: aims and objectives	73
4.3	Philosophical Framework	75
4.3.1	Ontology.....	75
4.3.2	Epistemology.....	78
4.4	Methodology.....	80
4.4.1	Sampling.....	81
4.4.2	Data generation.....	82
4.4.3	Reflexivity	86
4.4.4	Ethical rigour	86
4.4.5	Rigour	88
4.5	Research approaches	90
4.5.1	Rationale for a grounded theory approach	91
4.6	Grounded Theory	93
4.6.1	Philosophical approaches underpinning grounded theory study.....	94

4.7	Constructivist Grounded Theory	94
4.7.1	Collection and interpretation of the data.....	96
4.7.2	Coding	97
4.7.3	Memo Writing	98
4.7.4	Abstracting the concepts to find theoretical meaning	98
4.7.5	Theoretical sampling	99
4.7.6	Theoretical sensitivity.....	100
4.7.7	Core category formation	100
4.7.8	Diagramming and theorizing	101
4.7.9	Knowing what the theory is.....	101
4.7.10	Evaluating grounded theory: credibility and originality.....	102
4.7.11	Literature review and constructivist grounded theory methodology.....	104
4.7.12	Reflexivity in Grounded Theory	104
4.8	Methodology Summary.....	106
	Chapter 5 Methods	107
5.1	Introduction	107
5.2	Practical considerations before entering the field	107
5.3	Recruitment.....	109
5.3.1	Summary of the process of recruitment	109
5.4	The sample	110
5.4.1	Summary of the sample.....	110
5.5	The development of the interview schedule	112
5.6	Data collection.....	113
5.6.1	Sampling.....	114
	5.6.2 The interviews.....	116
5.7	Data analysis.....	116
5.7.1	Coding	117
5.7.2	Line by line coding.....	117
5.7.3	Focused coding.....	118
5.7.4	Memos during early analysis	119
5.7.5	Theoretical sampling	120
5.7.6	Axial coding	120
5.7.7	Theoretical coding.....	123
5.7.8	A substantive model emerging.....	124
5.7.9	Constant comparative method.....	125
5.8	Data saturation.....	126
5.9	Rigour	127
5.10	Conclusion	128
	Chapter 6 Findings.....	130

6.1	Introduction	130
6.2	Summary of the asexual self-identity theory.....	130
6.3	Core category overview.....	132
6.3.1	Transcending sexualisation to fulfil a need to belong	132
6.4	Category 1: Becoming	138
6.4.1	Subcategory: Assimilating.....	139
6.4.2	Subcategory: Connecting.....	143
6.4.3	Subcategory: (Experiencing) Situational binds	147
6.4.4	Subcategory: Reframing	152
6.5	Category 2: Resolution	155
6.5.1	Subcategory: Disengagement.....	155
6.5.2	Subcategory: Searching for explanations.....	159
6.5.3	Subcategory: Contemplating asexuality	166
6.6	Category 3: Consolidation	171
6.6.1	Subcategory: Embracing the nuances	172
6.6.2	Subcategory: Critiquing sexuality	180
6.6.3	Subcategory: Essentially asexual	186
6.7	Conclusion.....	193
Chapter 7 Discussion		196
7.1	Introduction	196
7.2	Revisiting the Research Questions	196
7.2.1	How do asexuals define their asexual identity?	196
7.2.2	How does embracing the identity impact upon relationships with others?.....	199
7.2.3	How does embracing an asexual identity impact upon health and wellbeing?.....	201
7.3	How does this study relate to the existing literature on self-identified asexual identity? 202	
7.3.1	An interpretation of the study findings	203
7.3.2	Emerging understandings.....	206
7.3.3	Advances in understanding	208
7.3.4	Gaps in the literature.....	210
7.4	The theoretical contribution of this study.....	213
7.4.1	Bourdieu’s notions of social structure and dispositions.....	214
7.4.2	Habitus: The embodiment of societal structures in the context of becoming	217
7.4.3	The relationship between habitus and field in the process of transcending sexualisation.....	223
7.4.4	The influence of cultural capital in the field	226
7.5	Conclusion	230
Chapter 8 Conclusion.....		231
8.1	Summary of the study	231
8.2	Thesis contribution to the current state of knowledge on self-identified asexuality	232

8.2.1	The first study to explore the process of asexual self-identity and to provide a grounded theory of asexual self-identity.....	232
8.2.2	A re-contextualisation of asexuality	233
8.2.3	A detailed diagrammatic and theoretical representation	233
8.2.4	An exploration of the impact of situational binds	233
8.2.5	New and useful considerations	234
8.3	Strengths and limitations	234
8.3.1	Strengths	234
8.3.2	Limitations.....	234
8.4	Reflexivity	235
8.5	Testing the theory: Criteria for grounded theory studies.....	237
8.6	Implications of the study	239
8.6.1	Research.....	239
8.6.2	Policy and practice.....	240
8.6.3	Health service delivery	240

REFERENCE LIST.....	242
APPENDICES.....	263
APPENDIX A: Asexuality matrix.....	264
APPENDIX B: Table of included studies for thematic synopsis.....	279
APPENDIX C: Letter of ethical approval.....	290
APPENDIX D: Study information sheet.....	291
APPENDIX E: Participant consent form.....	294
APPENDIX F: Axial coding for subcategories 2 – 10.....	295
APPENDIX G: All Categories and Properties.....	304
APPENDIX H: Stages 1 – 6 of model development.....	305
APPENDIX I: Asexual self-identity model.....	311

List of Figures

Figure	Description	Page number
Figure 3.1	PRISMA flowchart (1)	Page 35
Figure 3.2	Concept model of asexuality	Page 53
Figure 3.3	PRISMA flowchart (2)	Page 61

List of Tables

Table	Description	Page number
Table 3.1	List of studies in concept analysis (CA)	Page 36
Table 3.2	Additional studies for thematic synopsis	Page 62
Table 3.3	Allocation of papers to themes	Page 63
Table 4.1	Key features of semi-structured and unstructured interviews	Page 85
Table 4.2	Qualitative Research Approaches	Page 90
Table 5.1	Summary of research participants	Pages 111
Table 5.2	Line by line coding	Pages 117
Table 5.3	Focused coding	Pages 118
Table 5.4	Axial coding	Page 122
Table 5.5	Comparative method table	Page 125
Table 7.1	Comparison of the six stages of identity development (Robbins et al. 2016)	Page 204
Table 8.1	Testing the theory for grounded theory studies	Page 238

Glossary of terms

Asexuality: A word used to represent an identity or orientation where attraction and desire are not acted upon in a sexual way (The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), 2019).

Sexual desire: Conscious cognitions about sex as in fantasies and the felt action tendencies (Everaerd & Laan, 1995).

Sexuality: All aspects of social life and subjective experience that have erotic significance (Jackson, No date).

Intimacy: The state of having a close personal relationship or romantic relationship with someone (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018).

Romantic attraction: The desire to be romantically involved with another person (AVEN, 2019).

Romance: Refers to the actions and feelings of people who are in love, especially behaviour which is very caring or affectionate (Collins English Dictionary, 2019).

Heteronormative/heteronormativity: The power of heterosexuality when it operates as a norm (Chambers, 2007).

Sexualisation: When something is made sexual either in quality or character, this can be in relation to sexuality or in relation to human beings (APA, 2007). In this thesis, the term specifically applies to the sexualisation of culture within society, a phrase used to capture “the growing sense of Western societies as saturated by sexual representations and discourses” (Gill, 2012: 484).

Panromantic: A person who is romantically attracted to others but is not limited by the other's sex or gender (AVENwiki, 2013).

Biromantic: A person who is romantically attracted to two or more genders (AVENwiki, 2013).

Grey asexual: People who identify in the grey area are between asexual and sexual (AVENwiki, 2013).

Demi romantic: A type of grey romantic who only experiences romantic attraction after developing an emotional connection beforehand (AVENwiki, 2013).

Aromantic: A person who experiences no romantic attraction to others (AVENwiki, 2013).

Heteromantic asexual: A person romantically attracted to a member of the opposite gender. Heteromantic asexuals seek romantic relationships for companionship, affection and intimacy, but they are not sexually attracted to their romantic partners (AVENwiki, 2013).

Demisexual asexual: Someone who does not experience sexual attraction to another person until they have formed an emotional bond (AVENwiki, 2013).

Romantic asexual: Someone who identifies as asexual and experiences romantic attraction or an emotional response in the absence of asexual attraction (AVENwiki, 2013).

Agender: A term that can be translated as without gender (AVENwiki, 2013).

Quoiromantic: An umbrella term for those who don't quite understand their romantic orientation (AVENwiki, 2013).

Quoiasexual: An umbrella term for those who don't quite understand their sexual orientation (AVENwiki, 2013).

Poly asexual: Being attracted to many genders whilst being asexual (AVENwiki, 2013).

Chapter 1 Introduction chapter

1.1 Asexuality and sexuality

According to Bogaert (2012), the story of life begins asexually. Reproduction through the act of sex has only existed for a fraction of geological time over the Earth's natural history (Bogaert, 2012). The idea that someone can have a lifelong absence of sexual attraction however, is unbelievable and in some cases, unacceptable (MacInnes & Hodson, 2012).

There is an expectation that everyone feels sexual attraction and sexual desire. These feelings are presumed to begin in adolescence. This is called the sexual assumption (Carrigan, 2011). Carrigan (2011) suggests that assumptions about sex are so ingrained that most of society are unaware of them. The sexual assumption is embedded into contemporary culture (Hills, 2015). It can be subtle, for example, assumptions about sex and sexuality being something one is born with, or precise, where engagement in sexual behaviour within a close personal relationship is an expectation.

The media portrayal of relationships between two people is generally based on the assumption that sexual activity is intrinsic to relationship formation and longevity. Intimate relationships are often assumed to be sexual in nature. Sexual attraction and sexual behaviour are positioned at the apex of relationship formation and continuation. Societal representations of relationships become integrated into the beliefs of most of us. This is a mechanism through which the sexual assumption is embedded and perpetuated.

There is, however, an emerging movement that challenges the sexual assumption and it is being driven by a community of individuals who self-identify as asexual. People who identify as asexual are united by their acknowledgement of a culture of a supremacy of sexuality – where relationships that do not fit with a centralised model of sexuality are considered as problematic or pathological. Their identity is informed by a lifelong negative appraisal of, or neutral response towards, the sexual component of their relationships and the absence of a sexual component within their experiences of attraction, or both.

1.2 The importance of research on asexuality

Cerankowski and Milks (2014) hold that asexuality remains barely intelligible, irrespective of how it is characterised. Understanding asexuality is challenging for many and data from a number of studies suggest that asexuality is largely shrouded in misunderstanding and negativity, as well as being met with doubt and questioning (Conger, 2012). There is a need to understand asexuality in greater detail in order to promote a greater understanding that is not based on pathology or suspicion. This is because it will facilitate a more normative framing of asexuality, which will in turn facilitate a normative understanding of people who self-identify as asexual.

1.2.1 The contributions of this research

Despite recent growing academic and popular interest in asexuality, many questions remain unanswered about identity formation. This study aims to fill a gap in the literature on asexuality, captured through the perspectives of people who identify as asexual. To be precise, it will unpack the construction of asexuality and propose new ways of understanding how asexuality is experienced. Moreover, it aims to gain some insight into the social processes that inform self-identification.

1.3 Introducing the researcher

It would be naïve to think that that my research on behalf of this study is purely objective. This section provides evidence of my consideration of the reflexive process and an awareness of my place in the study. It will be written in the first person as it is a personal account and this approach feels more natural for autobiographical writing. This section will draw on excerpts from my reflexive journal, which I kept throughout the process of this research.

I am a midwife, a midwifery lecturer, and a senior research fellow in maternal and reproductive health. In particular, I have an interest in sexual identity due to my own experiences of identifying with a non-conforming sexual identity. I am a mother, a wife, and a woman whose significant lasting meaningful relationships have always been with women, and this fact renders me having to identify as gay or lesbian. I bring a set of dispositions to this work. I am aware that I am affected by my background, my life experiences, my beliefs, morals, values, and my opinions. I have negative associations with the word lesbian. I still answer to the term, but I tend not to use it as a label for myself. I have a rich experience of belonging to a sexual minority group and I have experience of negotiating a society where heterosexuality is the norm. I can reflect upon these experiences and I realise that my gay identity has brought with it some severe costs, such as homophobia, both internalised and externally experienced, and heterosexism. It has also resulted in some significant benefits, for example, a sense of wholeness, authenticity and honesty about who I am.

I grew up in a rural setting in Western Scotland. The secluded setting of my home meant that my family were isolated from other families. Our home was situated in a remote environment with no direct access to public transport; it was one mile away from the nearest house and three miles away from a bus route. Although it was a safe area, compared to most other children I knew, the geographical area and rural setting were limiting and restrictive in terms of my social and environmental development.

The early recognition of a sense of difference from my peers, which came more than ten years before identifying as gay, was a difficult personal journey that began in early adolescence during the beginning of the 1980s. During this period, I had a growing awareness, mainly through mainstream media, of a negativity towards people who

identified as gay. Within my peer groups nobody talked positively about being gay and there were limited positive representations of gay personalities or characters, including no exciting or interesting gay stereotypes. As a result, constructing a lesbian identity was challenging. The word lesbian itself was regularly used by my siblings and at school as a term of ridicule and it was associated with embarrassment, abnormality, and perversion. In the school environment in particular, there was outright rejection and subjugation of anyone in the media who identified as gay. My parents were liberal in their thinking. Yet, same-sex relationships and homosexuality were seldom discussed because they were non-issues. The fact that being gay was a non-issue in my household was itself an issue. There was a general naivety on the part of my parents that the outside world reflected the same liberal attitude within the home. Whilst our parents taught us about respecting and embracing diversity in others, they did not prepare us for the prospect of being diverse ourselves, nor did they appear to have considered the possibility of their own children's diversity. Whilst my parents ensured that respecting other people's lifestyles and decisions was fundamental to my core values, being gay myself was never an option that was put to me in childhood or adolescence. The absence of conversations about same-sex relationships and same-sex self-identity is, in part, at the root of my own internalised homophobia.

The word lesbian still feels to me like a homophobic and misogynistic slur. Given this early experience of identity construction against a backdrop of geographical, cultural, and societal challenges, I feel I can draw parallels to the experience of people who identify with the asexual narrative. In particular, those trying to construct an identity and who are navigating society, not just in the face of adversity, but in the absence of strong role modelling. I have an interest in the construction of asexuality identity for this reason. Furthermore, my own experiences and lifelong questioning of myself and to others of "Why am I, what I am?" has led to have an interest in learning about the processes involved in the construction of a non-mainstream identity.

Finally, as a non-heterosexual woman I bring to this study a lifelong experience of indirect discrimination through exposure to heteronormativity, which is the powerful heterosexual structure and normative principle that refers to the assumption that heterosexuality is a universal norm. I have experienced discrimination from both men and women, but predominantly from men. This has led to an ongoing and enduring

discomfort relating to people making incorrect judgements. Due to the exposure to heteronormativity, I am acutely aware of the negative impact and the distress associated with the heterosexual assumption. I know that, in the immediate moments of being confronted by heteronormativity, I have to do or say something that disproves this assumption. As a consequence, this leaves me having to make decisions about whether to hide and remain invisible owing to the fear of negative attitudes, or to declare myself as non-heterosexual, risking a negative response. This no-win situation is underpinned by fear and anxiety, which has been an enduring feature of my life since late adolescence. At this stage, I can only hypothesise that the sexual assumption leaves those who identify with an asexual narrative as facing similar levels of discomfort.

I am not blinded to the possibility that the conclusions derived from this research may be influenced by my own biases or tangled up with them. The complexity is that my internalised homophobia is such a deeply woven part of myself, which makes it difficult to determine what is the real me and what is borne from intense shame. Consequently, it is impossible to untangle the two. However, on a pragmatic level I am constantly considering the ways in which my biases may become enmeshed in my interpretations. In the spirit of openness as a researcher, I am fully aware that I will not undertake this work as a distant observer and so it is vital that my position is stated. My aim is to ensure that my disclosures will remind me of the necessity to be constantly aware of, and to think critically about the extent of my insider status. To this end, the key mechanisms for being reflective in this process will be to ensure that I analyse and note personal values throughout the process, describe my decisions and dilemmas, and reflect upon my behaviour and thoughts (Finlay, 2002; Watt, 2007; Polit & Tatano, 2010). A full account of this reflexive process will be presented in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

1.4 Organisation of the thesis

The structure of this thesis follows the traditional scientific process with regards to its aim to understanding the social processes informing asexual self-identity. It begins by outlining an area of social interest or phenomena, setting the study in context, providing a concept analysis of asexuality, reviewing the relevant literature, posing research questions, explaining the design and method of the study, presenting the findings, discussing the findings within the context of the wider body of literature, and concluding with recommendations. The thesis will therefore be organised into eight chapters, which are discussed in more detail below.

As seen above, Chapter 1 introduces the study and addresses the researcher's primary area of interest. It explains various contemporary perspectives on asexuality and how the study originates from my experiences. It also sets out the potential expectations of the study before providing an overview of the thesis structure.

Chapter 2 will provide relevant background information and the context of the study. In particular, it provides a summary of the history of sexuality and an overview of how we have come to understand sexuality over the last century. It proceeds with a chronological structure to the development of understandings of sexuality and an exploration of the rise of public, academic, and scientific interest in sexuality, thus charting the scientific exploration of sexology. The pathologising of sexuality is addressed, alongside an overview of the main essentialist and constructivist views. This chapter draws upon some of the theoretical work of Michel Foucault in his book entitled *The History of Sexuality* (HS1) (1979).

Chapter 3 sets out the literature review and concept analysis. First, the chapter begins by outlining the steps of a systematic search of the asexuality literature. Second, a concept analysis, facilitated by an outline of an adapted version of the Morse et al (1996a) approach to concept analysis (CA), is employed to provide a further understanding of asexuality. Third, a diagrammatic representation of asexuality is suggested based on the core findings from the CA process and a brief critique of the process is undertaken. Finally,

this chapter presents the reader with a thematic synopsis of the empirical work undertaken to date in order to identify research gaps within the asexuality literature.

Chapter 4 describes the research methodology. It provides a summary of the main differences between quantitative and qualitative research, arguing in favour of a qualitative approach to fulfil the aims of the study. Next, the chapter justifies and explains the selection of constructivist grounded theory (CGT) as the approach used in this research study. It also deals with issues focused on rigour and trustworthiness in qualitative research.

Chapter 5 outlines the process undertaken in order to carry out the research and illustrates the steps taken; from gaining ethical approval to conduct the study, to the completion of the coding process. The application of CGT is discussed, including the processes around theoretical sampling and the co-construction of data. The chapter presents demographic data on the participants before it finally addresses the process of theoretical saturation and the steps taken to ensure confidence in decision-making around reaching this point of data collection. Rigour is addressed using the framework put forth by Beauchamp and Childress (2009).

Chapter 6 presents the study's findings. The chapter begins with a presentation of the final grounded theory substantive model. The process of transcending sexualisation to fulfil a need to belong is then illustrated, followed by the presentation of each of the three categories and ten subcategories that make up the final grounded theory model.

Chapter 7 discusses the theoretical context behind the grounded theory of self-identified asexuality. This chapter also draws out the links between this study and Bourdieusian theories. The study findings are discussed in the context of the empirical literature presented in chapter three to explore and consider how this study adds to the overall body of knowledge.

Chapter 8 is the final chapter of the thesis, which summarises the study and highlights its main contributions to the literature on self-identified asexuality. It considers the strengths and limitations of the study and makes recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2 Historical and contemporary contexts of sexuality

2.1 Introduction

For the purpose of the thesis, the concept of sexuality must be explored prior to a discussion of asexuality. This chapter therefore begins with reference to a period of human development across the West, which is referred to in this work as the age of enlightenment. It will proceed by outlining the development of the general understanding of sexuality, in addition to the rise of public, academic, and scientific interest in sexuality, thus charting the scientific exploration of sexology.

This chapter provides an outline of the relationship between human sexuality and pathology, alongside the essentialist and constructivist positions on human sexuality. This chapter draws upon the theoretical work of Foucault in his book entitled *The History of Sexuality* (1979) (HS1). Seidman (2010) claims that the work of Foucault (1979) has shaped the field of sexual studies, whilst Jackson and Scott (2010) identify that HS1 provides a comprehensive account of how we came to understand sexuality as the absolute core to our existence. This chapter illuminates how sexuality shaped society and how society shapes sexuality. The idea that sexuality is socially constructed is associated more with HS1 than any other work. Therefore, it is reasonable that Foucault's seminal work should serve as a meaningful platform from which the historiography of sexuality can be addressed.

Finally, this chapter will explore and analyse some of the more recent perspectives on sexuality. To be more precise, it will examine different definitions, theories, and concepts all linked to sexuality in order to develop the meaning of sexuality in contemporary society. In the interests of consistency, sexuality will be defined as "all aspects of social life and subjective experience that have erotic significance" (Jackson, n.d.).

2.2 Essentialist notions of sexuality

The exploration of sexuality in this chapter will begin from the period known as the age of enlightenment, which is recognised as a period of human development across the West. During the Age of Enlightenment, existing methods of knowing and understanding, such as the use of superstition and intolerance, were being challenged by more informed

ways of thinking (Hampson, 1982). This shift in understanding was guided by an intellectual movement of academics, scientists, and philosophers. A new era of logic and reason influenced all sectors of society, including education, science, and politics. A central aspect of this era was the questioning of traditional institutions, customs, and morals, in addition to a belief in rationality and science.

This was an era driven by essentialism, which is the belief that people or phenomena have an underlying, true, and unchanging essence (Delamater & Hyde, 1998). Essentialism dominated philosophical and scientific thought in the Western world and the concept of essentialism remained central to the scholarship of science and medicine.

Health was an area of particular focus in this era. Alongside the rise of capitalism, the cultural and economic shifts of the industrial revolution meant that the reduction of mortality and improvements in health had significant benefits to society. This interest in health led to curiosity about anatomical structures, disease, and the body (Chase, 2014). Between 1700 and 1800 there was a developing awareness of the importance of science and many practical advances in medicine. The science of modern pathology, public health, and hygiene were receiving more attention (Hampson, 1982).

According to Mitchell et al. (2011), different approaches to acquiring medical knowledge evolved radically during this period. The development of new mechanical principles was underway to facilitate a greater understanding of the human body. Scientific developments also began to flourish alongside socio-political changes (Hampson, 1982). In terms of health and healthcare, the role and benefits of science and medicine generated an optimistic outlook compared to that of pre-enlightenment.

2.2.1 The implications of essentialism

Essentialism and its associated ways of thinking and scholarship provided a vision that most modern thinkers of that time believed. Health was a natural state of the body, which was capable of being maintained and protected. Simultaneously, there was the belief that eventually all diseases could be eradicated (Risse, 1992). This vision became key to the scientific understanding of sex and sexuality, rendering all things sexual as a biological mechanism (Delamater & Hyde, 1998).

The unbiased and factual premise of science was a widely held belief. Policy relied on scientific information as a basis for knowledge and understanding, specifically for matters relating to health, welfare, sex and sexuality. Sex and sexuality were constructed and defined from a scientific biological basis, shaped by the continuing belief that sexual behaviour was a biological given. The essentialist view during this period reinforced heterosexual norms (Foucault, 1979). This period marks a time where the relationship between the human body and human sexuality was studied in detail (Harvey, 2002). Foucault (1979) illustrates how essentialist (biological) constructions of sexuality at that time, as well as the subsequent reinforcement of heterosexual norms, were instrumental in organising sexual behaviours along the binaries of normal and deviant. Foucault (1979) presents a compelling argument and debate about the organisation of sex and sexuality, thus leading to the notion that normal functioning sexual relationships were between a man and a woman, monogamous, and with the man as dominant and the woman as passive (Foucault, 1979). A heteronormative narrative that was underpinned by biology dominated understandings of sex and sexuality. According to Harvey (2002), the eighteenth century was an era, which informed our contemporary understandings of sex and sexuality, and by the nineteenth, deviations from heterosexuality were believed to stem from the mechanisms and structures within the body.

2.2.2 Challenging essentialist notions

Foucault (1979) challenges essentialist notions of sexuality. He argues against the ideas of scientific psychology of this era, that sex was fundamental, natural, and predetermined. In an attempt to convey how societal attitudes to sexuality changed over the period from pre-enlightenment to post-enlightenment, he presents an example of the fluidity of sexuality. He illustrates how an environment can shape the ways in which sexuality is played out. Foucault (1979) acknowledges a shift in the way that sexuality was addressed between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He alludes to a liberal attitude and an open vocalisation of sexuality during the Renaissance, proposing that these behaviours were significantly different from the analytical studies and controlled awareness since the eighteenth century. He presents a compelling case for a shift in sexual behaviour, demonstrating how the environment in which sexuality exists substantially fashions its characteristics.

There is a general lay belief that the Victorian era (1837 – 1901) was a period of sexual repression. However, whether sexual repression is truly an established historical fact remains unanswered. Foucault (1979) presents the idea that the subject of sexuality was not hidden, and that it had a presence and was visible in many places. The way in which sexuality was spoken about, specifically when spoken by the theorists and scholars, was from a neutral, scientific, and what was later termed as essentialist position. In summary, what Foucault (1979) suggests is that there was no repression of sexual behaviour *per se* on an individual level. However, sexuality discourse was operationalised through measures of repression in order to maintain a ubiquitous heteronormative narrative.

The term discourse refers to written or spoken communication or debate. The term itself captures the essence of meaning behind the spoken word, which can also be known as the sub-text. Foucault (1979) posits that discourse created a truth, a morality, and a meaning about sexuality that still exists in contemporary society. Whilst discourse in its crudest form can refer to written and spoken words, as a social construct it is “created and perpetuated by those who have the power and means of communication” (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2012: 2). In HS1, Foucault (1979) suggests that discourses of the eighteenth century and later shaped not only what was said and thought about sexuality, but also who was best placed to say it, when they could say it, and with what authority.

According to Foucault (1979), whilst this period set the scene for the creation of a biologically driven theory of sexuality, it also ensured that informed experts of the intellectual movement managed sexual discourse. This invariably meant that those belonging to disciplines of science, medicine, education, and religion had the responsibility for informing others about sexuality. By virtue of the fact that discourse is interwoven with power and knowledge, those who did not have the expert status became marginalised, silenced, and oppressed (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2012). On an operational level, this is discourse (Foucault, 1979).

In summary, all matters concerning sexuality were believed to be biologically mediated. There was an operationalisation of a discourse on sexuality, which rendered anything other than heteronormative sexuality as being deviant. Sexual behaviour was believed to be “a driving instinctual force, whose characteristics are built on biology” (Halland, 1993: 19). During the Victorian era, the way in which sex and sexuality were understood was

focused upon the application of science, biology, psychology, and criminology. This is interpreted by Foucault (1979) as an attempt to silence, whilst simultaneously uncovering, exposing, and correcting anything that deviated from heterosexual relationships. The act of silencing and hiding deviant sexual behaviour stands in stark contrast to what seems to be a need to uncover and expose such behaviours.

A final point about essentialism is the importance of Foucault's discussion of the "essentially biological family" (Foucault, 1979: 42), which was held up as the sole natural means of perpetuating the human race. This example of acceptable sexuality was acknowledged as a model of normality. It is important to note that this period of time was significant in the carving out of a clear narrative about sexual normalcy and what it meant for those who did and did not engage with that narrative. As Foucault (1979) argued, the emerging consequence of repression was the production of sexuality in all its various forms. While sexual behaviour was far from repressed, the essentially biological family were the most visible form of sexuality and the only form of healthy sexuality. Any other form of sexuality was silenced and hidden and only became visible and exposed through religious confession, criminal conviction, or psychiatry. The following section presents an explanatory framework of the social construction of sexuality, in addition to outlining the strategic ways in which the discourse on sexuality was operationalised during this era of essentialism based on the work of Foucault (1979) in HS1.

2.3 Social construction and the operationalisation of sexuality

The social construction of sexuality is based on the view that one's sexuality is shaped by society. Social construction theory views knowledge as constructed, as opposed to created (Andrews, 2012). Foucault (1979) rejects the positivist philosophical theory that sexuality is natural, predetermined by genetic, biological, and physiological mechanisms and stable. Instead, he uses HS1 to demonstrate how the positivist movement (led by the views of sexologists and psychologists) purported a fundamentalism and naturalism of sex. According to Foucault (1979), biological constructions of sexuality and the subsequent reinforcement of heterosexual norms were instrumental in organising sexual behaviours along the binaries of normal and deviant. By widening the lens through which sexuality has been understood and experienced since seventeenth century positivism,

Foucault is able to illustrate that sexuality may be a product of social conditioning rather than of biological factors.

In HS1, Foucault (1979) provides an account of how sexuality is understood in contemporary society, and argues that the politically or state-mediated construct of a biologically driven natural sex was indeed responsible for the construction of sexuality. Foucault presents the idea of a historical and social construction of sexuality. In reality, the construction of sexuality in all its forms extending beyond natural/normal functioning sexual relationships, reflected the extent to which the concept of sexuality was socially, rather than scientifically constructed.

2.3.1 Foucault and the deployment of sexuality

Foucault (1979) points out that the regulation of sexuality has often been a pre-occupation of political powers. According to Foucault (1979), this is believed to be associated with the importance of sexuality in terms of regulating bodies and regulating the population. It is also attributed to the rise in capitalism, which is a hallmark of this era. Foucault's (1979) insights into the development of a science of sexuality provides a useful framework for examining the mechanisms underpinning and informing sexuality, and how they have been operationalised over subsequent centuries.

Foucault uses the term "the deployment of sexuality" (Foucault, 1979: 77). The term accounts for a set of complex interactions that took place during an era where the narrative of sexuality was biologically mediated. At this point, it is important to emphasise that essentialist notions of sexuality, which robustly constructed sexuality as biologically driven, became a powerful force for exposing, diagnosing, curing or containing anything that might deviate from the behaviours of the "essentially biological family" (Foucault, 1979: 42).

According to Seidman (2010), Foucault is proposing in HS1 that sexual discourse created what we know today about sex and sexuality. Foucault (1979) sets out to examine the relationship between power and sex. Foucault (1979) examines sexuality by exploring four centres, known as the deployments of sexuality which have unified power and knowledge with sex (Foucault, 1979). In particular, sexuality has become a crucial mode of societal control, which is operated through key strategies. In the latter chapters of HS1,

Foucault (1979) centres on the idea that disciplinary power relies less on the power to silence, than on the power to normalise and shape behaviour.

Foucault (1979) identifies marriage as the original way of diffusing power and shaping the behaviour of individuals. The prominent idea at the time being that people would marry for alliance and not necessarily for love. He refers to this as the deployment of alliance, which is a system designed to maintain a stable structure within society. For example, the fathers of women paid dowries, whereas women took on their partners name and produced heirs. Since the seventeenth century, the deployment of sexuality has been used as a method of controlling society. Rubin and Butler (1994) claim this has become superimposed onto the deployment of alliance.

Foucault (1979) discusses the deployment of sexuality as four strategic unities that link together a range of practices of technique of power which centre on sex; the hysterisation of women's bodies, the pedagogisation of children's sex, the socialisation of procreative behaviour, and the psychiatrisation of perverse behaviour. According to Weeks (1989), four types of human subjects were targeted, explored, and controlled: the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult. In an effort to examine how the deployment of sexuality was used to control and regulate, and how this interplay between society and the deployment of sexuality has influenced the construction of sexuality, the four strategic unities of the eighteenth century (and the human subjects targeted) will be illustrated.

2.3.2 A hysterization of women's bodies

In relation to hysterical women, the "hysterisation of women's bodies" led to women being examined and investigated in detail. The female body was subjected to medical scrutiny, assumed to be driven by sexuality, and labelled as flawed. According to Foucault (1979), the need to optimise fertility was at the root of this investigation, but a consequence of this was a pathologisation of non-fertility. Foucault (1979) explains that the female body was:

“Analysed - qualified, and then disqualified – as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it; whereby, finally, it was

placed in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biologico-moral responsibility lasting through the entire period of the children's education): the Mother, with her negative image of "nervous woman" constituted the most visible form of this hysterisation" (Foucault, 1979: 104).

Foucault (1979) suggests that the female body and the way in which it works was the subject of medical attention, claiming in HS1 it was believed to be disordered from the male body. The menopausal body was believed to be pathological. Ultimately, what was intended was for the female body to be regulated and controlled due to its reproductive value. The disordered female body focused upon those aspects related to the non-childbearing and non-reproductive state (Smith-Rosenberg, 1973). Coincidentally, this medical scrutiny of the female body occurred at a period in time where women were considered to be incapable of anything else but childbirth. Since women were pregnant more often than not, the parameters of their health was conceptualised as the time in which they were pregnant (Semenkewitz, 2011).

The female reproductive system was thought to dominate the body of a woman, there was a belief that biology had incapacitated them (Smith-Rosenberg, 1973). Experts purported the view that menstruation was pathological. Generally, the medical community held the view that menstruation was a failure of a woman's body to reproduce. Women were essentially defined by their reproductive capacity. The depiction of women and their temporary madness, led to menstruation being set up as a negative bodily act, representing the turmoil of a non-pregnant woman (Semenkewitz, 2011).

Hysteria was the first mental disorder attributable to women as it was associated with the uterus (Tasca et al., 2012). Hysteria was widely documented across the medical literature of the time (Maines, 1989). The expert informed narrative was that non-fulfilment of a natural desire caused disorder to women (Tasca et al., 2012). The hysterical woman was the "middle class woman of leisure, deprived of productive labour and imprisoned in dependence of her family" (Weeks, 1989: 44). Furthermore, the symptoms

of such were associated with poor physical and mental health, such as weight gain (Maines, 1989).

Menopause was seen as an illness that affected the body and mind, where women were believed to lose their identity within a society that saw them as nothing more than child-bearers. Upon reflection of the historical and contemporary constructs of the female body, King (2004) suggests that, through time, every aspect of abnormality has been searched for, exposed, and classified by experts driven by a need to provide evidence of its pathology.

The findings which emerged from medicine and science relating to the non-pregnant and non-childbearing woman served as a powerful force to shape the behaviour of society at this time. It is recognisable that the pregnant woman and the state of being pregnant would have been associated and rewarded with recognition of normality, health, and sanity. A powerful system of control emerged which encouraged women and men to continue to procreate with a vision of a stable societal structure. This illustrates the connection between insanity and the subsequent risk of incarceration and the medical field, thus highlighting how medical findings can be used as an instrument of control. Recent modern and contemporary scientific findings still appear to be guided by past social perceptions of the hysterical woman. The advancement of science has created a better understanding of women and their biological distinctions, but superstitions and assumptions still permeate, for example, the promotion of the concept of premenstrual tension.

2.3.3 A pedagogisation of children's sex

The pedagogisation of children's sex as a strategy, details the control over children's sexual development (Foucault, 1979). Here, the masturbating child was targeted, investigated, and regulated. According to Foucault (1979), children were seen as highly sexual and their sexuality had to be monitored and controlled.

The fundamental notions of essentialism at the time rendered the sexual activity that children may indulge in as natural. Though, there was a contrasting view of the naturalism of this stage of a child's development. The belief that the child was a sexual being, and their sexuality was unnatural, led to the emergence of a state led control over children's

sexuality. A sexual child posed physical and moral as well as individual and collective dangers (Foucault, 1979). According to Foucault (1979), the strategy was that parents and families, in addition to educators, doctors, and physicians in later centuries, would have to take charge of the sexual potential of children through the formal and informal transmission of sexual knowledge and awareness. It is in this way that society would be able to define normal sexuality through sex education. In particular, they could decide on the appropriateness of education on sexuality. The state operated a system whereby children experienced their learning about sex and sexual practices through the church and the home environment. The education system later played a part. The sexual development and identity of children was constructed through the influences and sources of information within these networks.

The formal sex education of children and adolescents became something that was officially sanctioned and regulated, and delivered mainly within the school system. Informally, children would develop their understanding of sex through their parents, who would have previously been exposed to the pedagogic heteronormative discourses of sex education as children.

2.3.4 A socialisation of procreative behaviour

The third object of investigation and regulation was labelled as the Malthusian couple under the title of the socialization of procreative behaviour (Foucault, 1979). The socialisation of procreative behaviour increasingly confined sexuality to reproductive tasks, leaving other forms of pleasure silenced. Sexual perversions were considered deviant sexual behaviours. Anything beyond procreative sex between a man and woman was subject to action due to its potential harm or criminality, or both. This included acts of masturbation, sodomy, pornography, homosexuality, extramarital sex, premarital sex, sexual compulsion, and prostitution (Foucault, 1979). Hitchcock (2012) identifies that the latter half of this period witnessed an increasingly phallogentric view of sex, where non-penetrative activities other than what was considered normal sex were excluded. There was a greater emphasis placed on coital sex as the only acceptable form of sexual behaviour.

According to Foucault (1979), sex was studied as a medical and psychiatric phenomenon. Divergences from procreative heterosexuality were identified as illnesses that required

correction. The surveillance of sexuality, established norms and standards for sexual behaviour, against which people could be measured. This strategy employed a governing of reproduction. Deutscher (2012) suggests that the repressive hypothesis served to orientate sex towards a purely reproductive task. What would initially appear to be a repressive hypothesis, is perhaps better understood and interpreted as a state-led strategy to encourage a procreative sexuality. Excessive and non-productive sexual practices such as homosexuality and masturbation are “rendered problematic, not just because they offend, but because of their non-conformity with the requirements of a disciplined, channelled, and non-squanderous reproductive sexuality” (Deutscher, 2012: 122).

Foucault (1979) regularly questions the motivations of this era, remarking that the transformation of sex into discourse, and the need to expel any forms of non-procreative sex had a purpose of generating a sexuality that was economically useful:

“All this garrulous attention which has us in a stew over sexuality, is it not motivated by one basic concern: to ensure population, to reproduce labour capacity ... to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative” (Foucault, 1979: 36).

The socialisation of procreative behaviour was facilitated by attempts to silence the sexually perverse voice. However, it has had the opposite effect in as much as it has served to multiply perversions and “initiated sexual heterogeneities” (Foucault, 1979: 37).

In short, the socialisation of procreative behaviour reflects a strategy defined by the observation of sex in its relation to marriage. The products of this strategy include the notion of unacceptable sexuality. In other words, sexuality that does not have a procreative purpose and falls out with performativity. This strategy also brought about the development of a taxonomy, a system of categorisation, by which sexual behaviour is defined. The sexologists of this era created diagnostic categories, including homosexual, heterosexual, hysteria and nymphomania (Hart & Wellings, 2002).

2.3.5 A psychiatrization of perverse pleasure

Psychiatry played a major role in developing the idea that some sexual behaviours are expressions of disease. The psychiatrization of perverse pleasure was the name allocated to Foucault's take on the fourth deployment of sexuality. Here, the sexual instinct was said to be isolated as a separate biological and physical instinct. According to Foucault (1979), a clinical analysis was made of anything that did not conform to a standard sexuality based on the Malthusian couple. Sexual behaviour was assigned as being either normal or pathological and corrective technology was assumed to cure anything perceived to be an anomaly. Sexologists became interested in homosexuality (Chan, 1995 in D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995). Through the fourth deployment of sexuality, Foucault (1979) presents a case that the sciences, alongside the other forces at that time, constructed sexual categories and the identities associated with them. According to Foucault (1979), sexual categories and the labelling of sexual behaviour as we have come to know them today are a consequence of the repressive hypothesis. A combination of a growth and spread of discourses about sex focused on exposing anything unusual or unacceptable, has resulted in the notion that anything which deviates from heterosexual behaviour is pathological (Princep, 2012). During the era of the deployments of sexuality, sexual practices and habits were psychologically analysed, scientifically categorised, and statistically measured. The science of psychiatry invented names and categories to specify all forms of tendencies and desires. As we identified in the hysterisation of women's bodies, the sexual body was dissected and compartmentalised. Whilst asexuality was not a term that arose during this period, this aspect of the deployments of sexuality is the most significant in relation to the pathological labelling of altered levels of attraction and desire from that which was expected within the population. This period was critical in terms of its influence on the construction of certain concepts, such as asexuality.

In an effort to try and account for how we came to understand sexuality as a fundamental truth, it is pertinent to point out that the discourses around and within the four targets of the deployments of sexuality have been dominant throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The discourse has influence, as it is promoted through professionally skilled individuals belonging to politics, academia, scholarship, science, and medicine. Foucault (1979) regularly debates whether the discourses were

an effort to gain control of and regulate sexuality. He concludes that the strategies within the deployment of sexuality were responsible for the production of sexuality. Based on this conclusion, Foucault's notion of sexuality as a social construction becomes a plausible and acceptable definition of sexuality. He concludes that, rather than being solely constituted in and determined by one's biology, sexuality is a historical construct.

“Sexuality ... is the name that can be given to a historical construct, not a furtive reality that is hard to grasp but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening controls and resistances, are linked to one another in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power” (Foucault 1979: 105).

Weeks (1989) suggests that sexuality is not a given, but is a product of a negotiation struggle. Weeks (1989) refers to the social character of sexuality and understands sexuality as something that is produced in complex ways. In other words, we are not born sexual; we learn to be sexual, and this occurs in societies that create the notion of sexuality (Seidman, 2010). This is social construction in action.

Foucault uses the latter chapters of HS1 to debate whether the deployments were an effort to define and regulate sexuality. Smart (1985) critically reviews Foucault's work and suggests that the four strategies do not represent mechanisms for controlling or regulating. Rather, the relations of power and knowledge articulated within the deployments brought a notion of sexuality upon everyone. According to Jackson and Scott (2010), the deployments that were initially observable in the eighteenth century anchored the nineteenth century's construction of the sexual. If the essentialist narrative of sexuality is one that purports a view of the sexual as natural, biological, and not subject to change, it can be questioned how it could have become altered and manipulated through the deployments of sexuality. Furthermore, it is questionable how an essentialist and stable condition of sexuality could be subjected to a process that would alter and re-condition it to operate in a specific way. Whilst it is not entirely possible to confirm or reject the theory of the deployments of sexuality and its intention to regulate and control, what can be concluded from HS1 is that the attempts to repress discourses of deviant

sexuality seem to have intensified the focus on the behaviours within long lasting interpersonal relationships.

By embarking on charting the history of sexuality, Foucault (1979) was not investigating a pre-given object, but rather the historical emergence of the construct of sexuality. He questions and simultaneously provides some possible reasons for how we came to identify ourselves through our sexuality. Jackson and Scott (2010) highlight, that sexuality came into being as a consequence of aligning bodies and pleasures into sexual categories. One example of this is the development of a taxonomy through which sexual behaviour is defined. This explains the claim made by Foucault (1979) that sex was formed inside the deployment of sexuality and presents the case for sexuality producing sex. Foucault suggests that sexual behaviour and sexual conduct as we know it today were formed inside the deployments.

Social construction theory offers a lens through which the development of sexuality throughout Western society since the eighteenth century can be explored in more detail. The patriarchal family has continued to be considered as the moral pillar of society (Sultana, 2011), and a political, social, and cultural climate has been created and maintained. The objective to build heteronormative families continues to thrive through key institutions and structures. Social expectations based on the belief that everyone is, or should be heterosexual, continue to be the dominant force in informing sexuality and gender identification (Meyer, 2016). Whilst other forms of sexuality exist, a sexual hierarchy has been created where anything that is alternative to heteronormativity exists on the margins of society. According to Rubin and Butler (1984), all societies create sexual hierarchies and, by doing so, anything with erotic significance can be classified as good and bad. This is a system which is argued to cultivate a healthy and respectable sexuality. Simultaneously, the construction of a normality is set against other forms of sexuality, considered to be abnormal, sinful, and immoral.

Foucault presents compelling evidence for the sociological influence upon the development of sexuality and sexual hierarchies in modern society. His work in HS1 rejects the belief of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century that sexuality is/was natural. Instead, his work proposes that sexual behaviour is a product of social conditioning and/or social construction. When applied to the concept of sexual

orientation, social construction holds that sexual orientations are the products of historical and cultural understandings (Bohan, 1996).

Social construction theory has the potential to provide new theories about sexuality by virtue of the way it represents the social relativity of sexual practices (Vance, 1989). It provides a platform for exploring the possibility that the expression of any process of erotic significance is socially mediated and could therefore change over time. According to Vance (1984), in order to embrace such theory, one has to accept ambiguity and fluidity within the scope of sexual behaviour and practices. Smart (1985) proposes that the deployments of sexuality resulted in the emergence of new sexual subjects. When a socially constructed concept of sexuality is embraced, a greater understanding of Foucault's (1979) proposal of the development of sexuality is facilitated.

2.4 The development of the sexual

Social construction theory opens up the potential for embracing the idea that anything with erotic significance and meaning is continually developing. Giddens (1992) proposes that there have been further transformations of intimacy and relationship formation in and throughout modern society. In the present day, the deployments of sexuality have become increasingly maintained and embedded. Social institutions no longer concentrate on the relationship between sex and marriage. Instead, they take an interest in the widening range of sexual behaviours across a much broader population. In religion for example, there are many lesbian, gay bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) affirming religious groups. In addition, the last decade has seen a growing academic interest in sexuality and ageing, as well as regulating sexual behaviour in general in the modern age.

According to Burnham (1973), during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries cracks began to appear in the strategies employed to uphold the morality of sexuality. With respect to the pedagogisation of children's sex, it became evident that children were gaining information concerning sex and reproduction from other sources beyond formal education, and the family. Children were unable to be protected from "degenerate adults" (Burnham, 1973: 886). Burnham (1973) refers to Foucault's alleged age of repression as a conspiracy of silence and situates this alongside what he refers to as the double standard of conduct. Women were expected to be free of any immorality and men had considerable freedom to indulge.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there was a recognition that social stability was constructed and maintained through double standards and conspiracies of silence (Burnham, 1973). This period signalled the first wave of the women's rights social movement and recognition by women of a need to attain a level of equality (Hannam, 2008). This movement was later renamed feminism and, alongside another set of forces associated with the First World War, may have played a part in initiating a revolution in sexual standards and the construction of a contemporary sexual being (Hannam, 2008).

Jackson and Scott (2010) identify that mid-twentieth century thinking about sexuality was influenced by the sociology and sexology of earlier periods. At the turn of the twentieth century, there was an acknowledgement of a failure to keep children in a state of innocence (Burnham, 1973), rising illegitimacy rates (Thane, 2011), the open discussion of previously taboo subjects such as the treatment of sexual diseases (Brandt, 1987), and the challenging of gender boundaries (Galligan, 2010). Across Europe and the United States (US), the disruptions of both world wars allowed isolated groups of non-heterosexual men and women to meet as soldiers or other war-workers. A greater awareness of non-heterosexuality emerged, far beyond that of the pre-war era where gay identities were almost hidden (Morris, 2014). Post-war periods saw radical sex reforms across Europe, including the legalisation of abortion (McLaren, 1999).

Sociocultural and political change encouraged a second and third wave of feminism. A new generation emerged, activists campaigning for civil rights, and gay and lesbian liberation movements in the 1950s and 1960s. Changes included reforms to divorce laws in 1969 based on an increasing number of marital breakdowns (Probert, 2005). Amendments to laws also included the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in private in 1967, the introduction of the possibility of legal termination of pregnancy on social grounds (Her Majesties Stationary Office (HMSO), 1967), and the 1967 Family Planning Act, which enabled local authorities to set up family planning clinics for both married and unmarried women (Richardson, 2000). All of these changes and amendments facilitated a further shift away from a strategy that denounced non-productive desires, pleasures, and symptoms. These developments and subsequent societal shifts in relation to sexual expression and relationship formation reflect the extent to which sex and sexuality are socially constructed.

At state level, post-war reproduction assumed major importance. Women's reproductive rights came under surveillance from other spheres including eugenicists, feminists, doctors, and birth controllers (McLaren, 1999). Essentialism continued to dominate scientific thought (McLaren, 1999). The biomedical model continued to thrive. Different warnings emerged, aimed at deviancy. This time, the language was altered and terms such as perverts, mannish women, effeminate men, and frigidity came to the fore (McLaren, 1999). The language of this era has now become incorporated into sexological science and modern-day knowledge of sexual health and normality (Nicolson & Burr, 2003).

2.4.1 Regulating sexual behaviour in the modern age

The medicalised perspective of the world, which is what Foucault (1979) labels the clinical gaze (Hart & Wellings, 2002), transforms the observation of sexuality into control. The tendency to view sexuality through a medicalised, biomedical, and essentialist lens is one that has continued into the modern age. It is within this context that we have come to understand and experience sexuality. Twentieth century sexologists, such as Sigmund Freud encouraged the concept of a normality of human sexuality into clinical and public domains (Parker & Gagnon, 1995). Since then, sexuality has been heavily influenced by medicine. The open discussion of sexuality and sexual behaviour in Britain in the early twentieth century has evolved. It was not solely led by medicine, but instead became the province of popular culture, philosophy and activism (Hart & Wellings, 2002). One example is Edward Carpenter who presented the idea of an intermediate position between the two sexes and the inner sex mind, being different from the biological sex of a person. Hart and Wellings (2002) identify that sustained medicalisation of sex does not have to involve doctors to support ideological positions. Instead, the medicalisation agenda is promoted in popular culture and media, often without medical experts, demonstrating that medicalisation is a social process.

Postmodern society has seen medicalised models of sexual fulfilment (Hart & Wellings, 2002). A concept previously known as lust, which was associated with sinful behaviour and deviancy, is now a form of sexual desire and sexual attraction in contemporary society. Sexual problems are associated with absences or the failure to reach a certain expected standard or threshold of desire and attraction (Warnock, 2002). Rather than

sex per se being scientifically studied, there has been an intense focus on the science of sexual satisfaction. Consequently, sexual satisfaction and fulfilment have now moved from being something that is subjectively experienced to something that is prescriptively influenced.

According to Laumann et al. (1999), medicine colonises and controls the realms of sexual performance and sexual fulfilment is considered an area of public health concern. Drugs aimed at enhancing men and women's sexual performance and sexual fulfilment have refocused media and clinical attention to the scientific study of sex. New ideas of what constitutes healthy sexual activity (Nicolson & Burr, 2003), alongside new industries directed at facilitating healthy sexual activity, have become an accepted feature of everyday lives. Attwood (2006) acknowledges that a rise in industries and technologies promoting the importance of satisfaction with sexual performance have brought about more permissive attitudes to sex, especially "through the commercialisation of, and the ease of access to, intimacy and sexual encounters" (Attwood, 2006: 4).

2.4.2 Reshaping the sexual

Whilst the dominant heteronormative narrative remains, the move from modernity to post-modernity has seen a shift in the social landscape. More alternative discourses of sex are emerging, accompanied by a greater acceptance of the diversity of human relations. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the work of Sigmund Freud and Alfred Kinsey have been influential in rethinking sexuality. Through extensive studies on patterns of heterosexuality, the widespread variability of human activities has been revealed. Research into the roles of religion, gender, class, and race in shaping patterns of relationship formation has promoted the need to reconsider sexuality (Seidman, 2010).

A combination of other activities, including the introduction of birth control, have brought about a rethinking and reshaping of sexual behaviour. Therapeutic advances, such as contraception and medical treatments for sexually transmitted infections have lessened the number of negative consequences arising from sexual behaviour. Alongside an apparent erosion of the sexual double standard (Seidman, 2010; Jackson & Scott, 2010), this was an era where contraception was fast decoupling sex from reproduction, thus bringing about a more theoretically developed concept of plastic sexuality (Giddens, 1992). Based on a growing freedom from previous discourses on sex and sexuality, plastic

sexuality “embraces the potential of the sexual self to search for personal fulfilment and intimacy over and above physical sex” (Giddens, 1992: 204). Jamieson (1999) defines plastic sexuality as more responsive and creative, and a late twentieth century freedom from any pre-given way of being sexual. Plastic sexuality can therefore be said to be a manifestation of the revolution of women’s sexual freedom and the flourishing of homosexuality. Plastic sexuality suggests much greater flexibility in terms of intimacy and erotica. New and emerging sexualities appear to be consequence of the new social conditions that have been created by social change in late modernity. Jamieson (1999) suggests that, in times of quick and of profound social change, traditions become abandoned. This gives rise to an individual’s heightened awareness of their own creativity and limitations with respect to both themselves and their social world.

It is noteworthy that existing ideas about sexual practices, values, discourses, and identities have been reshaped. New sexual understandings have emerged as part of this exploration of the development of sexuality. With identities such as pansexual and quasexual, which do not limit individuals in terms of sexual choice or gender of sexual partner. There is growing evidence in favour of the sexual self-being less of the province of biology and science, and more of the province of the social and the learnt. This move to a more sociological understanding of the development of the sexual is far from exhaustive. There are, and will be, many other components within this interplay. The documentation and observation of sexual development within modern Western societies provides more strength to the argument that human sexual encounters are social and learned interactions. A concept first introduced and labelled as sexual script theory (SST) by William Simon and John Gagnon (Seidman, 2010).

Sexual script theory identifies three major areas of social life with significance to sexuality: the cultural (which helps us to form human activity), the interpersonal (how people orchestrate sexual attractions), and the intrapsychic (the real or fantasised roles that people play in their sexual lives) (Simon & Gagnon, 1984). Whittier and Melendez (2007) suggest that SST operates in accordance with the theory that humans are motivated by social and cultural forces more so, or as much as, they are by physical influences. According to Whittier and Melendez (2007), different elements of the theatre, including the stage, scripts, screen, and props, play a vital part in the construction of sexuality. Foucault (1979) regularly identifies the role that discourses have on the development of

sexuality in HS1. In similarity to discourses, scripts can be highly variable and fluid and subject to constant revision and editing. The scripting, or the backdrop against which sexuality has developed since the Victorian era provides a further understanding of sexuality being situated as less biological and more cultural, historical, and social.

2.4.3 Changing constructions of the sexual self in contemporary society

The postmodern era is driven by a significant change with respect to sexuality. In turn, this cultivates an increased awareness and creativity of an individual's subjective erotically significant experiences. HS1 illustrates how societies do not ban non-heterosexual or non-procreative sexual activities and identities, but actively produce and shape them. In response, an emerging postmodern sexual world becomes plausible. In other words, there could be a society with sexual citizenship (Evans, 1993), which has been defined as "the transformation of public life into a domain that is no longer dominated by male heterosexuals, but that is based in gender and sexual diversity" (Heckma, 2015: 4). Sexual citizenship facilitates all sexual communities, including minority groups in political, social, cultural, and economic participation (Heckma, 2015). For people who identify with a sexual narrative, the right to develop diverse identities has become unhindered (Richardson, 2000). What is less clear, though, is the rights of those who do not develop a sexual narrative or whose narrative is not one that is based on a traditional understanding of sexuality. With regards to individuals who do not operate their lives around a centralised model of sexuality, such as those who are celibate, platonic, or asexual, the plausibility of their existence in meaningful and satisfying partnered relationships in a sexual world requires consideration. In a society where the portrayal of intimate relationships and partnerships between two people is generally based on the assumption that sexual activity is intrinsic to relationship formation and relationship longevity, they too have a right to have their partnered relationships legitimised.

Sexual discourse has taken on new forms of expression in postmodern society. At the same time, there are wider transformations occurring within the story of sexuality. The development of sexual and intimate relationships now occurs against a backdrop of individualisation, detraditionalisation, and increased self-reflexivity. The concepts of love,

longevity, and commitment in relationships are based upon equality, in terms of choice, trust, and compatibility, rather than on traditions or arrangements (Plummer, 1995).

The increasing acknowledgement of non-sexual identities have led to the development of a new language of relationship discourse. This language is asexual, where asexuality is defined by some as a spectrum (Mosbergen, 2016), and lies beyond that of heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual languages. For others, asexuality is a lifestyle that allows for the decoupling of sex from romance (Carrigan, 2011) or, as suggested by Scherrer (2008), complexly and variably lived. Nevertheless, asexuality still sits within a framework dominated by sexual discourse. There is a slow growing acknowledgement that some people who identify as asexual are not interested in romantic physical contact or coital sex (Scherrer, 2008; Carrigan, 2012).

2.4.4 The history of asexuality

Evidence suggests that researchers and sexologists, through the work of Alfred Kinsey (founder of the Kinsey Institute for Research on Sex, Gender and Reproduction) have known something of lowered levels of sexual desire and attraction in humans since the 1940s (MacInnes & Hodson, 2012; MacKay, 2013). The work of Kinsey (1948, 1953) identified an element of possible asexuality within the population and this group were labelled 'Group X' (MacInnes & Hodson, 2012; MacKay, 2013). According to Kinsey, approximately 1.5% of the adult male subjects in his research fell into the "X" category, meaning that they expressed "no socio-sexual contacts or reactions." (MacKay, 2013). There is no evidence of further exploration of this demographic until some years later. Johnson (1977), explored the concept of lowered levels of sexual desire in "Asexual and Autoerotic Women", using evidence largely retrieved from letters to the editors of women's magazines (Aven Wiki, 2013). According to Hughes (2011), Johnson (1977) there was an absence of the words that were available to describe lowered levels of desire in the absence of pathology.

Through the work of Kinsey, asexual people were labelled asexual by default (Hughes, 2011). According to Johnson (1977), society either ignores, denies their existence, or insists they must be asexual for religious, neurotic, or political reasons (Johnson, cited in Gochros & Gochros, 1977).

Research by Storms (1979) suggested a reimagining of the Kinsey scale might be appropriate, with a view to including 'asexuality', in his 1980 publication of the Theories of Sexuality. Consequently, four sexual orientation categories were proposed by Storms (1979), that of asexuality, homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality. The first study to provide research data about a group of people labelled as 'asexuals' was published in 1983 by Paula Nurius. In a study designed to examine relationships among four measures of clinical psychopathology (depression, self-esteem, marital discord and sexual discord), and measures of sexual attitudes, activities and preferences, Nurius (1983), classified asexuality as 'largely preferring not to be involved in any sexual activities' (Nurius, 1983; 122). In a sample of n = 689, 'largely young, well educated, ethnically diverse individuals' (Nurius 1983: 122), based on relevant sexual survey data, the results identified that 5% of men and 10% of women reported a predominantly asexual orientation. Again, there is no evidence that any further work was done in the field of asexuality studies until an asexual activist, founded the largest online asexual community in 2001.

The Asexuality Visibility Education Network (AVEN) was founded in 2001 by David Jay (Cavendish, 2010). Jay acknowledged the lack of resources available regarding asexuality. AVEN defines an asexual individual as someone who does not experience sexual attraction (AVEN, 2009), however AVEN acknowledges a considerable diversity exists within the asexual community, with each person who identifies as asexual experiencing relationships, attraction and arousal differently (AVEN, 2009). Since the development of an online community, research in this area has grown, beginning with Bogaert (2004), who undertook secondary data analysis of a large data set to investigate the demographic characteristics of asexuals, based on the response "I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all". Bogaert (2004) takes this to be indicative of asexuality. The data also facilitated the development of an account of the predictors of asexuality. Bogaert's (2004) work was later subject to a degree of criticism, as the demographic predictors suggested little about the factors associated with taking on an asexual identity. In addition, the definition of experiencing "no sexual attraction", rather than "low", was thought to exclude a sizable number of those who self-identified as asexual (Carrigan, 2011). Prause and Graham (2007) conducted a small qualitative study as a preliminary to a larger online survey study, which included sexual and asexual respondents. The survey was focused on exploring differential characteristics which between asexual and sexual individuals.

Scherrer (2008) uses a qualitative approach, with open ended on line surveys, investigating the identities and lived experiences of self-identified asexuals recruited through the AVEN website. Using three themes from the data; “the meaning of sexual”, “essentially asexual”, and “the romantic dimension”, Scherrer (2008) explores unique aspects of sexuality, focusing on what asexual identities are, how individuals come to identify as asexuals, and what this identity means to them. Researchers up to this point suggested that the ongoing qualitative inquiry into asexual identity was important, as research previously focused on exploring asexuality as behaviour (lack of sexual acts) or a desire (lack of desire for sexual acts). This behavioural focus is said to arise from the concern for aetiology of asexuality, rather than subjective insight (Carrigan, 2011). The qualitative research community appeared to be concerned about, and were keen address, the medicalised perspective of the world; named by Foucault in HS1 as the clinical gaze (Hart & Wellings, 2002). The tendency to view sexuality and asexuality through a medicalised, biomedical, and essentialist lens is one that has continued into the modern age.

Asexuality appears to be a new story, based less on sexual acts and more on alternative models of closeness and intimacy. Drawing upon some of the theoretical work in HS1, sexuality has always been a function of power of the institutional forces of knowledge that regulate desire (Foucault, 1979; Boone, 1998). Therefore, from a constructivist perspective, asexuality could represent another product of the function of power that regulates desire or it may represent something far more different.

2.5 Criticisms of Foucault

Foucault is considered to be a leading figure of modern continental philosophy. His work has undeniably drawn attention to sexuality and its relationship with power and knowledge. In particular, his portrayal of the development of sexuality from the Victorian era is compelling and he provides critical insights into the concept of sexuality as a historical and social construct. By charting the process of sexual development over the last three centuries, it becomes plausible that sexuality has both been shaped by, and shaped society. Whilst it is perfectly reasonable that this seminal work should serve as a meaningful platform from which to discuss the historiography of sexuality, the criticisms of his work should be acknowledged within this chapter.

Foucault's concerns with the influence of power in HS1 create limitations in relation to his sexual theory. He casts aside the relevance of the female sexual experience and, by doing so he pays little attention to the structures of gender and gender division or their impact upon sexual identity and behaviour. Furthermore, he disregards the value of individual agency in terms of shaping and influencing sexual behaviour. Individual agency is discussed in detail in chapter 7 of this thesis, where its relevance is highlighted and demonstrated as fundamental to individuals in terms of carving out a non-sexual identity. A final criticism of his work is that his illustrations of the deployments of sexuality undermine the innate desire for love, belonging, and family. Again, this is elaborated upon in more detail in chapter 7.

Although Foucault's writing could be said to be fascinating, engaging, and plausible, at times it is abstract, especially when he speculates on the modern obsession with sex. His work is based on opinion and assumption, and unlike contemporary academic researchers and theorists he does not feel the need to prove anything. None of his claims are based on evidence. However, as a philosopher, he is entitled to borrow evidence from many resources and claim no skill at evaluating its truth. Beyond the lack of evidence to underpin his writing, he nevertheless gives an interesting historical analysis and critique of the modern intellectual scene (Grow, 2018).

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided background information and the context of the study. To be more precise, it provided a summary of the history of sexuality and an overview of how sexuality has come to be understood over the last century. A chronological structure to the development of understandings of sexuality has been presented, alongside an exploration of the rise of public, academic, and scientific interest in sexuality. The pathologising of sexuality has been addressed through the deployments of sexuality together with an overview of the essentialist and constructivist positions. This chapter has also drawn upon some of Foucault's (1979) theoretical work in HS1 to inform the discussion throughout.

Chapter 3 Concept analysis and thematic synopsis

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the results and findings from the following three activities:

1. A systematic search for empirical work, which focuses on asexuality.
2. A concept analysis of asexuality.
3. A thematic synopsis of the key empirical studies on asexuality.

The chapter will begin by outlining the steps of the systematic search of the asexuality literature. The processes employed, which led to the selection of a body of empirical work on asexual self-identity, will then be presented. This includes the development of a set of questions to guide the search and review, the selection of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the quality appraisal process.

Following on from this, the use of and rationale for a concept analysis (CA) will be explained, facilitated by an outline of the approach by Morse et al (1996a). The CA approach adopted for this thesis is an adapted framework by Morse et al (1996a), guided by Bright et al (2011). This will be detailed in order to illustrate the CA process. The core findings from the process will be presented and similar constructs will be discussed to present the reader with a sense of the definitional boundaries of asexuality. A diagrammatic representation of asexuality will be presented based on the core findings from the CA process. A brief critique of the CA process is also undertaken in this section.

Finally, this chapter will present the reader with a thematic synopsis of the qualitative work accessible through peer-reviewed scientific journals.

3.2 Systematic search of the asexuality literature

3.2.1 Data selection

A systematic search of the empirical work on asexual self-identity based on peer-reviewed scientific journals was conducted. The purpose was to facilitate the development of a CA of asexuality and to provide a thematic synopsis of the existing empirical research. The search of the empirical work was not guided by a need to explore every potential area of significance linked to asexuality, nor was it designed to identify specific aspects of asexuality that should be studied. Instead, the review was designed to

ensure that the selected study area was appropriate and to add some further understanding to a less understood self-identified sexual minority identity. The entire process of searching and selecting a body of empirical work, undertaking a CA, and providing a thematic summary of the empirical work was designed specifically to answer the important questions listed as follows:

- 1) How is asexuality presented through the existing empirical work?
- 2) Is asexual self-identity an important issue to justify a research study being undertaken?
- 3) Does a comprehensive understanding of the process of self-identifying as asexual already exist?

Guided by the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (CRD, 2009), a computer-assisted systematic search and review method was used to identify literature for inclusion in the review. Between October 2014 and January 2015 four electronic databases were searched for research studies on human asexuality. Advanced searches of published and unpublished work with no date restrictions were conducted using the Cinahl, Medline, Psych INFO, and Academic Search Premier databases. Advice and guidance was sought from experienced library support staff when deciding upon the most appropriate search terms and these were agreed as follows:

Subject Heading Search: sexual orientation or attitude to sexuality or sexual behaviour or sexual identity or sexual expression.

Key Word Search: asexual*

The following library subject guides were recommended by experienced library support staff: Gender studies, Sociology, Health and Social Care, and Psychology. As research into asexuality is continually evolving, the search was repeated towards the end of the review process to identify any new literature. A citation search was also undertaken to capture papers or published and unpublished work not found as part of the database search. To do so, the citation lists of all the included work being reviewed were used. Finally, the bibliography found on the Asexuality Explorations bibliography (Hinderliter, 2009) was consulted to ensure there were no significant publications or grey literature that may have been missed.

Papers and empirical studies were included if they explored the perspectives of people who self-identify as asexual, so long as the research presented was attuned to asexual experiences or to the asexual community. Papers published in English language, scientific, and peer-reviewed journals were considered. All papers that met the criteria were included. The titles and abstracts for all retrieved papers were reviewed for relevance and to assess whether they met the inclusion criteria. Full copies were obtained when papers appeared to fit the inclusion criteria and, when relevance could not be determined by the title or abstract, these studies were reviewed to confirm or refute their eligibility for inclusion. A limitation at this point was that only one author reviewed the studies eligible for inclusion. For the purpose of the CA, included papers function as data and so the use of the term data here refers to the included articles (Morse et al., 1996a; Bright et al., 2011). Details of the 18 included studies can be found in Appendix A in the Asexuality Matrix.

3.2.2 Results

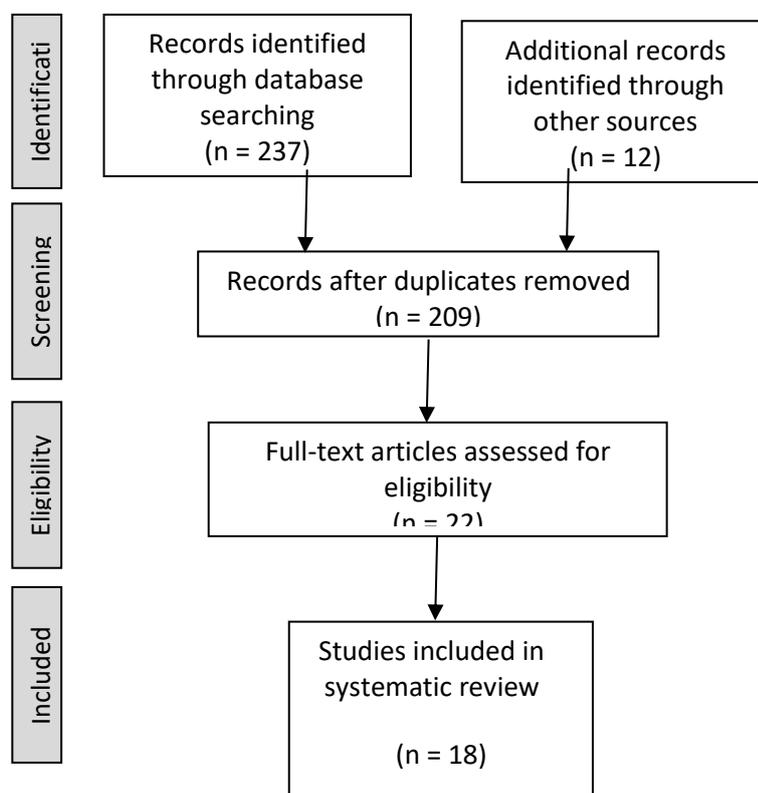
The database searches resulted in 237 potential papers. Abstracts of all 237 papers were scrutinised and, where possible, the full paper (with reference list) was scrutinised as occasionally full-text versions were available on the databases. Twelve potential additional papers were subsequently identified from screening the reference lists of full-text articles, thus giving a total of 249 potential papers. All titles and abstracts were reviewed and 40 duplicates removed, which left 209 (a combination of abstracts and full papers) to be screened. Publications were then excluded leaving 22 papers.

Four studies were excluded during the data extraction process: (Bogaert, 2004; Aicken et al., 2013; McClave, 2013; Hogland et al., 2014). The excluded studies reported on survey data (data from the NATSAL survey and the NSFG survey), which identified individuals who responded to a question about sexual attraction by stating that they had never felt or experienced sexual attraction. These participants were not identified by the authors as being asexual and were excluded for this reason.

Revisiting the inclusion criteria (papers will be included if they explore the perspectives of people who self-identify as asexual) reinforced that this exclusion was the correct decision in accordance with the protocol. Despite exclusion from the body of empirical literature informing the CA and thematic summary, these studies will be drawn upon and

addressed later in the thematic synopsis. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flowchart illustrates the process in more detail.

Figure 3.1: PRISMA flowchart (1)



The body of empirical work on asexuality used for this CA comprises eighteen papers, of which seven are based on qualitative research, eight on quantitative research, and three use a mixed methods approach. Of the eighteen papers, fifteen appear in peer-reviewed journals. Of the remaining three, one is a study undertaken in partial fulfilment of a Doctor of Philosophy (Haefner, 2011), and two are studies conducted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts (Yule, 2011; Sundrud, 2011).

A list of the names of the included studies is detailed below in **Table 3.1 List of studies in CA.**

Author(s)/Date	Title of study/publication
Prause N, Graham CA (2007).	Asexuality: classification and characterisation.
Scherrer KS (2008).	Coming to an asexual identity: Negotiating identity, negotiating desire.
Brotto LA, Knudson G, Inskip J, Rhodes K, Erskine Y (2010).	Asexuality: a mixed methods approach.
Brotto LA, Yule MA (2010).	Physiological and subjective sexual arousal in self-identified asexual women.
Sundrud JL (2011).	Performing asexuality through narratives of sexual identity.
Yule M (2011).	Furthering our understanding of asexuality.
Haefner C (2011).	Asexual scripts: a grounded theory inquiry into the intrapsychic scripts asexuals use to negotiate romantic relationships.
Carrigan M (2011).	There's more to life than sex? Difference and commonality within the asexual community.
Pacho A (2012).	Establishing asexual identity: the essential, the imaginary, and the collective.
Gazzola SB, Morrison MA (2012).	Asexuality: an emergent sexual orientation.
Yule MA, Brotto LA, Gorzalka BB (2013).	Mental health and interpersonal functioning in self-identified asexual men and women.
Pinto SA (2014).	Asexually: on being an ally to the asexual community.
Yule MA, Brotto LA, Gorzalka BB (2014).	Biological markers of asexuality: handedness, birth order and finger length ratio in self-identified asexual men and women.
Yule MA, Brotto LA, Gorzalka BB (2014).	Sexual fantasy among asexual individuals.
MacNeela P, Murphy A (2014).	Freedom, invisibility, and community: a qualitative study of self-identification with asexuality.
Foster AB, Scherrer KS (2014).	Asexual-identified clients in clinical settings: implications for culturally competent practice
Van Houdenhove E, Gijls L, T'Sjoen G, Enzin P (2015).	Asexuality: a multidimensional approach.
Brotto LA, Yule MA, Gorzalka BB (2015).	Asexuality: an extreme variant of sexual desire disorder.

3.3 The use of concept analysis

The scholarship of asexuality has grown significantly in the last five years. However, there are a relatively small but increasing number of empirical studies using qualitative and quantitative methods. Study findings of the existing research have shown that the use of different criteria to define asexuality results in different groups being categorised as asexual (Van Houdenhove et al., 2014). Researchers themselves make generalisations about how asexuality should be defined. A case in point is a study by Bogaert (2004) on sexual health practices, which found that 1% of respondents of a nationally representative UK sample in the late 1990s, reported never experiencing sexual attraction to anyone. This finding laid claim to the fact that 1% of the population was asexual, based on never experiencing sexual attraction. This statistic has regularly been used to estimate the prevalence of asexuality in research papers, highlighting that conclusions drawn from research findings are potentially misleading. They serve as a platform for further research to perpetuate something that strays from factual accuracy. An additional complication is that much of the definitional framework for asexuality, appears to happen, not solely through scientific research, but through online platforms, where asexuality seems to be continually defined and redefined by the asexual community themselves.

Prior to undertaking any research on asexuality there is a need to gather existing knowledge on the subject. This should generate insights into the best criteria that can be used to define asexuality. At this stage it is important to consider this body of empirical work on asexual self-identity, by way of how it represents my interpretation of researcher interpretations of asexuality. Consequently, the work in this chapter will produce a set of findings about asexuality that will not be substantiated directly by asexual voices until the fieldwork has taken place. However, what is central to the CA process is to understand how asexuality is presented through existing empirical work.

Concept analysis is essential to theory development and research. It is a method of enquiry which can clarify and provide meaning to complex phenomena (Shattell, 2004). In addition, CA contributes to increasing a body of knowledge (Norris, 1982; Walker & Avant, 1995; Baldwin & Rose, 2009). There has been a proliferation of CA papers across

healthcare journals in the past decade, which is indicative of the availability of a range of different frameworks and approaches.

Concept analysis requires the researcher to analyse a concept in minute detail (Foley & Davies, 2008b). The process aids the researcher in progressing to subsequent phases of the research. Concept analysis has gained research publicity in improving understanding (Caplan, 2007; Mancuso 2008), articulation (Johnson & Amella, 2013), clarification (Shattell, 2004; Xyrichis & Ream, 1996), definition (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007; Mikkleson & Federikson, 2011; Bruggemann et al., 2012; Garcia-Dia et al., 2013; Coker et al., 2013), or simply just “providing a starting point for consideration” (Bright et al., 2014: 10).

Beckwith et al. (2008) point out that frameworks have been used uncritically by researchers in the past. This is evident across the CA literature as many studies using a CA framework have failed to critique their use or offer any assistance, guidance, or views on their utility and appropriateness. Consequently, the selection of a suitable framework can be challenging. Many frameworks have been said to be “unjustified, hybridised or adapted versions of each other” (Beckwith et al., 2008: 1839). Of note, amongst the critiques of CA frameworks, the frameworks themselves are not criticised. Instead, it appears to be the way in which they are used that raises concerns. Certainly, if the main criticism that Beckwith et al. (2008) make is based on their unjustified and uncritical use (Beckwith et al., 2008), then a requirement of the approach in this context would be to justify the selection of the chosen framework and critique its use within the process. According to Beckwith et al. (2008) the use of CA frameworks does not suggest that nothing can be learned through their application, but simply that their use should be justified and critiqued.

From a pragmatic perspective, it is evident that a degree of clarification is required in the field of asexuality studies. This cannot be overlooked prior to undertaking any further research. An operational definition or clarification of the term asexuality based on the existing research might be helpful prior to further academic enquiry. Concepts are evolving, as is the field of asexuality studies, and therefore in this context it is understood that CA may only provide us with a snapshot of this concept (Rodgers & Knafel, 2000). This endeavour may be understood as a first attempt at providing a definition of an emerging

concept. Alternatively, it may help with operationalizing the concept, selecting a design, and choosing an appropriate measurement instrument (Foley & Davies, 2017).

The methodology that will guide the CA process derives from Morse et al. (1996a). The body of empirical work on asexuality is both qualitative and quantitative and this framework was found to be “a useful tool enabling the analysis and synthesis of both qualitative and quantitative data” (Bright et al., 2011: 499). A brief critique of the application of Morse et al.’s (1996a) CA methodology will be undertaken. The utility and application of the CA methodology to the body of asexuality literature will be facilitated by a constant comparison of my own process, in accordance with the work of Bright et al. (2011). To clarify, Bright et al.’s (2011) research has been guided by Morse et al.’s (1996a) CA framework methodology, which is used to clarify the concept of hope during recovery from a stroke and to propose a working model of such. The application of their proposed model has “contributed to a fuller understanding of hope after stroke” (Bright et al., 2011: 499). The researchers refer to their approach as a concept clarification (Bright et al., 2011: 499), which involves the use of a systematic approach to clarify and develop an understanding of the concept in question.

3.3.1 Morse et al (1996) framework

Morse et al (1996b) identify that the criteria for a concept evaluation should include an assessment of the definition and the characteristics of the concept. Morse et al. (1996b) also acknowledge that all concepts must have boundaries, which should be identified when an exemplar is no longer an instance of a concept. Bright et al (2011) apply a framework to the Morse et al. (1996a) methodology, which takes into account the following:

1. The definitions of the phenomena under investigation.
2. The characterisations of the concept under investigation.
3. The processes associated with the concept under investigation.
4. The outcomes associated with engaging with the concept under investigation.

Each of these aspects will be discussed with regards to the body of empirical work on asexuality. This particular approach to concept clarification was selected as it appears to employ a straightforward method involving the gathering of data on the four relevant aspects: definitions, characterisations, processes, and outcomes. Furthermore, it has

been successfully used in a number of papers to conceptually clarify and evaluate as well as to “contribute to fuller comprehension” (Bright et al., 2011: 490). Not only is the framework considered reasonably uncomplicated, the approach offers a more realistic and pragmatic framework within which asexuality could be explored. Its previous application to engagement in healthcare and rehabilitation (Bright et al., 2014), highlighted the complexities and multidimensional aspects of the construct and it was anticipated that asexuality may produce a similar finding. The following section explains the steps taken to examine the literature and apply the CA framework of Morse et al. (1996a) and Bright et al. (2011).

3.3.2 Application of the framework

Papers were retrieved and read in their entirety to gain a broad understanding of asexuality. Coding and analytic questioning was undertaken and data initially coded to extract information. The definition of asexuality, the characterisations of asexuality, the processes or mechanisms associated with the journey towards asexuality, and the outcomes of arriving at an asexual identity were the focus of the analytic questioning.

Asexuality was separated from the concepts of sexual disorder or sexual dysfunction. It was documented across the studies, how the authors/researchers achieved this. A more comprehensive analysis of the data was undertaken by exploring how asexuality had been defined and how this influenced the data, specifically in relation to the study findings. This facilitated a more detailed understanding of the cognitive process and behaviours linked to asexuality and the measures and determinants of such behaviours. This also facilitated a close examination of the experiences of individuals during and following their experience of identifying as asexual.

Following the method adopted by Bright et al. (2011), the findings from the data analysis were recorded using matrices, which allowed for a comparison within and between the data. The matrices were built, developed, and redeveloped over a period of time, whilst the concepts of characterisations were fully explored and understood (Morse et al., 1996a). A synthesis of each of the core findings was undertaken (Morse et al., 1996a). Themes were extracted and refined from the final matrix with the assistance and guidance of a constant comparison (CC) (Boeije, 2002). Where themes were compared with data from all of the included qualitative and quantitative studies the findings were

extensively documented. An example and outcome of the CC process is illustrated through this documentation seen below:

“The subjective experience of attraction and its relationship to self-identification as asexual is confusing to understand. For example, ‘Nora’ in Scherrer’s (2008) study claims that ‘attraction is not a factor’. Although, attraction appears to be something that she actually does experience as she later states that she is attracted to ‘personality’. This results in her feeling a need to be in the company of the individual for whose personality she is attracted to. Hence, ‘attraction’ and its mechanisms may need to be explored in more detail.”

3.4 Presentation of the core findings

The core findings based on the body of empirical work on asexual self-identity will be presented in the section below. These findings are not based directly on asexual voices per se as this body of empirical work represents researcher interpretations of aspects of asexual discourse.

3.4.1 Definitions of asexuality

Researchers have drawn upon a number of definitions of asexuality when framing their studies. The most commonly cited definition used to frame the studies focused upon, or referred to, alternative levels of sexual attraction and sexual desire (Scherrer, 2008; Haefner, 2011; Yule, 2011; Brotto & Yule; 2011, Prims, 2012; Gazzola & Morrison, 2012; Pacho, 2013; Foster & Scherrer, 2014; Yule et al., 2014a; Yule et al., 2014b; Van Houdenhove, 2014; Brotto et al., 2015). Some considered a framing of asexuality around the fact that it had been defined in many different ways (Prause & Graham, 2007). Prause and Graham (2007: 342) also provided a further four definitions of the term asexual(s), before proceeding to provide four previously used definitions based on sexual attraction, desire, and behaviour:

1. Lacking interest or desire for sex.
2. Individuals who do not experience sexual attraction.
3. Never having felt sexual attraction to anyone at all.
4. Having no preference for either homosexual or heterosexual activities.

The commonly cited definition adopted by AVEN (The Asexuality Visibility Education Network) refers to an asexual person as “a person who does not experience sexual attraction” (AVEN, 2012). AVEN’s definition was referred to in various studies (Carrigan, 2011; Sundrud, 2011). Furthermore, asexuality was defined in one study as a self-categorisation. The range of definitions used by researchers to explain asexuality, alongside multiple conceptualisations of asexuality, supports the rationale for this conceptual clarification.

3.4.2 Characterisations of asexuality

An analysis of how asexuality has been characterised across the body of empirical work was undertaken in order to gain a clearer understanding of its characterisations. Following a synthesis of the many characterisations of asexuality alluded to across each study, the analysis process conceptualised asexuality as having three key characterisations: (1) Diversity (Prause & Graham, 2007; Scherrer, 2008; Sundrud, 2011; Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Brotto & Yule, 2011; Yule et al., 2014b; Pacho, 2013; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014; Van Houdenhove, 2014), (2) A need for legitimacy (Prause & Graham, 2007; Scherrer, 2008; Prims, 2012; Yule et al., 2014a; Brotto et al 2014, Brotto et al 2015), and (3) Romantic difference alongside sexual indifference (Prause & Graham, 2007; Scherrer, 2008; Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Brotto & Yule, 2011; Foster & Scherrer, 2014; Yule et al., 2014b; Brotto et al., 2015). Each of these characterisations will now be elaborated upon further.

3.4.2.1 Diversity

Diversity was evident across all of the studies. Researcher characterisations of asexuality reflect a great deal of variety within the asexual identity. Diverse ways of forming relationships, achieving intimacy, and experiencing attraction were portrayed across the studies. Despite the fact that definitions of asexuality seem to be focused on levels of sexual attraction, desire, and behaviour, attitudes towards sex and sexuality and engagement in sexual intercourse were varied across the data. As Brotto et al. (2010) highlight, there is not one prototype. Diversity in relation to responses to sexual cues (Prause & Graham, 2007; Brotto & Yule, 2011; Yule et al., 2014b), sexual behaviours (Prause & Graham, 2007; Carrigan, 2011; Scherrer, 2008; Haefner, 2011; Brotto & Yule, 2011; Yule et al., 2014b; Van Houdenhove 2014), and romantic attraction and

affectionate attachments (Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Pacho, 2013; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014) were all illustrated through qualitative accounts and quantitative outcomes. Data from a number of studies demonstrates that these experiences of diversity in terms of relationship formation and attraction occur against a backdrop of expectations and assumptions about sex and relationships, where engagement with sexual intimacy and the physical act of sex is a given (Prause & Graham, 2007; Scherrer, 2008; Brotto et al., 2010; Sundrud, 2011).

Asexuality is regularly subcategorised into demisexuality, grey-asexuality, aromantic, heteroromantic, homoromantic, biromantic, and panromantic (Carrigan, 2011). Hence, asexuality has a growing vocabulary and language that represents its developing subcategories. Most studies summarised this diversity by commenting on the heterogeneity of the asexual community (Brotto et al., 2010; Gazzola & Morison, 2014), the variation and complexity of subidentities (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014), the degree of subgroups within asexuality (Van Houdenhove, 2014), the diversity evident in asexual narratives (Prause & Graham, 2007), and the range of attitudes towards romance (Scherrer, 2008; Carrigan 2011). The diversity of asexuality is reflected in the range of relationship preferences, from passionate relationships to aromantic to sexual (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014).

3.4.2.2 A need for legitimacy

There was a sense of a need for the identity and what it represented, to be considered as authentic and genuine. In other words, data suggests an ongoing search for asexuality to be acknowledged as non-dysfunctional, non-distressing, biologically based, and authentic. Specifically, data illustrates a positioning of asexuality as a legitimate alternative to sexuality (Van Houdenhove, 2014), a legitimate sexual orientation (Brotto et al., 2010; Yule, 2011; Yule et al., 2014a), and a legitimate non-dysfunctional choice (Prause & Graham, 2007; Yule et al., 2014b; Brotto et al., 2015). Asexuality has been identified as legitimate and valid in a number of studies for a number of reasons. Thus, the authenticity of the experience was seen as a key characterisation/attribute of asexuality. Van Houdenhove (2014) proposes various notions of authenticity by considering asexuality as an alternative to sexuality, rather than as an alternative to heterosexuality, homosexuality, lesbianism, or bisexuality. Van Houdenhove (2014) recommends that sexuality be conceptualised on a continuum based on varying degrees of asexuality. Using

a quantitative study design Prause and Graham (2007) present evidence that self-identified asexuals potentially have a higher excitatory threshold for sexual arousal. Evidence of a biological basis for asexuality that may “offer asexual individuals’ a sense of legitimacy” (Prause & Graham, 2007: 354).

Yule et al. (2014) and Brotto et al. (2015) suggest that asexuality is a category distinct from sexual desire dysfunction and could be classified as a unique sexual orientation. The discovery of biological characteristics and markers for the lack of sexual attraction are characteristics of asexuality according to most quantitative studies. For example, a central mechanism preventing the activation of neural receptors by androgens (Brotto et al., 2010), the influence of the pre-natal environment (Yule, 2011), and biological pathways implicating the development of homosexuality were present in those who selected asexual as the orientation that best described them (Yule et al., 2014a). The claims being made by these studies seem to be based on a central aim of proposing that asexuality, or the term asexual, should be considered as a legitimate and authentic orientation.

This body of research aims to liberate asexuality from any underlying psychopathology, and for asexuality to be legitimately associated with wellbeing. Prause and Graham (2007) discounted the view that asexuals were depressed, whereas Brotto et al. (2010) found no evidence for higher rates of depression but found some qualitative data suggestive of higher rates of Asperger’s Syndrome (Brotto et al., 2010). In comparison, Yule et al. (2013) found a higher rate of depression and interpersonal problems in self-identified asexuals. However, membership of a sexually marginalised group may be experienced as stressful and stigmatising and Brotto et al. (2015) suggest that this may account for elevated rates of psychopathology. Finally, the legitimacy of distinguishing asexuality from sexual dysfunction was also sought and evidenced across the data. For instance, asexuality has previously been linked to hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD) and sexual aversion disorder (SAD) in accordance with the framework proposed by Morse et al. (1996a). This will be explored in more detail in the section of this chapter addressing related constructs (Section 3.4.6).

3.4.2.3 Romantic differences and sexual indifference

A close inspection of the research data illustrates that there has been a tendency to characterise asexuality in terms of its associations with the non-sexual aspects of relationship forming. Portrayals of asexuality as being guided by affectionate and emotional responses and non-sexual expressions are vastly varied and seem to represent what has come to be known as the romantic dimension of asexuality. This is again reflective of the portrayal of asexuality as being diverse.

Data across a number of studies suggests that the asexual experience can be categorised by a deep affectional and/or emotional awareness and expression. A deep emotional connection is portrayed through the empirical body of work as a facilitator of relationship formation, continuation, and the experience of attraction. This occurs not in the absence of sexual attraction, but in the presence of what could be referred to as a level of sexual indifference. This is where indifference is played out as a general feeling of neutrality towards the act of engaging in sexual activities. Interestingly, despite the operational definitions of asexuality being focused on an absence or lowered level of sexual attraction, it is evident from this body of empirical work that some self-identified asexuals do feel something that they understand to be sexual attraction.

Participants make references to experiencing attraction in emotional and intellectual terms (Carrigan, 2011; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014), appreciation of others in artistic and aesthetic ways (Scherrer, 2008; Pacho, 2012; MacNeela & Murphy 2014), desiring a different kind of closeness other than sexual (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014), loving the human form (Scherrer, 2008), or achieving happiness by spending time with and being close to another person (Brotto et al., 2010). The frequency of data suggesting that the participants perceived their connections with others to be of almost a different emotional depth from sexual connections was enough for romantic difference, alongside sexual indifference, to be considered as features of asexuality.

The romantic dimension and its possible arrangement along a continuum is alluded to across a number of studies. For example, Scherrer (2008) refers to the romantic and aromantic identity, MacNeela and Murphy (2014) refer to asexual biromantic affectionate reference points in the asexual self-identity, Carrigan (2011) acknowledges the range of attitudes and orientations towards sex and romance, Prims (2012) demonstrates that many asexuals desire romantic but non-sexual relationships, whereas

Van Houdenhove (2014) and Brotto et al. (2010) respectively found that three out of four participants experienced romantic attraction and a significant proportion of participants had been in a romantic relationship. The data indicates that researchers interpret the romantic dimension and its differences from the aromantic dimension as something that should not be overlooked. To be more precise, it should be given as much consideration as the sexual attraction/sexual desire dimension of asexuality. However, sexual indifference was a strong theme throughout the data on characterisations of asexuality. Studies focusing on asexuality, or on the experiences of asexuals with respect to sexual attraction, desire, arousal, and behaviour, were conceptualised under the heading of sexual indifference. To clarify, this is where indifference reflects a general lack of interest or a take it or leave it attitude towards engagement in sexual activity.

A number of studies have sought to explore and understand asexuality qualitatively and quantitatively through the experience of attraction and desire (Prause & Graham, 2007; Brotto et al., 2010; Brotto & Yule, 2011; Brotto et al., 2015). This was the case even in much of the qualitative work that was simply seeking to further understandings of the asexual experience (Prause & Graham, 2007; Scherrer, 2008; Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Pacho, 2013; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014). These studies reported data that defined and presented asexuality in the context of sexual interest and response. Findings from these studies were varied, with self-identified asexuals reporting low excitation processes, similar levels of behaviours than non-aexuals, varying degrees of sexual experience (Prause & Graham, 2007), a lack of or absence of sexual attraction (Scherrer, 2008; Brotto et al., 2010; Haefner, 2011; Brotto & Yule, 2011). Ultimately, the findings centred on a neutrality with and about sexuality. Where there was evidence of arousal to sexual stimuli (Brotto & Yule, 2011), it tended to be perceived neutrally and non-sexually. To clarify, both aspects of the romantic and the sexual play a key role in characterising and understanding the characterisations of asexuality. In summary, a review of the body of empirical work on asexuality highlights that romantic difference and sexual indifference are important characteristics of the phenomena. What is also evident across the data is that the experiences of romance and sexual attraction are perceived by individuals who identify as asexual as being out of sync or misaligned with how other sexual people experience them. This is best summarised as an experience of

sex and romance that does not align with a sexual narrative, where engagement with the physical act of sex is a given, is expected, is unquestioned, and is seen as normal:

“It was rather painful but ... but whenever he wanted it, I did not refuse” (Prause & Graham, 2007: 344).

“I think people are biologically programmed to be interested ... it just comes naturally” (Prause & Graham, 2007: 345).

Hence, at this stage of conceptual development, experiencing a diversity of romantic and sexual connections that do not align to a sexual narrative should be considered as an attribute of the asexual identity.

3.4.3 Process

There appears to be an underlying process which leads an individual to asexuality. This was documented across a number of qualitative studies and was associated with a journey (Scherrer, 2008; Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Pacho, 2013; Foster & Scherrer, 2014; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014; Van Houdenhove, 2014). Quantitative data also highlights a biological process relating to asexuality. This is presented in some studies as a contributory factor to asexuality (Prause & Graham, 2007; Brotto et al., 2010; Yule, 2011; Yule et al., 2014a). The process is almost universally experienced and is associated with the following stages: feeling different from peers during adolescence (Prause & Graham, 2007; Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Pacho, 2013; Van Houdenhove, 2014), anxiety (MacNeela & Murphy 2014), self-questioning (Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Pacho 2013), assuming something is wrong, (Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Pacho, 2013; Foster & Scherrer, 2014; Van Houdenhove, 2014), experimenting with other sexual identities (Haefner, 2011; Sundrud, 2011), and finally self-clarification, which was sometimes through the discovery of others (Scherrer, 2008; Brotto et al., 2010; Sundrud, 2011; Foster & Scherer 2014; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014) or simply through the acceptance that asexuality is central to their experiences of attraction (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014). Interestingly, the data showed that another feature was the assumption that a lack of sexual attraction was acceptable (Haefner, 2011), as well as being given rationalisations from others in the form of being advised one has high standards or is a late developer (Haefner, 2011). Furthermore, one participant reported experimenting with asexuality to

see if it fitted (Sundrud, 2011). In summary, the process of identifying as asexual presented in qualitative studies reflect a model of non-heterosexual identity formation, which may be similar to other non-heterosexual identity processes. This is an area which requires further exploration as the existing body of research does not provide adequate detail of the process.

Quantitative studies on asexuality add very little to our understanding of the processes associated with, or involved in, the development of an asexual self-identity. Nonetheless, they do shed some light on the biological mechanisms that may contribute to the development of some of the characteristics associated with the identity. The methodological frameworks of these studies illustrate the complexity of the contemporary understanding of asexuality. For example, they are driven by the objective of characterising or classifying. Researchers use measures and questionnaires to explore sexual functioning and behaviour and the results make it possible to draw conclusions about the possible biological and/or physiological processes associated with being asexual. Prause and Graham's (2007) use of measures of sexual desire within a group of individuals who identify as asexual supported the idea that human asexuals have low excitatory processes, but not high inhibitory processes. These measures included: dyadic sexual desire and solitary sexual desire, sexual arousability inventory, and sexual inhibition indicator. Furthermore, a higher excitatory threshold for sexual arousal and lower behavioural activation provides some basis for a biological and/or physiological process underpinning asexuality. However, it cannot be ruled out that the responses from participants to questions about the frequency of sexual intercourse and their motivation to engage in sexual activities could reflect that of someone who identifies with some of the characteristics generally associated with asexuality. This is because these participants will already identify with an asexual narrative prior to completing the questionnaires.

Brotto et al. (2010) use measures of sexual behaviour and sexual response to determine the frequency of engagement in sexual activity, sexual behaviours, and levels of distress. Yule et al. (2014) explore right-left handedness, the number of older siblings, and self-measured finger length as neurodevelopmental markers linked to sexual orientation to conclude that the prenatal environment and the role of androgens are linked to the development of a set of behaviours commonly associated with an asexual orientation. Quantitative studies draw on essentialist constructs of asexuality. As Chapter 2 illustrates,

studies searching for objective truths about sexuality (or asexuality) operationalise a discourse through their methodological frameworks. The use of measures to identify specifics in relation to sexual functioning and the search for biological markers illustrate a set of characteristics that people have to identify with in order to participate. Consequently, the particular features employed to identify the eligibility of participants have become the characteristics that have been attributed to the phenomena being studied. These studies should not be dismissed as being analytically wrong. They feature within this body of empirical work, which means that they should not be completely excluded from the CA, especially as they offer interesting insights into the diversity of researcher interpretations of asexual discourse. Their inclusion in the CA renders asexuality as an orientation or an identity which is informed by an integrated model of social processes and biological mechanisms. Their consideration within this body of research informs the process of selecting a design, and choosing an appropriate method for data collection before entering the field.

3.4.4 Outcome

There were very clear themes within the data across the studies, which allowed for the outcome of asexuality to be synthesised in a helpful way. For much of the data, embracing an asexual identity as an outcome of asexuality, was reflected in three key elements: (1) developing an identity pride, (2) recognising and working around the limitations of language, and (3) navigating the non-asexual world. Each of these aspects of embracing an asexual identity will now be discussed in more detail.

3.4.4.1 Developing identity pride

Data across the studies generally reflects pride and positivity as being a result of embracing an asexual identity. Words such as liberating and empowering were used to describe the feelings associated with adopting the identity and discovering an asexual community (Scherrer, 2008; Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Sundrud, 2011). Of note is the difficulty to tease out from the data the saliency of these expressions in the absence of a strong asexual community. The data from these studies was provided predominantly from those who accessed the AVEN website. The extent to which the existence of AVEN has informed a positive experience.

Despite much of the data being reflective of the outcome of embracing asexuality as positive, data from three participants across two different studies reflected some negativity. For example, one participant expressed that embracing asexuality did not bring them anything positive as it was a disability that had to be “work around” (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014: 804). Another expressed concern that the validation of sex as not being the main factor in a relationship could mean the end of that relationship (Haefner, 2011). Finally, for another participant the outcome of their identity meant isolation due to asexuality’s perceived closeted existence (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014). A small proportion of the data reflected something more than feelings of liberation and satisfaction. For instance, the outcome of the asexuality identity provided some asexuals with meaning explanations, truth, and social location (Scherrer, 2008; Brotto et al., 2010; Sundrud, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Prims, 2012). The data also reflected the asexual identity as enabling some asexuals to critique the non-asexual world and its heteronormativity from, what seems to be, a queer theory perspective. Therefore, whilst recognising that it was distant from mainstream culture, the outcome of embracing the asexual identity was that it highlighted the faults within society (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014), normalised asexuality (Pacho, 2013), and facilitated an acceptance of non-mainstream sexual motivations (Prims, 2012).

3.4.4.2 Working around the limitations of language

Bogaert (2012) highlights that the forging of an identity requires the development of a language that reflects commonalities with those who share the same characteristics and differences from those who do not. This was apparent throughout the data. Not only was there evidence of the development of a specific asexual vocabulary, the data reflected the creation of a new language and words pertaining to the identity. This reflected the current limitations of existing language within a sexual framework and was evident across both quantitative studies (Brotto et al., 2010; Van Houdenhove, 2014) and qualitative studies (Scherrer, 2008; Carrigan, 2011; Pacho, 2012). For some, embracing an asexual identity means embracing a new language and words such as aromantic, demisexuals, and grey asexual can be used to understand and explain the ways in which people can and do connect (Carrigan, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Prims, 2012; Van Houdenhove, 2014). Redefining existing culturally agreed upon acts, such as masturbation and cuddling, as being non-sexual was evident in one study (Scherrer, 2008).

Collectively, these findings suggest that the available language of relationship forming does not appear to be fit for asexual purposes. Further evidence of the limitations of the existing language was observed across a number of studies. First, where asexual participants self-identified as something other than male or female or in some cases did not identify as either male or female (Brotto et al., 2010; Gazzola & Morrison, 2011; Van Houdenhove, 2014). Second, where participants who use their romantic orientation to self-identify were unsure of how to describe themselves (Van Houdenhove, 2014). Finally, where participants defined or redefined the sexual and the romantic as separate constructs (Van Houdenhove, 2014; Scherrer, 2008; Brotto et al., 2010; Haefner, 2011). This evidence highlights that the asexual experience of relationship formation was limited by the existing language, which has been constructed within a sexual framework of relationship formation. The existing sexual framework seems to place an emphasis on the two constructs of romance and sex being assumed as one. One participant commented that coming out created a lot of ways to define a relationship (Sundrud, 2011). For another participant the outcome of the asexual identity facilitated an explicitness of her romantic identity, which turned the asexual identity into something it is rather than something it is not (Scherrer, 2008).

3.4.4.3 Navigation and negotiation of the non-asexual world

Data reflects that navigation and negotiation are specific outcomes of embracing an asexual identity. A navigation of the non-asexual world was undertaken by asexuals in order to seek out and find like-minded others (Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011) and to endure the experience of being challenged by, and providing explanations for, friends and family (Haefner, 2011; Prims, 2012). Data also suggests that navigation has to be undertaken with partners in order to avoid placing oneself at risk of being assigned with a diagnosis of sexual dysfunction or aversion disorder (Yule, 2011; Brotto & Yule, 2011). This is due to the potential for asexuality to be pathologised. For some asexuals, navigation of the non-asexual world may be associated with distress and anxiety (Yule et al., 2013).

A need for navigation and negotiation was further evident across data that explored arousal pathways. According to one study, there may be a need for a strategy of negotiating a lack of sexual attraction in order to reach an agreement on what level of activity will be acceptable to partners (Brotto & Yule, 2011). Navigation within healthcare

settings was also evident in the data, specifically in relation to disclosure. Many participants in one study revealed a process of decision-making was undertaken before assessing the safety of disclosure (Foster & Scherrer, 2014).

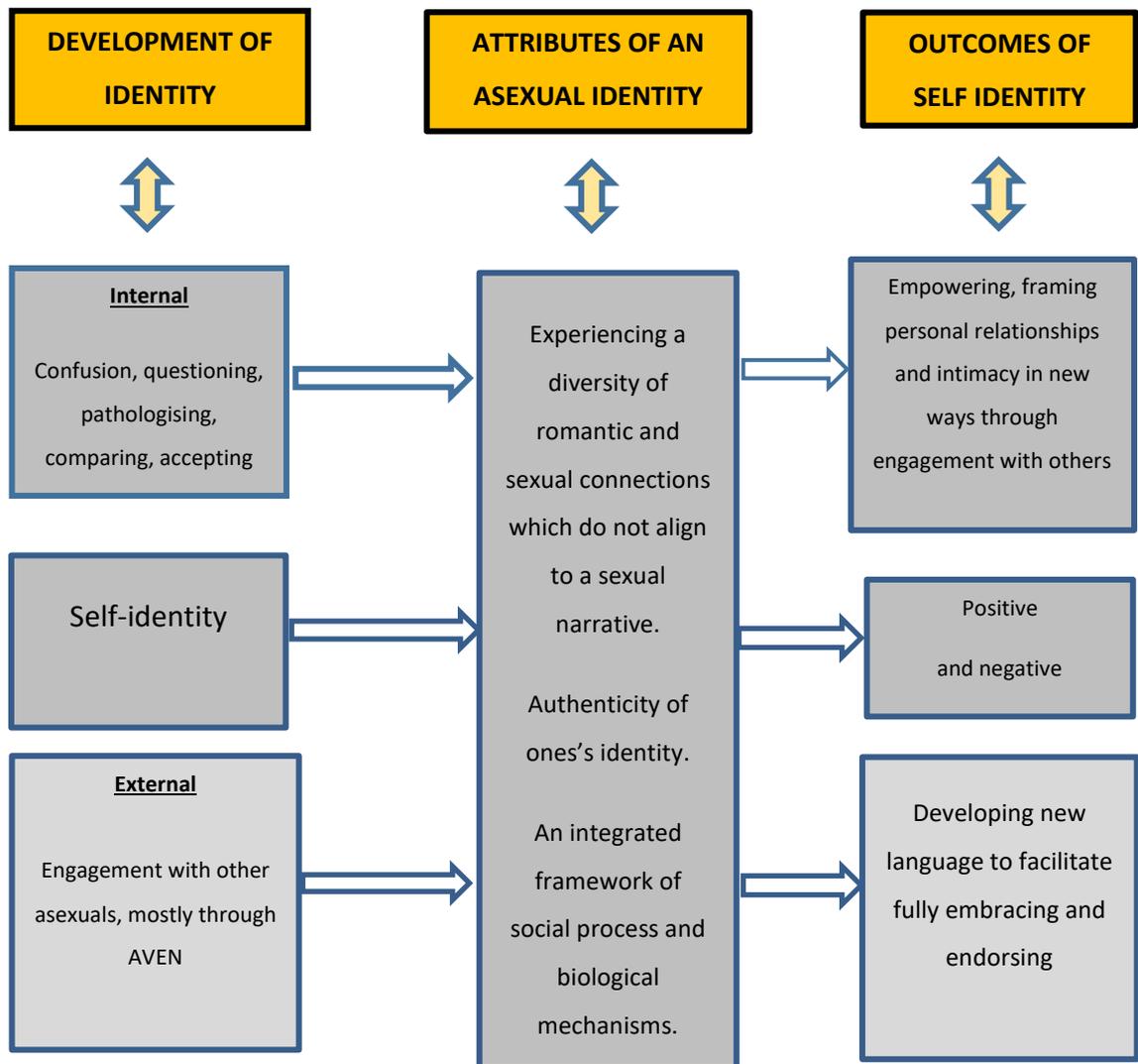
Generally speaking, the core findings on the outcome of arriving at an asexual identity highlight that asexuals feel more empowered and happier once the identity is embraced. One study in particular found that self-identified asexuals have higher self-esteem than asexuals who do not self-identify (Prims, 2012). The longer the participants identify as asexual, the lower their levels of depression (Prims, 2012). A process of framing personal relationships in ways that facilitate the creation of a new language can occur once the identity is embraced. In turn, this seems to encourage asexuals to navigate and negotiate their way through society, generally with a stronger and more confident sense of self. According to this body of empirical work, navigation and negotiation is undertaken with friends and family, health professionals, and potential and/or existing partners.

The data further identified a number of factors that appear to be associated with the development and maintenance of an asexual identity. These can originate from internal or external sources. Internal sources include a sense of self and sense of personal meaning, which adopting the identity brings (Scherrer, 2008; Haefner, 2011; Prims, 2012). External sources include support from family, friends, health professionals (Prims, 2012; Foster & Scherrer, 2014; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014) and social connections with other asexual people (Scherrer, 2008; Brotto et al., 2010; Haefner, 2011; Pacho, 2013). For some asexuals, navigation of the non-asexual world is problematic and distressing, especially for those who identify as having lowered levels of sexual attraction and for those who have not engaged with an online community, such as AVEN. The findings by Yule et al. (2013) suggest that some asexuals who have never heard of asexuality are more isolated, distressed, or confused than those who belong to an asexual community.

3.4.5 Model of the concept

The CA process was undertaken with a view to answer the question detailed at the start of this chapter: How is asexuality presented through the existing empirical work? This question is answered through the explanatory narrative below, which supports the concept model detailed in Figure 2 directly below: Concept model of asexuality

Figure 3.2: Concept model of asexuality



Asexuality as a sexual identity is influenced by a range of subjective and cognitive experiences with respect to feelings of attraction, desire, arousal, interest, and sexual and romantic behaviours. For people who later go on to identify as asexual, their experiences of attraction, love, and relationships do not align with a sexual narrative. Asexuality has been studied as both an identity and an orientation, and is understood through both social and biological processes. The way in which asexuality is presented through empirical work has been influenced by a drive for it to be considered as authentic, non-pathological, non-distressing, and non-dysfunctional. A significant number of people who identify with asexuality have found self-identity to be a positive outcome of their lifelong

experience. The adoption of the identity has positively impacted on the lives of many who had previously encountered confusion, unhappiness, and anxiety. They have acknowledged the lack of language to describe their experiences and used this pragmatically and positively to create new words and phrases, which facilitate a developing understanding of themselves and their relationships with others. The existing empirical work suggests that asexuality as an identity may share some characteristics of models and theories of LGBT self-identity, however this needs further examination and research is limited in this area. Based on the findings of this concept clarification, a working model of asexuality is presented, which may contribute to an emerging understanding of asexuality. The key findings of asexuality from the existing research are:

- Asexuality is an identity or an orientation which is developed through the internalisation of attraction and relationship experiences, a drive to self-identify, and engagement with a set of external mechanisms that frame sexuality as a given.

The characterisations of an asexuality include:

- Experiencing a diversity of romantic and sexual connections that do not align to a sexual narrative.
- The authenticity of one's identity.
- An integrated framework of social processes and biological mechanisms.

Asexual self-identity can yield positive and negative internal and external experiences for asexuals. Positive experiences with respect to finding support and friendship amongst similar others and potentially negative experiences with respect to isolation and discrimination. Positive outcomes reinforce the self-identity and help to embed the experiences of individuals into an asexual narrative. However, the limited language available to capture and illustrate the diversity of experiences of attraction can act as a barrier against asexuals and non-asexuals fully embracing and endorsing the asexual experience.

3.4.6 Similar constructs and boundaries

Morse et al. (1996b) highlight the importance of being able to separate a concept from similar constructs. The next section will explain some of the thought processes and decision-making around the demarcation of asexuality in an attempt to distinguish it from pathology.

Across some disciplines, similar constructs have been used interchangeably with asexuality. HSDD is characterised by a distressing lack or absence of sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). HSDD is the most closely comparable to asexuality, particularly if it is lifelong. Within the literature included in this systematic review, asexuality appears to closely overlap with HSDD and sexual aversion disorder (SAD). There is an assumption that people are sexual unless otherwise specified (Chasin, 2011). It is also well documented across the asexuality literature that a disinterest in sex can and has been regarded as pathological and problematic. Asexuality researchers, including Cerankowski and Milks (2010), Chasin (2011), and Brotto and Yule (2010), draw attention to and make reference to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM 4 and DSM 5) published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) (APA, 1994; APA, 2000). In this manual, conditions such as HSDD and SAD are associated with experiencing a lack of sexual desire and a lack of sexual attraction. However, the lack or absence of desire must be accompanied by marked distress in order for it to be considered as a disorder (APA, 2000).

Much of the existing asexuality research provides those with an interest in asexuality with some scope to distance asexuality from pathology (Bogaert, 2004; Bogaert, 2006; Prause & Graham, 2007; Scherrer, 2008). This appears to be based on the critical distinction between asexuality and pathology as the presence or absence of distress. Prause and Graham (2007) identify that making this distinction is not straightforward because a diagnosis of HSDD (implying abnormality) may exacerbate concerns in an asexual individual, especially for those whose distress is due to conflicts with social expectations or concern that a sexual problem exists. Therefore, it could be said that the undiagnosed remain undisturbed and vice versa. A number of quantitative studies (see matrix) present evidence that challenges the speculation that asexuality should be classified as a sexual dysfunction of low desire, alongside evidence that denies distress amongst the asexual community (Brotto et al., 2010; Brotto & Yule, 2011; Yule; 2011; Brotto et al., 2015). Furthermore, Prause and Graham (2007) found that asexual individuals were not motivated by avoidance, thus providing evidence that they were unlikely to meet the criteria for SAD (Yule, 2011). Brotto et al. (2014) identify that one cannot rule out the possibility that some individuals who initially meet the criteria for a lifelong HSDD might subsequently be classified as asexual. Generally speaking, defining the parameters of

asexuality seems to require the researcher to understand the asexual experience and identity as one that is embraced in the absence of marked distress. However, when exploring distress amongst the asexual community it must be considered whether the distress is a cause or a consequence of the asexual identity.

The CA methodology that was used to guide an understanding of asexuality suggests that all studies should be included, regardless of quality. CA does not traditionally incorporate a full quality appraisal. However, part of presenting the findings from a body of literature should involve providing a sense of the methodological quality of the retrieved papers. It was therefore decided that a critique of the papers would be undertaken once they are selected. The following section discusses the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the included studies.

3.4.7 Quality appraisal

The methodological strengths and weaknesses of the included studies have been considered and documented in the matrix. Each study was examined for strengths and limitations and comments have been made taking into consideration the limitations already acknowledged by the authors of the studies. A general overview of the limitations and strengths is provided here.

All of the included studies have made a significant contribution to the development of asexuality research, with particular respect to furthering an understanding of asexuality. The transparency of study design and methodologies was evident across the studies. The primary issues with many of the studies were with respect to study recruitment. All studies appear to have recruited either partially (n=9) or fully (n=8) from the online community AVEN, although this is difficult to determine for certain as one of the recruitment strategies simply refers to recruitment from an 'online community' (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014). Furthermore, a number of studies recruit from AVEN, Craigslist, and the University subject pool (Yule et al., 2014a; Yule et al., 2014b; Brotto et al., 2015). As a result, it is unclear how many of the self-identified asexuals have come to the study through AVEN and how many have come from elsewhere. Hinderliter (2009) suggests that recruiting from AVEN is "unproblematic for qualitative research" (Hinderliter, 2009: 620). However, it cannot be ruled out that some participants who have engaged with an online asexual community may adopt the dominant discourse of that

community. Hence, in the case of AVEN “an asexual person is someone who has never felt sexual attraction” may be included into their own narrative to the exclusion of other hermeneutical aspects and understandings of the asexual experience. Hinderliter (2009) further suggests that quantitative research should be developed from samples without online recruiting as there is a difficulty obtaining an operational definition that is high in specificity and sensitivity.

The commonly cited definition for asexuality as an absence of sexual attraction, even if technically accurate, can be functionally problematic. For instance, it can be questioned how a person is able to determine what sexual attraction feels like if they have never felt sexual attraction before. Of note, a third of research participants in Brotto et al.’s (2010) study recalled their first sexual interests. The question of how they can recall their first sexual interests despite claiming to have a lifelong absence of sexual attraction needs to be addressed. This is compounded by evidence that a number of self-identified asexuals may not feel forms of sexual attraction, but do feel forms of non-sexual attraction (Scherrer, 2008; Carrigan, 2011; Pacho, 2012; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014). Therefore, assuming that all participants understand sexual attraction to mean the same thing, can result in the production of unreliable data (Hinderliter, 2009).

Brotto et al. (2010) provide unsolicited feedback from some of the research participants on the quantitative component of the mixed methods study, which explores relationship characteristics, the frequency of sexual behaviours, sexual difficulty and distress, psychopathology, interpersonal functioning, and alexithymia. Participants identified that the questionnaires were more appropriate for individuals who experience sexual attraction and were therefore less relevant for some participants. Based on this feedback, it could be suggested that all studies using similar measures designed for use with people who embrace a sexual identity may not be appropriate. Finally, if most of the recruitment to this body of literature has come through AVEN or another online community then this potentially omits a sample of individuals who do not have internet and/or do not engage with online communities. As a result, the full diversity of the asexual community may remain unknown.

3.4.8 Critique of the CA methodology

One of the criticisms of CA frameworks is that they have been used in the absence of any critique (Beckwith et al., 2008). This gives the impression that previous applications of frameworks have been relatively straightforward and without challenge. The process of CA in this study has identified that the idea of concept maturity, as a prerequisite for analysis, is difficult to interpret. Morse et al. (1996b) refer to concept maturity as a point in time when a concept has been well-developed or is clearly defined, with the definitions being relatively consistent or coherent.

According to Morse et al. (1996b), a concept must be mature before it can be operationalised and definable (Morse et al., 1996b). As asexuality has been ambiguously defined, and a cohesive definition seems to be lacking, the term itself may be too immature to undergo an effective CA. Despite this, the characteristics, preconditions, and boundaries described in the existing literature enabled the compilation of an asexuality matrix – and this process has facilitated a fuller understanding of the asexual experience from attributes through to outcomes, specifically in relation to the qualitative studies.

Beckwith et al. (2008) question the idea of concept maturity and the process of CA evaluation. More specifically, they query how it can ever be determined when a concept is mature and whether there can ever be a criterion to demonstrate concept maturity, especially given that concepts are thought to mature over time. Research begins a process of understanding and findings from studies become integrated through time to assist with the process of generating new approaches for furthering understanding. Concepts may therefore mature over time as knowledge and understanding develops. It makes sense that a concept will continue to mature and may never reach full concept maturity. Synthesising data across the body of empirical work on asexuality into a matrix and engaging in a process of identifying the characteristics, processes, and outcomes of asexuality was complex. Bright et al.'s (2011) study facilitated a level of understanding of asexuality and encouraged a different consideration of asexuality, which a thematic analysis may have lacked. A closer look at the asexual journey and its outcomes was facilitated by this approach. However, at times there was an overlap in the data across processes and outcomes and decisions had to be made regarding which category the ambiguous data should belong to.

Whilst helpful in organising and analysing large amounts of data, at times the CA process required pragmatism and decision-making in the absence of a significant research other. Although it facilitated a process of teasing out many of the significant aspects of asexuality, it was time-consuming. The process did provide a partial appreciation of the further research work that is required on asexuality, specifically highlighting a need for further research on social processes of asexual self-identity. A thematic summary of the empirical work is therefore necessary alongside the CA process in order to fully appreciate the body of empirical work. The identification of boundaries and related constructs is relevant within the process and highlights to the researcher that there should be some way of accounting for areas where the subject area overlaps with other concepts, such as the overlap between HSDD and asexuality. The process has been useful at enabling a degree of analysis and the synthesis of data. At the beginning of the process, significant differences in definitions of asexuality were evident, but despite these, the CA process has facilitated the conceptual clarification of asexuality. Furthermore, it has assisted with sketching out the concept, provided a model to work with for my own research purposes, whilst illustrating how asexuality has been presented through the existing empirical work. Hence, the CA process facilitated an interrogation of the empirical literature in order to provide some clarification of the concept. The process also provided the opportunity to critique, analyse, synthesise, comprehend, and gain an overall understanding of the existing work, including its merits, strengths, and limitations.

3.5 Thematic synopsis of the qualitative research

In 2017 the initial search was updated in order to undertake a thematic synopsis of the qualitative literature on asexuality. The search was repeated and the same four electronic databases were searched for research studies of human asexuality. Again, no date restrictions were applied to the search. Advanced searches of published and unpublished work were conducted using the databases of Cinahl, Medline, Psych INFO, and Academic Search Premier The search terms were agreed upon as follows:

Subject Heading Search: sexual orientation or attitude to sexuality or sexual behaviour or sexual identity or sexual expression

Key Word Search: asexual*

A citation search was undertaken to capture papers or published and unpublished work that are not accessible through database searching. This was achieved using the citation lists of all the included work being reviewed.

3.5.1 Inclusion criteria

Papers and studies were included if they reported on qualitative research exploring the perspectives of people who self-identify as asexual. There was a specific interest in the narratives of self-identified asexuals, which provided details of what it means to identify as asexual, experiences of the process of embracing the identity, and experiences of being asexual in an everyday sense. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

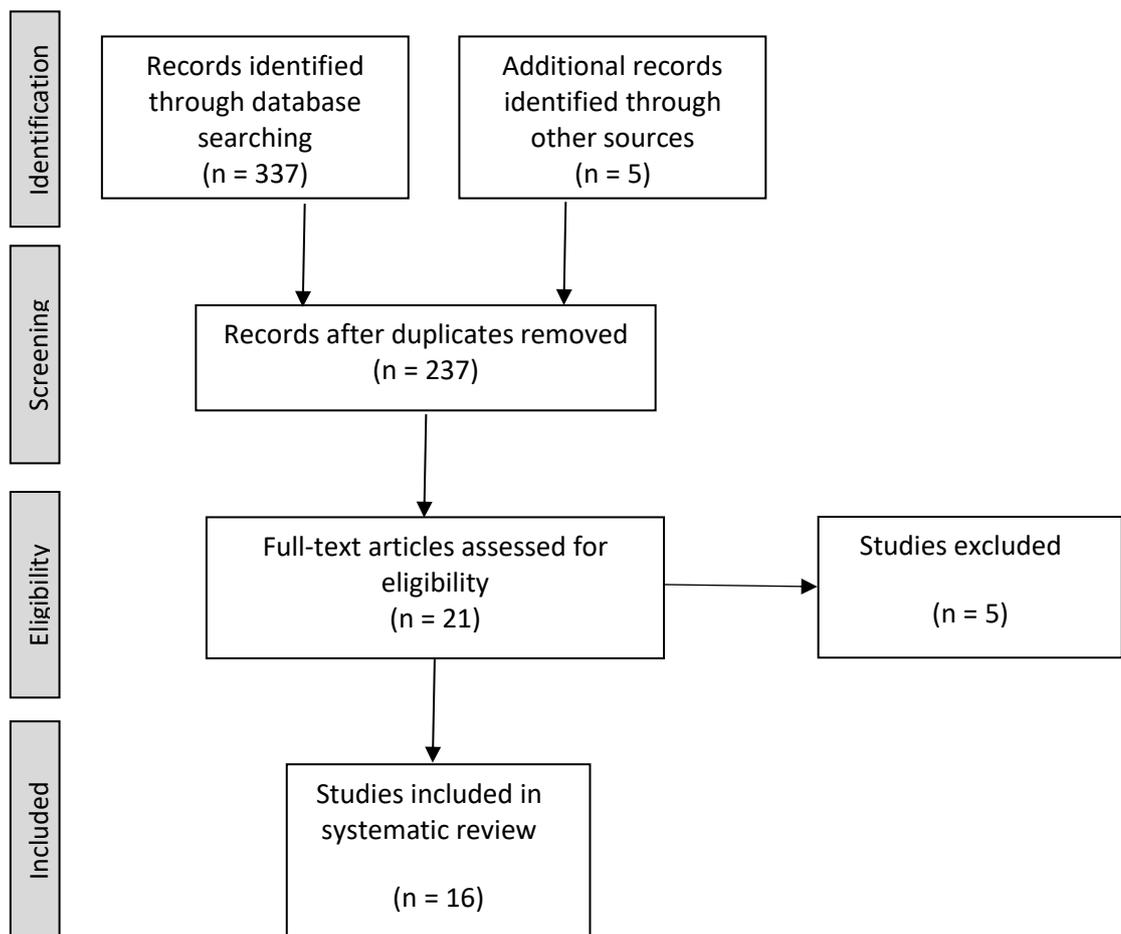
1. Any qualitative work that included narratives of self-identified asexuals and provided details of what it means to identify as asexual.
2. Any qualitative work that included narratives of self-identified asexuals and provided details of the experience of coming out to oneself or others.
3. Any qualitative work that included narratives of self-identified asexuals and provided details of the experience of 'being' asexual in an everyday sense.

The CA process provided some relative familiarity with the broader scope of asexuality scholarship and so this review was purely exploratory. All quantitative studies were excluded and, by doing so, some key pieces of scholarship may also have been excluded. However, there was a strong rationale for excluding this work given that this exercise was an endeavour to make sense of the qualitative (interview) data and to construct useful features of the asexual identity.

All papers meeting the criteria were included and the titles and abstracts of all retrieved papers were screened and reviewed for relevance and to assess whether they met the inclusion criteria. Full copies were obtained when papers appeared to fit the inclusion criteria and when relevance could not be determined by their title or abstract. These studies were reviewed to confirm or refute their eligibility for inclusion.

The PRISMA flowchart in below illustrates the process in more detail.

Figure 3.3: PRISMA flowchart (2)



A further five papers were found since the previous search. These are tabulated below.

Table 3.2: Additional studies for thematic synopsis.

Author(s)/Date	Title of study/publication
Galupo MP, Davis KS, Gryniewicz AL, Mitchell RC (2014).	Conceptualisation of sexual orientation identity among sexual minorities: Patterns across sexual and gender identity.
Sloan LJ (2015).	Ace of (BDSM) clubs: Building asexual relationships through BDSM practice.
Dawson M, McDonnell L, Robbins S (2016).	Negotiating the boundaries of intimacy: The personal lives of asexual people.
Robbins NK, Low KG, Query AN (2016).	A qualitative exploration of the coming out process for asexual individuals.
Fox J, Ralston R (2016).	Queer identity online: informal learning and teaching experiences of LGBTQ individuals on social media.

3.5.2 Process for thematic synthesis

The qualitative analysis of the interview data was guided by the work of Lofgren (2013) and the steps included the following:

- Reading all of the available interview data presented in the studies.
- Making notes about ‘first impressions’ and paying particular attention to the context of each study.
- Rereading the available interview data one by one and line by line.
- Labelling (coding) relevant pieces of data, including words, phrases, sentences, and sections.
 - Codes were applied to any words, ideas, and facts that occurred frequently within the data. An assumption was made that if a particular subject, word, or idea kept reoccurring then it was relevant within the asexuality discourse. Codes were also applied to anything that was linked to the idea that the concept of asexuality is associated with sex and sexuality, relationship formation, attraction, desire, behaviour, arousal, romance, friendship, and intimacy.
- Codes were read and reread, some codes were combined, and some initial codes were dropped.
- Categories (also known as themes) were created from codes, which were grouped together. At this stage, the data was conceptualised whilst every attempt was made to remain unbiased and open-minded.

- Categories were labelled and a decision was made regarding their relevance. Connections were also made between categories.
- The categories and their connections formed the main results of the analysis.

3.5.3 Results

A table of the included studies can be found in Appendix B. The body of literature used for this thematic synthesis comprised 16 papers based on 14 studies that were undertaken across four different countries (the US, UK, Canada, and Belgium) between 2007 and 2016. 624 asexuals were included, with sample sizes ranging between three and 169. Two studies used a mixed methods approach (Brotto et al. 2010; Prause & Graham, 2007), but only the qualitative data from both studies was included in the analysis. To summarise, six studies recruited entirely through AVEN and six recruited partially through AVEN alongside other environments, such as LGBT virtual and non-virtual communities and BDSM communities, social networking sites (Twitter, Tumblr, Huffington Post, and Facebook), and health and lifestyle related websites. Recruitment was also facilitated by a combination of AVEN and local press and local community centre advertising (n = 1). Two studies did not recruit through AVEN. Instead, they facilitated recruitment by advertising in public places using flyers. The qualitative analysis produced three themes that can be used to frame asexuality in a positive and normalising way, as well as to provide a greater understanding of asexuality, romantic differences coupled with sexual indifference, the validation of identity through engagement with asexual communities, and the diversity of sub-asexual identities. See below for the allocation of themes across the included studies.

Table 3.3: Allocation of papers to themes within the thematic synopsis

Theme 1: Romantic differences coupled with sexual indifference	Prause N, Graham CA (2007) Scherrer KS (2008) Brotto LA, Knudson G, Inskip J, Rhodes K, Erskine Y (2010) Haefner C (2011) Carrigan M (2011) Galupo MP, Davis KS, Gryniewicz AL, Mitchell RC (2014) Van Houdenhove E, Gijs L, T'Sjoen G, Enzin P (2015) Sloan LJ (2015)
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	Dawson M, McDonnell L, Scott S (2016)
Theme 2: Validation of identity through engagement with asexual communities	Scherrer KS (2008) Brotto LA, Knudson G, Inskip J, Rhodes K, Erskine Y (2010) Sundrud JL (2011) Carrigan M (2011) Pacho A (2012) MacNeela P, Murphy A (2014) Foster and Scherrer (2014) Van Houdenhove E, Gijs L, T'Sjoen G, Enzin P (2015) Fox J, Ralston R (2016) Dawson M, McDonnell L, Scott S (2016) Scott S, McDonnell L, Dawson M (2016) Robbins NK, Low KG, Query AN (2016)
Theme 3: A diversity of sub- asexual identities	Scherrer KS (2008) Brotto LA, Knudson G, Inskip J, Rhodes K, Erskine Y (2010) Sundrud JL (2011) Haefner C (2011) Carrigan M (2011) Pacho A (2012) Galupo MP, Davis KS, Gryniewicz AL, Mitchell RC (2014) MacNeela P, Murphy A (2014) Foster and Scherrer (2014) Van Houdenhove E, Gijs L, T'Sjoen G, Enzin P (2015) Scott S, McDonnell L, Dawson M (2016)

3.5.3.1 Romantic difference coupled with sexual indifference

This theme was evident across nine papers (nine studies). Asexuality can be characterised by its associations with both the sexual and non-sexual aspects of affiliation and relationship formation. Affectionate and emotional non-sexual expressions varied, which seemed to represent what has come to be known as the romantic dimension of asexuality. This dimension reflects a diversity of asexual identities, ranging from the aromantic, which is “completely void of feelings, not even a sensation, no romantic feelings whatsoever” (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015: 271), to the romantic. Data across a number of studies suggests that the experience of relationship formation can be categorised by a deep affectional and/or emotional awareness and expression, which for many asexuals

seems to facilitate relationships. This is not exclusively in the absence of sexual attraction, but in the presence of sexual indifference. Participants experience attraction in emotional and intellectual terms (Carrigan, 2011; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014). The appreciation of others in artistic and aesthetic ways is a feature of asexual relationships (Scherrer, 2008; Haefner, 2011; Pacho, 2012; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014). Desiring a different kind of closeness other than sexual also featured across the data (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015; Sloan, 2015). Loving the human form (Scherrer, 2008), and achieving happiness by simply spending time with and being close to another person (Brotto et al., 2010) was another key feature.

The frequency of which the data suggested that participants perceived their connections with others to be of almost a different emotional depth from sexual connections was enough for romantic differences, alongside sexual indifference, to be considered as key characteristics of asexuality. The romantic dimension is alluded to across a number of studies. Romantic attraction appears to exist on a continuum with people who experience almost no romantic feelings, to those who identify with a strong affectionate and loving narrative. Scherrer (2008) refers to the romantic and aromantic identity, MacNeela and Murphy (2014) refer to asexual biromantic and biaffectionate reference points in the asexual self-identity. Carrigan (2011) acknowledges the range of attitudes and orientations towards sex and romance, whereas Brotto et al. (2010) revealed three out of four participants experienced romantic attraction. The data indicates that the romantic dimension of relationship formation, and its differences existence on a romance continuum, should be rated as important as the sexual attraction/sexual desire dimension of asexuality.

Whilst a lack of sexual attraction features regularly across the commonly used definitions of asexuality, sexual indifference was a strong theme throughout the qualitative data on asexuality. Diary entries in one study (Dawson et al., 2016) reveal that sex was currently being practised by roughly a third of the research participants. This is reflective of findings from other studies, which assert that self-identified asexuals do engage in sexual activity. According to Dawson et al. (2016), it cannot be assumed that sex is unwillingly performed by asexual people and the sense of indifference is reflected in the following comments.

“It did not hurt me or anything but I just wasn’t interested”
(Dawson et al., 2016: 358).

“Sex is just not one of our ‘kinks’, Asexual people enjoy plenty of other things that fall under the umbrella of BDSM, but sex can be anywhere from uninteresting to disgusting” (Sloan, 2015: 555).

“This is just boring. So, it was like that’s the extent of it. It was just boring” (Prause & Graham, 2007: 345).

“Even though an asexual person might want to clean out the plumbing once in a while, they don’t have any interest in doing it with someone else” (Brotto et al. 2010: 611).

Data presented from Haefner (2011) and Sundrud (2011) captures a similar sense of indifference and lack of interest in sexual activity:

“I just assumed I was sexual for so long and so I pushed myself more and more in that direction because every time I had a physical experience with someone it wasn’t fulfilling and so I was just like, I need to try new things and find out what’s the next interesting thing” (Sundrud, 2011: 64).

3.5.3.2 The validation of identity through engagement with asexual communities

The validation of an asexual identity through engagement with asexual communities was evident in twelve papers (ten studies). Most of the studies in this review used data collected through AVEN. To be specific, six studies recruited wholly through AVEN, six recruited partially through AVEN, and one study used data gathered through AVEN forums. At first glance, AVEN promotes itself as a site for individuals who self-report a lack of sexual attraction. Though, there are additional aspects of the online community that allow for more than sexual attraction, or a lack of sexual attraction, to be the defining feature of the asexual experience. For instance, the ‘Learn More’ section on AVEN’s homepage states that: “there is considerable diversity among the asexual community, each asexual person experiences things like relationships, attraction, and arousal somewhat differently” (AVEN, 2008). Furthermore, the founder of AVEN, David Jay,

suggests that asexuality may just be a label that people use to understand themselves. Given AVEN's angle of promoting themselves as an online community for those demonstrating a wide-range of behavioural and emotional personal interactions, it could be speculated (and, to an extent, the data reflects this) that the asexual identity that is captured through AVEN reflects much more. The qualitative data suggests that AVEN and other online community forums appear to play a significant role in identity awareness, acceptance, and affirmation. Qualitative accounts from Brotto et al. (2010), Sundrud (2011), Carrigan (2011), Pacho (2013), MacNeela and Murphy (2014), Van Houdenhove et al. (2015), and Scott et al. (2016) provide insights into the process of identity formation for many asexuals. The stages illustrated in many of these accounts appear to reflect those typically occurring in adolescence or early adulthood during the coming out process for LGBT identities. In addition, the significance of the discovery of an asexual community in terms of shaping and validating the asexual identity is found in a number of narratives, specifically from Scherrer (2008), Brotto et al. (2010), Carrigan (2011), Sundrud (2011) and Robbins et al. (2016). Theorists such as Cass (1979) and Coleman (1982) use identity models to reflect the process of identity development. Broadly speaking, most models illustrate a pattern of confusion, comparison (with others), tolerance, acceptance, and identity pride. Data from Foster and Scherer (2014) suggests that asexuals use AVEN as an educational tool for teaching non-asexuals about asexuality. Whether the experience of self-identifying was positive or not, the data suggests that online communities like AVEN are central to strengthening the identity. AVEN appears to have assisted previously confused and anxious asexuals (Scherrer, 2008). AVEN appears to have had a role in the development of personal freedom and confidence (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014). In addition to this, AVEN seems to foster a feeling of belonging (Carrigan, 2011), and relief (Robbins et al., 2016). The increasing popularity of AVEN and other asexual online communities has provided a space for asexuals to self-express and share affiliations based on shared values and beliefs. According to Fox and Ralston (2016), this has been particularly important for asexuals as asexuality is rarely portrayed in the media.

3.5.3.3 A diversity of subidentities

The diversity of sub-asexual identities was alluded to in eleven papers (ten studies). Synthesis of the data in this body of literature suggests that the number and variety of sub-identities within asexuality are significant. Attitudes towards, and engagement in

romantic relationships and sexual intercourse, were considerably varied across the data. As Brotto et al. (2010) highlight, there is not one prototype. Diversity in sexual behaviour (Prause & Graham, 2007; Carrigan, 2011; Scherrer, 2008; Galupo et al., 2016; Dawson et al., 2016; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and romantic attraction and affectionate attachments (Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Pacho, 2013; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014; Sloan, 2015) were illustrated through multiple qualitative accounts. Furthermore, asexuality can be, and is, regularly sub-categorised (Carrigan, 2011; Sundrud, 2011). Most studies summarised this diversity by commenting on the heterogeneity of the asexual community (Brotto et al., 2010), the variation and complexity of sub-identities (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014), the diversity evident in the asexual narratives (Prause & Graham, 2007), and the range of attitudes towards romance (Scherrer, 2008; Carrigan, 2011; Scott et al., 2016). The diversity of asexuality is reflected in the range of relationship preferences, from compassionate enduring relationships to preferences for the aromantic or any other position across the spectrum (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014).

This qualitative analysis presents three significant features of the asexual identity based on the interview data. These features have been presented in order to develop some understanding of asexuality before entering the field to commence data collection. The analysis suggests that, for those who embrace an asexual identity, romantic differences coupled with sexual indifference, validation of identity through engagement with asexual communities, and a diversity of sub-identities are strong features of that identity.

3.6 Conclusion and foreshadow questions

The process of searching and selecting a body of empirical work, undertaking a CA of asexuality, and providing a thematic summary of the empirical work on asexuality was designed specifically to answer some important questions:

- 1) How is asexuality presented through the existing empirical work?
- 2) Is asexual self-identity an important enough issue to justify a research study being undertaken?
- 3) Does a comprehensive understanding of the process of self-identifying as asexual already exist?

The presentation of the CA on asexuality has provided some insights into the primary patterns of identity development as depicted through existing research. The process has highlighted an area for further research – specifically around the social processes of identity development. In addition, some relevant aspects of the identity have emerged. The attributes of asexual self-identity and the outcome of self-identity are outlined through this model. There is an overall lack of detail about how the social environment impacts upon individuals as they negotiate a sexualised world and it would seem that a deeper understanding of the process is required. Despite the development of a model of asexual self-identity, asexuality remains an important issue to study.

The CA process has illustrated the complexities involved with defining the concept of asexuality and defining its parameters. Multiple definitions have been used across the existing body of asexuality research and the parameters of asexuality overlap with pathology, thus indicating that asexuality as a concept may not have reached what Morse et al. (2006b) refer to as sufficient maturity. Despite this conclusion, the CA process and the thematic synopsis presented here have been useful in enabling a degree of analysis and the synthesis of data. Whilst significant differences in definitions of asexuality continue to be a feature of asexuality research, the CA process has facilitated a conceptual clarification of asexuality and has assisted with sketching out the concept, thus providing a model for research purposes and the identification of areas for future research. Of note here is that AVEN has been a key source of research participants for many of the studies. However, as identified in earlier sections of this work, there are some

limitations associated with recruiting solely through AVEN. Therefore, it would be advantageous to access a more representative sample of asexuals beyond AVEN. To summarise, the gaps in the literature are detailed below.

3.6.1 Definitions of asexuality

There are gaps in the literature concerning how asexuals define themselves, and how they prefer to be defined by others. It seems as though current definitions of sexual attraction and desire do not specifically capture the main features of asexuality, including its diversity, its validity as non-pathological, and its focus on the romantic dimensions of relationship formation. It would be useful to know the key features that asexuals feel represent them and their asexuality, especially as many asexuals seem to define themselves according to AVEN's definition. This would help to provide the non-asexual community with an insight into asexuality based on the perspectives and interpretations of asexuals themselves. Therefore, a key area of exploration should focus on how asexuals define themselves and their identity.

3.6.2 Pathology and distress

Prause and Graham (2007) view asexuality as defined by a lifelong absence of sexual attraction was a consequence of depression. Brotto et al. (2010) found no significant levels of depression and alexithymia amongst the asexual community. In comparison, Yule et al. (2013) found a higher rate of depression and interpersonal problems in self-identified asexuals. The essential areas of exploration therefore should focus on the concepts of wellbeing and asexual identity. For those who identify as asexual and do experience distress, it might be helpful to establish whether they identify their distress (or any other psychopathologies referred to across the research) as a cause or consequence of their asexual identity.

3.6.3 The romantic dimension of asexuality

With a number of studies suggesting that romance appears to be more of a defining feature of asexuality, the concept of romantic attraction within asexual relationships may benefit from further exploration. For example, how romantic attraction can be distinguished from close friendship and how this works for asexuals who are trying to negotiate the non-asexual world. Broadly speaking, in the non-asexual world romance seems to garner less attention and appears less significant in relationships than sexual

intercourse. If romance and its mechanisms in terms of how it becomes a key feature of an asexual relationship, can be understood in detail, then romance may be offered a greater appreciation in a broader context.

3.6.4 Discrepant levels of interest in sexual behaviour

Whilst the CA process has highlighted immense diversity within the experiences of those who identify as asexual, it is worth noting that, in one study, asexuals had levels of sexual behaviour similar to non-asexuals. Discrepant levels of interest in sexual behaviour can be problematic for all couples and, therefore, an exploration of how asexuals negotiate and experience discrepant levels of sexual behaviour is worthwhile. This might illustrate the complexities associated with understanding asexuality as well as other relationship configurations.

3.6.5 The role of AVEN

AVEN features strongly in the development of asexual self-identity. The differences between the formation of the asexual identity for those who are part of the AVEN community and those who are not may be another area for exploration. Yule et al.'s (2013) finding that asexuals who lack sexual attraction but have never heard of asexuality are more isolated, distressed, or confused than those who belong to an asexual community was significant. Exploring the use of different resources, and how they relate to identity development, may be insightful, particularly for individuals who do not have access to online asexual communities.

3.6.6 Asexuals in healthcare settings

The conceptualisation of asexuality by non-asexuals has important implications for how asexual individuals are treated by others, including healthcare professionals. It is therefore important to gain an understanding of how asexuals negotiate and experience their asexuality in the context of healthcare. These findings may assist asexuals to have their identity acknowledged in healthcare settings. In addition, they could provide healthcare professionals with cultural competence in the context of asexuality.

3.6.7 Research aims and objectives

In order to address the six areas identified above, based on the gaps in the existing research, an overarching research question has been developed:

What are the social processes involved in constructing an asexual identity?

This can be further divided into a number of specific research objectives:

- To establish how asexuals define their asexual identity.
- To understand the processes that inform the construction of the identity.
- To understand how embracing the identity impacts upon relationships with others.
- To understand how embracing the identity impacts upon health and wellbeing.

The following chapter will describe the design and methodology that will be implemented to address the research question.

Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the design and methodology that will be implemented in order to address the research question. It will begin with a justification of the chosen method of research for the study of asexuality. The selection of a social constructionist (referred to from this point onwards as constructivist) approach will be discussed. Consideration is given to the ontological and epistemological tensions within sexuality research, particularly the issue of sexual orientation and whether it is essential in nature or whether sexual encounters are social and learned interactions. A framework for the study of asexuality is outlined and consideration is given to the debates surrounding strong and weak constructivist approaches in the methodology.

Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) is presented as an appropriate approach to facilitate an understanding of the social process that inform the development of an asexual identity. Furthermore, a justification of the GT approach is provided. Finally, the importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research is explained. At the core of this chapter is a justification of the form of knowledge chosen to shape this study on asexuality.

4.2 Research rationale: aims and objectives

The study on asexuality has a broad research goal and focus, with an overarching research objective of developing an understanding of the social processes involved in constructing an asexual identity. The term social processes represents the ways in which individuals and groups, interact, adjust and readjust and establish relationships and patterns of behaviour through their interaction. At the heart of this work is a drive to uncover and provide an understanding of the processes that lead to an individual identifying as asexual as well as the method considered most appropriate to enable an exploration of a complex social situation. As a case in point, a qualitative approach is most suitable for developing an understanding of asexuality. Not only is there a need to explore the construction of the identity, there is also a need to understand the deep and perhaps hidden structures that inform the process of identity development. A qualitative research design will enable a consideration of the existence of the structures and the way in which they contribute to the development of this identity. A comprehensive review of the empirical work

highlights the complexity of asexuality, which leads to the conclusion that a qualitative research method must be used in order to achieve the objective of understanding social processes. The exploratory nature of this approach will take into account external influences and their subjective importance on identity development.

Fink (2000) proposes an alternative to the traditional positivist paradigm in order to encompass the idea of truth in society. This other paradigm, which facilitates a study of the lived world instead of objective reality, is described using words such as post-positivistic, phenomenological, post-modern, and interpretative. This paradigm includes the study of the lived world and the individual experiences of human beings (Fink, 2000). Fink (2000) claims that the significance of qualitative research is that it is unified by the question 'why?' Hence, it is important to acknowledge that the simultaneous questioning of why is one that can only be facilitated by an exploratory and, therefore, qualitative approach. A qualitative approach will present a more holistic discourse of asexuality, which is applicable to the everyday lived experiences of individuals who are placed into the misunderstood asexual category. At the root of this research is a commitment to widening the lens through which asexuality is understood and experienced. According to Creswell et al. (2007), qualitative questions are evolving. Initial iterations tend to be tentative and exploratory, thus facilitating an articulation of the primary focus of the study (Agee, 2009). In this study there is a requirement to address some of the narrower questions that initially emerged from the literature review and concept analysis. The gaps in the literature gave rise to a set of initial research questions, which pertain to the following issues:

- How asexuals define themselves.
- How they would like to be defined.
- The mechanisms behind the construction of an asexual identity.
- How asexuality is managed and experienced within the context of emotional and affectionate relationships.
- The role that identity plays in contributing to and impeding the overall health and wellbeing of self-identified asexuals.
- How discrepant levels of sexual behaviours are negotiated within relationships.

- How asexuality is embraced in healthcare settings by practitioners and professionals.

4.3 Philosophical Framework

When using a qualitative approach, a researcher must take account of their own ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions about the nature of reality. This includes certain aspects of the social world and epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). The researcher should be aware of and should be prepared to explain how their chosen methodologies have been derived from these assumptions.

Krauss (2005) states that philosophical assumptions about reality are crucial to understanding the overall perspective for designing and undertaking research. A paradigm is defined as a set of assumptions that provide the philosophical and conceptual guidelines for an investigation of natural and social phenomena (Cook & Reichardt, 1979). The term refers to the set of ideas and beliefs brought to a research study by the researcher, which could be in relation to society and how it operates or about the world. Beliefs that have been acquired as a result of values and experiences, and interests and wider aims in life have the capacity to shape and fashion every aspect of research without the researcher necessarily realising. Each research paradigm, ranging from naturalistic qualitative perspectives to scientific positivist approaches, has its own view of reality. Each paradigm has its own view of the nature of the phenomena to be studied (ontological), its own view of the role of the researcher (epistemological), and its own view of how knowledge is obtained (methodological) (Al-Saadi, 2014). According to Guba (1990), research paradigms can be characterised by ontology, which asks about the nature of reality; epistemology, the general assumptions that are made about the nature of knowledge; and methodology, the processes used to uncover knowledge. Each one of these is explored in the following sections.

4.3.1 Ontology

Ontology is concerned with the nature of being, becoming, existence, and reality (Al-Saadi, 2014). Marsh and Stoker (2010) summarise that ontology is concerned with what we know about the world. Ontological assumptions are the assumptions one makes

about the nature of reality and the world. The world is experienced individually and from a unique perspective. As individuals, each of us experiences a different reality (Krauss, 2005).

Qualitative researchers are said to embrace an ontology that “denies the existence of a reality that exists outside and independent of our interpretations of it” (Searle, 1995: 154). The nature of reality from an ontological perspective is that it is multiple and so, in essence, there are no inherent features of reality (Berger & Luckman, 1991). According to Berger and Luckman (1991), social construction theory makes no ontological claims, thus confining itself to the social construction of knowledge. Ontology therefore confines itself to making epistemological claims only (Andrews, 2012). As such, qualitative researchers acknowledge the individuality of participants’ interpretations of reality. These individual interpretations are said to be embedded within an individual context, the context of the research participant and the interpreter of the data. They cannot be separated and generalised with respect to an entire population. Qualitative inquiry assumes that reality is socially constructed by every unique person based on their individual and unique contextual interpretations. Qualitative researchers maintain that knowledge emerges from achieving a deep understanding of the data and the context within which it is embedded. Kraus (2005) identifies that methods that attempt to aggregate across individuals are at odds with a qualitative paradigm, on the grounds that each individual is unique. Maintaining an internal perspective of the nature of reality in turn affects how the researcher gains knowledge of their reality and how they construct meaning from it.

Berger and Luckman (1991) propose that social construction theory makes no ontological claims. Krauss (2005) states that qualitative research is generally based on a relativistic constructivist ontology, which posits that there is no objective reality but multiple realities constructed by human beings who experience a phenomenon of interest. Davis (1995) supports this notion using phenomenology as an example, by proposing that meaning is always in the subject and not the object. Objective understanding is impossible. However, according to Davis (1995), we can attempt to understand objects as they are initially experienced before our cultural filters have altered the meaning.

Qualitative research tends to be based on a relativist constructivist ontology, which posits that that reality is subjective and represents multiple mental constructions, ethereal in nature, in so much as they cannot be seen or touched. The social construction of reality does not mean that reality is not real (Crotty, 1998). Berger and Luckman (1991) would say that it exists by consensus, and is accepted and agreed that it is what it is. Given the intention of this study to consider sexuality as a social and historical construct, an ontological stance based on a constructivist notion of reality is proposed.

Berger and Luckman (1991) claim that reality is socially constructed. With respect to the ontological stance of a constructivist notion of reality, this thesis proposes that individuals and groups interacting as part of a social system, make intangible mental representations of each other's actions (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). These concepts become accustomed into reciprocal roles, which are played out by members of society like actors as they interact with each other. As the roles are made available to others to act out, reciprocal interactions are said to become institutionalised. The meanings of the interactions become embedded into society and become societal realities (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). With respect to the ontological stance of a constructivist notion of sexuality, Berger and Luckman (1991) posit that sexuality presents clear evidence of the flexibility of human organisms in terms of moulding themselves into a given environment. In support of this suggestion, Berger and Luckman (1991), provide ethnological evidence to demonstrate this point. The assertion being that, although it may appear that one's sexual behaviour naturally corresponds to some particular attitude or behaviour in terms of sexual orientation, this idea becomes less credible and less acceptable when examining cross-cultural and anthropological evidence. According to Hammack (2005), a good example of the variation between sexual behaviour and behaviour as defined by sexual orientation is amongst the Sambia of Papua New Guinea. Adolescent males take part in an initiation ritual where they perform oral sex on young adult men, believing this act is necessary for fertility. One could therefore posit that there is a distinct period in the life of the males in which homosexual behaviour occurs (Hammack, 2005). However, Sambian men go on to form heterosexual relationships in adulthood and homosexuality is not frequently encountered (Hammack, 2005). This anthropological evidence supports a constructivist perspective where the bodily processes that underlie, sexuality, sexual orientation, and

sexual behaviour can be considered as biological, but the expression of these processes or their direction is socially mediated and changes over time.

4.3.2 Epistemology

Krauss (2005) proposes that epistemology is said to pose questions about the relationship between the knower and what is known. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state that epistemology asks “how do I know the world?” and “What is the relationship between the enquirer and the known?” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 157). On a personal level, however, a more helpful definition of epistemology is one provided by Auerswald (1985), which is that epistemology is “a set of imminent rules used in thought by large groups of people to define reality” (Auerswald, 1985: 1).

Krauss (2005) suggests that qualitative researchers operate under different epistemological assumptions. To clarify, according to Burrell and Morgan (1979) epistemological assumptions are based on views about knowledge, how it can be derived, and how truth is determined. Burrell and Morgan (1979) assert that truth and fallacy assume a certain epistemological stance. Epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge determine extreme positions on the issue of whether knowledge is objectively acquired or whether it has to be personally experienced (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Using Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) research as an example, it would appear that the opinions held by the researcher in relation to the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired will determine how the researcher conducts their own investigation. Therefore, it is fair to say that this basic belief system about what constitutes knowledge and truth and what rules we use to define our reality guides the investigation and ultimately the meaning which emerges from that investigation.

Social construction theory considers knowledge to be constructed rather than created (Andrews, 2012). Berger and Luckman (1991) are concerned with the nature and construction of knowledge and its significance for society and they consider knowledge to be a product of the interactions between individuals in society. Berger and Luckman (1991) maintain that conversation is the most important means of maintaining, altering, and reconstructing subjective reality. Social construction theory proposes that each person’s interpretation or construction is as true as any other persons so long as it works within a particular context. Using social construction to explore asexuality means that all

asexual stories are equally valid and that no single truth or interpretation exists because truth is subjectively perceived.

This has not always been the case, as beliefs about knowledge and its acquisition have changed over time. This is evident in the work of Foucault (1979) in HS1, particularly where he engages in a debate about how knowledge has been derived about sexuality. Social construction stems from an epistemological position as opposed to an explanatory theory. Foucault adopts a constructivist epistemology in HS1 to present compelling evidence for the sociological influence upon the development of sexuality. Foucault (1979) rejects the positivist philosophical theory that sexual orientation, sexual desire and sexual behaviour are natural and stable mechanisms. Instead, he uses HS1 to demonstrate how the positivist movement (led by the views of the sexologists and psychologists) purported a fundamentalism and naturalism of sex. According to Foucault (1979), biological constructions of sexuality and the subsequent reinforcement of heterosexual norms were instrumental in organising sexual behaviours into categories of normal and abnormal. Foucault uses a constructivist epistemology to demonstrate that all things sexual are a product of social conditioning and/or social construction as opposed to biological factors. Furthermore, he uses HS1 as a way of illustrating how the epistemological assumptions of positivism informed and configured sexuality and silenced anything suggestive of an alternative to heterosexuality.

Epistemological enquiry explores the nature and origin of knowledge and epistemologists are concerned with how what we take to be knowledge is justified (Phillips, 2007). Epistemological classifications in the study of sexual orientation could be considered as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and asexual. Our knowledge of sexual orientation therefore leads us to assume that people can be slotted into any one of these four classifications. According to Phillips (2007), the epistemological question regarding sexual orientation would concern “how we can determine which people fit into the categories?” A constructivist epistemological approach would be one that embraces the relevance of social and cultural contexts as mechanisms for determining which people fit into the categories. Take behaviour, or a certain type of behaviour (unruliness), as an example. The existence of a theory to explain unruly behaviour provides some indication as to why unruly behaviour exists. Unruly behaviour may be explained as a result of an accumulation of social variables. Social construction theory will say that the unruly

behaviour is a social construct. A constructivist epistemology would focus on the way in which unruly behaviour is known or perceived, what that behaviour means, and the meaning that can be derived from it. Social construction theory will explore the interplay between the cultural, the social, language, and discursive and symbolic practice. In other words, the epistemological position is that social and cultural contexts are mechanisms that construct the manner in which a person perceives, or makes sense of unruly behaviour.

4.4 Methodology

Now that the research question, objectives, and the broad framework have been identified, an outline of the methodology is required. This is the strategy that will be used to reach a set of conclusions.

Qualitative studies can be characterised by their aims to explore the depth, richness, and complexity of data (Green & Thorogood, 2010). Qualitative enquiry is a method that lends itself to understanding more about a phenomenon. In regards to qualitative enquiries, initial curiosities determining research often emerge from real-world observations (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Qualitative research is said to offer the potential for describing complex social situations as it attempts to develop meaning from social phenomena (Hayhoe & Conklin, 2011). Key characteristics of qualitative researchers are as follows:

1. Seeing the research endeavour as a pluralistic and an exploratory exercise that brings to light the result of a meaning making process.
2. Embracing the involvement of both the researcher and research participants.
3. Not seeking unilateral answers.

(Hayhoe & Conklin, 2011: 9).

The insights gained throughout the qualitative process can guide understanding and aid in the process of theory development. The logic underpinning qualitative research is that there is no single reality because reality is based on individual perceptions. Hence, what we know has meaning only within a given context and time (Burns & Grove, 2001). What follows is an outline of the methods of generating data based on qualitative research approaches.

4.4.1 Sampling

Sampling is the process of selecting research participants for the purpose of a study. This section outlines different sampling techniques in qualitative research. With respect to sampling, one of the key features based on the philosophy of qualitative research is that sampling does not demand a representative sample in the way that quantitative research does. In terms of answering questions of a complex nature, understanding phenomena, and the fact that its basis lies in “epistemological assumption” (Yilmaz, 2013: 1), the nature of qualitative research negates the need to generalise results back to the entire population (Marshall, 1996). Qualitative enquiry is an enquiry based on exploration and interpretation. It accepts the researcher’s own interpretations, the socially constructed value-laden dynamic of reality, and the fact that these elements are woven into an analysis and its findings. The uniqueness of such findings, which are borne from the co-construction of meaning, ensure that qualitative research delivers a deeper understanding of a phenomena, in a focused locality in a particular context. Its endeavour is not statistical generalisation. Therefore, a representative sample is not a pre-requisite. Sample selection has a significant impact on research quality (Coyne, 1997). Probability sampling is the process of selecting a population that have characteristics which are thought to represent wider society, thus enabling generalisations to be made from a smaller population of the whole population (Higginbottom, 2004). Qualitative research mainly uses non-probability techniques (Murphy et al., 1998) and does not involve random selection, which means that samples selected using this method cannot depend on the rationale behind the probability theory (Trochim, 2006). Non-probability sampling methods can be divided into two broad types: accidental or purposive. Though, most sampling methods are purposive, the researcher normally approaching sampling with a strategy in mind (Trochim, 2006).

Purposive sampling (also known as selective sampling) is said to be a practical necessity, which will inevitably be impacted upon by such things as time and limited by the researcher’s framework and developing interests (Schatzman & Strauss, 1972). The researcher’s aim in this case would be to select cases that they feel confident would provide in-depth and rich stories to maximise the potential for learning about central issues (Coyne, 1997). As the study progresses, however, new categories may be discovered (Schatzman & Strauss, 1972). This may lead to further sampling by the

researcher in their specific area of interest. Coyne (1997) suggests that this step into sampling, which is based on an exploration of a particular emerging area of interest, is very similar to the process of theoretical sampling. It is defined as “seeking pertinent data to develop an emerging theory” (Charmaz, 2012: 96). This technique is used in grounded theory methods. It is a flexible approach to data collection whereby the researcher simultaneously collects, codes, and analyses data, to decide which data to collect next (Coyne, 1997). Purposive sampling is necessary given that the goal of this study is to explore the experiences of asexual self-identity. Nonetheless, by considering the way in which asexuality has been identified as being complexly and variably lived, a flexible approach to data collection will allow for the exploration of specific dimensions of asexuality. These dimensions emerge as the study progresses and allow for the search and collection of more pertinent data in order to develop the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2006).

4.4.2 Data generation

Qualitative research data can be generated through interviews, observational methods, documentary sources, and questionnaires. The decision concerning which data generation method to use will derive from the needs of the study (Green & Thorogood, 2009). However, there are a lot of factors to be considered alongside this, including the experience of the researcher, the accessibility of the participants, and the timescales of the research project. Underserved groups or research questions exploring sensitive issues may require imaginative methods of data collection (Green & Thorogood, 2009). At the planning stage, it is important that a researcher considers how the data will answer the research question, and whether the data collection method will provide the most appropriate kind of data to facilitate an understanding of the phenomenon (Green & Thorogood, 2009). The most commonly used methods in qualitative enquiry are interviews (individual or group) (Gill et al., 2008). Though, it is important to begin by providing a brief outline of the other methods of generating data in qualitative research. What follows is an outline of observational, documentary, and interview research methods.

Observational research methods: As the name suggests, this is a method where the researcher gathers data about the daily life of a group or a setting through observation (Murphy et al., 1998). The key characteristic of this type of study is that the researcher

does not intervene, at least not deliberately (Green & Thorogood, 2009). These methods can be divided into participant methods (where the researcher is present in the setting) and non-participant methods (where the researcher observes the setting). Participant method observations allow the researcher to hide their true identity and fully participate in the situation or to declare their identity and simply observe the situation. Most qualitative researchers adopt a position that lies between the two, they declare their identity and position, and participate in the situation. The choice the researcher makes in terms of their identity will have a significant impact on the data generated (Murphy et al., 1998). The observational approach can provide a greater understanding of a phenomenon when compared to relying on other people's accounts. The researchers have direct access to what people do and say in a particular setting. In other words, they have access to the "mundane and unremarkable features of everyday life" (Green & Thorogood, 2009: 148). They are often cited as the gold standard of qualitative methods as they allow researchers to get closer to the essential truth (Green & Thorogood, 2009). The challenges of undertaking participant observational studies include gaining entry to the research setting, gaining the trust of research participants, and recognising the impact that being observed may have upon their behaviour.

Documentary sources: Existing documents can provide an efficient source of information for undertaking qualitative research. These include public records, private documents, research publications, archived research data, and mass media sources (Green & Thorogood, 2009). Organisational and institutional documents are regularly used in qualitative research (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis is commonly used alongside other methods. The rationale for its use includes its role in methodological and data triangulation. Bowen (2009) suggests that it has immense value in case study research and is useful as a stand-alone method for specialised forms of qualitative research. A document and textual analysis can provide data on the context of the research, suggest questions that need to be asked in the research situation, provide supplementary research data, provide a means for tracking change and development, (Bowen, 2009). The advantages of this method include time and efficiency in terms of the ability to access information quickly, availability, and cost-effectiveness. Its disadvantages include insufficient detail, low retrievability, and bias selectivity (Bowen, 2009).

Interview: The interview is a method of data collection that involves an interviewer asking a respondent questions (Polit & Beck, 2010). It can be undertaken on a one-to-one basis (between one researcher and a participant) or on the basis of group interviews or focus group interviews (between one researcher and a number of participants). Interviews are most appropriate when little is known about the phenomenon under investigation and where detailed insights are required from individual participants (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). An in-depth interview allows the interviewee to develop their own accounts of the important issues to be explored (Green & Thorogood, 2009). Interviews can be categorised as structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. Structured interviews are usually undertaken using a questionnaire and only allow for a limited response from the participants. They tend to be guided by a strict question-based schedule and this approach does not allow for detailed accounts of a phenomena to emerge. This type of interview may be more suited to an exploration of a situation that requires specific responses. A group interview/focus group interview typically include between six and ten research participants (Burns & Grove, 2001). It provides an effective way of collecting data about participants' perceptions on a focused area and should be conducted in a non-threatening setting (Green & Thorogood, 2009). One of the assumptions underlying this type of interview is that the group dynamic will assist the participants to express their views in ways that a one-to-one interview is unable to facilitate (Burns & Grove, 2001). Whilst focus groups are said to be a natural means of data collection, Morgan (1995) suggests that participants will not discuss sensitive topics in focus groups and, in cases where topics are of a sensitive nature, the researcher must create a safe atmosphere and environment for self-disclosure. It is for this reason that group interviews are an unsuitable method of generating data for a study aimed at exploring asexuality. In addition, asexuality research, with a drive to seek and explore meaning and gain a better understanding of self-identity, may be more suited to interview techniques that are less-structured and standardised. According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), qualitative interviews should contribute to a body of knowledge that is conceptual, theoretical, and based on the meaning that life experiences hold for the interviewees. The table below highlights the key features of semi-structured and unstructured interviews as identified by DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) and Whiting (2008).

Table 4.1 Key features of semi-structured and unstructured interviews

Key features of semi-structured and unstructured interviews	
Semi-structured interviews	Unstructured interviews
Scheduled in advance at a designated time	Guided conversations
Location normally outside everyday events	Originate from ethnographic and anthological positions
Organised around a set of pre-determined questions	Key informants are selected
Other questions emerge from the dialogue	Interviewer elicits information about the meaning of behaviour, interactions, artefacts and rituals with questions emerging as the investigator learns about the setting
Usually last from 30 minutes to several hours	

With regards to semi-structured interviews, the researcher is said to set the agenda in terms of the topics covered (Green & Thorogood, 2009). Given that this study is driven by a research aim and a set of objectives, there is a necessity to use a set of pre-determined questions for the interview process along with the flexibility of having the possibility of other questions emerging from the dialogue between the researcher and participant. In consideration of the above, a semi-structured in-depth interview approach is considered to be the most suitable method of generating data in order to address the research objectives.

4.4.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity in qualitative research refers to researchers engaging in an explicit self-aware meta-analysis (Finlay, 2002). The researcher needs to consider their starting points, standing points, their views, and their positions in society to understand how these could shape the interpretation of the data. The process facilitates and encourages researchers to embrace and, to an extent, attempt to understand the ways in which their “subjectivity becomes entangled in the lives of others” (Denzin, 1997: 27). Subjective meanings and subjective perceptions are crucial to qualitative research in order to ensure rigour and trustworthiness. Reflexivity is also said to be a valuable tool in the construction of knowledge and meaning. Clancy (2013) identifies reflexivity as an active process that may occasionally be difficult and probing, but which is crucial to becoming self-aware. According to Clancy (2013), during the reflexive process the researcher is able to see any influences that could affect his or her data collection or analysis. This will increase understanding and allow for a more rigorous research approach. The reflexive agenda in the social sciences is said to provide more clarity of the processed informing knowledge construction, resulting in a greater understanding (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

4.4.4 Ethical rigour

Ethical rigour starts with the identification of the research topic and continues throughout the study. The conduct of research requires expertise and diligence, honesty and integrity (Burns & Grove, 2001). Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that they recognise and protect the rights and wellbeing of research participants, and codes of practice such as the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2008), provide guidelines that reinforce the principles of human rights and ethics.

The Declaration of Helsinki, is one of the most significant documents on medical ethics. This was adopted by the World Medical Association (WMA) at the 18th General Assembly in Helsinki in June 1964. The latest version was adopted by the 59th World Medical Association General Assembly in 2008 and the most current version has 35 principles guiding medical research involving human subjects. Whilst this study of asexuality is not medical research, it falls into the category of non-therapeutic research, the Declaration of Helsinki is an appropriate framework to use. It illustrates the ethical issues that must be considered when undertaking this work. Ethical considerations involved in this study

such as informed consent, the privacy of research subjects, voluntary participation and protection from harm which have their basis in moral and ethical principles, will be addressed through the key ethical principles of respect for human dignity, autonomy, truth and justice, within the Declaration of Helsinki (2008).

Prior to participation in the study, prospective participants will be given an information sheet about the study. The information sheet will stress the voluntary nature of participation and that confidentiality will be protected. Participants will also be assured that they can withdraw from the study at any time to no detriment. Completed consent forms will be obtained from all participants. The confidential nature of the project will be stressed to participants at the outset. Ethical approval will be gained from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of Hull prior to commencement of the project.

The most widely used ethical framework from which to analyse ethical situations with respect to research is Beauchamp and Childress (2009) which employs 4 key principles; Respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice. These are discussed below.

Respect for autonomy. Informed consent will be obtained prior to participation. A participant information sheet will be produced, for interviews signed consent forms will be completed.

Non- Maleficence. It is recognised that this study may involve discussing sensitive issues with people. Participants will be informed that they have the right to stop any interview, without any explanation, at any time and take no further part in the study to no detriment. This will be done both verbally and using the information sheet. Assurances of confidentiality will be given via the information sheet and verbally – but with a verbal/written caveat that any information placing them or someone else at risk of harm may have to be acted upon. All participants will be assured that they can withdraw up until data analysis has taken place at that point it will not be possible to completely identify their own data. They will also be assured that identities will not be revealed within any reports or publications from the project. All data from the project will be stored securely in locked filing cabinets and/or on password protected computers.

Beneficence. Whilst this study will not directly benefit participants, they will be informed that the findings of the study will be used to improve and inform evidence base for asexuality on a national and international level.

Justice. No participant will be disadvantaged by not taking part. Declining to participate will not affect care in any way - agreeing to take part will confer no advantage.

4.4.5 Rigour

Qualitative research is regularly criticized for its weaknesses, specifically in relation to bias, lack of generalisability, and rigour (Anderson, 2010). Trustworthiness has been defined as the conceptual soundness of the research (Bowen, 2009). Four factors have been suggested for establishing rigour of qualitative research; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These are discussed below.

Credibility and trustworthiness: Credibility is a term which is more commonly used in quantitative research designs. Merriam (1985) highlights that the qualitative investigator's equivalent concept to credibility asks the questions about the congruence of findings with reality. According to Charmaz (2006), credibility can be assured by the researcher asking questions of their own research in relation to the extent of their familiarity with the setting or topic, the sufficiency of the data, and the strength of the link between the gathered data and the argument and the analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Further methods of assuring credibility can be the researcher's commitment to evaluate the project as it develops. This can be done by the use of a diary or memos which contain a running commentary of the process as it develops. The commentary can play a significant role in monitoring the researcher's developments, documenting emerging ideas and outlining the researchers ongoing subjectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Member checking can be used to ensure credibility. This is a process where a researcher confirms their interpretation of the data with research participants and can be formal or informal.

Transferability (External validity): This refers to the question of "how generalisable are the study findings?". According to Merriam external validity "is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations" (Merriam 1985: 57). Since the goal of qualitative research is to achieve in-depth understand of a phenomenon,

rather than finding out what is true of many (Merriam, 1985), generalisability is a limitation, or inappropriate for social sciences. Researchers can be consumed with trying to demonstrate transferability in qualitative research, however, the need to demonstrate transferability should not be traded off against appreciating the importance of context (Merriam, 1985). Since the researcher knows only the context of the study at a specific time, claims to transferability cannot be made (Shenton, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (2000) suggest that it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that there is enough contextual information provided to enable the reader to make a transfer of the study findings, so providing sufficiently rich descriptions and contextual information is a vital aspect of demonstrating transferability. Shenton (2004) advises that the results of a qualitative study must be understood within the context of the particular characteristics of the organisation or environment which the fieldwork was carried out. In order to assess the extent to which findings may be true of people in other settings, similar projects employing the same methods but conducted in different environments may be of value.

Dependability: Lincoln and Guba (2000) suggest that a demonstration of credibility, to an extent will ensure dependability. In order to address dependability more directly, Shenton (2004) advises that the processes within the study should be documented in detail to enable another researcher to repeat the work. Details such as the research design and its implementation, operational details relating to data gathering and a reflective appraisal of the project should be made available in order to present the reader with a full account of the research process (Shenton, 2004).

Confirmability: The techniques discussed above, if employed during the research process, form the basis of establishing conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Miles and Huberman (1994) advise that confirmability is the extent to which the researcher admits his or her own predispositions. One method which will enhance confirmability is that of maintaining a reflexive diary in which field notes, memos about decisions regarding the collection and analysis of data can be kept. Reflexivity should take place throughout the process. From deciding on the area of interest, defining the research focus, writing the proposal, deciding on the methodology, undertaking the research, collecting the data, analysing the data and writing up the findings. The individual assumptions and preconceptions of the researcher, and how these affect the research should be explained (Hsiung, 2010). A reflexive researcher recognizes that what they write, has the potential

to influence and redefine what they are writing. They do not pretend to be value-neutral and are alert to the ways that their research expresses, reinforces or undermines the values that they hold. They are also alert to the fact that they may not be aware of their own deepest values which only surface in the context of the research. The process of reflexivity requires a constant check vigilance and on ability to live with doubt and self-doubt about one's motives (Gabriel, 2015).

4.5 Research approaches

Now the method of generating data has been agreed and justified, before proceeding to consider the methods of data analysis, it is necessary to consider the most suitable approach to the study of asexuality. At first glance, it appears that there are four main qualitative approaches belonging to the constructivist or interpretivist paradigm, which could guide the study of asexuality; ethnography, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, and grounded theory (GT). The relationship between the research approach and analysis is such that the analytical procedure is determined by the approach. The analysis that is associated with these approaches, and the research product obtained from these approaches are identified in the table below.

Table 4.2: Qualitative Research Approaches

Method	Research Product
Ethnography (Ethnographic content analysis)	Cultural understandings and meaning of the phenomenon (Altheide, 1987)
Phenomenology (Phenomenological analysis)	A description or clarification of the existence of a phenomenon which enhances understanding (Brocki & Wearden, 2006)
Narrative inquiry (Narrative analysis)	Insight into the ontological and epistemological assumptions behind a phenomenon (Altheide, 1987)
Grounded theory (GT) (Constant comparative analysis)	The development of a theory about a specific phenomenon (Charmaz, 2012)

Thorne (2000) suggests that data analysis is the most complex of all the phases of qualitative research. Data can come in various forms, for example interview transcripts or textual data from websites, or discussion forums or completed questionnaires. The analysis of the data will result in the product and in qualitative research there are a number of data analysis methods each of them yielding a different research product. Not only is there a need for a researcher to be aware of the research product of each method, they must give consideration to their own desired product in order to arrive at a decision as to which method best suits their own study.

Ethnography captures in-depth detail of the everyday lives and practices of a particular situation or phenomenon (Green & Thorogood, 2012). Phenomenology attempts to use the study of subjective experiences and meanings in order to grasp a phenomenon (Green & Thorogood, 2012), and narrative inquiry focuses upon the analysis of data in terms of understanding the importance of certain aspects of the text. Narrative inquiry focuses on the importance of the storytelling which takes place during data gathering in relation to the phenomenon of interest. Content analysis classifies the words in the text/narrative into categories, in relation to their importance to the phenomenon of interest (Burns & Grove, 2001). On further examination of each approach it would appear that only one of these approaches is suited to a study which is expected to explain or at least develop a theory to explain the social processes which inform the development of asexuality; that is grounded theory. What follows is a discussion about the logic which has to be applied to this decision, alongside a justification for the chosen approach.

4.5.1 Rational for a grounded theory approach

The preceding chapters have used the existing asexuality research to present the general current thinking about asexuality. According to Scherrer (2008), it is very complex and variably lived, it is diverse, as highlighted by the CA process. Asexual discourse readily admits that there is no clear-cut boundary between sexual and asexual, and is generally comfortable with the lack of clarity (Hinderliter, 2009). Current research also makes reference to the limited language available which captures and illustrates the diversity of asexual relationships, suggesting that these limitations, can and do act as a barrier to asexuals and non-asexuals fully embracing and endorsing the asexual experience.

Throughout the preceding chapters there has been a growing recognition that a best-fit methodological approach is one which should capture and work with, not only the complexity of asexuality, but the newness and immaturity of the concept. Currently there is no asexuality theory from which to begin this study, and so it is critical that the methodological approach assists in providing answers to the variation whilst allowing for further exploration. It is important to facilitate a more in depth understanding, which counteracts the construction of a theory of asexuality as abnormal, problematic and pathological. Of priority is to employ a research approach that develops a theory or an explanation about asexuality, given its limited evidence base and propensity to be considered by some as a problem.

According to Geertz (1973), at the heart of the qualitative approach, should be methods for representing the details of the lives of individuals. Ethnography, phenomenology, discourse analysis, and content analysis are recognised as potential forms of investigation. They are not, however, considered a suitable fit to shape the study of the meaning of asexuality. It is clear that there is less of a need, at this relatively early stage of asexuality research, to focus on uncovering details of asexual histories, life events, language practices and even lived experiences. These are investigations and explorations which may be more relative to other qualitative approaches within the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm. Although it cannot be ruled out that histories, life events, lived experiences may be uncovered throughout the course of data collection. There appears to be more of an urgent need to generate a theory intimately tied in with evidence; a theory that is consistent with empirical data. Given the need to generate asexuality theory from the data which represents the finer details of the lives of asexuals, this intuitively leads to the appropriateness of grounded theory.

The findings from Chapter 3 highlight the lack, or absence of contemporary asexuality theory; a finding supported by Haefner (2011) who uses grounded theory as a research method to explore romantic relationships within asexuality. To an extent, the Haefner (2011) study, (unpublished), appears to have started the process of theory building using grounded theory as a research method. The theory which is generated from the Haefner (2011) study is more focused upon romantic relationship formation in self-identified asexuals, as opposed to a theory linked to the social processes informing asexual self-

identity. Having identified that GT as the most appropriate research method, the overall goal of this study would be to generate a theoretical framework, grounded in the data.

4.6 Grounded Theory

There is a general impression across the existing literature that asexuality is poorly understood – particularly the social processes surrounding identity formation. The decision to use GT methodology is supported by the lack of existing theory regarding asexuality. Grounded theory is an attractive option in this case, with its overarching goal to develop a theory of basic social processes studied in environments in which they take place (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Given Glaser and Strauss’s claims of what GT is capable of, following a GT approach should allow the researcher to gain an understanding of the basic social processes of self-identified asexuals, from which, asexuality theory can be derived.

The discovery of GT is said to have offered “systematic strategies for qualitative research practice” (Charmaz, 2008: 5). For Glaser and Strauss (1967), the defining components of GT include; simultaneous involvement in data gathering and analysis, developing codes and categories, comparing and findings across interviews, developing theory, memo writing, sampling aimed toward theory construction, and conducting a literature review (Charmaz, 2006). Since these initial GT directives, Glaser and Strauss have taken GT in different directions (Charmaz, 2006). However, all versions, classic (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) evolved or Straussian (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and constructivist (Charmaz, 2006) adhere to the same basic research process: gathering data, coding, comparing, categorizing, theoretically sampling, developing a core category, and generating a theory.

Methodologically, GT is an attractive option for the study of asexuality; this approach offers a structured and rigorous methodology (Markey & Taylor, 2014). In an eagerness to gain a further understanding about asexuality, it might be tempting to focus on what the study should be producing without giving consideration to organising the data, and the processes involved in reaching the goals of the study. However, the need to follow a set of steps of the GT process should prevent this. The next sections of this chapter address the specific merits of GT with particular reference to how this approach to data collection and analysis suits the purpose of this study.

4.6.1 Philosophical approaches underpinning grounded theory study

Researchers demonstrate different perspectives of the three GT methods. There is profound variation in the way are interpreted and undertaken. Whilst the advantages are that researchers can now choose how to use GT as a research method, the challenge for the novice GT researcher, according to Markey & Taylor (2014), is to use an approach consistent with their thinking. Markey & Taylor (2014) strongly recommend that before beginning a GT study, researchers should understand the different philosophical assumptions underpinning each approach and explore their own philosophical beliefs. The following paragraph addresses this.

An ontological stance based on a constructivist notion of reality has been proposed throughout the preceding chapters. The classic GT approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), according to Markey & Taylor (2014), alludes to a realist position; that there is a single reality, independent of researchers' experiences views and perceptions. The objectivist philosophy of the classic GT approach, fails to accommodate the constructivist notion of reality which has been identified as the framework for the study of asexuality. At this point it appears fairly straightforward to rule out the classic GT approach; with its focus on conceptual understanding of social behaviour, rather than a constructivist focus on interpretative understandings of participants' meanings (Breckenridge 2012). It is less straight forward to rule out one of the remaining two constructivist approaches. The following section illustrates this.

4.7 Constructivist Grounded Theory

There are two approaches to consider at this point; Charmaz's (2003, 2006) constructivist approach and an evolved/Straussian approach by Strauss and Corbin (1997). The evolved/Straussian approach has also been identified as constructivist; according to Taghipour (2014).

The ontological and epistemological stance of relativism that focuses on local and specific constructed realities is embraced by the constructivist paradigm of GT (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). According to Mills et al (2006), Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Charmaz (2003) are said to offer a relativist ontological position. In terms of data collection and analysis, at an initial glance, it is difficult to visualise any differences that would assist in the selection

of an appropriate method between the two. The GT literature offers very little to help novice researchers identify one as being more suitable over the other. At times, it seems that the debates over which of the approaches is more constructivist over the other are avoided across the literature, which would suggest that it may come down to making a random decision. Mills et al (2006) points out however, that the literature contains different opinions about the ontological nature of the work of Strauss and Corbin (1994). This is said to be in part due to Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) never directly addressing the paradigm of thought that underpins their method (Mills et al., 2006; Hussain et al., 2014), leaving this approach open to suggestions that it demonstrates a mixture of language “vacillating between post positivism and constructivism” (Mills et al., 2006: 3). Indeed, there is a general sense across the literature, that whilst nobody negates the value of Straussian/evolved GT, researchers seem to have less confidence in Straussian/evolved approach as a purely natural theoretical ‘fit’ with constructivism.

Constructivism is defined as “a social science perspective that addresses how realities are made” (Charmaz, 2006: 87). For a study which explores asexuality from the perspective of self-identified asexuals, this perspective has appeal, as it assumes that people construct their own realities (Charmaz, 2006). Unlike Straussian GT, Charmaz (2003) offers a version of CGT that is purely constructivist in its approach. The constructivist approach guided by Charmaz (2006) is the most appropriate for the study of asexuality as it confidently offers a research method that will allow for the position of the social, and therefore the sexual world as constructed to be upheld. A position which is presented in Chapter 2. Constructivist grounded theory informed by Charmaz (2006) presents itself as a research approach that proposes a view of reality that seeks respondents and researchers’ meanings. This approach has the potential to provide an exciting and interesting angle to data collection and analysis, where theory is derived from the relationship between the participants and the researcher. In addition, CGT will provide asexual participants with the opportunity to use their own definitions of their identity. Finally, CGT offers an ontologically relativist and epistemologically subjectivist approach (Mills et al., 2006), which should shape the interaction between researcher and the participants. The relativism and subjectivity inherent in CGT mean that the final theory which is generated, is truly a co-construction.

Moghadden (2006) helpfully outlines 3 basic steps to be addressed for the process of developing a grounded theory; the collection and interpretation of data, the abstraction of concepts to find theoretical meaning, the presentation of theory by bringing together concepts, and integrating categories which have explanatory power. The specific merits of each of these steps will now be discussed, with details of how the process evolves.

4.7.1 Collection and interpretation of the data

Grounded theory is an approach for developing theory that is grounded in data, systematically gathered and analysed (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Although the methods of data collection are not specified in a GT approach, the most common methods used are participant observation, interviewing, and the collection of artefacts and texts (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Ryan and Bernard (2000) propose that the data most traditionally associated with GT is that of interview transcripts. The researcher collects data in the setting, and concurrently analyses, to generate a hypothesis. One of the distinctive elements of CGT is that data is co-constructed between the researcher and interviewee. The constructivist paradigm offers an acknowledgement of the researcher's interpretative understanding of the participant's accounts of the phenomena being investigated (Barnett, 2012). In other words, the researcher is interpreting the participant views of reality as opposed to relaying it. The consequence of this theory of co-construction within the CGT approach is that meaning derived through CGT is co-constructed through an interactive process (Charmaz, 2006). It is worth pointing out that what is known, and how it is known, are vital questions which should be asked whilst collecting and interpreting the data. As the researcher analyses the data, and interprets its meanings, a process of continued and sustained awareness of meanings and their relationship to the respondent's voices, and the researchers own life experiences, should be taking place (Munhall, 1994). This is discussed in more detail in a later section which deals with reflexivity. The acknowledgement of a process of co-construction is offered as an alternative to classic GT where the researcher is said to be distant from the participant (Brackenridge, 2012). The theoretical analysis derived from the process "are interpretive renderings of a reality, not objective reporting's of it" (Charmaz, 2008: 206).

Grounded theory provides a number of steps involving simultaneous collection and analysis of data. Analysis is said to start early, it takes place during the data collection

process, and should be thoroughly integrated into all aspects of it. In this way, each step of data collection feeds into the analysis. Once the first data has been collected, coding of the transcripts occurs.

4.7.2 Coding

Coding is a pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory (Charmaz, 2006). In the Initial or open coding process, codes are said to emerge as you scrutinise the data and define meanings within it. On a practical level, the transcripts should be read line by line and the codes written at the end of each line to represent, whether on a descriptive or an explanatory level, what is being said in the line. It is a way of identifying important words, or groups of words in the data and labelling them accordingly. When first reading a transcript, the researcher might not know what words are important, which is why a line by line approach would seem to be a pragmatic way of not missing anything.

Coding should be a detailed process, as it “furthers our attempts to understand acts and accounts, scenes and sentiments, stories and silences from our research participants’ views” (Charmaz, 2006: 46). Data collection should be driven by the desire to know what is happening in the setting in people’s lives and in the lines of the recorded data. Charmaz (2006) advises to stick closely to the data at initial coding, from the beginning of the process, the researcher is said to face some tensions. Tensions between “analytic insights and prescribed events, spoken accounts or written observations, between static topics and dynamic processes, and participants’ worlds and professionals’ meanings” (Charmaz, 2006: 47). As a way around these tensions, Charmaz (2006) advises to try to see actions in each segment of data rather than applying pre-existing categories; where possible coding data with actions is advised.

Line by line coding is said to provide the researcher with leads to pursue. When an important process is identified in an interview conducted at a later stage, an earlier interview can be returned to see if that process explains events and experiences of the earlier interview. If not, Charmaz (2006) suggests seeking new respondents to illuminate the process. According to Charmaz (2006), careful line by line coding is said to move the researcher towards fulfilling two criteria for completing a CGT analysis; fit and relevance. The CGT analysis can take place when constructed codes, which emerge from the process

of line by line and focused coding, are developed into categories. The categories should clarify the experiences of self-identified asexuals, and allow for an analytic framework to be offered. The framework should interpret what is happening, providing a lens through which the relationships between implicit processes and visible structures can be examined (Charmaz, 2006).

During the initial coding process, *in vivo* coding can be done, and this applies to situations where words or terms used by the interviewees; research participants' special terms, are thought to be so remarkable, that they should be taken as codes. The words themselves become a code; an *in vivo* code. Charmaz (2006) points out that these codes help to preserve participant's meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself, and whether they provide useful codes in the later more integrated analysis depends on how the researcher treats them analytically. The codes need to be integrated into the theory and subjected to comparative and analytic treatment.

4.7.3 Memo Writing

During data collection and coding, the researcher is constantly asking questions of the data, beginning the process of suggesting and developing links between the initial/open codes, in order to develop larger and more substantive categories. Memo writing is integral to this process. This is a process of stopping and writing notes about the codes. Charmaz (2006) points out that during memo writing, the researcher should stop and analyse their ideas about the codes "in any and every way that occurs to them during the moment" (Charmaz, 2006: 72). The process is said to prompt the researcher to analyse the data and apply codes early in the process. Memo writing can guide the process of further data collection, as the researcher moves through the data and realises there are aspects of the story that require further investigation in the next set of interviews. In addition, memo writing can facilitate in, and be a record of, the researcher becoming more analytical in the process of developing ideas of how codes can be related.

4.7.4 Abstracting the concepts to find theoretical meaning

Holton (2010) states that grounded theory is about concepts that emerge from the data and not the data per se. The conceptual rendering of the data is the foundation of grounded theory development. The key relationship between data and theory is a conceptual code. Charmaz (2006) identifies that generating categories from codes as a

process of explicating properties from the code and examining the specific conditions under which it arises, is maintained and changes. During this stage, the relationship of the newly formed category is compared with others. Categories are said to reflect theoretical definitions of actions or events (Charmaz, 2006). Conceptual codes are said to add precision and clarity, they can help in making the analysis coherent and comprehensible.

4.7.5 Theoretical sampling

Simultaneous data gathering and analysis is a key aspect of CGT, this helps to focus the researcher early so mistakes are not made in terms of exploring leads. Theoretical sampling allows the researcher to take time to understand the relevance of the leads. Charmaz (2006) encourages the researcher to follow these emergent leads to explore their relevance. Categories can be “interesting but thin” (Charmaz, 2006: 96), the researcher is encouraged to engage in a purposive collection of data that focuses on the category and its properties; a strategy known as theoretical sampling. This allows the researcher to seek and collect relevant data to elaborate and refine categories. Theoretical sampling is undertaken to develop the properties of the categories. This can take many forms, the collection of data from a new situation or group of participants, it could be used to tighten up previously used research questions in order to collect more data from an existing set of participants, or collecting more data from the same or similar situation. Indeed, Charmaz (2006) does encourage repeat interviews; suggesting the one interview is seldom enough. Theoretical sampling can be undertaken until the researcher is confident that no new properties are emerging; until the point of theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation in CGT is different from that of other qualitative research, in that whilst the qualitative researcher seeks descriptive saturation, the grounded theorist is concerned with saturation at a conceptual level (Breckenridge, 2009). It is the conceptual category that is said to be saturated with data when a point of theoretical saturation can be confirmed. Categories are said to be saturated when gathering fresh data, no longer generates new theoretical insights (Charmaz, 2006). Disagreements arise about the meaning of saturation and some researchers are said to invoke saturation uncritically; claiming it, without proving it (Morse 1995). On the subject of claiming saturation, rather than having categories that are saturated by data, we have categories suggested by data. Dey (2007) prefers the term theoretical sufficiency better fits how researchers conduct

GT. According to Dey (2007) saturation of categories might be an artefact of how CGT is conducted, and Charmaz (2006) does, to an extent engage in the debate about whether or not, claims of saturated categories can be genuine. According to Charmaz (2006), when researchers treat GT guidelines like recipes, they limit possibilities for innovation without having explored their data. Ultimately, saturation has to be considered as a critical concept based on subjective decision; one can never know if further interviewing would give more data unless they undertook the further interviewing. It seems therefore important, not to start theoretical sampling too early, and a process of open sampling should be followed for as long as possible. Charmaz (2006) warns about missing analytic possibilities, and about constructing superficial analyses, and offers up what appears to be a solution of being open to what is happening in the field, being willing to grapple with it, and returning and re-coding earlier data to see if new leads are defined.

4.7.6 Theoretical sensitivity

This term frequently associated with CGT refers to having insight and the ability to give meaning to data. The researcher should have the capacity to understand, and the capability to separate the important and relevant from that which is not (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As data collection and analysis continue, the researcher, aided by prior knowledge from the literature, and from personal experience builds a conceptual framework of the process under investigation. Theoretical sensitivity is said to represent an important creative aspect of CGT, where the researchers personal and professional experience come together with the literature enabling the research situation to be considered in new ways. Strauss & Corbin (1990) recognise that making use of knowledge whilst holding onto the reality of a phenomenon can be challenging, and suggest that the researcher steps back and questions the fit of the data.

4.7.7 Core category formation

Identification of a core category is central for the integration of other categories into a conceptual framework or theory grounded in the data (Hallberg, 2006). The core category is said to determine and delimit the theoretical framework. Whilst operationalising the process of core category formation seems daunting for a novice grounded theorist, Moghadden (2006), outline Strauss and Corbin's (1998) criteria for choosing a central category. The core category must be central and relatable to all other categories, it must

appear frequently in the data. The explanation that evolves from the core category should relate logically to the other categories. The name or phrase used to describe the central category should be sufficiently abstract to do research in other substantive areas. It should explain variation as well as the main point made by the data. When conditions vary, the explanations of the core category should still hold. The process of, or the steps involved in moving from core category formation to writing the theoretical framework is largely unexplained in the GT literature. Having confidence that what is emerging during this process is the theoretical framework for the study seems like a daunting task for a novice grounded theorist; this is addressed in the following section.

4.7.8 Diagramming and theorizing

Moghadden (2006) suggests that once a core category is positioned at the centre of the process, other categories which relate to the core category can be identified as the causal conditions, strategies, contextual conditions, and consequences. According to Charmaz (2006), much of the GT literature emphasizes writing about a single category, however, researchers may need to juggle with more than one. A process of sorting (using the memos to piece the data together) will help to establish how these categories do or do not fit together. Sorting, diagramming and integrating memos is advocated by Charmaz at this stage as all three strategies can facilitate in generating ideas for constructing and writing about the theoretical framework. The process of arriving at a theory can be facilitated by the creation of a condition and consequential matrix (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). This could be in diagrammatic form; a diagram which maps out the various categories and their relationship to each other. The matrix is considered to be a way of helping to frame the story (Moghadden, 2006), which is the key aspect in formulating the GT. Charmaz (2006) suggests that a major purpose of the matrix is to help researchers think more broadly about structural systems, and how they interact with larger social conditions and consequences.

4.7.9 Knowing what the theory is

Charmaz (2006) recognises that the term theory remains slippery in GT discourse, with many theorists talking about it but few defining it. It appears that a more rounded understanding of what theory means in social scientific thinking, and what it translates to, will be a pre requisite for this stage of the process. Charmaz (2006) offers positivist

and interpretive definitions of theory. According to Charmaz (2006), when interpretive theory is considered, avoid limiting this to individual or micro situations. From extensive reading and researching of CGT, and examining the process of theory generation from a practical perspective, there appear to be four elements to consider during theory generation. These four steps adapted from Charmaz (2006) to fit the study of asexuality provide confidence that what emerges from the data will be in fact a theory of asexuality. The theory should emerge from linking the categories and investigating the connections between concepts. The theory should explore the varied behaviours of social participation and ideas within sexual and asexual communities that collectively involve larger structures; the larger structures are taken to mean the dominant discourses that permeate society (Foucault, 1979). The theory should recognise the construction of individual and collective action within the asexual community, and the intersections between them. The aim of the theory will be to conceptualise the process of asexual self-identity, to articulate theoretical claims about the relevance of asexual self-identity, to acknowledge subjectivity in theorizing, and hence recognise the role of negotiation, dialogue and understanding within the experience of asexual self-identity and to offer an imaginative interpretation of asexual self-identity. Once these elements have been addressed, I can be confident that what I have is a constructivist grounded theory of asexuality.

4.7.10 Evaluating grounded theory: credibility and originality

A number of issues have left GT open to the accusation that it lacks credibility (Charmaz, 2006). A number of questions should be asked in order to prevent such accusations. These questions include the extent of the researcher's familiarity with the setting or topic, the sufficiency of the data, and the strength of the link between the gathered data and the argument and the analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The key criteria that should be considered with respect to these questions are based on the credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness of the grounded theory. These are discussed in more detail below.

The researcher's familiarity with the setting or topic: With respect to credibility, Charmaz (2006) encourages the researcher to ask questions in relation to the research achieving intimate familiarity with the setting or topic (Charmaz, 2006). Rich and sufficient data is

required to provide the intimate familiarity which Charmaz (2006) alludes to. Questions include the sufficiency of the background data to illustrate details about persons, processes and settings, the adequacy the data to reflect a range of descriptions of participant's views and actions, the depth of the data to reveal what lies beneath the surface and to illustrate how things may change over time (Charmaz, 2006).

The sufficiency of the data: Charmaz (2006) encourages the researcher to ensure that the categories portray the fullness of the experience being explored, that all meanings within the data have been revealed (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006) also encourages the researcher to ensure that theory makes sense to the participants or people who share their circumstances, that data is sufficient with respect to the claims being made and that there has been a systematic process of comparing between observations and categories. The categories should cover a wide range of empirical observation.

The strength of the link between the gathered data and the argument and the analysis: Additional questions the researcher should ask relate to the links between the gathered data and the argument and analysis. The research should provide adequate evidence for the researchers' claims, to allow the reader to form an independent assessment and agreement (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006) suggests the questions the researcher should ask should centre on whether the data offers new insights, the analysis provides conceptual rendering of the data, the social and theoretical significance of the work, and the ways in which the theory challenges or extends current thinking about the topic (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006) also encourages the researcher to explore the use of the findings to the everyday world. The potential for further research in other significant areas should be discussed, along with the contribution the findings make to society.

Finally, an important element of CGT which has previously been discussed is that of the constant comparative method which takes place during data collection and analysis. This is a critical aspect of ensuring credibility (Miles & Huberman 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Silverman, 2001). During the constant comparative process, the data is searched, for aspects and findings that contradict patterns or explanations. Any cases which do not fit with the emergent theory are known as deviant or negative cases which stand far apart from the emergent theory. Negative case analysis can be explained as careful analysis of the negative cases. This analysis will deepen understanding of the people being studied

(Taylor & Bodgen, 1998) and assists in refining the analysis so that most if not all cases can be accounted for. The result of the negative case analysis is that the theory has used the full range of data, and is therefore able to explain the typical and the atypical cases (Wicks, 2010).

Charmaz (2006) states that “criteria for evaluating research depend on who forms them and what purposes he or she invokes” (Charmaz, 2006: 182). Whilst trustworthiness of the process is not directly addressed in the work of Charmaz (2006), the criteria above and its associated questions around credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness which Charmaz (2006) presents can be used as a tool for demonstrating that the process has been transparent, appropriate and sound.

4.7.11 Literature review and constructivist grounded theory methodology

The issue of when and how to engage with the literature in GT is contentious. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued against conducting a literature review prior to data collection. This purist position is to prevent the researcher coming to the research with preconceived ideas and imposing these onto the analysis. This stance contradicts academic convention, particularly in PhD studies where students are expected to familiarise themselves with the literature. Having undertaken a concept analysis and thematic synopsis of the existing asexuality literature, from a purist perspective this may be problematic, in that it is impossible to come to the research from a position of objectivity. Charmaz (2014) recommends a detailed literature review to uncover gaps in knowledge and to avoid “reshaping old empirical problems” (Charmaz, 2014: 306) and therefore a level of engagement with the existing research does not seem problematic when using a CGT methodology. Apriori assumptions are expected in any case, and it is important that these are critically examined through the reflexivity process.

4.7.12 Reflexivity in Grounded Theory

Reflexivity, the process of reflecting critically on the self, and of analysing and noting personal values that could affect data collection and interpretation encourages researchers to describe decisions and dilemmas of their research experience (Finlay, 2002). Watt (2007) considers reflexivity as essential, potentially facilitating understanding of both the phenomenon under study and the research process itself. Learning to reflect on your behaviour and thoughts, as well as on the phenomenon under study, creates a

means for continuously becoming a better researcher. The process can be ambiguous and unclear (Finlay, 2002). Whilst the importance of being reflexive is acknowledged in social science research, according to Mauthner and Doucet (2003), the difficulties, practicalities and methods of doing it are rarely addressed. Being reflexive in practical terms requires the researcher to employ a set of techniques; including, detailing the investigator position in the research process. Creating an audit trail, triangulation of the data, providing a description of the researchers' assumptions within the process, and providing detailed discussion of the effect of the observer or the researcher in the environment on the actions of the subjects are all fairly specific elements of reflexivity within qualitative research. There are various reflexive strategies specific to the GT method which can support and ensure groundedness (Ramalho et al., 2015). Charmaz (2006) identifies that memo writing is one of the analytic tools which foster reflective thought. This method helps the researcher keep a trail of the decision made during the process, however the production of memos should start at the beginning of the process from when the project is being conceptualised (Ramalho et al., 2015). Charmaz (2006) suggests that memo writing is a method of the researcher exploring their own ideas about their categories, and they can be private and unshared. As meaning is constructed from the data, the researcher documents the process of thought that they engage with in order to construct that meaning. In doing so they document the role they have in the analytic process, and the preconceived ideas and assumptions they bring to their analysis. Gentles et al. (2015) identifies that reflexivity in GT is a broad multi-dimensional practice which should take many forms. Gentles et al. (2015) promotes the use of reflexivity to account for the range of possible researcher actions/influence on research design and decisions, researcher participant-interactions, researcher influence on the analysis, and writing, the researcher influence on the researcher. Further Gentles et al. (2015) believes that reflexivity should be used to consider the researchers influence on the various phases of the research process, and to acknowledge where the research interactions have influenced the research process.

To summarise, reflexivity is a valuable tool in the construction of meaning; and the practice of the engagement in explicit, self-aware analysis places the researcher in the position of acknowledging how their own thoughts and views have become entangled in the data. For the purposes of this study, the process of memo writing (Charmaz, 2006)

and the framework suggested by Gentles et al. (2015) will be used to guide the reflexive process during this research process.

4.8 Methodology Summary

This chapter has outlined the design and methodology that will be implemented to address the study of asexuality. A justification for the use of a qualitative approach has been presented along with an outline of the key elements to consider in qualitative enquiry.

Grounded theory has been presented as the most suitable qualitative approach for the ambiguity of a concept and a lived experience such as asexuality. It is an approach which should capture and work with the complexity and newness of the concept, whilst facilitating the emergence of a theory constructed from deep within the accounts of self-identified asexuals.

The preceding chapters defend the position that all aspects of social life and subjective experience that have erotic significance are socially constructed as opposed to created. An ontological stance based on a constructivist notion of reality has been proposed throughout this work. Based on this view, the chapter proceeds to justify the selection of constructivist grounded theory to study asexuality.

Finally, the specific elements of constructivist grounded theory are presented, followed by an outline of the process for ensuring trustworthiness of the emerging theory.

Chapter 5 Methods

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the process undertaken in order to carry out the research. It will illustrate the processes which took place after completion of the methodology chapter. The steps taken from this point right up to completion of the initial coding process will be outlined. Consideration will be given to the ethical approval processes, advertising, recruitment, sampling, interviewing, note taking and writing memos throughout interviews and the process of initial coding. Application of the Grounded theory (GT) framework will be discussed in this chapter, for instance the processes around theoretical sampling, and co-construction of the data. Finally, the chapter will address the process of theoretical saturation and the steps taken to ensure confidence in decision making around reaching this point of data collection. Rigour will also be addressed using the framework from Beauchamp and Childress (2009).

5.2 Practical considerations before entering the field

This short section outlines some of the practical aspects of data collection which had to be considered prior to seeking permissions.

Hinderliter (2009) in a paper outlining the methodological issues in studies of asexuality suggests recruitment through asexual websites is appropriate for qualitative asexuality studies. In addition, online communities play a significant role in asexual identity awareness, acceptance and affirmation. The review of the literature also indicates that internet users are a specific group with a higher likelihood of sense of community, and shared experiences and meanings. In view of this, internet forums specifically aimed at providing a platform for asexuals to meet and share their experiences was considered to be a good method of capturing rich data for this research. Online recruitment to the study was facilitated with an eflyer, to target the sites detailed below. Prior to posting the eflyer, permissions were obtained from the site managers. The following forums and networks were targeted:

- AVEN, asexuality.livejournal.com and asexuality.org.
- Asexual Facebook and Twitter pages.
- Craigslist UK, Craigslist US community pages.

In order to capture a greater range of experiences and participants beyond the online community, recruitment was further facilitated by:

- LGBT+ networks such as The Hull and East Riding LGBT Forum, the LGBT Foundation in Manchester, Stonewall, the Hull University LGBT society, and West FM: Loud and Proud radio station.

There was some reluctance to solely recruit through online forums and LGBT+ communities, not wanting to potentially exclude participants that would not use social media and online platforms, furthermore, this route may have excluded people who did not actively seek out other asexuals through any networks; online or other, at all. Diary excerpts indicate this;

“AVEN and the like; probably great for recruitment but what if I’m missing out on a specific type of asexual who does not engage with online forums, and what if this type of asexual does not really engage with LGBT networks either; what about the ones who don’t embrace, but just simply ... identify, will I be able to target anyone like this? Maybe I should just try and recruit through a newspaper”
[21st June 2017]

My view was that whilst it may be beneficial to advertise the study through a network which may facilitate a more traditional approach to recruitment, this would probably be costly, unless I went through an ebulletin type of outlet. So, the study was further advertised through the University of Hull ebulletin.

Full ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (REC) in August 2017: The approval letter (Appendix C), study information sheet (Appendix D) and the consent form (Appendix E) can be found in the appendices. In May 2018, an amendment was made to the REC, following a period of slow recruitment from March – April. Recruitment was extended to LGBT networks and societies advertised and accessible through ‘myGwork’; the recruitment and networking hub for LGBT professionals and organisations. Data was collected between October 2017 and August 2018.

5.3 Recruitment

One of the essential features of CGT research is the continuous cycle of collecting and analysing data, facilitated by a method of ongoing recruitment. This study operated on an ongoing recruitment method, where participants were recruited over a period of time; from October 2017 to August 2018.

5.3.1 Summary of the process of recruitment

This was a study of the social processes that inform asexual self-identity. There were no strict definitions used to define asexuality, and there were no exact criteria to meet in order to be considered suitable to take part. Individuals were recruited from the asexual community, through a purposive sampling technique. The inclusion criteria were as follows;

- Individuals who embrace an asexual identity or self-identify as asexual.
- Individuals who are 18 and over.
- Members of the asexual community who are sufficiently fluent in English to take part.

5.4 The sample

5.4.1 Summary of the sample

Following the targeting of participants through the networks identified above, 73 people expressed an interest in taking part in the study, all of which were sent an information leaflet. Responses were received from 52 people, who all requested a consent form. Signed consent forms were received from 23 people. Two participants were uncontactable on the day of interview. Leaving a total of 21 interviews being undertaken. Three interviews were accidentally deleted before transcription took place (June, Molly and Frances). Molly was re-interviewed, so, 21 interviews were undertaken and transcribed. In total, 24 interviews were undertaken. The data for this study is therefore based on interview data from 21 participants.

All participants were asked to report their age. Age ranged from 18 – 65. Not all participants volunteered their gender, and this was not specifically asked for, however, from appearance, most of the participants identified as male (4) or female (15). One identified as non-binary, and one did not provide a gender, and it was not possible to tell. The best estimates for female to male asexual ratio suggests a 7:3 ratio, so the numbers within this sample appear appropriate. Giving consideration to the educational and socio-economic status of this sample, they largely appeared to be a white middle class group, however they were representative of a mixed population, from United Kingdom, France, Germany, United States and Brazil. Selective sampling approaches were used to try and gain a more diverse population including more males and people of colour however this was not achievable. A table of the sample is provided below.

Table 5.1: Summary of Research Participants

Country	Pseudonym	Date of interview	Time of interview	Identity	Age
UK	Emily	13 th October 2017	Telephone	Female, bi, grey, demi romantic female	39
UK	Sophie	18 th October 2017	Telephone	Female, pan romantic asexual	33
UK	Diane	20 th October 2017	Face to Face	Female, aromantic asexual	20
UK	David	3 rd November 2017	Skype	Male, between heterosexual and asexual	64
France	Fiona	14 th November 2017	Face to Face	Female, demi romantic and heteroromantic asexual	20
US	Elaine	16 th November 2017	Skype	Female, aromantic asexual	27
UK	Richard	5 th March 2018	Face to face	Male, demi-sexual asexual	33
Brazil	Shirley	12 th April 2018	Skype	Female, bi-romantic asexual	24
Germany (Erased)	June	31 st May 2018	Skype	Female, pan romantic demi asexual	27
Germany (Erased)	Molly	4 th May 2018	Skype	Female, aromantic asexual	unknown
Germany	June	25 th June 2018	Skype	Female, pan romantic demi asexual	27
US	Anne	26 th June 2018	Skype	Female, romantic asexual	18
US	Paula	29 th June 2018	Skype	Female, aromantic asexual	40
US	Valerie	1 st July 2018	Skype	Female, aromantic asexual	25
UK	Helen	9 th July 2018	Skype	Female, aromantic asexual	20
US	Rachel	10 th July 2018	Skype	Female, aromantic asexual	28
US (Erased)	Frances	12 th July 2018	Skype	Agender, aromantic Agender asexual	19

US	Bobbie	15 th July 2018	Skype	Unknown, aromantic asexual	18
UK	Sharon	16 th July 2018	Skype	Female, aromantic asexual	30
Brazil	Patrick	19 th July 2018	Skype	Male, aromantic asexual	28
US	Alex	5 th Aug 2018	Skype	Non binary quoiromantic quoisexual	27
US	Olivia	12 th August 2018	Skype	Female, bi, poly asexual	25

5.5 The development of the interview schedule

The initial interview schedule is detailed below. Questions were very broad and exploratory. As the study progressed there was a need to explore specific aspects of the experience in more detail. Interview guides were revised accordingly. Below is the first interview guide.

1. Explore the experience of coming to an asexual identity (Prompts may include tell me about the 'backstory' which led to the process of arriving at an asexual identity)
2. Explore the experience of being asexual (Prompts may include everyday experience of being asexual, is it something that you have to remind people of, is it something that you feel defines you, are you 'out', what do people think about it?)
3. How would you like your identity to be understood by others? (Prompts may include encouraging the participant to consider wider society should understand asexuality?)

Phase 2: Revised interview guide: Exploring asexual relationships

1. Explore the experience of coming to an asexual identity
2. Areas for further exploration: the potential for going back (un-identifying as asexual), feeling pressure to conform to sexuality, the importance and meaning of sex, the meaning of intimacy, the importance of being able to self-identify, the earliest experience of that feeling of difference, the access to (a)information.

Phase 3: Revised interview guide: Exploring asexual relationships

1. Explore the experience of coming to an asexual identity

2. Explore relationships since becoming asexual
3. Explore the meaning of sex to asexuals
4. Explore if participants think they were born asexual

5.6 Data collection

In the previous chapter, interviews were considered as the most appropriate method of data collection. The rationale for this chosen method is that asexuality is a lesser known, lesser understood phenomenon. It is recognised that detailed insights are required from individual participants (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2008). This study of asexuality is driven by a need to seek and explore meaning, and gain a better understanding of self-identity. Given that this study is driven by a research aim and a set of objectives, there is a necessity to use a set of pre-determined questions for the interview process with the flexibility of having the possibility of other questions emerging from the dialogue between researcher and participant. The interview technique identified as most suitable is one which adopts a semi structured approach.

Participants were offered the option of the interview being conducted face to face, by telephone, or by Skype. Internet based methods are becoming increasingly important methods of communicating, particularly with studies requiring recruitment from around the world. There is a risk that with this type of interview process, that there may be a loss of richness of the interaction or that the participant to interviewer rapport may be compromised in some way (Rowley, 2012). For those interviews which had been arranged by telephone and Skype, particular attention was paid to the importance of rapport building over a period of time pre the interview. Being informed and guided by the work of Iacono et al (2016), a series of friendly emails were exchanged before the interview, to facilitate the process of building a connection. The interviews conducted via Skype and telephone were not vastly different from those conducted face-to-face. In terms of the length of interview, there were no noticeable differences based on mode of interview. Using Skype and telephone meant that there was a loss of social contact, but this did not detract from the quality of the interview or the data quality. Participants generally seemed to be more comfortable and relaxed via Skype interview. With the Skype and face-to-face interviews, during transcription, it was possible to relive the interaction between myself and the participant, remembering their personality and their emotions,

but this was not the case during the transcription of the telephone interviews. There was one Skype interview where the participant had their camera switched off and this was alarming initially as it was unexpected. All participants before this had their cameras on. On reflection, it should have been discussed via email, with all participants pre interview about whether cameras were preferred to be on nor off. This was an oversight. However, the interview with the camera switched off was the most awkward of all the interviews, and it is not clear whether this was due to the camera being off and a lack of face-to-face interaction or something else. What is clear is that in future research, where interviews are being conducted via Skype, camera being on or off will be one of the points which will be clarified before the interview takes place.

5.6.1 Sampling

The previous chapter highlighted the importance of sampling strategy geared towards seeking out cases that would provide in-depth rich stories, to maximise the potential for learning about asexuality. It was also recognised that theoretical sampling involved the purposeful selection of a sample in the initial stages (Coyné, 1997). In the initial stages, purposeful (selective) sampling in action for this study meant that a broad asexual sample were selected – this group of self-identified asexuals contributed to the evolving theory.

After interviewing and transcribing 2 - 3 interviews, I realised that I wanted to know more about asexual relationships. This is where the process of theoretical sampling was operationalised. This aspect of data collection can be explained as simultaneously collecting, coding and analysing data, deciding what data to collect next, and where to find this data, in order to develop the emerging theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2012). I had uncovered a lot of detail about the journey towards identifying as asexual, and this was enabling a theoretical model of the development of the identity to be considered. But, given that some participants had alluded to being in relationships, I was keen to understand more about what happened beyond the consideration and construction of the identity. Specifically, I wanted to find out about relationship formation in this context. I was keen to explore the concept of closeness to others, intimacy, and asexual beliefs about relationship identity. Reflecting back on the gaps in the asexual literature identified in chapter 3, this development in my sampling strategy, aligned itself constructively to one of the four questions which remained unanswered from the literature review; “How

does embracing the identity impact upon relationships with others?” I was also keen to understand more about whether negative experiences of physical intimacy (dread of sex, being sex repulsed) were the same for male asexuals, a need to gain greater clarity about the distinction between close friendships and platonic relationships, and finally, if adolescence was the time when a sense of difference from others begins to crystallise for everyone or if for some people it occurred at a different life stage.

After the initial interview, transcribing, and coding process, a group of self-identified asexuals who were sexually or/and romantically active were sought and selected. To achieve this, I considered the idea that those asexuals who identified as aromantic were less likely to engage in romantic and sexual relationships. I specifically set out to ensure that the participants I recruited were not aromantic asexuals; this allowed for an opportunity to explore terms like crushes, romantic relationships, intimacy and sex within the next cohort of participants. I was also particularly interested in interviewing male asexuals at this point. Consequently, interviews 4 – 12 allowed for the collection of more specific data, which helped to develop some theoretical strands within the model in terms of asexual relationship formation and operation.

During this phase, and during the discussions about intimacy and relationships, I was becoming more aware of the shared belief among participants that their identity was deep rooted within them. There was self-belief from a number of participants that they were born asexual. They believed their identity to have both a genetic and a biological basis. Following on from this, I was keen to understand more about the shared belief among participants that their identity was deep rooted within them, this is documented in my diary:

“Thoughts for the day ... I’m confused ... Sex, sexuality and all things erotic are socially constructed BUT participants recognise their dislike of the omnipresence of sex, but at the same time they feel that their identity has a biological basis, so for them, asexuality, is a response to over sexualisation, but the basis of that response is genetic? [a case in point; Andy, Interview 7 for instance] So, this might mean that

they think their asexuality is genetically encoded in them”
(June 2018)

Based on this confusion, I was keen to understand how asexuals felt about their own identity and whether it is rooted in biology. For those who felt it was biological, it was necessary to understand what participants meant. Acknowledging that there was no longer a need to seek out data specific to relationships, the initial sampling strategy was revisited. Self-identified asexuals including aromantic asexuals were sought. The interview schedule was adapted to accommodate this new line of enquiry. The development of the interview questions, in line with the development of the emergent theory is detailed in the following section.

5.6.2 The interviews

Each interview took approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews took place in the following locations, a private room in the University library, within the participant’s home, via Skype in the researcher’s work office or home office, and via telephone in the researcher’s work office or home office. Interviews were guided by a flexible interview schedule, particularly in the early interviews, however, this was adapted as analysis and theoretical sampling guided the study (Charmaz, 2001). Field notes were written following each interview to ensure a record of ideas was kept, and to serve as memos and note any significant elements of the interview.

The qualitative data collected from the interviews was recorded digitally. It was transcribed within 2 – 3 days of the interview and once transcribed, the recordings were deleted, and the transcriptions held on the University iCloud systems.

5.7 Data analysis

Data collection and analysis occur concurrently in grounded theory. Data were gathered and analysed immediately. The process of analysis started with open coding, which built the theory as more data were collected. During this stage the researcher is writing memos and identifying areas and topics for further discussion in further interviews. This section will explain the process of data collection and analysis. This section will chart the journey to the development of the grounded theory, which is presented in the following chapter.

5.7.1 Coding

This section illustrates the initial steps of analysis, and is guided by Charmaz (2006). Open coding begins with line by line coding and then leads to focused coding.

5.7.2 Line by line coding

The first step of grounded theory analysis is open coding which starts after reading the full transcription from the initial interviews – continuing until the completion of data collection. Open coding began with reading through and trying to see interaction in the data. Charmaz (2006) advises researchers to stay close to the data at this stage, and in an attempt to do this, it was important to avoid the urge to be conceptual or to overthink sections of data. Each line of data that provided meaningful detail was named, with language that reflected its content. Memos were written to capture thought processes and to help identify relevant areas for exploration in subsequent interviews. An example of line by line coding is detailed below.

Table 5.2: Line by line coding

Participant	Narrative from interview	Line by line code
Sophie	But around about the time that I was 17 or 18, I knew that I was certainly different from a lot of my friends and I knew I was attracted to men and women.	Comparing self to others/sense of difference.
Diane	I found there was a lot more people than I realised identified as that – there’s not much like media attention on it or anything but there is a community there online erm and that was quite nice to find	Finding a community. Reassurance of others.
David	The the erm (pause) the women I was sort of closest to, Erm I guess (laughs) she was disappointed but erm erhh she understood it but I think she would have liked me to be more [pause] - physically affectionate ... [silence]	Has experienced a ‘sort of’ closeness. Dealing with your perception of others’ needs.
Fiona	... it looks like me but it cannot be me because I fell I fell in love with guys a couple of times and it is saying that asexuality is a sexual orientation and I’m obviously heterosexual because for me	Assessing one’s own behaviours and experiences against a definition.

	heterosexual meant fall in love with heterosexual people	
Elaine so I was like, “Oh, I’m just not interested in the boys around here because I have known them since kindergarten and there’s nothing appealing about a boy that you know peed his pants in the first grade.” I was like, “Oh, I’ll be interested in boys once I get to college.”	Providing reassurances to oneself.
Richard	You know, I’d recently separated from my wife, and it kicked everything up in the air and made me reassess about sexuality really and about moving on. It’s a conclusion that I’d come to quite quickly after separating from my ex-wife.	A major life event triggers a re-assessment of own sexuality.

5.7.3 Focused coding

The next step is focused coding, and for Charmaz (2006) suggests that the researcher begins to look for patterns in the open codes, including similarities and links. Larger codes are formed from the open codes during this stage, and the researcher may find themselves forming focused codes, and then later undoing the codes and reforming them into different codes. Concurrent data collection took place at this time, and focused codes became combined, were extended to accommodate others. The table below provides examples of how open codes became focused codes.

Table 5.3: Focused coding

Line by line/open codes	Focused code
Sex is omnipresent	The high visibility of sexuality.
High visibility of sex	
Doused with romance and sex in culture	
Negotiating this very sexual world	
I mean, you walk through the town centre and it’s [sex] everywhere. Absolutely everywhere.	
Finding sex unsatisfactory	The experience of sex and sexuality.
Continuing dissatisfaction with sex	
Tried sex – did not like it	
Confronting a lack of enjoyment of sex	

Not an intensely thrilling experience	
Need to 'be' something	Exploring other identities.
Assuming bi-sexual identity	
Am I gay?	
I tried heterosexual sex	
Joined the LGBT society/Engaging with LGBT networks	
Knowing I was different	Experiencing a sense of difference.
Not interested in what the other girls were interested in	
I think my dad had identified early on that I was slightly different	
Something wasn't quite right, In social situations with peers	
No interest in the sexual stuff that others were into	
I'm a Late bloomer	Constructing a meaningful rationale for lack of interest in dating/sex/sexuality.
Oh, eventually I'll get there.	
Oh, boys just have to mature and stuff	
I had strong views on abstinence	
I just assumed I was bi-sexual	
A throw back from my religious upbringing	
I was too busy with my studies	
It was such a self-evident thing – did not everyone prefer egg and chips to sex	

The focused coding stage allowed for the sketching out or the early development of the model. This can be seen in **APPENDIX H Stage 1**. At this point it was evident that the process to self-identity could be illustrated through three individual stages.

5.7.4 Memos during early analysis

According to Charmaz (2006), memo writing is critical in GT as it provides a meaningful process of prompting the researcher to analyse and code early in the process. This in turn facilitates the researchers to seek out or follow up specific lines of enquiry. At this early stage of data collection and analysis, early memos written as short notes were documented. Some were significant in terms of the next set of interviews. Early memos (from the first 2 interviews) reflect a need to find out more about what was meant by the term 'finding sex unsatisfactory', and 'a relationship does not provide more than a friendship to me'. There were memos written which indicated that 'close friendship and a relationship that does not involve sex' needed further clarification in the next set of interviews. Short notes, written alongside interview data from the initial interviews highlight an interest in 'finding out more about 'adolescent encounters', as part of the

process of questioning one's identity. There was a list of questions arising after the first 2 interviews written into the memos journal, some of which are identified below:

- Is adolescence the only time when people start to consider their asexual identity?
- Are there any other key prompts or indicators pre asexual identity, apart from not liking sex?
- How might you find out about asexuality if internet access is not available?
- What is the difference between a close friendship and relationship?
- Is the experience of not liking/not enjoying sex a female thing – what's the male experience of asexuality?

5.7.5 Theoretical sampling

In the initial stages, purposeful (selective) sampling in action for this study meant that a broad asexual sample was selected – this group of self-identified asexuals contributed to the evolving theory. However, as analysis proceeded theoretical sampling was used to explore some specific areas. A combination of memos and a constant comparison approach, where data were compared with data to find similarities and differences, was used to expand on the emerging codes. For example, when open coding, it was clear in the first interview it was found that the action of physical sex was unsatisfactory, prompting from the second interview highlighted that physical intimacy could be unpleasant and repulsive, but only at times. And that during the early exciting stages of a relationship, physical intimacy could be enjoyable. Memos on this required the issue of physical intimacy to be explored in further interviews with different gender – and also to seek out a number of both male and female asexuals who had been in physically intimate relationships.

5.7.6 Axial coding

The next step in the coding process is that of generating axial codes, although according to Charmaz (2006), the generation of axial codes is optional. Axial coding is referred to as a third type of coding which relates categories to subcategories/focused codes. It is said to “specify the properties and dimensions of a category” (Charmaz, 2006: 60). Whilst open coding is said to fracture the data, axial coding has been identified as a process which allows for large amounts of data to be brought back together again into a coherent

whole (Charmaz, 2006). Using axial coding, it is possible to describe the studied experience more fully (Charmaz, 2006).

This part of the analysis is similar to focused coding in that it involves looking for patterns, similarities and links in the focused codes and placing them into larger axial codes. Axial coding really brought the model together as subcategories started to emerge and the properties within those subcategories became apparent. **Stages 2, 3, 4 and 5 of model development, (Appendix H)** occurred during this phase. As interviews were coded, it became evident that the process of self-identity was more complex than a three-stage model was able to accommodate. There were other aspects to consider in the process. Participants were socialising and developing relationships and their stories brought to light the interactions, and actions as participants engaged with and resisted a culture of sexuality. The model expanded to accommodate the participant's sense of agency, their ability to make their own decisions, their ability to think critically, and to progress onwards towards self-identity.

The process of identity development started to unfold in an iterative way. Some early attempts to chart the process of identifying as asexual were unsuccessful in that they did not capture all of the experiences of all the participants. The earlier models presented the process as linear, and it became clear that for some participants there was a tendency to move around the first stage of identity development a number of times rather than move smoothly through the process. After rereading the transcripts and going back and forth between the analysis and the emerging models, the later models began to capture this process. So, for example, there is a noticeable change between the models from stages 5 to 6 (APPENDIX H), as stage 6 includes the introduction of 'situational binds' and 'reframing'. These categories emerged over time and reflect the theoretical definitions of the actions and events of the participants as they navigated relationship formation and attraction in the context of sexualisation.

The final models became less linear and more permeable at different stages – in that participants could enter them at any point. The model was later refined to illustrate the cyclical process of reframing where participants sometimes repeatedly by-passed the opportunity to resolve their earlier situational binds and labelled then relabelled themselves as something like a late bloomer. This meant that they continued to repeat a

cycle of assimilating and connecting before moving on to begin the process of finding a resolution. One participant seemed to be in a perpetual cycle in the first stage of identity development and it later transpired after revisiting that transcript, that despite responding to the recruitment flyer which was aimed directly at self-identified asexuals, during the interview process he described his identity as “not unequivocally asexual, but somewhere between asexual and heterosexual”. This case did not fit with the emergent theory; and could be considered as a deviant or negative case, which stood far apart from the emergent theory. This raised the question of whether or not this participant was ever fully committed to an asexual identity. Raising the question of whether this participant should be included in the sample. This participant never really owned his asexual identity. What was relevant at this stage of the analysis was that his identity would most likely be considered as ‘Grey-A’ on the asexual spectrum. He may have only realised this had he contemplated his asexual identity as ‘Grey-A’ and if he had moved onto the next stage of identity development. His accounts of his process to self-identifying as asexual situate him on a perpetual cycle of reframing. This finding within the data contributed to the redevelopment of the model into the final version (**Stage 7: Appendix I**). By maintaining an identity which uses a language of sitting “somewhere between asexual and heterosexual” the participant was almost reframing his experiences as sexual as opposed to asexual.

In this step of the analysis, 10 completed subcategories were produced and selected from the axial coding process; (1) Assimilating, (2) Connecting, (3) Situational bind (4) Reframing (5) Disengagement, (6) Searching for explanations, (7) Contemplating asexuality, (8) Embracing the nuances, (9) Critiquing sexuality, (10) Essentially asexual. An example of axial coding is provided below;

Table 5.4: Axial coding

Focused Codes/sub-categories	Axial coding to sub-category	
Exploring identities/identity confusion.	Making sense of oneself in a new sexual world.	Assimilating.
Sexual self-categorisation.		
Defining oneself by a sexuality.		

Positive attitude towards physical intimacy.		
Negative attitude towards physical intimacy.		
Experiencing confusion over feelings towards others.	Weighing up own and others relationships.	
Comparing yourself to others.		
Observing friendships more closely.		
School comparison with peers.		
Confronting a feeling of difference.	Working out if you are different and how.	
Experiencing a sense of difference.		

The axial coding for the remaining subcategories are in the appendices (Appendix F).

5.7.7 Theoretical coding

The theoretical coding process (Charmaz, 2006; Holton, 2007), is the most abstract, conceptual level of coding, which involves constant comparison to inspect the relationships between the categories. Whilst axial codes relate focused codes to categories, the process of theoretical codes conceptualises how the codes may relate to each other and how they become integrated into the theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). The ten categories that have emerged from the axial coding process reflect theoretical definitions of actions or events, and at this stage, they require further examination to give them some explanatory power.

Advanced memos, also known as theoretical notes (Bohm, 2004), written during the open and focused coding process were used to develop the theoretical implications of the categories. Bohm (2004) refers to a theoretical note as anything that notes how something in the text or codes relates to the literature, and writing theoretical memos allows the researcher to think theoretically. Examples of theoretical memos about bonding and attachment, and relationship formation, and how this becomes tangled up with sexuality are provided below.

A theoretical memo about sexuality/becoming sexualised: *I believe we are born with a need to form attachments to others for survival – it is like an innate need to be socially bonded. I’m a midwife, I don’t deny the existence of other forms of attachment but I come to this work with a particular perspective about bonding and attachment which is rooted in the work of Bowlby and Maslow; and that is that, we are born with a need to form*

attachments to others. Pre asexual identity, participants go about their business forming those attachments and that seems to be fine for them.

A theoretical memo about belonging: *I have a sense that the categories of assimilation and connecting are inter - related, and the theory of belonging may add some theoretical meaning to how they relate to identity formation. Participants seem to be engaging in a process of comparing, measuring and trying to categorise themselves (I have called this assimilation) where the participants are trying to make sense of themselves, work out if and how they are different, weighing up facts about themselves and about others.*

Theoretical coding sees the categories identified through the previous stage assembled in a coherent way in order to generate a substantive theory, facilitating the telling of an analytic story (Charmaz, 2006). They conceptualise how the codes are related, and they move the analytic story in a theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2006). The process of theoretical coding resulted in the construction of a model with theoretical significance, with the ten existing categories being related through a number of theories including that of connecting, belonging, agency, self-identity, habitus and doxa.

5.7.8 A substantive model emerging

This section describes the process of the development of a substantive model of asexual self-identity. Included in this section is a presentation of the penultimate framework of asexual self-identity, which will set the scene for the detailed and in-depth presentation of the complete GT in the following chapter.

The GT analysis process allowed the emergence of ten categories. Further analysis, and theoretical coding using theoretical memos led to the expansion of these categories into a conceptual model. This led to the development of a model with a non-linear pattern of progression, enabling the researcher to place the categories of self-identity into a longitudinal type diagram – the categories represent stages in the self-identity process. Further analysis allowed the self-identity processes related to each of these stages to be defined – along with attempts to describe an overall process by which individuals navigate the journey to asexual self-identity.

Developing a substantive model is an iterative process. At times the steps within that process can become complicated, uncertain, and untidy. The model presented here is

the result of many attempts to understand and explain the process. Diagrams and models that were initially considered, then modified, and rejected, only to be refined and reconsidered. Field notes and diagrams can be used to illuminate the development of the model. In the penultimate stages of analysis, a skeleton model emerged. There were still question marks attached to sections related to factors driving the asexual self-identity development process.

5.7.9 Constant comparative method

Charmaz (2006) identifies that the GT method depends on the use of CCM. This requires comparisons to be made between the data, the codes and the categories across the interviews. This analytic step compares similarities and differences between categories from case to case in order to reach theoretical saturation. When this stage is complete, a conceptual model of the social process under investigation should be complete. This process should occur simultaneously to data analysis, but becomes more important in the later stages when the construction of the model and theory are underway.

Using the categories and the properties of those categories which were constructed through the axial coding process, the CCM was used to check and compare the data supporting each category – asking the question, “How different and similar were the issues and the processes that led to people self-identifying as asexual?”

Each category was compared across all data. The table below illustrates the constant comparative process operationalised across the interviews.

Table 5.5: Comparative method table: comparing categories and properties (P=Participant)

	P 1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9 →20
Assimilation	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Connecting	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Situational bind	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Reframing	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Disengagement	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Searching for explanations	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Contemplating asexuality	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√

Embracing the nuances	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Critiquing sexuality	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Essentially asexual	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√

During the CCM process whilst the researcher was exploring the differences and similarities across each participant, the category which was known as the situational bind, and its associated properties, which were discrepant levels of desire for sex, what others seem to be doing, discrepant levels of attraction, sexual expectations, and neutrality with physical intimacy, a further axial code emerged; sexual expectations. This property represented a set of consequences associated with meeting the sexual expectations of others and not meeting those expectations. The relevance of this will be elaborated upon in the following chapter.

Each time the category and at least one of its properties were identified in the data of each participant, a process of exploration of the similarities and differences of each property was undertaken across the data and relevant notes were made. An excerpt of the memos which illustrate this are detailed below.

Memo written during the CCM process: *The act of ‘disengagement’ might need more refinement, is it the right name for that category I wonder, as it occurs more subtly in some scripts than others – it’s not just an active walking away/turning your back on/making a stand against anything sexual – its more subtle for some people – they reflect on it more subtly, for example one participant says – She started to ask herself, “Why am I not interested in finding boyfriends like my friends are?”. Her disengagement was her not actively NOT seeking a partner when everyone else around her seemed to be trying to hook-up. So, disengagement has many meanings ...*

5.8 Data saturation

At its most basic, the notion of saturation refers to the point at which no new ideas emerge. Bryant & Charmaz (2007) identify that researchers recognise when saturation has been reached, when they no longer hear new information from their interviews, and no new information is discovered during analysis. According to O’Reilly and Parker (2012) in GT saturation “is when categories are fully accounted for, the variability between them

are explained and the relationships between them are tested and validated” (O’Reilly & Parker, 2012: 192).

In this study, the point at which no new ideas emerged was around interview 15, although additional interviews were conducted to ensure this was the case. After 18 - 20 interviews no new codes were emerging, the analysis adequately accounted for and explained the variability between categories, and the researcher was satisfied that the categories developed at this stage had strength, and supported an explanation of the process of asexual self-identity. Appendix G identifies all categories and the related properties which will form part of the substantive theory. The models identified in Appendix H outline the process of model development and the stages involved.

5.9 Rigour

To enhance the trustworthiness and rigour within the study, four factors have been suggested for establishing rigour of qualitative research; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The descriptions for each of these steps are detailed in section 4.4.5 in the previous chapter. The operationalisation of these steps is detailed below.

Credibility

- Familiarity with the setting – understanding of asexuality through undertaking a literature review, the results of which are in Chapter 3.
- The use of diaries and memos which contain a running commentary of the process as it develops, throughout the processes of data collection and analysis.
- Collection of substantial qualitative data from up to 24 in-depth interviews.
- Data triangulation – using multiple methods of data sourcing including using on line, email, and flyer recruitment strategies, and interviews with a wide age range of participants.
- Investigator triangulation – regular detailed discussion with supervisors regarding the analysis process and transparency of the process throughout this chapter.
- Management of the subjective meanings and perceptions of me the subject, through the use of a journal, diary and memos, and my discussions of these in the opening chapter of the thesis.

Transferability

- Ensuring that sufficient contextual information about the fieldwork site and the sampling and data collection processes is provided to allow others to make judgements about transferability to their context.
- Ensuring that publication writing highlights pertinent issues for asexuals which will serve the asexual community well and benefit them.

Dependability

- Ensuring that sufficient detail is provided on the processes within the study, thereby enabling others to repeat the work. Sections 5.2 through to 5.8 which provide clarity about the presentation of the rich details of this study including the development of the interview schedules, the thought processes which guided theoretical sampling, the ways in which the interviews were undertaken, the processes of data analysis including open coding, line by line coding, focused coding, axial coding, memo-ing, and the transparency of these processes can and should be considered as adequate descriptive data to allow for a process of comparison to occur.

Confirmability

- Ensuring that the findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics. This has been done through the process of member checking.

5.10 Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the process of gathering and analysing data for the study. The researcher entered the field to identify, recruit, and interview the first participants moving on to subsequent interviews using theoretical sampling facilitated by the inclusion criteria. Coding processes began after the initial 2-3 interviews, and memos and field notes captured aspects which required further investigation and exploration. An ongoing process of theoretical sampling guided and informed subsequent interviews. As more data were gathered, more codes emerged. Axial coding allowed for greater clarity about codes, and about areas for further exploration in further interviews. Categories were constructed from codes, and comparative methods were then used to explore similarities and differences across the data with all cases. A process of member checking was undertaken with four interviewees about the emerging theory and a presentation was delivered to a wide audience consisting of people who self-identify as asexual and

sexual, to gain some feedback about the plausibility of the findings and the analysis. Further interviews and comparison of data was undertaken until a point of saturation was reached and a solid model was constructed.

Chapter 6 Findings

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a substantive GT of how individuals come to self-identify as asexual. The findings reflect the co-constructive and interpretive processes of CGT. Firstly, a summary of the theory will be outlined. The substantive model is introduced as a whole in Appendix I. The categories that underpin the model will be described individually. Narratives will be used to illustrate the relevance of the categories and to provide credibility to the findings.

6.2 Summary of the asexual self-identity theory

The findings from the analysis provide a framework for understanding asexual peoples' experiences of identifying as asexual, and how this process is connected to their relationships with others and their general wellbeing. There was an overall sense from the interview data, that the process of self-identifying as asexual was informed by a central premise of transcending the sexualised world. This was conceptualised as a core category of transcending sexualisation to fulfil the need to belong. During the process of asexual self-identity, all participants describe an awareness of a sexualised world that seems to problematize their efforts **to achieve belongingness**, and the creation of meaningful connections with others, alongside a number of processes, strategies and behaviours that reflect an attempt on their part to address and resolve the difficulties associated with sexualisation. The belongingness hypothesis is that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quality of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995: 497). It was understood that self-identified asexuals, on the journey to identity consolidation, experienced a pervasive context of expectation around sex and sexuality. How they responded to those expectations shaped their levels of uncertainty about their sexual identity, as well as shaping how they felt about themselves and the people around them.

Appendix I outlines the substantive model and explanatory theory of the process that generates asexuality: this will be called Asexual Self-Identity Theory. Three conceptual categories were identified that underpin the core category of transcending sexualisation to fulfil a need to belong, (1) Becoming, (2) Resolution, (3) Consolidation. The basic social process reflects a pattern of progression that may or may not be linear. The three stages

are permeable, they are not entirely sequential for all participants, and some stages can be revisited. Advancement is not contingent on completion of previous stages. When stages are revisited, the properties remain the same, such as the situational bind, however the overall purpose of progression remains the same: to transcend sexuality to fulfil a need to belong. Each category is relational to its individual subcategories, and subcategories were found to iteratively influence each other.

The journey to identifying as asexual begins with a stage of becoming. This reflects a point in life where becoming sexual was presumed to be a definitive pathway or a one-way street for participants. Interview data demonstrates that it is a socially accepted misconception that everyone one will become sexual. Integral to this stage are the properties of assimilating and connecting with others. Data indicates that individuals enter the becoming stage having already encountered the term asexuality, but having limited understanding of what it means to be asexual. The stage of becoming continues in a straightforward way for many, as long as individuals experience satisfaction within the processes of assimilating and connecting. For some, an event, a number of events or a situation occurs resulting in the individual finding themselves in a situational bind: this is a critical juncture in their sexual and social lives where there is a level of risk to their ability to form meaningful relationships: their sense of belonging is potentially compromised. These situations, or events constitute a crisis of internal conflict, and the individual may feel something has to be done to rectify it. Those who decide to rectify it move on to the resolution stage. Sometimes this can be challenging in the short term, but moving on to the resolution stage seems to improve the overall situation in the long term. Some individuals reframe their experience of the situational bind, and by doing so, they by-pass the opportunity to resolve, hence by-passing the opportunity to contemplate their identity as anything other than sexual. However, the process of reframing will perpetuate the 'becoming' cycle and often leads one back in to the situational bind. For those who do not reframe, a stage of resolution follows. This stage alters the becoming trajectory: where individuals make a stand by disengaging from the cultural norms of sexuality/heterosexuality: for example, some stop dating altogether, or some join an alternative or queer community. Participants either take on asexual discourses, and some pragmatically take what they need from the online asexuality resources and communities. Simultaneous disengagement and searching for

explanations invariably leads the individual to asexuality, and the possibility of being asexual. A contemplation of asexuality occurs, and many individuals choose to adopt the asexual identity at this point. In pursuit of an exact definition for their experiences, some participants engage with asexuality's range of identity categories. This endeavour may leave them feeling "out of category", they go back to reframing and perpetuate the stage of 'becoming' finding themselves back in the situational bind. For those who embrace an asexual identity, they reflect on and remember the challenges they faced, whilst simultaneously critiquing sexual scripts. This process brings about an understanding and acceptance of asexuality and what that means to them: the essential self is considered as asexual: where the need to belong is now able to transcend an inner acknowledgement of the sexualised world. They embrace the nuances of attraction and relationship formation, they break with traditional notions of relationship formation (where having sex and being sexual seems to be considered the gold standard of relationship formation), they consolidate their asexual self-hood.

6.3 Core category overview

This section introduces the core category that emerged from the analysis. Evidenced within the data is an overarching social context of sexualisation, which participants have to contemplate simultaneously as they engage in the formation of social bonds and meaningful relationships. The categories and subcategories which support the core category are presented in sections 6.4 – 6.6.

6.3.1 Transcending sexualisation to fulfil a need to belong

During the interviews it became clear that the process of self-identifying as asexual was informed by a central premise of transcending a sexualised world. Many of the participants alluded to the process of the formation of social bonds and connections, giving rise to an awareness of a world that was driven by expectations revolving around sexuality. Participants unanimously described feelings of difference as being central to their first understanding of their asexual identity - the difference they were feeling seemed to crystallise over time, leading them to recognise that at the core of how they felt, was a lack of something that other people seemed to have, or seemed to be displaying; best described as an enthusiasm or a motivation to become sexual in some way:

“I was around 16 – it was cut and dried, I always felt something wasn’t quite right. In social situations with peers, there was an expectation that I would start liking boys. It came up really young – I’m supposed to start liking boys at 6/7/8 maybe, like as soon as I was put into regular social situations with boys I had that understanding, boy bands, who is the cutest. (Valerie)

Whilst at this stage, participants did not identify themselves as asexual, the data indicates that unanimously, they were united by a shared experience, and were set apart from their peers as a consequence of:

1. Their negative appraisal of the sexual component of their relationships.
2. The absence of a sexual component within their experiences of attraction.
3. A combination of both.

Some participants, although having previously encountered the term asexuality and having questioned their own sense of difference, and whether this might be related to asexuality, proceeded to explore the possibility of alternative sexual identities rather than considering the possibility of asexuality. Take Rachel for example, who began telling her story with the statement: “I always thought I was a straight girl that did not like sex” (Rachel). This evaluation of identity, and subsequent defaulting to an alternative sexual identity, stems from a surrounding social context that provides powerful assumptions about sex and expectations of sexuality. Some of these expectations could be considered by a non-asexual (allosexual) as subtle, benign or insignificant: for example, the expectation or presumption that they fancy someone else, or find someone attractive, or that they want to date someone. However, when they reflected on their journeys to identifying as asexual, they provided examples of what gave rise to their early experience of a sense of difference, and invariably it was linked to a sexual component of their relationships or the experience of attraction. It seemed that there was a centralised model of sexuality driving a number of expectations about relationship formation. For Diane and Shirley, this was associated with early classroom and playground discussions about attraction to other people:

*“And then other people started fancying people and it was like
“Who do you fancy, who do you fancy?”, and I was like, “No one”*

*(laughs and breathes heavily), that was like my first kind of sign”
(Diane)*

“Because you get to your teenage years and everyone is like, oh, I wanna kiss that guy, and I want to erm date that girl, and you have boys that like guys, and boys that like girls. Then, erm, the way they express it, I never felt it, like, I’ve dated some guys, I’ve thought I’d you know ‘fall in love’, things like that, but when I would go out with them, I would just not feel it” (Shirley)

Similarly, for Valerie, these expectations gave rise to a questioning, about the processes her peers were employing in order to choose someone to be attracted to:

“I don’t understand how you ‘chose’ this, am I just supposed to do this arbitrarily?” “I don’t understand how you do this” ... Then as I got older, they started crushes and dating” (Valerie)

Significant in Anne’s journey was the recognition that the level of media attention surrounding issues of sex and sexuality, gave rise to a number of negative feelings:

“So, I knew, even before ever I went on AVEN, that I was just [pause], generally annoyed with the media for having a lot of sex dominating imagery and stuff like that, like, you can see the little things here and there, and that just annoyed me and stuff. And I wasn’t interested, and it angered me that it was everywhere, all the time, and it was tiring” (Anne)

The quote below highlights the challenges that Shirley faced in her journey to asexuality, growing up in a part of the world which is represented both domestically and internationally as a sexually uninhibited society:

“I mean some people have problems like they feel pressured by the amount of sexuality that is around, but erm if I had known earlier I think I would have felt more comfortable during my teenage years. Cause you know I had my friends trying to set me up with this guy and that guy and sometimes I accepted to go out

with a guy because of peer pressure. And we, I mean, I'm from Brazil, so we have a, you know, it is very open and sexualised, you know the carnival and that sort of thing, and parents and cousins and uncles, and big family. You know they are always asking, you know, oh what about the boys, about this and about that. And if you don't go out with a guy there's that "Oh maybe she's like 'That' you know ... maybe she's a lesbian" and all that kind of talk, so they expect you to just go out and date even when you are 15 and 16 they want you to go on dates. And I kind of want, you know sometimes because I liked that person, but most of time it was pressure" (Shirley)

These examples were wide ranging, illustrating that the physical act of sex as a component of relationship formation, and sexual attraction was put forth to them at an early age in terms of being an important facet of their on-going lives. In the quote below, Patrick alludes to the fact that his sex education curriculum education did not feature any recognition of non-sexual relationships:

"In Brazil, in school I had sexual education early but I never learned that you can NOT have sex, I always learned that eventually everyone was going to have sex and everyone was going to like it"
(Patrick)

Participants indicated that there was a positing of activities associated with sexuality as being normal, and a key source of social reward:

"It's just more common to get married, have kids, if you're a woman you'll have a man, and everyone thinks especially in cultures like mine, you know Latino's, we have this ... you know 'family is the most important thing'. So, and, and, we were a very patriarchal society until 3 or 4 decades ago women were considered to grow up, get married, have kids and be a good mum and a good wife – that was their job. It's like it's the one thing that's meant to make you happy you are your own person and you're going to find happiness in something. For some people

being a mother is the happiest thing that can happen to them”

(Shirley)

Alternatively, seeking belonging which signifies the human and emotional need to be an accepted member of a group, was considered to be compromised if sexuality was not central to their relationships. Disengagement or deviations from what appeared to be a set of expectations about sex, sexual behaviour and sexual relationship formation was constructed negatively: a threat to an inner desire to belong – with consequences associated with loneliness, feeling less important, being left behind, being abandoned:

“... as people started to pair off and have, you know, these people, and starting to marry, that sort of thing, and I started to have these things were like you were so tight with your friends in high school, and you went together as this huge shambling mob everywhere, and people started to fall off, and date, and you'd never see them again, or it felt like you wouldn't. I mean you would see them again, but they vanish for about a year or whatever, and you started to feel like “I'm going to be alone”. Like, the fact that I don't want to have sex means that no one will ever – I will never be more important than anyone else to anybody. I will never be first in anyone's life because of the sex, like the fact that I don't want to have sex means that no one will ever – I will never be more important than anyone else to anybody. I will never be first in anyone's life because of the sex, and so that was really hard”

(Paula)

Sexuality is played out to participants as a symbolic aspect of human life, in that it is embedded within the participants' cultures, within their education systems, and within their understandings of models of wellbeing and happiness. Participants became aware of the sympathetic and negative attitudes towards people who did not appear to form meaningful relationships – and these attitudes shaped participants beliefs about the value to sexual relationships, where meaningful became conflated with sexual:

“Like someone who did not date and did not have kids – oh poor thing she did not have kids, she did not get married – they pity

people like that like, I have an aunt who did not get married and it was like “Oh she had such a poor life, she’s not happy” and you know when you are young you don’t want to be unhappy ... It’s like it’s the one thing that’s meant to make you happy”. (Shirley)

For some participants, they experienced a degree of unhappiness themselves when they were not in relationships, and this reinforced to them that they were driven by an inner desire to connect with others despite their inner acknowledgement of their sense of difference from others:

“I tried to brainwash myself that it is fine being alone – until there came a point when my friends were having relationships. I felt jealous and I did not like feeling that way. Had to accept that I wanted a relationship as well as being ace” (Sharon)

Seeking belonging, connecting with others, finding that special person, and not being alone was central to participants’ accounts as they negotiate a sexualised world. Here, Elaine explains the challenges of being honest about her attitude towards sexual intimacy with others:

“ I’m on Tinder but really I mean if I never found a guy on there I really wouldn’t care because I’m really not that interested, I just don’t want to be alone for the rest of my life and if I could find someone kind of like how I feel about my best friends, but I guess someone who would be willing to marry me or something or like that, I would be willing to and I would probably be willing to be more girlfriend-y with them even though I would explain to them up front like, “This is never going to make me actually attracted to you.” And on there, I’ve got some negative stuff because the boys will be like, “Oh, you should come over for this.” And I’m like, “I’m not really interested in sex.” And they flip: they were so nice before and then you tell them you’re not interested in sex and then all of a sudden they are like, “You’re ugly, you’re fat, no-one likes you anyway, and you’re a bitch.” And it’s like, “Really? Because you liked me 2 seconds ago” (Elaine)

Participants' experiences of transcending the sexualised world, existed within a framework of societal heterosexism. This section outlines the central premise of transcending the sexualised world. In summary, participants describe a strong sense of desire to be connected to others in meaningful ways; the meaningful seemed to take the form of sexual. They describe their fears about being left alone, being lonely. They also explain their experiences of existing in a world where there is a centralized model of sexuality driving relationship formation. Intrinsic to the overarching core category is a rich description of the acknowledgement of a set of expectations, which seem to arise from a multitude of sexual assumptions – alongside a degree of inner turmoil about the consequences of their embodied experiences of sex, sexual attraction and physical intimacy.

The following three sections (6.4, 6.5, and 6.6) will detail the findings from the coding and categorisation process in the previous chapter, and outline the composition of the core category of the GT.

6.4 Category 1: Becoming

Becoming is the conceptual category which emerged from participants accounts of their early experiences which shaped their identity development. It signifies a stage in a person's life where they are on a cusp of becoming sexual (or as the data will go on to evidence, asexual) however, again as the data will reveal, becoming asexual was never an option that was formally put to them. For most participants, although not all, this stage was during adolescence, a stage when they were developing their interpersonal relationships. Noteworthy though, some participants describe themselves as having known of their differences in terms of the absence of any sexual component within their experiences of attraction, from a very young, pre-pubescent age.

The becoming stage is also marked with experiences of growth and development both socially and emotionally. Integral to the stage of becoming are the interactive subcategories of (1) Assimilating, and (2) Connecting. Assimilating represents the taking in, weighing up and making sense of the information going on around during the formation of bonds and connections. Connecting signifies an ongoing drive to form social bonds and connections with other people. Noteworthy, as the data below will evidence, a significant number of participants enter the becoming stage having had some previous

exposure to the term asexuality in one way or another, but having very little understanding of what that term will eventually come to mean to them, as the data below will demonstrate:

“So, I first came across this term asexuality and because a friend mentioned it to me and she is a type of asexual and erm and around the time I also started seeing the term of tinder and erm when I first looked into it did not really resonate with me because I thought well I had crushes, so I can’t be asexual” (June)

“When I was a senior in high school, one of my friends used the term asexual’. he said, “Oh, I’m asexual.” And she used it in a way that actually meant celibate, but it was the first time I heard that word other than the science way of reproduction and I’ve never really thought too much about it other than I was like, “Oh, that’s cool for her.” (Elaine)

Like I say, when I was 19 and I was talking about sexuality with people, I was using the word “asexual” then ... So, I must have been aware of the term then, but I don’t know, I don’t think I was really aware of what it really meant” (Sophie)

“I remember when I was about 18, 19, being on a train and reading an article about asexuality and although I identified with some of it, I kind of dismissed it ...” (Richard)

6.4.1 Subcategory: Assimilating

This subcategory represents a process of integration and incorporation of sexual knowledge, alongside the development of a level of understanding about sexuality. This seems to occur in order to facilitate the process of becoming part of a sexualised community. Evaluating and comparing was a significant part of assimilating. The properties within this subcategory are (1) Making sense of oneself in a sexualised world, (2) Weighing up own and others relationships and (3) Working out if you are different and how.

Making sense of oneself in a sexualised world: Data suggests that the sexualised world was complicated for participants. The whole process of dating, as something that was worthy of being excited about and motivated towards, seemed fundamentally flawed to participants. For many participants, there was limited understanding of what the big deal was. In fact, Sharon and Paula's accounts of their experiences of dating led them to conclude that their peers were not being completely honest about the whole thing:

"Everyone perceived me as heterosexual, urmm. I was going out with guys. I did not think that there was anything wrong with me until I was about 20, cos, at first I thought, I always knew that my experiences were different than the others. But at first when I was I think at secondary school I thought others were either lying or bluffing about [pause], cos I couldn't really relate to what they were saying ...". (Sharon)

"I just thought maybe it's not the right person or maybe I just haven't tried hard enough, this is like everyone, nobody really feels anything like that, but they're just you know, same as you whatever. I did not know" (Paula)

Shirley was trying to assimilate facts and knowledge about her experiences of attraction to help inform her of which sexual category she should align herself to:

"... and then I thought both times, you know, I wanted to get to know about this girl or wanted to know about this boy, and it was because I had crushes on them and erm, so it's like I was slowly putting everything together you know in my experiences and understanding them" (Shirley)

Because asexual identity development is a process for which individuals have been unprepared, and due to asexuality's lack of visibility, it is an identity which is largely contextually unsupported. For many participants in this stage, it would seem that the process of understanding one's identity through assimilation is characterized by confusion. The quote below from June reflects some of the confusion that was encountered during the becoming stage:

"I thought I was probably heterosexual. Then when I was around 18, I had a kind of crush on a girl in my class, so I thought maybe I'm bisexual, cos I also had a crush on a boy so ... and erm nothing came of either of those crushes, and it did not really bother me"
(June)

Sophie's asexual identity was almost like a slow unfolding process where the assimilation and connecting stage took her back and forth between sexual identities:

"... but around about the time that I was 17 or 18, I knew that I was certainly different from a lot of my friends and I knew I was attracted to men and women. And so I think I assumed that that must be bisexual and I still remember though being about 19, because I had a gap year when I was 19, and I remember being frank or saying to somebody that I knew then that I couldn't work out if I was bisexual or asexual" (Sophie)

Weighing up own and others relationships: Shirley tried dating and relationships, and these experiences led her to conclude that there were some fundamental aspects of relationship formation that were not incongruent to her. These experiences left her blaming herself:

"... I was asking myself – "Do I wanna see this person naked? "Do I want to kiss them and hug them?" The answer is "No" ... "So, I like someone, and I don't want to kiss them". And when I was younger I thought "Right, OK, maybe I'm very selfish, that I just want their attention, then I don't want to give them attention, maybe that kind of thing". That felt very selfish, cold, maybe even prudish, although I am not" (Shirley)

Patrick was assimilating knowledge about sex by satisfying his curiosity – a curiosity that had evolved from what he perceived to be everyone else making a 'big deal' (Patrick) out of it:

"I had my first sexual experience at 14, cos I was curious and wanted to know what the big deal was ... What drove me to sex, one thing, it was curiosity – I was very curious about what was the thing that other people feel about sex that was so great and I could not feel" (Patrick)

Working out if you are different and how: The reported feelings of inner conflict expressed by Patrick and Shirley above, coupled with what could be described as an embryonic asexual identity led participants to engage in negative self-evaluation, an example of which is provided by Elaine below:

"I first started to think I was something other than straight, or not the first time but that's when I started to seek other people. I guess all my life I never was interested in dating or anything, or what the other girls seemed to be into. I always thought I was just weird" (Elaine)

For some participants, it was difficult to make sense of what was going on. Sophie for example, reflected on her experience, and concurred that making sense of her sexual identity was complicated by the 'nasty tropes that come into play about the female identity' (Sophie)

"I sort of had inklings that it [not enjoying sex] might not be normal, but then a lot of what culture throws at you, especially if you're a woman, is that sex is a sort of thing that's quite passive and that not that many people are really bothered about anyway. The first time always hurts, you're always getting messages that are essentially you're not particularly expected to enjoy sex, basically (laughter) or certainly those are the messages that I saw. And so I thought, "Okay, well, I know I like men and women, I'm not bothered about sex, I don't masturbate, but I'm not sure if that's normal or not", so I kind of just assumed, "Oh, well, that must mean I'm bisexual then, probably ..." (Sophie)

Assimilating represents one of the interactive components of the stage of becoming. It represents a process of learning, contemplating, understanding, and comparing. It also illustrates how the participants absorbed information around them in order to contemplate where they might belong. This was only possible when it occurred alongside the process of connecting, which is addressed in the following section.

6.4.2 Subcategory: Connecting

Participants stories and accounts of coming to an asexual identity unanimously involved connecting with others. Through the process of connecting with others and forming social bonds, participants were socialised within what felt like sexualised settings, to a set of explicit and implicit norms. However, some of these norms were incongruent to participant's values and beliefs, and this incongruence was a catalyst for the process of assimilating (as discussed previously). What was central to participants' experiences was the learning and understanding that came with connecting with others: learning about themselves, and learning about other people. In short, the connections that participants made, and what they learned from those connections were intrinsic to the process of the development of their asexual self-identity. The properties within this subcategory are (1) Connecting with friends, (2) Connecting with others, (3) Connecting to a group or society', and (4) Connecting through dating.

Connecting with friends: For some participants, during the becoming stage, the connections that existed within their simple friendships gave rise to a level of questioning:

"At University, I did wonder maybe, I was romantically interested in my best friend, because I was like, well, a lot of what we do can be classed as romantic, like we hugged and we spent a lot of time together. And erm, it was, yeah, it was kind of like the romantic part without any kissing and stuff, and it really confused me. I was like, 'so, is this just platonic, or am I thinking of it as romantic?' And I kind of realised that, 'no, I do think of it as platonic', and it's just that, it's just really weird because there's not much of a boundary there and I think it's just how you think of it in your head, rather than what ... I don't know, it's difficult ..." (Diane)

Similar to Diane, Elaine experienced a degree of emotional pain and sadness when her intense friendship with a school friend ended. There were some fundamental aspects to the friendship that almost blurred the boundaries between friendship and relationship and left her having to explain to her parents why they were no longer friends:

“ ... and then my senior year of high school I was really close friends with this one girl and the reason we got so close is we both played softball, and we both made JV our senior year, for the first time, and we were the only 2 seniors that, like it was our first time making JV and seniors. And so it was something we bonded over, because we weren't the greatest players, but we finally made it. And we just started a really close friendship, and we became best friends really quickly. And then shortly after she came out as bisexual, and she dated some girls, and there was like a rumour going around that me and her were together, and I was really, like almost obsessed with her, I always wanted to make her happy and stuff, but it was never a sexual thing and that's when I used to think I was like, “Was that romance? Was that the romantic attraction?” because I referred to her as my ex because when we stopped being friends it felt like a break-up, it hurt a lot: I had to explain to my parents why I no longer hung out with her and it was really weird, like the relationship I had with her but it had become abusive, not like physically, but she was actually not that great of a person once I took a step back” (Elaine)

The quote below highlights how the blurring of the boundaries between friendship and relationship acts as a catalyst for participants having to find labels to attach to their experience. In this case, June was drawing on the language which is used in a sexual context, 'crush' because there does not seem to be the words available to apply to what was actually going on:

“Well its difficult because it was 10 years ago now – it mostly was well I really enjoyed spending time with those people, I kept thinking about them all the time, thinking how can I spend time

with them, or what will they think of me, so stuff like that. Erm, I hadn't experienced this before and so it was also a desire to be liked by them, and erm, yeah so I labelled it as a 'crush', and so erm, so, it was people from high school and after graduation. Well, I've seen the girl again once because we were also friends, [difficult to hear] but yes, it was about 9 or 10 years since then ..."
(June)

Anne, on the other hand has access to a more nuanced vocabulary to capture her experience of her intense friendship connection:

"So, she was my best friend for ten years of my life, essentially and I would still call her my best friend now. So, our relationship, kind of, was ... I mean it started platonically and then I guess in high school, developed into hyper-platonic feelings and then she started flirting at me, but I was like, "Oh, this is just friendship, right?" So, the line, for me, between platonic and romantic was very, very blurred, just because we had such a very strong relationship beforehand" (Anne)

Connecting with others and becoming unconnected: This was also intrinsic to the process of identifying as asexual, and is reflected in the story told by Olivia about her experience of being very close and then separating:

"Well, I was on a summer camp and I clicked with a girl there – and when summer camp was over, I really missed her. And that was not how I normally missed people. I started thinking about it – and I knew it was a thing, so yeah, and, then wondered if I was lesbian, but then realised I was bi-sexual" (Olivia)

It seems that the process of separation can be a trigger for contemplation. For some participants, the ending of a friendship, and the feelings that this evokes can be just as powerful; as the friendship itself.

Connecting to a group/society: For some participants, connecting to an LGBT society was integral to an initial exposure to the term asexuality and what that meant:

“Around that time one of my close friends came out as a gay and I was thinking about what that meant and how did he stay in the closet for so long and then I started thinking about myself and my experiences and I did more research and then when I went back to school in that Fall I joined the LGBT group on campus and that’s when I started identifying as asexual when people would ask me that was the first time I would say it” (Elaine)

Connecting through dating: Some asexuals, connecting with others through the framework of traditional ‘dating’ was central to their experience of assimilating. Like Shirley for example, who reflected back on her early dating experiences and how that led her to begin a process of weighing up her likes and dislikes:

“... and at the first date, I was around twenty I think, and I was watching a movie and was with this guy, you know, on a date, and I remember thinking, you know, I would rather watch this movie than kiss him. And I liked him yeah, but when ... but I was more interested in the movie we were watching, and after that I was like – OK, I don’t want to go out with you again, and sometimes I wonder, do I like girls, but at that time, I would find them pretty, but I just did not feel anything. And I ask myself, do I want to see this person naked, do I want to kiss and touch and the answer is no – laughs a little. So around when I was 21/20/21, right after I’d dated this guy, I went and found a website called AVEN which is for asexuals” (Shirley)

The reality of the situation that participants were facing in the becoming stage came into being through interactions. In summary, the data reflects the criticality of the simultaneous processes of connecting and assimilating to the development of an asexual identity and central to the process of becoming. These processes gave rise to a sense of difference during the becoming stage. Participants witnessed their peers displaying an enthusiasm to become sexual and engaging with sexuality. The concurrent understandings that the participants were forming during this stage, seemed to make the links between non-sexuality (and for many, non-heterosexuality) and the self, very

problematic, as becoming non-sexual, or not becoming sexual did not seem to be an option. Not only that, anything other than a sexual identity, in the minds of the participants, would be perceived as negative: a potentially stigmatised identity which would culminate in loneliness and unhappiness, as identified earlier in this chapter in section 6.3.1.

The process of becoming plays a major role in shaping participants asexual identity. For participants, the process of becoming is complex. It might be that the process itself will be complex for both allosexuals and asexuals, however in the absence of allosexual data this is merely conjecture. It is hypothesized that the stage of becoming is a universal process where individuals assimilate and connect with others and through this, they reach a level of understanding about their sexual needs, values, preferences for sexual activities, and modes of sexual expression. Sexual and asexual identity development appears to entail an understanding (implicit or explicit) of one's membership in either a privileged dominant group or a marginalized, minority group. If the marginalised, minority group were lesbian, gay or bisexual, then there would be a corresponding set of attitudes, beliefs, and values with respect to members of other sexual identity groups. However, here, the marginalised group are asexuals. The uniqueness of the asexual identity leaves asexuals with no corresponding attitudes, beliefs, and values to learn from or to follow, rendering the process more complex than it would be for other marginalised groups. What remains fundamental to this process is the need to fulfil a sense of belonging. The following section outlines an interruption to the becoming process. The disturbance of the becoming sexual trajectory causes participants to add another layer of questioning and uncertainty onto their attitude towards sexuality.

6.4.3 Subcategory: (Experiencing) Situational binds

A situational bind interrupts the process of becoming and places the participant in a state of confusion, uncertainty and in some cases turmoil. Binds involve internal conflict where an individual has to make a choice between one value and belief over another (Nathaniel, 2006).

Within the data, situational binds involved an intricate interweaving of factors, such as discrepant levels of desire for sex in relationships, discrepant levels of attraction within a peer group, expectations from others, and individual morals and values and beliefs. They

varied in their complexity and context, but they were similar in terms of their immediate and long-term effects. They could be summarised as follows: (1) Conflicts about discrepant levels of desire for or interest in sexual activity and (2) Discrepant levels of 'attraction' within peer group.

Conflicts about discrepant levels of desire for or interest in sexual activity: Some participants were faced with situations where their interest in, and their motivation to engage with the physical act of sex was different from that of their partners. This type of situational bind resulted in inner conflict and distress. Sophie for example in a long-term relationship with her boyfriend, for whom she had very strong feelings, but feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the sexual component of their relationship:

"... So I did sleep with people, and I just thought "I'm not really enjoying this". And it became more of a problem when I had a boyfriend in my late 20s. He had quite a high sex drive and I just could not keep up, it was just really, really, unpleasant. And even though I really, really liked him and I found him really attractive and I loved him very much, just the act of having sex, I came to find it really uncomfortable and kind of repulsive" (Sophie)

Sharon, in the early stages of a new relationship, was faced with the prospect of having to engage on a sexual level with someone for whom she felt strongly, but had no desire to sexually engage with:

"I was in a [pause] erm, let's say, let's call it a platonic relationship, for about 5 years, and I never realised that it wasn't right, in a way it felt so right, but then we had a break. And I was in Amsterdam at the time, and I was going out with a guy, and obviously the nature of the relationship was really different. And I really panicked, I said, 'oh my God', [sigh], I can't do this, and I actually did like the guy, really liked him. And I did not know what to do, until finally, I left after a few months, and I never spoke to him again, I feel really sorry about that, but I was so confused" (Sharon)

David made a special connection with someone, but felt unable to take it any further:

“So ... fast forward now, until I’m 37, and ermmm I’d had a very pleasant evening with a woman, when it sort of struck me afterwards ... that if there was ever going to be such a person as Ms Right she would be it. You know, I mean, she was just the type. We had a lot in common, we got on very well, and it was a very pleasant evening. And I thought, you know, if I’m not going to have ... or if she’s not going to do anything for me in that way, you know, I can’t accept that I haven’t met the right woman yet – but I had [Silence] ermmm so ... [silence] ...” (David)

Some participants experienced a neutrality about sex, which was incongruent to their partners’ feelings. Alex for instance encountered a situational bind during a series of sexual experiences, which left him with a general lack of interest in sexual activity:

“... and then I went through a series of sexual experiences at 18, and got bored with them very quickly, (laughs) like maybe within a month, and I thought it was something to do with either me, or the situation. And like ... it wasn’t that the entire concept of sexuality was not working for me, but it must have been something in the scenario” (Alex)

David experienced a degree of neutrality, not about the person themselves, but about the act of sex:

“ ... yes, well, yes, well, I suppose, yeah well, I think it’s really at the point I suppose actually, when, [pause] some people were actually interested in having sexual relationships with me (laughs) I realised, I just thought, I just wasn’t interested – it’s not ‘you’ as in the person, but in sexual relationships [pause] ... “. (David)

One participant’s reflections on an early sexual experience highlighted the awkwardness that arose from his situational bind:

“ ... then my first girlfriend came along when I was 17, and the whole sexual mechanics of that was very awkward, and we just put it down to me being nervous and me being respectful, and me

being slightly different. But, actually, I just wasn't capable for quite a long time" (Richard)

Situational binds did not just affect the participants themselves; they affected their partners. Alex and David during their reflections alluded to the negative impact of discrepant levels of desire on another person:

"... I remember when I got into a serious relationship later, and part of me was really reluctant to have a relationship with any sexual component, and I could not figure out for the life of me why I had that hang up, because I would never say I'm sexually repulsed. So, I was wondering, you know, what's going on, and it really negatively affected that relationship because it really negatively affected the other person, because I refused to have a sexual relationship with them and I did not know why, because everything else in the relationship was really wonderful" (Alex)

"Erm, I guess (laughs) she was disappointed, but erm, erhh, she understood it, but I think she would have liked me to be more – physically affectionate – I did not want to sort of 'play a part' with her" (David)

The nature of situational binds was varied. Some issues occurred for participants which were less about the physical act of sex, and more about levels of attraction as addressed below. These could be equally distressing.

Discrepant levels of attraction within peer group: For a small number of participants, the situational binds occurred in their school years, where they faced a degree of confusion and uncertainty about what their peers claimed to be experiencing compared to themselves. Some participants questioned the authenticity of the behaviours of their peers:

"... because I felt like I was faking a lot of interest in things that my peers were interested in, and I wasn't sure if it was just a social game that everyone faked it or if it was legitimately something different" (Alex)

“So, I guess when I was in high school, I dated a little, and I never felt what I thought I was supposed to feel. And I just thought maybe it's not the right person, or maybe I just haven't tried hard enough, this is like everyone, nobody really feels anything like that, but they're just you know, same as you, whatever ... ” (Paula)

Other participants perceived themselves to be in a bind when they witnessed their friends dating and developing crushes, they did not share their experiences. Helen and Valerie both felt a burden of expectation upon them to do what everyone else seemed to be doing so easily:

“As a kid, all my classmates were going crazy about boy bands, having crushes on each other, and dating. And I was thinking, “oh somethings not right here, I don't understand this cos I just don't get any of this, how are you guys like getting these feelings, how are you initiating it, it's all completely beyond me”, but I kind of had this expectation on me” (Valerie)

“... I think it started for me around high school, everyone started going through puberty and getting all these stereotypes of what they should be doing I suppose. And urm I had no interest in like, the sexual aspect of anything, so, I'd hear my friends being like ‘Oh that person's so hot, and ‘Gosh I'd love to sleep with them’ and I'm kind of like ‘mmm, cool?’. And this was me at about 14/15 maybe, and erm, at that time I did not really know what it was, I was just kind of like, maybe I'm a bit special ... ”(Helen)

A small number of participants were exposed to the expectations of others. Both Rachel and Diane enjoyed their friendship connections with boys, and became alarmed that these connections were being misconstrued as potentially sexual, or even just more than friendship:

“ ... I was being friendly, and guys thought it was something else, I was shocked that's not what I wanted them to believe” (Rachel)

“ ... It’s just awkward and I’d feel embarrassed and erm I don’t know, I don’t like it. Erm so yeah, people that have gone, ‘do you wanna date?’ – well they did not say it like that, but you know what I mean. Erm and yeah, one of these boys that was hanging out with me, he kept insisting to pay for things, and wouldn’t let me pay. And I was like no, this is not a date, I don’t want you to pay. And he bought me chocolates and flowers and I thought I must tell him, I need to make it really clear, I’m not interested in him. Erm, it feels awkward and I feel guilt not wanting to hang out with him because of that – because he’s a nice person” (Diane)

As a subcategory, the situational bind represents a process of negotiation and a period of conflict. Data highlights that the situational bind places the participants in a dilemma. The absence of any motivational force to engage in a specific set of behaviours associated with sexuality renders participants at risk of being unable to form meaningful relationships: potentially, their sense of belonging is compromised. However, engaging seems to be associated with inner conflict and negativity.

6.4.4 Subcategory: Reframing

Following on from the situational bind, a significant number of participants engaged in reframing: they reflected on their situational bind, and considered it from a perspective which could potentially fulfil their drive to continue to be connected to others. By doing this, they were able to create a meaningful reason for the awkwardness or the internal and external conflict they encountered during or within the situational bind. Some participants were able to construct an understandable and acceptable context for the absence or lack of motivational force to engage in a specific set of behaviours associated with sexuality. The key and overarching property of reframing was found to be ‘The acceptable context for the situational bind’.

The acceptable context for the situational bind: A number of participants applied different labels to themselves as a way of reframing the situation. Elaine’s reframing process involved sifting through a number of possibilities for her lack of interest in boys, and placing it into a more acceptable context linked to the behaviour of boys, or her being overwhelmed with the demands of schooling:

“ I guess all my life I never was interested in dating or anything, or what the other girls seemed to be into. I always thought I was just weird, and, also I went to a small school, so I was like, “Oh, I’m just not interested in the boys around here because I have known them since kindergarten and there’s nothing appealing about a boy that, you know, peed his pants in the first grade. I was like, Oh, I’ll be interested in boys once I get to college. And, I went to college, in my Freshman year I was like, ‘Oh, I’m just so overwhelmed with school, that’s why I’m not noticing anyone.”
(Elaine)

Rachel reflected on her religious upbringing and concluded her lack of motivation to engage in sexual activities were associated with that:

“I was raised pretty religious so ermmm, for me, sex was never something I had to think about because it wasn’t something that I was going to do until I got married. So, I almost did not think about it, and all of my friends were of a similar mind set. So, I just sort of avoided all thoughts about sex and boys and everything cos I just, I was so focused on studies. I did not really care about boys to be honest, in college it was really similar, I was so busy again, I hadn’t met anybody [silence] [difficult to hear] ... Then I had boyfriend, and started having sex, and I sort of just assumed it was a hangover from being so previously religious – and I thought that was why I was having so many hold ups {silence} so yeah ...” (Rachel)

Richard was able to reconcile his situational bind by relating it to his political ideologies:

“ ... before I’d made the conclusion about not being heterosexual, I always thought, Well, I’m just a feminist, really. I’ve got high respect for women in that regard, but, you know, it’s not mutually exclusive ...” (Richard)

Labelling oneself as a late bloomer was another strategy employed by the participants as a way of reframing their experience, and placing into a more understandable context. For some, sexuality was a place they needed to get to, and this strategy seemed to provide reassurance that they would as Valerie put it, “get there eventually”.

“ ... but then I was like, I’m still too young to know for sure, because some people were just late bloomers and I know my mum did not go out with people until she was quite late on as well so, I was like Ahhhh [sighs] maybe I’m just like my mum, I’ll just be a late bloomer”. (Diane)

The self-labelling of late developer or late bloomer provided a layer of comfort to participants. It meant that they did not have to consider seeking any kind of advice, and they could keep themselves open to the idea of positive sexual experiences in the future:

“I kind of dismissed it, as a ‘late teenager’, who’s possibly a little bit confused about the whole thing” (Richard)

“I guess in High school I knew I was a late bloomer, ermmm, or at least I thought I was a late bloomer, because I felt like I was faking a lot of interest in things that my peers were interested in” (Alex)

Interesting here is that, for men in particular, the violation of normative scripts for the timing of sexual debut by way of nonengagement is associated with negative evaluation from peers, but for Alex and Richard, the option of labelling oneself as a late bloomer was still preferable to the potential negative social and interpersonal consequences of identifying as asexual.

As a subcategory, reframing gave permission to participants to continue exploring the potential of their sexuality. By reframing the experiences as they did, the participants were able to continue to consider themselves as still belonging to the sexual majority. What is notable about reframing however is that it facilitates a process of remaining in the stage of becoming – as long as participants continue to reframe their experiences in a sexual context, they never move on to a meaningful resolution. The following section

presents the process of resolution that participants enter if they avoid reframing their situational bind into something more acceptable to them.

6.5 Category 2: Resolution

Resolution involves a level of acknowledgement that a problem exists and that it requires a solution. It is a move to almost set things right, and involves an interactive process of (a) Disengagement (b) Searching for explanations and (c) Contemplating asexuality which will be addressed in section below. Disengagement and searching for explanations occur simultaneously, and they iteratively influence each other.

6.5.1 Subcategory: Disengagement

Disengagement represents a number of activities which define a process of separation from mainstream sexuality. It illustrates that for participants, there were a number of activities following on from the situational bind which reflected separation, a disconnect from, or a hiatus, which was crucial to them finding a resolution. The properties of this subcategory were (1) Separation, (2) Distancing from relationships, and (3) Disengaging from normative (hetero) sexual scripts.

Separation: For some participants, disengagement represented a separation from a partner. The concept of disengagement is captured through the breakdown of Richard's marriage (below). Having previously used the reframing strategy, and by-passed the opportunity to identify as asexual, the end of Richard's marriage provided the catalyst for him to rethink his sexual identity, but first he had to avoid the temptation to immediately get back into finding himself a new partner, and give some meaningful consideration to the 'what next':

"You know, I'd recently separated from my wife, and it kicked everything up in the air and made me reassess about sexuality really and about moving on. It's a conclusion that I'd come to quite quickly after separating from my ex-wife. It, kind of, made me think, "Okay, in terms of moving on, where do I go next?" (Richard)

Similarly, Sophie was faced with a relationship breakdown, and this appears to be a pivotal time in her recognition that there was, and probably always would be a problem with her lack of interest in the sexual component of relationship formation:

“ ... and it transpired we hadn't had sex for a very long time towards the end of the relationship. And when we were talking about it in the kind of break-up stages, he was saying, Well, I wasn't getting enough sex. And it turned out that the compromise amount for him, he was willing to compromise at twice a week: whereas my compromise amount would have been, probably at a push, twice a year. So, it was just a massive, massive kind of disparity there, and even there, I just thought, Oh, it's just a mismatch of sex drives. But the more I thought about it, researched it and came across this asexual label online, I just thought, Oh, that must be what I am, that makes sense”. (Sophie)

David's form of disengagement seemed to take the form of allowing a relationship to just diminish gradually over time. The quote below illustrates the lack of motivational force on both sides of the relationship to maintain the momentum of the initial excitement:

“It's really, you know the novel thing was exciting at first, but after that, there really wasn't anything there ... it was like going through the motions more often, and after a not very long time, we just got bored. There was no break up, we just stopped bothering” (David)

Alex became acutely aware of the negative impact his refusal to engage in sexual activity was having on his partner. He also recognised a need to step back from the relationship in order to try and make sense of his own behaviour:

“ ... and it really negatively affected that relationship, to effectively ending the relationship. Because it felt like there is something I had to figure out about myself, that really was negatively impacting this other person at this point, because I just refused to have any sexual activity with them. And I did not know why, and

... I broke off that relationship and did not attempt to enter another relationship for a number of years” (Alex)

Distancing from relationships: Similar to the experience of Alex above, for some participants, this category of disengagement represents a distancing from the potential for any type of relationship:

“I did not really do much, you know there were 1 or 2 incidences, but it wasn’t a big thing really, erm so (pause), and I suppose I wasn’t sure whether I was not – whether I was doing something wrong (pause), not creating opportunities for myself that I would actually enjoy (laughs), giving off the wrong messages or something or ermmm, or whether, whether, I really wasn’t interested. And this is why you know, it took me until I was 37 before I realised, I’m really just not that interested [laughs] ...”
(David)

Whilst data demonstrates an urge to belong and be connected to others, what is noticeable here is that for some participants, disengagement does not appear to be a hard ship. Continuing to engage in relationship formation at this stage in the process would mean having to pretend or to be false, and the previous situational binds have had profound effects on the participants. Patrick, at this point was identifying as bisexual, however due to the grey romantic nature of his, at the time, unknown asexual identity (grey romantics do not often experience romance attraction and do not desire romantic relationship), disengagement was a fairly comfortable experience:

“I believed for a long time that I was bi-sexual. I am grey romantic asexual so it was kind of easy not to be in a relationship with someone. So, I just realised I was asexual around 2003/2004 when I was graduated in college and I had contact with AVEN then I realised I was asexual I tried to date before but it was always so complicated” (Patrick)

Disengagement seems to provide sanctuary for participants. For some, it allows for a process of internalisation of any potential stigma attached to the series of situations

which participants found themselves in. For Paula, even the loneliness was acceptable as long as there was an authenticity about the way she was living her life:

“So, I'm just going to live like the person I am. Because you know, ultimately what choice do any of us have but to be who we are. So yeah, it was like this lonely feeling of like, there's something wrong with me” (Paula)

Disengaging from normative (hetero) sexual scripts: For others, disengagement came in the form of disengaging from a conventional heteronormative identity, giving participants some space to explore their relationship with sexuality as a whole. By doing so, participants were able to continue to connect with others, but with an alternative identity, as Emily and Elaine both identified below:

“My initial sexual encounters led me to think I was bisexual, so I adopted that identity for some time” (Emily)

“... but during that time I thought, “Am I a lesbian? Am I bisexual?” I thought, “No.” I thought, maybe I was bisexual because I did not like both boys and girls equally, I did not like them, so I thought maybe I was just bisexual and I just haven't found the one” (Elaine)

Valerie used her clothes as a way of expressing a disengagement from conventional heteronormative expectations around dress:

“I did spend several years presenting masculine, for no particular reason either, I am not and was not transgender to my knowledge, and erm, I just really enjoyed dressing and presenting as a boy. And my family thought it was weird and wanted me to wear cute dresses, they did not really have a problem with it ... urm, no one at school ever gave me shit for presenting in a masculine manner” (Valerie)

The maintenance of a bisexual identity outlined below, whilst representing a form of disengagement from normative sexual scripts, allows for a sexual identity to be upheld, facilitating a process of presenting oneself as sexual. Data demonstrates how

heterosexism privileges heterosexuality and stigmatises, but to an extent tolerates other sexual behaviours however, for Sophie there was an increasing awareness that this was not working:

“... but around about the time that I was 17 or 18, I knew that I was certainly different from a lot of my friends and I knew I was attracted to men and women ... but I never enjoyed sex and the problem was that I'd had sex with guys, and I'd had sex with women, and I did not enjoy either of it, really (laughter)” (Sophie)

Disengagement represents participants recognising that their experiences are not congruent with most cultural contexts, they are submitting to this realisation, and they step back in an attempt to attain a whole sense of self. It also represents stepping away from what felt like an oppressive sexual context which was filled with expectations; expectations about relationships, about sexual conduct, about dress codes. As a subcategory, disengagement takes a number of forms: it can be as direct and explicit as the decision made by Alex to stop dating altogether, or it can be more subtle and implicitly played out, for example, the thought processes of Elaine, where there is an ongoing questioning followed by an inner recognition of a need to re-identify as something, an alternative to the mainstream identity of her peers. Whatever form it takes, even in the form of relationship breakdown, disengagement represents a stepping outside of oppression. As identified previously, this stage occurs simultaneously to searching for explanations, and it is this subcategory which is addressed in the next section.

6.5.2 Subcategory: Searching for explanations

Alongside disengagement is a process of searching for explanations. This takes many forms including (1) Seeking advice from medical professionals (2) Searching the internet, and (3) Friends and allies. Participants most commonly sought the advice of medical professionals and their experiences of seeking advice through this route are detailed below.

Seeking advice from medical professionals: The idea that there could be a cure or a justification for what participants were experiencing provided hope. With hope came the

possibility that they would be able to rectify the problem, rectify the distress associated with the problem, and reduce the likelihood of future loneliness. Paula (below) relates loneliness to something being wrong with her and believes the answer to her loneliness lies in being fixed:

“So yeah it was like a lonely feeling of like, there's something wrong with me. Like I did talk to therapist thinking that I needed to get me fixed and you know I've always had doctors kind of treat it like a medical problem and yes, it's just that feeling that you needed to somehow be fixed or cured” (Paula)

More often, engagement with medical professionals led to an unsatisfactory experience. Shirley's reflects on a negative experience with a psychologist which left her feeling that they were unable to support her in a meaningful way:

“I went to a psychologist for a while exactly because of this 'problem'. You know, I told him about, erm, I feel like I'm a robot, I don't fall in love, I don't feel that need. And I felt it was terrible, because he had no idea what asexuality was, he had no idea, and he told me to join groups that do dancing and hugging and kissing, and that kind of thing to, to, because he said I was afraid of touching and things and he also was I think he was catholic, and he had, and he saw with that mind” (Shirley)

Sophie's experience of engaging with professionals provided confirmation of the lack of understanding about asexuality and the absence of a unified approach to supporting asexuals who seek advice:

“So, I went to one doctor: it was the same surgery, there were two different doctors. And I just sort of gently approached it and I said something like, “I'm really worried because I just don't ever, ever feel like I want to have sex”. ... And his exact words were, “I've never had this before and I don't know what to say”. And then he said, “Just try different things out, that's all I can recommend” ... And then I came back for a different health complaint, I saw a

different doctor. And I hadn't had any progress with my sexuality, so I just mentioned it to the doctor again. I thought, It's worth bringing up again, so again very tentatively I just said, "Last time I was here, I mentioned that I've got my physical problem". And the doctor just cut me off. She was just like, "Yes, I know, I've read your notes and I'm not discussing it" ... But the two doctors that I saw: one was clueless, which I can forgive, but the other one was just horrible, which I can't really forgive. The way she made me feel has really stayed with me" (Sophie)

Determined to continue searching for explanations, Sophie went on to seek advice from a sex therapist:

"So, I have seen a sex therapist: so that was the next thing I did, was to go for private therapy with a specialist in sex therapy ... And then the counselling became more kind of standard counselling, talking about what was going on in my life at the moment, my perceptions of things, challenging those perceptions. Really in the end I just thought, I'm paying 40 pounds an hour and I just don't feel like I'm getting anything out of this. So, in the end I just cancelled it" (Sophie)

Similarly, other participants experienced an overall lack of understanding from other medical professionals:

"Then in university I sort of dated a little bit more, and I did not, I just did not want to have sex and I talked to therapists about it, and one of them was like, oh you must have been like, I got the whole, you must have been abused, and you're just repressing the memories and all that stuff" (Valerie)

"I always felt that, I felt weirded out, I look during the time with, I talk with a psychologist, and they never could answer me about what it was that I lack that made me connect with other people" (Patrick)

Searching the internet: The internet provided another resource for trying to make sense of oneself and one's experiences. Some participants were browsing the internet for information about sexuality – Shirley for example, was regularly using the internet to understand more about sexuality, which led her to asexuality:

“So around when I was 21/20/21, right after I'd dated this guy, I went and found a website called AVEN which is for asexuals. And when I read about it, it just clicked, I read about what people said and I thought yeah that's exactly how I feel, that's it, this is it. And I just kept reading and to see how they explain themselves, and when I read that, I was like, yeah that's it! ... I spent an entire afternoon and night reading about it [asexuality]. And it felt like a burden was suddenly disappearing from my shoulders” (Shirley)

“I was so confused, so confused, and I remember, it was at that time that I go to Google: not interested, cos it wasn't even about like no sexual desire, it wasn't about that, it's just about having the concept in your mind in a way, so yeah I just – I can't remember, just googled a load of stuff, and I finally discovered yeah asexuality” (Sharon)

Part of the process of searching for explanations led Sophie to develop a strategy, facilitated by social media, to compare with her friends, how she felt about sex. This strategy enabled her to determine whether or not her experience of, and attitude towards the sexual component of her relationships was different to her friends – and ultimately it led her to simultaneously browse the internet and discover the term asexuality:

“I think I found out about it online, to be honest with you. I think when I was at Uni, Facebook had just started, it had just come out, and I remember I made a group on Facebook called, 'I prefer egg and chips to sex'. All my friends were joining, because who on earth does not prefer egg and chips to sex, I just thought that was such a self-evident statement that everybody wanted to join that group. And I remember my friend, did not join and I was really

offended and I sent her a message being like, "Why haven't you joined my group?" And she sent me a message back being like, "I'm really sorry, I don't prefer egg and chips to sex." And I was like "What!? How? I don't understand?" And I think kind of around that time I was probably, again, I was becoming conscious of this lack of something that everybody else had, and I think I found out about it just by generally browsing the internet. You see it on social media, you see it on YouTube: there wasn't like one moment when it was like a light-bulb, it was like "Oh my Gosh, this word has come into my life"... But the more I thought about it, researched it, and came across this asexual label online, I just thought, Oh, that must be what I am. That makes sense" (Sophie)

Having heard about asexuality through a different platform, and wondering if this label applied to her, Fiona used the internet to search for some explanations about her own behaviours and attitudes:

"So, I went on the forum of the article and there was a topic about asexuality and I said "I'm wondering if I'm asexual but maybe not, probably not, but maybe this this this this and this". And I only say the definition of asexuality, and erm then people started to answer my questions and erm, and I couldn't I couldn't go back. I was obviously asexual so it was a bit difficult for the first months ... I was not learning that I was asexual, I was learning that other people were not, and I was always like this" (Fiona)

The experiences of Helen and Elaine were similar – their search for explanations via the internet occurred alongside discussions about asexuality with friends, again illustrating the power of interactions as a fundamental process of the asexual identity coming into being:

"When I was in 6th form I got really into the like LGBT side of stuff, through searching on the internet, and also my friends were identifying as different things, and that's when I came across the term asexual, so I looked into it more, did a bit of research and stuff,

and that's kind of when I took that term and applied it to myself"
(Helen)

"She said, "Oh, I'm asexual." And she used it in a way that actually meant celibate but it was the first time I heard that word other than the science way of reproduction, and I've never really thought too much about it other than I was like, "Oh, that's cool for her." And then it came back a few years down the road and I was like, "Maybe I should really look up what that word meant that she said." I went on Google ... "What does it mean when you don't like anyone?" And really basic questions that it made me feel, almost like an alien not knowing human emotions, like, What's the word for when you don't feel feelings for others?" (Elaine)

Friends and allies: To a lesser extent, a number of participants used friends and allies in their search for explanations. Bobbie was introduced to the possibility of his demisexuality through a chat with his friends. This excerpt suggests this is not something he had considered before until this point:

"... erm lets see a few years ago I was on a call with my little brother and some of my friends, and somehow, we were talking about sexuality. And someone said "hey you might be demi-sexual", it kind of made sense and I just refined it from there, I'd never thought about it before and then it was just someone saying "Hey this might be you", that made me think about it" (Bobbie)

The process of searching for explanations was a gradual one for Paula who reflected on her experiences of exploring the possibility of an asexual identity with a friend at work:

"I have a lot of friends who are gay and lesbian and my housemate that I've lived with for like 25 years now is bi and I've seen so much infighting within the community and so much like 'you're doing gay wrong' or whatever, you know? That I did not feel like I needed to be policed and I did not really want to get involved. Then I started, I talked to a friend about it at work and she and I

would joke about it a little bit sometimes, not in like a “Who would ever do that” kind of a way, but like you know just sort of exploring the idea of it. Like she made up the chant for me, “I’m here, I’m queer, you stay over there” which I thought was pretty good. Then I thought maybe I’ll go to Pride, like as an asexual, because I’d been to Pride before like as an ally, but I thought, maybe I’ll just go as an asexual, and sort of do the walk at the end where everyone joins in, and joins the parade, and I’ll do that, see how it feels, and it kind of felt good” (Paula)

David’s search for explanations led him to explore the possibility of his identity with his mother:

“As for coming to an identity well the first time I used the word I actually wasn’t sure it was the word, but I’d be, mmm, 14, and I remember asking my mother – you know people say they are homosexual and heterosexual, well is there such a thing as asexual? And she to her credit I mean this was the 70’s she said, oh yes, of course, of course, (laughs). So that was probably the first time I thought about it then after that – laughs and mutters” (David)

Working alongside disengagement, searching for explanations was an intricate part of the process of resolution. This stage marks the point at which asexuals make a decision to explore their attitudes to, and experiences of the sexual components of their relationships, or in some cases the absence of any sexual component within their experiences of attraction. They appear to be on a mission to find some answers or to find a solution. Data illustrates how some participants had positive experiences and some did not. Many of the negative experiences encountered during this stage seem to be as a result of an overall lack of understanding about asexuality. However, in the cases of Sophie and Shirley, there was a level of hostility towards the notion that someone might express negativity about the sexual component of their relationships, or that someone might be aware of an absence of any sexual component within their

experiences of attraction. This negativity could reflect a difference in reference points and cultural expectations across the field of medicine and healthcare.

In summary, searching for explanations as a subcategory reflects a process of internal and external problem solving. Through disengagement and searching for explanations, some participants try to find ways to make their identities congruous with the conventional sexual normative system around them, for example seeking advice from medics. They have recognised a centralised driving of sexuality around the act of sexual intimacy, they have become aware of the challenges of existing within that system, and their initial attempts are to find solutions and find answers so that they can possibly fit in. Through the process of searching for explanations, participants engage with and sometime re-engage with asexuality, and they are faced with the decision of whether to integrate an asexual identity into their being. The processes by which they contemplate asexuality is addressed in the following section.

6.5.3 Subcategory: Contemplating asexuality

This subcategory reflects a stage where contemplation of asexuality occurs. Contemplating captures the process of looking thoughtfully and in a considered way at the potential of being somewhere on an asexual spectrum. Upon discovering asexuality, participants contemplated the identity and weighed it up against aspects of their lives such as their previous dislike of sex, their fear of being 'broken', their concerns about having a disorder which would warrant medical help. Participants' accounts reflect a process of discovering, attempting to align their experiences with the term asexual, and making sense of their previous experiences. Many participants chose to adopt the asexual identity at this point. However, some initially questioned their asexual identity, because they felt that what they had experienced did not fit with the categories presented to them. The properties within this subcategory are (1) Discovering asexuality, (2) Aligning one's experiences to asexuality.

This section begins with an outline of participants' experiences of discovering asexuality.

Discovering asexuality: The act of discovery has clear significance in relation to the asexual identity. For Valerie, her contemplation of the identity was minimal, and this

point seemed to almost tick a box. It left her feeling satisfied that she had finally found an acceptable explanation for her experiences:

"I guess for a while I did not do much, because I felt like even finding out that asexuality was a thing I was very satisfied with that for a while cos I could just dust my hands off and go, Oh alright, I'm cool, I'm done, no more urhh, stuff to worry about here, it's all normal, its fine, I'm good" [laughs]. (Valerie)

As she contemplated an asexual identity for herself, Helen was able to access an adequate level of detail which not only informed her, but provided reassurances that what she was experiencing was non-pathological, and consequently seemed to resolve her concerns:

"... that's when I came across the term asexual, erm. So, I looked into it more, did a bit of research and stuff, and that's kind of when I took that term and applied it to myself. And then it kind of like gave me a bit of like, ahhh, OK, so I'm not completely abnormal. This is something that people do, and yeah, if that makes sense ... It felt good and not weird, it was nice that there were other people as well, and like I wasn't, just like, slightly broken I suppose, that's the term that a lot of people use" (Helen)

Anne's experience was similarly straightforward. It quickly provided her with an opportunity to contemplate her negative attitude towards what she felt was over-sexualisation and provided a level of resolution to her:

"So, I went on AVEN and I started looking around at the forums and stuff and it was like, "you know, I think that's me too". So that's how I figured that out, and that was when I was in freshman or sophomore year. So, yes. ... It made so much more sense to me that there was just a type of person who just wasn't interested in sex at all, and it wasn't a pressure to be interested in sex, it wasn't a necessity or anything and I felt finally that made sense to me. 'This is me, that's what I can abide with" (Anne)

Rachel on discovering asexuality was able to resolve her confusion about her previous self-identity of “being a straight girl who just did not like sex” (Rachel). This excerpt below illustrates that for Rachel, her discovery of asexuality was almost like a light bulb moment:

“About a year and a half or so ago, erm, I was 26 or 27, I was on Tumblr going through the LGBT tags, and I stumbled across the asexuality definition and everything. And I had heard of it before but I hadn’t really read anybody’s description of how they felt as an asexual and when I started reading urm other accounts, it was just like sort of a Holy Crap, this is me, I’m not just someone who does not like sex: this is actually a thing” (Rachel)

Aligning one’s experiences to asexuality: Similar to the experience described by Helen, discovering the term, and aligning her own experiences to the descriptors, allowed Sharon to consider her negative appraisal of the sexual component of her relationships in a more satisfactory and less dysfunctional way. She was able to resolve her worry about the possibility of seeking medical help:

“It is interesting cos, actually when I first start Googling, I was aware about sexual disorder, and you know, I have a background in psychology so I knew a lot about it, and I remember you know I was studying at University, I felt like I could relate to it, but that’s not how I view myself, it was causing me distress and I thought, ‘Is there something wrong with me?’, ‘Should I go and see a Doctor?’ And then, when I finally encountered it, the term asexuality, I just felt that it better represents me and in my way, in my view that’s how I often think about it” (Sharon)

Diane was able to not only further her understanding about asexuality, but also to apply the label to herself, and identify herself within a narrower category. Diane neatly captures her journey, as she attained a more rounded understanding of her sub-identity:

“I initial found it on BBC news I think, I think it said, asexual people exist, I was like, what’s that, I thought that was plants (laughs) I was like, ‘Really? People can reproduce by themselves - is this a

thing? Oh no, it's completely different', I was like, 'That sounds like me'. Laughs, and then I left it for a while and then I joined Tumblr and then I found it on there. So, there's quite a lot of LGBT stuff on Tumblr, so I ... there's a whole section on asexuality,long pause ...I found there was a lot more people than I realised identified as that – there's not much like media attention on it or anything but there is a community there online, erm and that was quite nice to find that, and I did find that there was a bit of erm, controversy over it as well, with some people saying they are LGBT and some people saying they are not. And it was, that's a bit confusing but, erm, at least there's a space, and I found out there was different types of it, and you can have romantic attraction and not sexual attraction – I figured I don't have either so I'm aromantic asexual – erm yeah, and there was a lot of different ... it's a big spectrum" (Diane)

Initially, Patrick was unable to align his experiences with the term asexuality. He considered his lack of understanding of what it meant to be asexual, was a barrier to him being able to identify with the label. He was unable to align himself to the asexual label due to his sexual experiences:

"Ahhh OK, so I live for a long time on the internet, I am an internet child so to speak, ahhh I remember AVEN from the start, but I never, I never connected it up, to me asexuality was, urrrmm, an asexual person who was agender, who never wanted to have sex, who never had sex. So when I had sex, I looked at it, and told myself, OK I'm not asexual, this is not for me, it's for other people, I just don't like sex. I knew the term for a long time but I don't quite understand what it means to be asexual. It took a long time to realise that I could have sex and be an asexual" (Patrick)

Whilst the narrower categories and identities were useful to some participants, a number of participant's encountered similar challenges to those experienced by Patrick (above)

when trying to align themselves within the categories and identities presented to them through asexuality forums and websites:

“Through using the internet I found AVEN, and I was able to see the different asexual identities – but the asexuality definition only partially fitted. And then I thought, no, I’m not that, because of 1 specific thing that I did not fit with ... and then I went back to the range of definitions and realised there was a place where my experiences and I fitted” (Emily)

“So, when I found out about asexuality, while I was like, ‘Oh, great, there’s this word that really fits in with how I feel and who I am’, but also it kind of confused matters even more. Because I feel like even with asexuality, I’m different, because a lot of the asexual people that are quite vocal about their experiences talk about how they masturbate, but they just don’t want anyone else involved. And for me that’s completely not the case” (Sophie)

David contemplated and went on to reject the asexual categories that were presented to him when he engaged with AVEN:

“I did briefly engage with AVEN, but I think I’m afraid I tired of it rather quickly, erm, erm, I suppose I found it to be about people who aren’t interested in football, setting up a nowhere supporters club [laughs]. I just thought it was a place where people sort of defined themselves in narrower and narrower categories, erm, and I suppose perhaps because I have read too much Foucault but I’m just tired of this game of people categorising themselves, so I was engaged with it for few weeks and then [Pauses and stops talking]” (David)

What appears to be a level of rejection during the contemplation stage, may have some significance in David’s journey to identifying as asexual. This raised the question of whether or not David was ever fully committed to an asexual identity. Thus, raising the question of whether he should be included in the sample. Whilst he responded to the

recruitment flyer which was aimed directly at self-identified asexuals, during the interview process he describes his identity in the excerpt below:

“I couldn’t unequivocally say that I identify as asexual – I think I sit somewhere between asexual and heterosexual” (David)

Scott et al (2016) refer to this as phenomena as a story of non-becoming, whereby an individual will recognise, engage with, communicate and manage the term asexual, but ultimately reject it as a central basis of identity. What is relevant here is that David’s identity would most likely be considered as Grey-A on the asexual spectrum, however, he may have only realised this had he contemplated asexuality through the use of an external resource: AVEN, Tumblr or an LGBTQIA resource. Noteworthy here is that David’s accounts of his process to self-identifying as asexual situate him on a perpetual cycle which steer him away from resolution, and back into the in the becoming stage through reframing: it could be hypothesized that by maintaining an identity which uses a language of sitting *“somewhere between asexual and heterosexual”* he is reframing his experiences as sexual as opposed to asexual, and is unable to fully embrace his identity as asexual. This emphasises the importance of the contemplation category of the process and the resources which are used to facilitate contemplation.

In summary, contemplating asexuality as a subcategory reflects a process of participants wondering, thinking deeply, and considering if asexuality is an appropriate label for them to apply to themselves. For many, there is a lack of clarity about their previous experiences, a motivational force to fit in, and a risk for some, of turning back to reframing. For many participants, contemplation represents a turning point, where they recognise an alternative identity and begin the process of progressively moving towards self-affirmation.

6.6 Category 3: Consolidation

This stage reflects a stage of recognition of one’s own asexuality and the building of a stable asexual identity based on one’s acceptance of the nuanced ways that attraction and relationship formation can be experienced. For those who embrace an asexual identity, at this stage, the discomfort of identity confusion has gone, and during this stage, they reflect on and remember the challenges they faced, whilst simultaneously critiquing

sexual scripts. This process brings about an understanding and acceptance of asexuality and what that means. There is still an inner need to belong, however it is now able to transcend an acknowledgement of the sexualised world. Asexuals are able to embrace the nuances of attraction and relationship formation, and break with traditional notions of relationship formation, where having sex and being sexual seems to be considered the gold standard. Ultimately, they consolidate their asexual self-hood. Integral to the stage of consolidation are the interactive subcategories of (a) Embracing the nuances (b) Critiquing sexuality and (c) Essentially asexual. At this stage it was felt pertinent that each participant have their ace identity and sub identity disclosed with their quotes.

6.6.1 Subcategory: Embracing the nuances

During consolidation, asexuals begin to accept that the traditional and conventional way that relationship formation is played out does not fit with their schema. In the asexual community, there are subtle differences in those core components of relationship formation and attraction and desire. Data has demonstrated that heterosexism fails to accommodate non-sexual behaviours and practices in affectionate relationships, and 'Embracing the nuances' as a subcategory, illustrates some of the ways in which an asexual model of attraction and relationship formation differs from one that is considered sexual. It includes the properties of (1) Alternative expressions of love and affection, (2) Making sense of friendships/relationships (3) Rewriting the sexual scripts

Alternative expressions of love and affection: Sophie provides a salient example of this. Her consolidation of her asexual identity facilitated an understanding of the fact she falls deeply in love, she feels what she can identify as a level of physical attraction, whilst being aware of, and accepting of, a normality about the absence of any sexual component within her experience of attraction:

"But I think physical attraction and sexual attraction are different. So, I do experience what I would categorise as physical attraction and I really enjoy it. I really, really love finding people attractive. I wouldn't change that. To be honest, now I don't think I would change my asexuality" (Sophie: Female panromantic asexual)

She also recognises and embraces the fluidity of the identity – expanding her possibilities for relationship formation; for example, not being limited by the gender of her partner, and being able to adapt her identity to fit with the identity of her partner:

“My partner, for example, so my partner is non-binary and that’s one of the reasons that I changed my identity from biromantic to panromantic, to kind of include that. And also, just as I become more aware of the different gender expressions, ‘bi’ just did not seem to be relevant anymore” (Sophie: Female panromantic asexual)

Making sense of friendships/relationships: A number of studies suggest that romance appears to be a defining feature of asexuality, and romantic attraction per se is an area which could benefit from further exploration. Particularly, how romantic attraction is distinguished from close friendship, and how this works for asexuals who are trying to negotiate the non-asexual world. Through the process of consolidation, participants were able to make sense of their previous experiences with their friendships, and to think more critically about aspects of their closeness to others which had previously confused them. Through engaging with asexuality forums, Diane extended her vocabulary to facilitate the process of making sense and embracing the nuances within her experience of attraction:

“I discovered the term squish which is like an asexual version of crush or a platonic crush, and I thought ‘oh that’s quite a cool word’ because it makes a lot of sense to me, because I thought that I was crushing on people, and at one point I thought no ‘this is a squish’. Cos I really really want to be that person’s friend. So, that’s kind of a similar thing which was very confusing at first, but once I figured out that was a thing, I was like, and ‘OK’ [laughs]”
(Diane: Female, aromantic asexual)

Fiona, was able to make sense of the differences between what she considers to be the sexual (non-demiromantic) experience of love, and what she now knows is the asexual (demiromantic) experience of love. Here she explains a more nuanced understanding of how demiromantic relationship formation works:

“... and erm yes, and so I think there is somethings about love that I can't really understand, because I'm not loving the same way. For me, love is like a thousand persons friendship. For me, first there is a boy finding interest in me, and then we are getting closer, and if nothing happens to break us apart, like, I don't know, he has a girlfriend or opinions that I can't stand or things like that, if there is nothing, then I can have a friendship and then a different 'ship' and fall in love. So, for me, it's almost a scientific process and I know that non-demiromantic people aren't experiencing love this way at all. So, here is the difference. Demiromantic is not really an important word for me because it's only precision” (Fiona: Female, demiromantic, heteroromantic asexual)

Within a more nuanced model of attraction and relationship formation, romantic connections and close friendship connections become more understandable. Here, Sophie, who experiences romantic attraction but not sexual attraction, explains what romantic love feels like for her:

“I'd be like, gosh, it is like appreciating art, so I thought that was a really good metaphor, because you do look at them in that same kind of state of wonder and just think, “Oh, this is really pleasing my eye.” In the same way that I don't look at a painting and get like a pang in my vagina (laughter), I don't look at a person and get a pang in my vagina either. So, I thought that, yes, that's a good analogy; it's like art appreciation. But it does make me feel something in my chest” (Sophie: Female pan romantic asexual)

Romantic attraction also appears to be associated with a yearning to be with someone but not on a sexual level. Here, Diane was trying to understand her non asexual friend's explanation of sexual attraction, and compare it to her experience of romantic attraction, so she could make sense of her own feelings towards another person. She described to me during the interview how that conversation went:

“Well she said you get butterflies, and you feel like you want to kiss them. And I was like OK (laughing), 'and you want to impress

them?’ And like, I do want to impress people, when I meet a new person I try and look reasonably presentable, cos I really really want to be that person’s friend. So that’s kind of a similar thing which was very confusing at first. But once I figured out that [a non-sexual crush/squish] was a thing, I was like, OK (laughs)”
(Diane: Female, aromantic asexual)

During the consolidation stage, participants were able to rethink previously held beliefs about attraction, sex and romance. Previous research by Carrigan (2011) identified asexuality as a lifestyle that allows for a decoupling of sex from romance. Having previously been anchored to the idea that the valid model of attraction within relationship formation is sexual attraction, participants during this stage are able to think more critically about the connections they have made with other people and start considering the application of an alternative framework to understand their subjective experiences of attraction. Equally they are also considering the relationships they have come to know as close friendships and how they can decouple these from asexual romantic and aromantic relationships. As Fiona points out, there are marked differences in terms of how asexuals interpret close friendship from romantic attraction:

“... most of the time, when this is the beginning of the process ermmm I think this boy is interesting, kind of romantically, so that even when I know we are not friends, yet I know that love could happen, so I could have a close friendship with a boy but knowing from the beginning that I would not fall in love with him. But I can have a close relationship with someone knowing that there could be more or probably could be more but for me. Its urm, yeah its clear it’s not the same, from the outside it’s the same thing its close friendship but for me [asexual] I’m not feeling the same way so I know what could become love and what not. Most of the boys with who I was friends there was a kind of romantic thing, like I felt in love with boys who I was friend, I have a friend who is boy but I could have fall in love with him but quite soon when I met him I learnt he had a girls friend so I did my best to [laughs] not fall in love with him and it worked but most of the time the close

relationship I have with boys have something linked to romantic even if it's not romantic" (Fiona: Female, demiromantic, heteroromantic asexual)

Attitude towards sex: During the becoming stage, participants provided accounts of negative appraisals of the sexual components of their relationships, and the absence of a sexual component within their experiences of attraction. This gives rise to a notion that the asexual identity in the consolidation stage would be defined by an absence of a sexual component to relationship formation, however for a number of asexuals this is not the case. Asexuals demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the physical act of sex: where sex is not a given, nor is it considered to be a fundamental part of the relationship. The consolidation of the identity allows for a more considered attitude towards engagement in the physical acts of sex as can be seen in the excerpts below.

Elaine, who has previously stated that she does not want to be alone for the rest of her life, is able to consider the possibility of engaging in the physical act of sex, despite being aware of an absence of a sexual component within her experiences of attraction:

"I would say there's room for negotiation but I can't promise on the delivery. Because I can say 'I'm okay' with something but I get really panicky in sexual situations. I can say, 'It's totally fine and okay if this happens' but if it starts happening ... Like, I've had panic attacks before where it wasn't even me involved, like thinking about, I don't know, at a party where I was thinking that 2 people were going to have sex in the same house that I was in, and I had a panic attack because I did not want to be that close to sex. So, if someone was trying to have sex with me and said, 'Okay, let's try this', I can't guarantee that I would actually be able to deliver on that, but I would like to believe I would want to try with my partner if I was able to" (Elaine: Female aromantic asexual)

For Richard, the consolidation stage meant that he was able to understand the demisexuality component of his identity, and relate this to his previous experiences. He was able to develop a strategy for pursuing further relationships which might have a sexual component:

“In terms of finding another partner, but in terms of asexuality, everybody I’ve had interactions with since, where it might look like it’s heading that way, I’ve always been honest about it. I’ve always explained about the asexual element, just because I don’t want the whole, “I might just put it as not being able to have sex just down to nerves.” I just want to be open about it. I will be able to have sex at some point, because I think about other people’s self-esteem as well. If you think, “Crikey, is this bloke nervous or is he just not into me?” etc., but it’s not that. It’s the biological part of it. Do you know, if I did not find anybody else, as long as I was open with people, then that’s what’s important to me really”
(Richard: Male, demisexual asexual)

Olivia was able to consider her asexual identity through a more detailed understanding of the breadth of the spectrum, one which incorporated sexual activity:

“I did not understand how broad the spectrum was. As soon as I understood it – even if you are asexual you can have sex, you can have relationships” (Olivia: Female bisexual, polysexual asexual)

Rewriting the sexual scripts: One of the ways in which participants were able to build a strong asexual identity base was through the process of rewriting what they had previously been exposed to as sexual scripts. Sexual scripting provides a framework for human sexuality, they tell us how to behave in sexual situations. So, for example, on a cultural level, sexual scripting would posit that in order to be in a meaningful partnered relationship, we should be connecting with our other person on an intimate, commonly understood to be sexual, level. Where previously sexuality was considered as a symbolic aspect of human life, the consolidation stage facilitated a process of rewriting such sexual scripts. Alex, a quoiromantic quoisexual), highlights how asexuality provides an alternative framework for understanding how to connect with others in relationships:

“It’s not that you’re missing anything, it’s just that there are other ways to connect, and you have to re-learn the value of those other connections. Identifying as asexual is you saying, you know, ‘I have

these other ways of connecting with people, and they are just as valid to me if not more valid than a sexual relationship'. It's just that plenty of asexual people have sex all the time, it does not mean people are not asexual, it just means that they are not actually having a model of sexual attraction to another person in order to have that sex. And so, I think it's just that unlearning that the only way to connect with someone is through sexual attraction. ... I want the relationship, because I'm not aromantic, I just don't want the sexual component, cos it does not do anything for me" (Alex: Non-binary quoiromantic quasexual)

Through the consolidation stage of the asexual identity process, Emily was able to construct her relationships with others in such a way that suited her, rather than conform to a number of sexual and social scripts:

"In terms of relationships, we have very strict criteria with respect to how we should connect with others: your relationship with friends should be like this, relationships with partners should be like this, relationship with family should be like this, and some of my friendship relationships don't fit with these ideas. Anyone looking in might think they are something else, like partnerships for example, but they are not 'partnerships' in the way that society would define them" (Emily: Female bisexual, grey, demiromantic)

Within the asexual framework, Sophie is able to deviate from sexual scripts by casting off monogamy as an accepted standard of heterosexuality, and considering the possibility of her partner having sex with someone else in order to satisfy their need for sex. As long as her sense of belonging would remain intact:

"So, I feel quite lucky that I am happy with non-monogamy in that way. It would be harder for me if then, out of that, it became my partner had met someone else that they really liked and wanted to be in a relationship with them as well. Like I'm not full-on polyamorous. It would be trickier to deal with that, but the way I see it, if my partner wants to go off and have sex with someone,

fine, it's nothing to do with me, really, it's just sex. So that hasn't happened yet, to my knowledge, but I'm open to that as a solution"
(Sophie: Female pan romantic asexual)

Sharon was able to have a sexual relationship with her partner by attaching what she felt was a different meaning to the act itself. A meaning which is partly associated with intimacy, but also linked to something that she is unable to articulate. What is fundamental to her engagement in the activity however, is that need for her and her partner to have a shared mutual understanding of the meaning behind the activity itself:

"I still have sex with my boyfriend even though we are both asexual. I don't know why we do it – I think its intimacy but it's not the pleasure, it's not the sexual thing, I don't know. I think sex for us has a different meaning, it has our own meaning. And the most important thing for me is that we're both on the same page, like I wouldn't have sex with a sexual guy, cos I know we're not going to be on the same wavelength but I would with my boyfriend" (Sharon: Female aromantic asexual)

Fiona embraced the nuances, and stepped away from conventional sexual scripts by accepting that for her, her asexual identity means that it is not possible for gender (or the anatomic structure of the human body) to dictate or determine who one feels attraction towards:

"This is why I'm glad to be asexual. Maybe it's not practical, maybe it won't facilitate my relationships, and maybe I'll have to explain over and over again. But at least, nothing, absolutely nothing, depends of others' body. My love does not have any borders. If I wasn't asexual, they would have been a chance for me to have those limits, to be condition by others' bodies. And I don't want this at all, no matter the price for me or what I could have won in exchange. I know it's a bias, I know I'm thinking like that only because I'm asexual, unable to understand the importance of sexual attraction, and that those people are perfectly happy as they are. But still. I will never regret not to be

allosexual again" (Fiona: Female demiromantic, heteroromantic asexual)

Data within this subcategory lucidly highlights how asexuals are able to consider a more nuanced perspective of the traditionally understood notions of sexuality. They are able to re-construct attraction and relationship formation in an asexual paradigm. Their intimate relationship discourse has taken on new forms of expression. They are able to acknowledge the validity of intimacy beyond sexual desire, and alternative models of attraction and desire, unconstrained by gender binaries. Their models of attraction go beyond the traditionally accepted platonic/sexual model. These deviations from traditional relationship formation reflect a transformation within the story of sexuality.

6.6.2 Subcategory: Critiquing sexuality

The increase in acknowledgement of the validity of attraction and relationship formation in an asexual paradigm provides a platform/fertile ground for asexuals to process what they previously experienced. This subcategory represents/evidences how asexuals are able to consider their environment and understand how the surrounding social context of their experiences of connecting with other people provided powerful assumptions about sex, relationships, attraction and expectations of sexuality. The properties of this subcategory are (1) Expectations (2) The omnipresence of sex and (3) Selective disclosure.

Expectations: Here, June talks about how the need to be in a relationship is continuously promoted, and that friendship is underrated. She feels this makes for awkward situations for example when she is invited to a social event and wants to take a close friend with her, as opposed to a partner:

"It's fairly important to me, also because society shows you every day that you are supposed to be in a relationship. And that you should want a relationship – that, you can't be a complete person if you are on your own. And of course, and of course, it's much more difficult to have a relationship as asexual, being asexual. And if you want to be in a relationship with a sexual person it can be difficult, erm to have, to talk about, erm so, erm so, yeah so. That's also something I feel very passionate about, and for

example, this summer I am invited to 2 weddings and I will go on my own. I'm really looking forward as all the people are my dear friends. The first is a gay wedding I'm really looking forward to that, and the second is a heterosexual wedding with people that I don't know. And it would be really nice to just ask a friend to erm join me, and to be there as my plus one, but it would be seen as weird. And I think that's a shame because friendship is really really important and I think it's underrated" (June: Female panromantic demi asexual)

Shirley's story highlights that, in some cultures, marriage is regarded as a symbol of social status. Dating seems to be considered as a crucial part of the journey towards that level of commitment. Consequently, she had an acute awareness of the cultural pressures, which dominated her adolescence, both from friends and family. Furthermore, there were consequences of not conforming to expectations, and these revolved around labelling, and casting aspersions as to true one's sexual identity:

*"Ermm, I mean some people have problems like they feel pressured by the amount of sexuality that is around but erm, if I had known earlier I think I would have felt more comfortable during my teenage years. 'Cause you know, I had my friends trying to set me up with this guy, and that guy, and sometimes I accepted to go out with a guy because of peer pressure. And we, I mean, I'm from Brazil so we have a, you know, it is very open and sexualised, you know, the carnival and that sort of thing. And parents and cousins and uncles, and big family, you know, they are always asking, you know, oh what about the boys, about this and about that. And if you don't go out with a guy there's that ...'Oh maybe she's like **that**' you know ... 'maybe she's a lesbian' and all that kind of talk. So, they expect you to just go out and date, even when you are 15 and 16 they want you to go on dates. And I kind of would, you know, sometimes because I liked that person, but most of time it was pressure" (Shirley: Female biromantic asexual)*

In Shirley's case, there is a power of perceived non-sexuality in shaping daily life. Rather than run the gauntlet of non-conformity to heteronormativity, and what that might mean in terms of sexual identity, it appears that 'acting out' a (hetero) sexual identity can offer an easier option in terms of managing the attitudes and opinions of others. However, as section 6.4.3 on situational binds has illustrated, the task of such identity management is challenging.

The omnipresence of sex: Richard ponders over whether the pervasive culture of sexualisation is something he has become more aware of since the recognition of his demi-sexuality:

"I suppose it's been, kind of, amplified since I started to notice how sexual things are in general, but I suppose I've always been aware of that. You know, even if you go to the leisure centre, there's music videos on in the background, and they're very sexualised. At 1:00pm while you're having lunch, you're surrounded by it, and in terms of advertisements, I mean, you walk through the town centre and it's everywhere. Absolutely everywhere. In terms of respect for other people's sexual autonomy, I don't really know what to say, to be honest" (Richard: Male demisexual asexual)

Fiona refers to an omnipresence of sex, and alludes to a rape culture within society which she feels should be a concern for both asexual and allosexuals:

"... society needs to think more about sex, because the sex as it is seen by our society has problems. There is a lot of things, there is the rape culture and there is omnipresence of sex, and erm so there is a lot of problems which concern asexuals but can also concern everyone" (Fiona: Female demiromantic, heteroromantic asexual)

Drawing on her experiences of finally realising that she was not dysfunctional, and there was an identity she could apply to herself, Valerie reflects on her experience of negotiating a sexualised society:

“Sexuality is intrinsically linked to what it means to be human through media. That just feels so alienating, when that is the only approach or theory to sexuality that you can see, it is very isolating and makes you feel, so like, there is something deeply wrong with you, like you’re missing a core part of being human. I still run into – on both straight and LGBT spectrum: sexuality is part of how we feel and how we relate to each other and what it means to be human” (Valerie: Female aromantic asexual)

The narratives presented above highlight how participants consider their environment, from a young age to be centred on sex and sexuality, or activities which will invariably lead to relationships which have a sexual component. Participants’ critiques of sexuality during this stage draw attention to a centrality of sex and sexuality within their culture where sexuality is perceived as a symbolic aspect of human life. With the recognition of a sexualised society (Przybło, 2011), comes a sense of integrity and self-realisation. Through the process of consolidation, they understand themselves as living their lives authentically as people who identify as asexual. They have become asexual to themselves, and to other appropriate people.

Selective disclosure: Data suggests here that with asexuality, there is a process of selective disclosure, which is less significant in terms of commitment to the identity, and more significant in terms of providing a platform to critique sexuality. The process of a subtle and less overt critique of sexuality was evident in the data which addresses participants’ decision-making about coming out, and their experiences of disclosing their identity to others. Participants decision making around whether or not to come out as asexual, who to come out to, reflect an anticipation of hostility. Additionally, their responses and reactions to the negativity from others when they *do* come out, to an extent reflects a more discreet process of critique of sexuality. Participants anticipate and accept any immediate hostility or negativity. A powerful example of this is provided below in Sharon’s coming out story. When she identified herself as asexual to her mother, Sharon was very accepting of her mother’s negative response to this. Sharon’s acceptance of her mother’s negative response demonstrates her ability to understand and accept the pervasive influence of sexualisation on the attitude of those around her, including her mother:

“At first, I wasn’t sure if I should tell me friends ... but it was making me ... Well I just had to blurt it out, and I said should I tell my parents, and they said, I don’t think that’s what you do if you, if it’s about what you do in bed. It is not any concern for them. But I thought, it’s about me and my identity, and I have such a close relationship with my parents, they will just accept, that this is who I am, and this is why I have been struggling. ... Then I told my mum and she just ... she just kept staring at me, she just couldn’t get it. I don’t blame her at all, and she told me, “Oh, you have a mental problem”, [laughs], I did not expect her to say anything to be honest. And I started crying because, not because of what she said, because I expected her to say something like that, but because I had been keeping it in for so long. And, then, she hugged me, and said I love you for whatever you are, and stuff. But, she thinks it’s just a depression, so I told her OK, let’s change the subject, and we will never talk about it again” (Sharon: Female aromantic asexual)

Sharon’s asexual identity becomes the elephant in the room, although her mother later **went on to develop** her understanding of asexuality, and reached a level of acceptance. Sophie appears to realise that when she came out as lesbian or bisexual, there was an acceptance of an identity (perhaps because it was associated with sexuality), but an identity which represents a negative appraisal of sex, or the absence of sexual attraction, may be beyond her parent’s comprehension:

“So, I’m not out as asexual to my family, because I’ve come out as various things to them. I have come out as lesbian and as bisexual and I just think now it’s just too much hassle to come out to them again. And I just don’t think they get it: particularly my mum and dad, I really don’t think they would understand. It’s interesting, because I feel like it only needs explaining in relation to other people. I am the way I am, which needs explaining, because other people aren’t the way I am” (Sophie: Female panromantic asexual)

Similarly, Fiona is lucidly aware that her parents are more accepting of a sexual identity than they would be an asexual identity. Initially, in her story, she is clear that it is not necessary for her to identify as asexual to her parents. She vacillates between the idea that her sex-life is nothing to do with her parents, and that her heteromantic identity enables her to conduct relationships without her parents knowledge, but later goes on to suggest that they would not understand her asexual identity:

“... and they are most concerned with if I am ready, rather than if I don't have a sexual life. ... It is none of their business. I don't need to come out. If I was a lesbian I would have to say “I'm a lesbian, I may want to come back with a girl”, but with me being heteromantic I still fall in love with guys so I can just bring a guy, and the only difference in our relationship would be in my bed. And it's none of their concern so I don't feel there is a necessity for me to say this and I'm not really comfortable to say this because erm I would have to explain to them what it is, asexuality and everything, and I'm a bit afraid they don't understand” (Fiona: Female demiromantic heteromantic asexual)

Previous research suggests that the familial environment has been identified as negative for a number of asexuals who disclose their identity (Gazzola & Morrison, 2012). Family of origin are a particular source of subtle discriminatory behaviour such as lack of acceptance and social distancing. Non-disclosure seems to be a preferred option for some participants. When family is identified as a potential site of hostility, asexuals may find non-disclosure an easier option. Whilst for some participants, the risk of mental health being conflated with their asexuality exists, data suggests that for some, it is more important to be considered by others as sexual but single, rather than be identified as authentically asexual. This is a strategy adopted by some, where an elevated risk of hostility exists.

In summary, critiquing sexuality as a subcategory reflects a process by which asexuals are able to view sexuality through an asexual lens. At this point in the process of asexual self-identity, they experience the world through an asexual perspective, however when the asexual and the sexual perspective confront each other, which happens regularly, when

the 'I' comes into contact with the 'other', they still continue to struggle to assert their asexuality. By critiquing the sexualised oppressive culture as they do, they are able to understand how it has imposed its values, language and its patterns of behaviour on themselves and others, and some of them may choose to engage in a struggle to assert their asexual identities over sexual expectations, but this is not the case for all participants.

6.6.3 Subcategory: Essentially asexual

This subcategory represents the multidimensional framework of beliefs held by participants, about their asexual identity. Participants provided a multifarious assessment of beliefs about their asexual identity, and these are captured through the different properties within this subcategory: (1) Intrinsically, socially and fluidly asexual, (2) Without sexuality and (3) The asexual experience.

Intrinsically, socially and fluidly asexual: A number of participants believed their asexual identity to be something innate within them, and something that they were born with. Elaine, for example, looks back at her preschool years and is able to recall aspects of her behaviour which she interprets as the early signs of her asexuality:

“ ... and then for me I think I was born with it because even thinking back to when I was really young, like on the playground, in the kindergarten and even I remember being in young 4s, like 4 year’s old in preschool and my dad dropped me off ... I have some memories from back then when I was just a little kid and I never, you know, like you hear about the little girls, I want to kiss the boys. I never wanted to kiss the boys or I did not understand why we had to hang out with the boys or why the goal was to catch the boys at recess or anything. And so, I was never interested in that, even from a young kid age and even with people constantly, “You’re going to grow up and get a boyfriend soon, you just wait,” it was never anything I wanted or was interested in” (Elaine: Female aromantic asexual)

Elaine’s appraisal of her asexual identity in childhood is largely attributed to her lack of interest in boys, and her negative appraisal of the expectations being placed upon her in

terms of her early connections with boys. Richard's appraisal of his identity is borne from the recognition that the physiological mechanisms related to his sexual performance are dependent on a specific set of circumstances: the formation of a deep emotional connection. For Richard, this is what defines his demisexual identity:

"So, yes, I was born this way. I don't think it's environmental. I'm fortunate that I live in a culture and a society that's more accepting of asexuality. I suppose I benefit from having the curiosity. I've looked into it, but having therapy related to OCD and being medicated and going through all that process made me realise that a lot of my problems throughout my last fourteen, fifteen years have stemmed from not realising about asexuality. ... It's not about being respectful, in that there is the biological link. I'm not engaging with sex at the start of a relationship. I mean, my nature is that I am a respectful person. It's not biologically possible" (Richard: Male, demisexual asexual)

The discourse about the innateness and almost naturalness of asexuality stands in stark contrast to the centuries of cultural and scientific debate over the origins and meaning of sexual identity. However, according to Bogaert (2012), the story of life does begin asexually, and for most of Earth's natural history, asexual reproduction has predominated. Based on the work of Bogaert (2012), there is an accuracy to what the participants allude to in terms of the birth origins of their identity. Patrick is of the opinion that he was born asexual, and identifies that the lack of early recognition of his asexual identity has made his life more challenging, equally he recognises that being asexual from birth is not something that is universally experienced or believed across the asexual community:

"I feel I was born an asexual. If I had known it before, then my life would have been very easy. I feel I was born asexual, but people can be different. Some people don't feel that they were born asexually but I feel I was" (Patrick: Male, aromantic asexual)

There appears to be some recognition and acceptance of a social influence on identity formation, and this is evident in Sharon's reflections on her own asexual identity:

“I’m not sure what I am exactly, like asexuality at the end of the day is a social construction, [laughs], but so is hypoactive sexual disorder, they are both social constructions at the end of the day, but I guess one makes me feel a bit better about myself. So [pause] So, yeah” (Sharon: Female aromantic asexual)

Whilst in the quote above she acknowledges asexuality as a social construct, in the quote below, Sharon shows what being asexual means to her. Here, there is an essentialist framing of sexuality, as she considers her motivation to engage with sexuality to be something that should have been innate. She feels she has had to learn how to be sexual:

“How to be asexual feels like, for me, like, so I don’t like, have the sexual scripts, they are not innate in me, but eventually I’ve learned them. So I do have them as a concept. It’s like an autistic, he does not have the social scripts in his mind and eventually he learns them – so they still don’t come naturally to him but he is aware of them, and that’s how I am. So that now I, if I’m having a conversation how I should behave, right, because I’ve learnt them, but I don’t feel them naturally in me. I am capable of being sexual – it’s just that it wasn’t innate, so it is artificial in a way, but at least I know. I had to learn that to function in society. So that’s it” (Sharon: Female aromantic asexual)

Anne questions the origins of her identity, believing herself to have been asexual all her life. But she is aware that she has experienced romantic attraction (in the form of what she refers to as crushes) in her early years. Consequently, it seems that the unresolved debate that exists within the asexual community more broadly, about the difference between romantic and sexual attraction may play some part in the confusion over whether asexuality is something one is born with:

“I think so, I feel it, because I never felt sexual attraction. I know that I felt romantic attraction here and there, if my crushes in first grade count, then I guess there’s that, but I am romantically involved with a girl now. I mean romantic and sexual attraction

being different and everything. But yes, I think I've been asexual all my life, yes, I would say so" (Anne: Female romantic asexual)

Both Bobbie and June appear to be open to a more integrative perspective for understanding their asexual identity:

"I think that it is a fluid concept and it can change, so it's difficult, so I think it's fluid but I'm also born this way, errrrrrrrm yeah. I think I'm born this way in the sense that I wouldn't say I'm asexual because of a certain asexual, I haven't experienced trauma and abuse or something like that, so ... silence" (June: Panromantic demi asexual)

"So for me, I don't see me drifting off from the label, because this is what I experience and this is how it describes me but I know that sometimes, erm, sexuality can change over time and people will adjust and refine their labels based on that. And erm, so I think if there's a catalyst possibly but I'm at a point where I just don't need to – without some change" (Bobbie: Unknown, aromantic asexual)

Being asexual: Being essentially asexual is associated with feelings of satisfaction and wholeness for participants. There is a sense that for some, this is a bitter-sweet experience. During the consolidation stage, there is a recognition that the identity itself comes with some losses, which appear to be associated with the fact that asexuals are, on the whole, considered to be non-sexual beings; and that sex and being sexual are associated with power and privilege. Through the process of transcending the sexualised world, participants have learnt that sex really matters in society. In response to this, Sophie understands her asexual identity as disempowering, and moving further into the margins than before:

"I do like it and I'm very proud of it now, but one of the things I guess that maybe put me off a little bit, in the same way that I think identifying as LGBT, back when I went for those tags as well, it's almost like a relinquishing of power. It's almost like you're

marginalising yourself, by identifying as asexual, you're marginalising yourself within a marginalisation. And I don't want to be on the peripheries, but I understand that it kind of societally, that socially and culturally by taking this identity and owning it, I feel more like I am stepping out into the peripheries" (Sophie: Female panromantic asexual)

Similarly, David's negative attitude towards his (and others) asexual identity, seen below, appears to come from a "what's the point in being out as asexual?" attitude. Similar to the views of Dan Savage (sex columnist) who questions the need for asexuals to assert their identity. The view that "no one cares if you are not having sex" is based on the idea that public displays of identity are more important for gays and lesbians, as they need to achieve acceptance and recognition for potentially prohibited behaviours. It might be the case that similar to David, some asexuals go about their lives without ever fully engaging with a forum or accessing a community devoted to asexual issues, based on the belief that sex really matters in society, and any alternative to sex, is not worth talking about:

"I did briefly engage with AVEN but I think I'm afraid I tired of it rather quickly, erm, erm, I suppose I found it to be about people who aren't interested in football setting up a nowhere supporters club (laughs). I just thought it was a place where people sort of defined themselves in narrower and narrower categories" (David: Between heterosexual and asexual)

For Richard, the initial self-acceptance of his asexual identity was one which was not associated with pride. Whilst eventually feeling proud of his demisexuality, Richard still considers his identity to be potentially problematic:

"I did not feel any pride in that to start off with, because, you know, we do live in a very sexual society, and I joked with my ex-wife, "Crikey, I've ended up with the shit sexuality, really." You know, more the, kind of, inert nothing really going on" (Richard: Male, demisexual asexual)

For Paula, embracing the identity has brought about a recognition that other non-mainstream identities can be less accepting of asexuality. There are a number of assumptions made about asexuality by others who occupy the queer spaces. The idea that asexuals are not oppressed and should not be included in pride events seems to be part of the experience of being essentially asexual. In the quote below, Paula describes a strong sense of ace identity in ace environments, however even in LGBT environments, there is some degree of questioning as to the inclusion of asexuality in queer spaces;

“I have definitely had some people look at my flag and they're like oh, a lot of people just don't know what it is, which is fine, but some people look at it and I kind of get glared at. You know like, you know, you're jumping on the band wagon, ‘You fake’, like, and so, you'll hear too like, I've been in forums where it's like, well you know asexuals don't have anything to be at pride about, they've never been correctively raped or any of these things. First of all, don't assume that. But secondly, I did not realise that was the ticket to get in the door” (Paula: Female, aromantic asexual)

Fulfilling a sense of belonging: This section provides insight into the ways in which participants make asexuality an ongoing part of their lives and their connections. They have become asexual to themselves and to a selection of other people, and in some of their situations there is no dissonance between their internal private understanding of their identity, and the perceptions of those around them. Being faced with situations where they encounter sexual assumptions, makes the process of selective disclosure an ongoing feature of their search for a sense of belonging. For Alex, his experience of asexuality is informed by his understanding of the need to embrace being different:

“You really have to embrace being different and give up the comfort of fitting in. I'm sure there are millions of people that are on a gay sexual spectrum because they haven't been shown that, that is an acceptable way to be, they just don't see it – or like me, just missed that alternative model of attraction. I just missed that you could want to be in a relationship that's not sexual. We are herding, we don't want to separate ourselves from the herd, and

you really have to be OK about being different. Being transparent about your experiences and own up to them. Being asexual is tough, if you're going to go by the model that 1% of the population is asexual: then because most people – most people (99%) are allosexual ... it's tough" (Alex: Non binary quoiromantic quoisexual)

For Alex, the risks associated with of stepping away from compulsory sexuality, and the burden of potential loneliness have been counter balanced by the fulfilment of a sense of belonging. 'Doing' asexuality means that he can comfortably seek out and fully engage with the relationships and friendships that feel right for him:

"My life has become enriched because it has allowed me to pursue relationships and friendship that are not based on sexual desire or sexual attraction, but y'know in a lot of ways, I don't care about trying to fit in and that is a big component. I'm asexual, I'm non binary, I'm an animal rights non-vegan, I just don't care, about fitting in. I'm I would rather just be really individual and talk about what I want to talk about" (Alex: Non binary quoiromantic quoisexual)

Sophie has fulfilled a sense of belonging as asexual but continues to have anxieties about the future of her relationship as her partner is not asexual:

"To be honest, now I don't think I would change my asexuality, but I think before I met my partner, I was a bit worried that it was dooming myself to a life of utter loneliness. Because my partner is not asexual and it's always a source of worry for me and a source of stress. Even though my partner's brilliant about it, really, really great, it is the sort of thing that I still am very paranoid about. And all of this is something that I have to deal with because I'm in a relationship with somebody who is not asexual" (Sophie: Female, panromantic asexual)

Conversely, Sharon is in a relationship with someone who is asexual, and is doing asexuality and engaging with sexual activity with her partner, but attaches a different meaning to the act:

"I still have sex with my boyfriend even though we are both asexual. I don't know why we do it – I think its intimacy but it's not the pleasure, it's not the sexual thing, I don't know ..." (Sharon: Female, aromantic asexual)

Elaine's sense of belonging is fulfilled through her engagement with the asexual community:

"I was like, 'Where have they been all my life?' I live in a fairly remote area of Michigan so I'm not near really populated cities, so even around me I think I was in the group a few years before I even met another asexual. Even here at least physically I haven't been around that many asexuals: I went to this one thing, it's a conference for everyone in the US who can go to in college, it's just like a big, basically a big gay conference and these have these little forums where people get together based on their identities and I went to the asexual and it had been the first time I was ever in a room with just asexuals, and there was like probably 30 or 40 people in there and it was really cool because I have never been around that many people who also have shared my identity, so it was like a really cool experience to just actually meet people who identified as me and just like going to pride and stuff and seeing people with asexual flag, you just feel a kinship" (Elaine: Female, aromantic asexual)

6.7 Conclusion

Conceptual rendering of the interview data demonstrates how participants' experiences of transcending the sexualised world, exist within a framework of societal heterosexism. Heterosexism privileges heterosexuality and stigmatises, but tolerates other sexual

behaviours. Overall the data provides a sense that heterosexism fails to accommodate non-sexual behaviours and practices in affectionate relationships.

The asexual identities in this study are far from uniform. As participants moved into different contextual spaces, they were not only shaped by societal representations of sexuality and asexuality, but they contributed to them in significant ways. A number of participants used school/college/university as a venue for engaging in identity-work. Their beliefs that a meaningful sexual identity was a desirable result, kept them motivated to explore the potential for same-sex and opposite sex sexual attraction. Only eventually realising that in fact their identities were less sexually informed and more asexually nuanced. The same sex and opposite sex exploration played a part in providing a more rounded understanding of their asexual preferences; therefore, this data shows that the majority of participants in this study were crafting asexual identities, cultivated through processes that allowed for the possibility of a minority identity. What is central to their experience is that they all arrive at a place where they understand their relationship formation needs and the way they connect with others, is not based on a centralized model of sexuality. The reasons why this is the case are complex beyond the remit of this work but, what is significant here is that unlike every other sexual identity, a centralised model of sexuality does not drive their relationship formation or their search for belonging. For many, unlike their previous reaction to step away from an oppressive sexual context, their narratives now reflect a preparedness to wrestle for a recognition of the value of relationships that are not solely based on sexual attraction, sexual desire and sexual intimacy. They are now able to recognise that throughout society, and throughout their journey to asexuality, there exists a culture of a supremacy of sexuality. Participants are now in a place where they are able to selectively engage with the struggle to fulfil their sense of belonging rather than step aside. Data suggests that they are now able to impose their own asexual values, language and ways of behaving in relationships upon the supremacy of sexuality.

Chapter 7 Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a substantive grounded theory of the social processes that inform a self-identified asexual identity. In doing so it provides insights into the phenomenon of self-identified asexuality from the perspectives of those who identify with an asexual narrative. The chapter focuses on how the findings relate to the central research aims and objectives, to existing research, and to Bourdieusian social theory, namely doxa, habitus, capital, and field.

7.2 Revisiting the Research Questions

The review of the literature in Chapter 3 produced an overarching research objective to develop an understanding of the social processes involved in constructing an asexual identity. Three research questions were established from the gaps in the existing body of literature, as identified below;

- How do people who identify as asexual define their identity?
- How does embracing the identity impact upon relationships with others?
- How does embracing the identity impact upon health and wellbeing?

The research aim has been achieved. The theory of asexual self-identity provides a conceptual rendering of the data that furthers our understanding of the studied experience. Theorising entailed engaging with a group of individuals who self-identify as asexual, whilst undertaking an in-depth exploration of the studied phenomena itself, and subsequently constructing abstract understandings about and within it (Charmaz, 2006: 130).

The work also contributes to knowledge relating to how asexuals define their asexual identity, how embracing the identity impacts upon relationships with others, and to a lesser extent how embracing the identity impacts upon health and wellbeing. Each of these will be addressed in the following section.

7.2.1 How do asexuals define their asexual identity?

This research question intended to contribute to knowledge about asexuals participation in defining asexuality. Consolidation of an asexual identity was initially found to represent

a form of adversity for some participants, particularly in relation to disclosure. However, this stage also meant that they were active participants embedded within a phenomenon of major contrasting experiences. The positive experience, which alluded to satisfaction and reassurance, expressed as “OK, so I’m not completely abnormal” (Chris), and the major negative aspects of this experience were fear and worry, “what if I end up alone” (Paula).

Despite these contrasts, within the phenomenon was a major process that participants were engaged in, in order to incorporate the experience of asexuality into their sense of self. This was around them defining their asexual identity. Many of the asexual stories which were told, anchored around reoccurring categories. Categories of early recognition of a lack of sexual attraction, recognition of a negative attitude towards sexual intimacy, and trying to understand what the problem was. However, these experiences far from defining their asexual identity, served as an indicator, or gave rise to participants needs to understand themselves in greater detail.

Findings from this work suggest that asexuals define their asexuality through expressions of weak social construction theory, where participants believe themselves to be born asexual, whilst at the same time acknowledging a fluidity of sexuality. In short, they consider themselves as born this way, and this gave rise to the category within the asexual self-identity theory as essentially asexual.

For participants, definitions of asexuality are informed by the repeated themes within their life stories. Patterns of struggles to negotiate sexuality from a very early age, and the distinctive and preferred asexual features of their closest and most intimate relationships were a regular feature of the participants’ stories. So, whilst human sexuality is generally considered to be a natural aspect of the human experience, self-identified asexuals define themselves through the narratives of their life-long experiences of asexuality, and from an understanding that this is how they were born. This understanding of the basis of one’s asexual identity as fundamental and natural, is one which aligns itself to weak social construction theory (discussed in Chapter 4); which posits that social constructs are dependent upon a background of fundamental facts. The fundamental facts, according to the evolutionary theory of attachment, suggest that humans are born with a fundamental propensity to form attachments with others from

birth, and this is key to survival, as suggested in works by Bowlby (1969), Harlow & Zimmermann (1958) and Lorenz (1953) cited in McLeod (2018). The need to form attachments plays out in individuals as a search for a sense of belonging, where belonging represents the formation and maintenance of enduring positive and significant interpersonal attachments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Whilst it is presumed to have an innate quality and an evolutionary basis, Baumeister and Leary (1995) identify that the belongingness can be distinguished from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). Belongingness does not regard the 'attachment' need as derived from a particular relationship (parent/care giver-infant for example), or focused on a particular individual (mother for example) (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to Baumeister & Leary, (1995), the need to belong has 2 main features;

1. Frequent personal affectively positive or pleasant contacts or interactions, free from conflict or negative affect, with the other person.
2. The existence of an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern and continuation into the foreseeable future.

The expression of these affectionate belongingness bonds exists within a specific model of human sexuality. The model of human sexuality exists within a social identity system which accommodates same sex diversity; however, it fails to accommodate non-sexual practices in affectionate relationships. Consequently, non-sexual behavioural practices within bonded relationships have to be constructed using as terms such as platonic, close friendship, partnerships and asexual. This leads to a set of behavioural practices becoming aligned to an asexual narrative, and in turn leads to asexual identity assumption being perceived as rooted in biology. The social and cultural contexts that shape identity formation, layered onto the fundamental propensity to belong has become the mechanism that constructs how participants perceive their bodies to be 'asexual' by biology. This is weak construction theory in action. Another interesting feature of this work is that despite the existence of many subcategories and sub-labels which contribute significantly to the overall asexual self-identity construction process, asexual identity labelling and categorization appears to be less important to self-identified asexuals in terms of defining their identity. When questioned about subcategories, participants were satisfied with the asexual label alone, and as one participant pointed out:

“So, here is the difference, demiromantic is not really an important word for me because it’s only precision. Asexuality is really important for my identity, and autochorissexual is just when I want to be precise for people who are aware of my asexuality. But it’s quicker to say asexual” (Fiona)

How asexuality is understood and defined has significant clinical, academic and sociocultural implications (Yule et al., 2015). Asexuality has been conceptualised as a sexual orientation by a number of research studies (Brotto & Yule, 2011; Brotto et al., 2010; Storms, 1979) and there are extensive theoretical discussions and debates about how to measure and define sexual orientation and identity. Researchers are often confused as to what they are studying when they assess sexual orientation in their research (Sell, 1997). What seems to matter most to participants, in terms of what asexuality means, is that they are understood as a population who have experienced their entire lives asexually. Many participants defined themselves through weak social construction theory, and some with a preference for a definition which is easily understood by others.

7.2.2 How does embracing the identity impact upon relationships with others?

Research by MacInnes and Hodson (2012) indicates that some participants find their asexual identity negatively evaluated by others. This research question intended to contribute to the existing body of knowledge about coming out as a self-identified asexual. Specifically, it aimed to explore the impact of coming out on relationships with others, including family and friends and any other types of relationships that the participants chose to discuss. It has been addressed, with a focus on family relationships, in chapter 6, in the section on selective disclosure under the subcategory of critiquing sexuality.

Data suggests that within the process of identifying as asexual, participants consider the impact of disclosure on others, and the impact of disclosure on their relationships with others. Through the development of the asexual self-identity theory, it became apparent that;

1. Participants’ experiences of transcending the sexualised world, exist within a framework of societal heterosexism.

2. Heterosexism privileges heterosexuality and stigmatises, but to an extent tolerates other sexual behaviours.
3. Heterosexism fails to accommodate non-sexual behaviours and practices in affectionate relationships.

For many participants, their relationships with others when disclosing their identity is further complicated by the pervasive privileging of sexuality over asexuality. This has been identified as 'anticipated hostility' in previous work conducted by Nordquist & Smart (ND) with the lesbian and gay community. This leads to asexuals being reluctant to disclose their identity to close friends and family, being happier to be perceived as belonging to any identity as long as the narrative associated with the identity is one which conforms to their understandings of a traditional relationship paradigm. For some participants, they believe family members would be more accepting of a non-heterosexual identity rather than an asexual identity.

Anticipated hostility rendered a number of participants (n=3) choosing non-disclosure to parents, leaving their parents to draw their own conclusions about identity. Their rationale was based on a presumed lack of understanding and knowledge about asexuality. Of those who disclosed their asexual identity, there was evidence of initial discomfort or disbelief from family, but a level of acceptance of identity followed. Across the participants there was no evidence of a long-term family division or sustained hostility. This does not mean **there were no** incidences of this within the sample, it just means that participants did not disclose any. Close friendships followed a similar path. This level of acceptance which stands in contrast to research findings by MacInnes and Hodson (2012), may be due to us living through a period of time which is witnessing the most significant and positive changes in public attitude towards asexuality. Asexuality as an identity and an orientation is more accessible than ever before, through mainstream and social media, and the shift in visibility may be making a difference to public attitudes.

It is important to note that there is no evidence of negative reactions from friends and family 'derailing' identity development. There is nothing in the data to suggest that participants doubt their decision making about adopting the identity, in the light of negative reactions. Some participants engaged in educative work to help parents and friends understand asexuality, and for some, a level of acceptance came from family and friends when it became evident that relationship formation and the seeking out of

meaningful partnerships was a feature of asexual relationships. Data from this work highlights that accepting one's identity as asexual may be associated with initial feelings of surprise and discomfort. However, what was more evident in the data was the finding that once an asexual identity is operationalised, and some of its features appear to align themselves with features of traditional relationships, family and friends are able to accept and understand the identity in a more holistic sense. Participants advocated for increased visibility and education as a means to facilitate acceptance further.

It is pertinent to point out that not all participants experienced full social approval from wider society. So, whilst close relationships were maintained, others were strained. These others tended to be casual friendships and acquaintances, there was evidence of negativity in the form of direct and indirect discrimination, and there was also some evidence of outright abuse, evident in Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.

7.2.3 How does embracing an asexual identity impact upon health and wellbeing?

This research question arose from the work in Chapter 3 which alludes to a possible relationship between self-identified asexuality, mental health and well-being, discrimination and stigmatisation. Identifying as asexual meant that participants became embedded within a phenomenon of contrasting experiences; from reassurance and satisfaction to stress and anxiety. Equally, that the decision to suppress one's asexual identity may also be stressful, evident in Chapter 6, Section 6.6.3 Subcategory: Essentially asexual.

Asexuality as a non-conforming orientation has previously been associated with psychopathology, and conflated with disorders such as hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD) and sexual aversion disorder (SAD). Consequently, previous empirical work has been driven by a line of enquiry about asexuality and mental health and wellbeing. Prause & Graham (2007) discounted the view that asexuals were depressed, Brotto et al (2010) found no levels of depression and alexithymia, but found some qualitative data suggestive of higher rates of Asperger's Syndrome (Brotto et al., 2010). Yule et al (2013) found a higher rate of depression and interpersonal problems in self-identified asexuals. However, discrimination is known to negatively impact upon the health and wellbeing of minority identities and so depression and other mental health challenges may be considered as a legitimate response to discrimination.

Engagement with interventions to support emotional wellbeing featured across the data. Out of 21 participants, eight identified some form of engagement with a combination of psychologists, counsellors, and/or use of antidepressant medication. Some of the experiences of engaging with psychologists and counsellors has been addressed in section 6.5.2 under the subcategory searching for explanations. However, the role of mental wellbeing and depression was not fully explored in that section. In an attempt to address the above research question, the following section provides some insights into the mental health and wellbeing of participants in the study.

Four participants disclosed that they had sought therapy through either counselling or a psychologist, believing that their negative or neutral response towards the sexual component of their relationships, and their experiences of attraction were pathological, and would benefit from, or respond to some form of intervention. Five participants disclosed that they suffered with and had been treated for depression, four participants identified depressive symptoms, which predated their consolidation stage. Three participants were treated for depressive symptoms pre consolidation stage. Two participants identified that mental ill-health became a feature in their lives after they identified as asexual and began the process of trying to understand their identity. Whilst it is not possible to answer the question of how embracing the identity impacts upon health and wellbeing, this data demonstrates that the relationship between mental health and wellbeing and asexuality is complex and difficult to untangle. The mechanisms of the relationship in terms of cause and consequence remain unclear, and an area that this study was not able to shine any further light on. It is clear, that 38% of the sample identified engagement with psychology, counselling, and/or antidepressant medication and given this finding, the emotional wellbeing of people who identify with an asexual narrative should be a matter of concern for health and social care professionals and warrants further exploration.

7.3 How does this study relate to the existing literature on self-identified asexual identity?

The purpose of this section is to interpret and describe the significance of my study findings in light of what was already known about the social processes which inform asexual self-identity. This section also explains emerging understandings and insights of asexuality as a result of the study. This section is addressed under four headings; (1) An

interpretation of the study findings in light of what was previously known about the social processes that inform asexual self-identity, (2) Emerging understandings and insights of asexuality as a result of the study, (3) How has my study advanced my understanding of the topic under investigation? (4) How have the findings revealed and filled gaps in the literature that had not previously been exposed or adequately described?

7.3.1 An interpretation of the study findings

There is an absence of a detailed grounded theoretical model outlining the social process which inform asexual self-identity across the existing body of empirical work on self-identified asexuality. To date this process has not been captured through diagrammatic representation, although the process of arriving at an asexual identity has been alluded to in a number of qualitative studies (previously discussed in Chapter 3). Previous work has alluded to the process as a journey (Scherrer, 2008; Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Pacho, 2013; Foster & Scherrer, 2014; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014; Van Houdenhove, 2014). Researcher's interpretations of the process, presented through the qualitative work reflects a model of non-heterosexual identity formation similar to that presented by Cass (1979). Previous work suggests that this experience was almost universal and could be illustrated through the following patterns; feeling different from peers in adolescence experience (Prause & Graham, 2007; Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Pacho, 2013; Van Houdenhove, 2014), experiencing stress and concern, (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014), self-questioning (Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Pacho 2013), assuming pathology (Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Pacho, 2013; Foster & Scherrer, 2014; Van Houdenhove, 2014), experimenting with same-sex identities (Haefner, 2011; Sundrud, 2011), and the discovery of 'similar' others (Scherrer, 2008; Brotto et al., 2010; Sundrud, 2011; Foster & Scherer 2014; MacNeela & Murphy 2014), and acceptance of the centrality of asexuality (MacNeela & Murphy, 2014).

One study in particular, Robbins et al (2016), explore the process in greater detail, identifying some primary patterns in the process of identity formation, and using these patterns to build on the previous work undertaken by Cass (1979). The six stages of identity formation identified by Robbins et al (2016) are identity confusion, discovery of terminology, exploration and education, identity acceptance and salience negotiation, coming out, and identity integration. The table below illustrates how the six stages of the

Robbins et al (2016) model map to the categories of the asexual self-identity theory in this thesis.

Table 7.1: Comparison of the six stages of identity development (Robbins et al., 2016)

Robbins et al (2016)	Asexual self-identity theory	
Identity confusion	Becoming	Assimilating
Discovery of terminology		Connecting
Exploration and education		The situational bind
		Reframing
Identity acceptance and salience negotiation	Resolution	Disengaging
Coming out		Searching for explanations
		Contemplating asexuality
Identity integration	Consolidation	Embracing the nuances
		Critiquing sexuality
		Essentially asexual

In terms of identity trajectory, my own study findings corroborate previous asexuality research; identity development follows a non-linear process, and the early stages are characterised by a sense of awareness of one’s difference to others. Many of the findings from previous studies are similar to findings in this study, for example, negative reactions from friends and family did not have a derailing effect on identity development, and ‘questioning’ adolescents pathologised their lack of interest in sex (Robbins, et al 1996).

One striking difference is that the work which informs the asexual self-identity theory (my study) illustrates a more detailed process of identity formation. Activities which underpin the stages are illustrated in greater detail; assimilating, connecting, critiquing sexuality etc, rendering the establishment of the identity as much more social and relational. The asexual self-identity theory acknowledges the more unique experiences, and the individuality of the process. A clear difference between the 2 studies is that of my study presenting a more sophisticated approach to identity formation. The identity confusion stage, a common feature in a number of models of sexual identity development is expanded upon to provide deeper insights. Coming to an asexual identity is a social process, this is borne out across the asexuality literature (Scherrer, 2008; Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Pacho, 2013; Foster & Scherrer,

2014; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014; Van Houdenhove, 2014) however, previous work has failed to provide such rich detail that this study provides in terms of the situational binds.

The rich and detailed descriptions of participant's experiences provide an opportunity to explore the situations they faced during their pre-asexual identity stage; the becoming stage. The stories allowed for an exploration of the difficult personal journeys that have been undertaken in order to become the people they understand themselves to be today. The conflicted situation of Sophie who was in love but unable to enjoy a sexual relationship with that person. The anxiety experienced by Sharon, as a consequence of feeling attracted to someone in the early stages of a relationship but knowing that she would be unable to allow the relationship to become sexual. The awkwardness of Richards early sexual encounters, which resulted in both him and his girlfriend concluding that it was down to him being respectful. Firstly, these stories illustrate the impact that situational binds have on an individual. Anxiety, fear, sorrow, concern have been the lived experiences of participants, and their rite of passage was not an easy process, as the data illustrates that situational binds posed a threat to the inner psyche. The use of situational binds in this work brings to the fore, the true conflict experienced by self-identified asexuals during the becoming stage, an area which is relatively unexplored. This research highlights that the situations faced during this stage are less about discrepant levels of attraction, desire and motivation to engage in sex, and more about the fact that through these experiences, participants were placing themselves at risk of being unable to form lasting, positive, significant interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to motivational theory in psychology, this renders participants unable to meet their belonging and love needs, and incapable therefore of meeting esteem and self-actualisation needs (Green, 2000). Using a broad spectrum of evidence pertaining to the need to belong hypothesis Baumeister & Leary, (1995) demonstrate that the need to belong shapes emotion and cognition, and deficits in belongingness lead to a number of ill-effects. This study demonstrates that belongingness has implications that go beyond psychological functioning. Data highlighted how situational binds provided the platform for participants to engage in a process of self-concern about themselves as instruments for attracting others and maintaining attachments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). During the becoming stage, participants witnessed many people being dependent on their sexual prowess, their sexual attraction and behaviour, as a means to facilitate the process

of belonging. The collective positions held by those less motivated to engage in sex than others, rendered them at threat of exclusion from the promise of future happiness. In this sense, to understand the implications of situational binds, is to appreciate the need for asexual citizenship to be acknowledged as equally important as sexual citizenship.

7.3.2 Emerging understandings

There are a number of emerging understandings from this study:

Previous research constructs people who identify as asexual as vulnerable outsiders: In Chapter 3, research data illustrated that there has been a tendency to characterise asexuality by its associations with altered levels of affection towards others, altered levels of sexual attraction, desire and engagement in sexual activities. A number of studies have explored asexuality qualitatively and quantitatively through the experience of attraction and desire (Prause & Graham, 2007; Brotto et al., 2010; Brotto & Yule, 2011; Brotto et al., 2015). In much of the qualitative work that was simply seeking to further understandings of the asexual experience (Prause & Graham, 2007; Scherrer, 2008; Carrigan, 2011; Haefner, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Pacho, 2013; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014) asexuality was defined and operationalised by sexual interest and response. Whilst some studies suggest that the asexual experience can be categorised by a deep affectional and emotional awareness and expression (Scherrer, 2008; Carrigan 2011; Pacho, 2012; MacNeela & Murphy 2014), many of the definitional approaches used across the empirical work have led to the assumption that the experience of self-identified asexuality is strongly associated with a distancing or a disengagement with the sexual narrative. By doing so, previous empirical work has rendered participants marked by their non-participation in what has come to be considered as important cultural practice. This is potentially problematic, as it constructs the “vulnerable asexual” as an outsider, negotiating a complex social order, with a set of associated stigma management strategies including concealment, and failing to disclose one’s identity.

Not all people who self-identify as asexual are vulnerable: This study presents self-identified asexuals differently. Anxiety, fear, sorrow, concern are borne out through their narratives, not in relation to their asexual identity, but in relation to the inner conflict they experienced pre-identity, when dealing with other people about discrepant levels of interest in sexual behaviour. Despite the recognition of an oppressive sexual context, the

vulnerable asexual does not feature in this study. Their narratives reflect a willingness and confidence to wrestle for a recognition of the value of relationships that are not solely based on a typical sexual model. Through skilfully critiquing sexuality, they come to recognise that their journey existed against a backdrop of a culture of a supremacy of sexuality. As active participants in the process of creating and re-creating asexual identities they selectively engage with the struggle to fulfil a sense of belonging. Based on this finding, it is clear that not all self-identified asexual are the vulnerable subjects that are often portrayed through research and media.

Theories of belonging provide greater insight into asexual self-identity construction than theories of sexual attraction: This research is a step towards asexuality being understood as something that is more suited to being explored through the lens of connecting, belonging and the formation of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships. Many of the participants allude to the importance of the formation of social bonds and connections, not only in terms of how connecting with others gave rise to an awareness of a world that was driven by expectations revolving around sexuality, but also about the fact that the need to connect with and form meaningful relationships with others, was the thing that propelled them forward to their asexual identity. This study places self-identified asexuals as a collective group with shared practices, motivations and experiences, their experiences are based on their need to connect with and belong within a framework of regular contact, positive interactions and mutual concern.

This research demonstrates clearly that from the outset participants were driven by a need to belong. The need to belong represented more than just a need for affiliation, or a need for sexual connection, and therefore this study rather than adding to a body of work which sets the asexual community apart from the allo-sexual community and constructs their differences around a sexual perspective. This study brings to the fore, the strength and relevance of the desire for interpersonal attachment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). By doing so, my work brings a new perspective of asexual self-identity to the existing body of empirical work. The construct that defines asexual self-identity in this work is belonging.

Conceptual rendering of the data introduced belonging as a central motivational force which propelled participants towards the process of self-identity. By exploring asexuality

through the construct of fulfilling a sense of belonging, this study attempts to move away from the portrayal of self-identified asexuals as a vulnerable group of outsiders. It presents their search for connections to others as a universal experience, one which begins at birth, and which runs parallel to that of non-asexuals; the shared commonalities of asexuals and allosexuals come to the fore. Bogaert (2012) identifies that the story of life begins asexually, from this perspective what appears to unite us from birth is the propensity to form attachments to others. The application of a weak social construction theory has allowed asexuality to be observed not through the lens of sexuality (which renders asexuals as absent in something), but through the lens of theories of attachment, belonging and interaction, as identified in section 7.2.1.

7.3.3 Advances in understanding

I always wondered why sexuality was considered by some people to be rooted in biology. Through this study, this has become a major concept and principle ‘eye opener’ for me. The growing understanding of the impact of ‘doxa’ has the potential to significantly influence the nature of my future research. One particular area of interest which has both advanced my understanding and shaped my future research interests is that of the role of the ‘doxic’ positioning (Bourdieu, 1977) of sexuality, and its impact on collective action. Doxa is concerned with common belief and popular opinion. Pierre Bourdieu in his Outline of a Theory of Practice, used the term doxa to denote what is taken for granted in any particular society.

“Doxa is internalised as an accepted and unquestioned ‘given’.
Thus, social constructions are naturalised and rendered obvious”
(Bourdieu, 1986: 471)

Interview data from participants demonstrates that it is a socially accepted misconception that everyone feels sexual attraction, and this leads to an individual becoming sexual. This assumption; identified by Carrigan (2011) as the sexual assumption renders the characteristics of sexuality as biological in that it is experienced as uniform, experienced from birth, and therefore natural. This level of conjecture provides some insights into why asexuality defined as an absence of sexual attraction is difficult to comprehend for many people. The application of Bourdieusian theory to participants early experiences of connecting and assimilating, reveals that sexuality has become self-

evident and unquestioned due to its assumed naturalness. If one does not experience sexual attraction they are labelled as abnormal compared to someone who does. Participants were both pathologised and engaged in self-pathologisation, borne out in the data through the action of participants to seek therapy to identify and correct their lowered levels of sexual attraction, and their absence of a motivational force to pursue sexual relationships. However, data in this study has highlighted that for the asexual community, relationship formation and continuation is based on a more nuanced model of attraction, where sexual attraction is not the central focus. For those participants who do engage in sexual practices, the subjective feeling of sexual attraction and the subsequent engagement in sexual activity did not prove nor disprove any level of normality. Some participants felt that they wanted to connect on an intimately sexual level at a specific point within a certain type of relationship, and equally, in other relationships this wasn't the case. Despite the misconception that everyone should feel sexual attraction, and engage in sexual activities, some participants tended to partake in these common practices in the absence of sexual attraction for various reasons. At times, in the pre asexual identity stage, this was done to make themselves feel and appear normal. Participants who feel inferior due to popular belief that they are not as normal as other people around them, may require to ease their insecurities they face. Data indicates that there were a number of ways this was done; reframing one's experience, or seeking out psychological support through counselling or medication, or through resolution – that is, finding and engaging with a community which reflects their narrative.

Similar to the promotion of gender normalcy, Butler (1993) sees the potential to take control of processes which are promoted as 'normal', identifying that the promotion of normalcy is an illusion, and therefore vulnerable to interrogation. Doxa offers a site for resistance to the dominant discourse of sexuality. Through interrogation comes a process of activism. Bourdieu refers to this as 'doxa' and believes that doxa is more than common belief. One theory is that the doxic positioning of sexuality is a throwback to the essentialist notions from the age of enlightenment when sex and sexuality were constructed and defined from a scientific, biological basis, shaped by the continuing belief that sexual behaviour was a biological given (Chapter 2: Section 2.2.1). The rendering of sexuality as a given natural state, reflects a set of actions which are in accordance with the deployments of sexuality (Foucault, 1979) (addressed in Chapter 3: Section 2.4.1).

Bourdieu (1977) believes that doxic positioning has the potential to give rise to common action. The common action being the steps that people take to ease the insecurities they may face.

General and popular definitions of sexual attraction allude to attraction and attractiveness being a factor of sexual selection or a factor of partner choice. Popular descriptions position sexual attraction as doxa, it has an unexamined appearance, leaving no potential for alternative forms of attraction (aesthetic, romantic, sensual, platonic) to be considered as a platform for relationship formation. The doxasticity of sexual attraction is not a matter of the extent to which it represents widespread public opinion – but the extent to which it galvanises collective action. The asexual movement represents the doxasticity of sexual attraction. It could be said that all sexuality discourse is doxastic because of how it has become entrenched in society through the family, religious communities, schools, through science and medicine and healthcare. Key influential institutions deploy discourses of sexuality to inculcate symbolic values relating to health and wellbeing, some examples are presented here: sex is good for your heart (NHS England, 2018), sex makes your relationship stronger (Roundtree, 2017), sex reduces anxiety and depression (Laderer, 2018). The positioning of sex and sexuality as both biologically grounded, and biologically influential, enhances the claims that it is fundamental, natural, and universally experienced. However, such claims are doxastic because of their status as a common sense.

From the emerging findings, it has been possible to synthesize one further aspect of this study which has advanced my understanding of sexual identity development. This is the organisation of sexuality. How knowledge about sexuality is organised, and the impact of political, social and moral rules on the body and its desires. (Detailed in Chapter 2) and this is woven into the following sections of this chapter, particularly those sections which discuss the medicalisation of sexual behaviour.

7.3.4 Gaps in the literature

This work has filled a number of gaps in the existing literature. Scherrer (2008) in a study of asexuality identified that asexual identities have “a complicated relationship with essentialist notions of sexuality” (Scherrer, 2008: 7). In addition, Scherrer (2008) suggests that the essentialist notion may be strategically useful for those striving for authenticity

of the identity. The application of the belongingness hypothesis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) has provided insights into how asexuals come to recognise themselves as born this way. According to the evolutionary theory of attachment, humans are born with a fundamental propensity to form attachments with others, this is key to survival, as suggested in works by Bowlby (1969), Harlow & Zimmermann (1958), and Lorenz (1953) cited in McLeod (2018). The need to form attachments plays out in individuals as a search for a sense of belonging, where belonging represents the formation and maintenance of enduring positive and significant interpersonal attachments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This finding, answers the question asked in other studies about how asexuals perceive their asexuality to be biologically driven. The social and cultural contexts that shape identity formation, layered onto the fundamental propensity to belong has become the mechanism that constructs how participants perceive their bodies to be asexual by biology.

Another area which this study expands the literature is that of the impact of the medicalisation of sexual behaviour. What began as a developing awareness of the relevance of sex as central to fulfilling a need to belong, became a search for explanations and a 'cure', for their assumed sexual deficiencies. The reality of their experiences was that transcending the sexualised world existed within a framework of sexualisation and medicalisation, a process which originated in the Western world in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, where understandings of sexuality came from a scientific perspective. During this era health was assumed to be a natural state of the body that was capable of being maintained and protected, and all diseases could be eradicated (Risse, 1992). The vision became key to the scientific understanding of sex and sexuality (Delamater & Hyde, 1998). For participants, the existence of societal heterosexism which is superimposed onto a legacy of medicalisation, results in a privileging of heterosexuality, and a stigmatisation of anything that deviates from a set of uniform standards about sex and sexual behaviour. In a medicalised model of sexual behaviour, desire and attraction become universally assumed experiences and levels of such are benchmarked giving rise to this concept of normal and abnormal levels. The impact of medicalisation resulted in participants defaulting to the absence of sexual attraction being something that can be, and needs to be remedied. Heterosexism and the medicalisation of sexual behaviour failed to accommodate non-sexual behaviours and practices in affectionate relationships.

Chapter 3 presents a concept analysis of asexuality, undertaken to provide some concept clarification of asexuality, and Chapter 6 presents the asexual self-identity theoretical model which illustrates the process which informs asexual self-identity formation. Whilst both models had different purposes, some similarities can be observed across both models. The concept clarification model outlines some elements of identity development which are captured and expanded upon in greater detail in the asexual self-identity model. The outcomes of self-identity are similar across both models, reflecting a process which culminates in reframing personal connections and relationships and developing a new language to capture and reflect relationship formation in an asexual context. The attributes of asexual identity are similar across both models, in particular the integrated framework of social process and biological mechanisms identified in the concept clarification is expanded upon in the asexual self-identity model. The asexual self-identity model reflects the finding that during the consolidation stage self-identified asexuals consider the asexual identity from a weak constructivist perspective, where by participants perceive their bodies to be asexual by biology. The process of bringing together the two different models, and comparing them for similarities and differences has been insightful and worthwhile, whilst providing an additional layer of credibility to the work. The most significant difference between the models are that the asexual self-identity model is a framework that interprets what happens during the process of self-identity and makes relationships between the explicit processes and structures that inform asexual self-identity visible.

As well as expanding the literature, this work has also revealed a number of gaps. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977), and logic of practice (1990) are used in the following section, to provide insights into self-identified asexuality. Capital, in particular cultural capital is explored in section 7.4.4. Pennell (2016) identifies that although Bourdieu's theory on cultural capital can be interpreted in a number of ways, it is often viewed through the lens of the white middle class; largely representative of the sample within this study (See Section 5.5.3). In this framework, those who did not fit these criteria would be viewed as having a deficit and therefore unable to progress to identifying as asexual. This study has revealed gaps in our understanding of how individuals who are not within the white middle-class category but do not identify with a centralised model of sexuality in their experiences of relationship formation and belonging navigate the field.

A significant proportion, 38% of the sample identified engagement with psychology, counselling, and/or antidepressant medication and given this finding, the emotional wellbeing of people who identify with an asexual narrative should be a matter of concern for health and social care professionals and warrants further exploration.

7.4 The theoretical contribution of this study

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977), and logic of practice (1990) provide analytical tools capable of providing insights into self-identified asexuality. Addressing the question of "What are the social processes involved in constructing an asexual identity?" this section outlines some theoretical considerations derived from key concepts of Bourdieusian social theory, as they offer a lens through which asexuality, sexuality and belonging can be thoughtfully engaged. One of the key theoretical premises of my work is that identifying as asexual is underpinned by a core social process of transcending sexualisation to fulfil a sense of belonging. Embedded within the process are activities of connecting, assimilating, 'encountering' situational binds, reframing, disengaging, searching for explanations, contemplating asexuality, embracing the nuances, critiquing sexuality, and 'being' essentially asexual.

This section will introduce the theoretical tools used by Bourdieu previously to explore key themes within his own work. Bourdieu's sociological concerns focus upon the practical logic of everyday life, and relations of power (Power, 1999). His key theoretical concepts habitus, capital, field and practice will be used to explore the social processes involved in transcending sexualisation to fulfil a sense of belonging. According to Asimaki and Koustourakis (2014), in order to convey and summarise the relationship between habitus, practice, field and capital, Bourdieu constructed the following model;

$$[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}$$

(Asimaki & Koustourakis, 2014: 123)

As illustrated in the model, practice stems from the relationship between the individual habitus and their position. Position is said to depend on the amount and structure of their capital within the social field (Maton, cited in Grenfell, 2008). The presentation of this model allows for the theoretical discussion of asexual identity formation to be undertaken in three distinct sections, with practice, concerned with the development of

sexual and asexual identities being discursively interwoven into these three sections detailed below.

- Habitus and the embodiment of societal structures will be explored in the context of becoming.
- The relationship between habitus and field in the process of transcending sexualisation will be explored.
- The influence of cultural capital in the field will be considered.

A necessary apriori activity is to outline Bourdieu's notions of social structure and dispositions; detailed in the following section.

7.4.1 Bourdieu's notions of social structure and dispositions

Habitus is informed by a set of dispositions which according to Bourdieu (1990) become inculcated through key societal structures. The following section will thoughtfully engage with some key sociological concepts related to habitus; namely social structure and dispositions, before engaging in a more detailed exploration of the theory of habitus and how this relates to asexuality.

Social structure is a shorthand term for complex social arrangements or networks that come from, and determine, the actions of individuals. Leyton (2014) refers to a concept of social structure as one of the core notions in social science. According to Leyton (2014), it is nebulous, there is no singular model of social structure, and it is impossible to do justice to the many intellectual traditions that have formed it. Social forces and pathways external to, independent of, and more than the sum of the individuals are considered by Leyton (2014) to represent social structures/systems. Leyton (2014) identifies that Bourdieu attempts to surpass a static notion of social structure, by proposing a more dynamic aspect of the concept; that is to say, its process dimensions. Bourdieu considers the social structure as a permanent dialectic process (Leyton, 2014). For, Bourdieu (1993) social structures may constitute a common sense, a doxa; a complex framework of practices and meanings, with a propensity to restrain actions and thoughts, highlight them as inappropriate, incongruous, and unachievable or displaced (Bourdieu, 1993). Social structures exist within the field (discussed in section 7.4.3 and 7.7.4), and Bourdieu has analysed the fields of education, the intellectual field, and the fields of science and religion (Power, 1999). Bourdieu identifies agency within the theory of habitus; that is the

ability of an individual to act independently, to have a sense of control over one's actions and consequences, and to make their own choices (Moore, 2016). The concept of agency will be addressed in Section 7.4.2, however at this point it is important to point out that agency cannot be fully separated out from structure; they do not exist on two separate levels, because at all levels, individuals are enmeshed within structures (Porpora, 1996). The existence of agency suggests that social structures therefore do not determine behaviour. The individual is predisposed to act in accordance with the structures that have shaped them. In this sense, society carries structures (Power, 1990), and their influence is more navigational in nature rather than dictatorial. Where structure acts as a constraint, action acts as choice (Rissman, 2004).

The existence of multiple levels of social structures is one of sociology's taken for granted assumptions (Porpora, 1996). Gender represents a form of social structuring which is explored in greater detail in the following section; however, within a feminist framework, gender division itself can also be considered as a field, as it is a structured space consisting of dominant and subordinate positions. Gender division renders masculine and feminine dispositions assigned to individuals from birth (Addison, 2008). Individuals are being placed on specific trajectories with respect to their assigned gender. Gender allocation of male or female creates a lasting scheme of perception of oneself in the world, which then directs thought and action (Addison, 2008).

As individuals, we do not arbitrarily assign ourselves to specific social structures or categories. On a sociological level, we become entrenched into behaviour patterns and lifestyles through the process of social structuring. For example, in the previous section, it became apparent that some people rely on their sexual prowess as a means to facilitate the process of belonging. An aspect of human culture, which enables people to satisfy the need to belong, through sexual behaviour is medicalisation. The availability of drugs to enhance sexual behaviour is part of a medicalisation agenda. The medicalisation agenda is a resource which has the power to facilitate and fulfil a need to belong. Terms such as libido and sexual performance are regularly used within a medicalised framework, giving rise to the idea that sexual behaviour which falls below a certain expectation is dysfunctional and can be corrected through medicine. In this way, sexuality becomes a scientific pursuit, rather than a social practice. Medicalisation in this sense, is a social

structure, because of the way in which individuals act in accordance to and with its agenda; believing themselves to be dysfunctional and seeking out a cure.

Social structuring entrenches people into a behaviour pattern of self-pathologising, believing they have to fix what they perceive to be a sexual problem. An example of which can be seen by Paula's story below:

Like I did talk to therapist thinking that I needed to get me fixed and you know I've always had doctors kind of treat it like a medical problem and yes, it's just that feeling that you needed to somehow be fixed or cured" (Paula)

What began as participants questioning their absence of sexual attraction, became a search for explanations during the resolution stage – another example of how doxa galvanises action. The tendency to medicalise the absence of sexual attraction, a behaviour which was observed across a number of participants, illustrates a legacy of the control and regulation of bodies, a practice through which, according to Foucault (1979), sexuality, has become framed by scientific discourses.

In this sense, social structuring can be considered as both a passive and active process that has influential capacity to shape actions, inform interactions and have noticeable and unnoticeable effects. The relationship between action and structure is not one directional, just as structures influence action, actions can also influence structures. Just as the medicalisation of sexual behaviour has become a structure through which people manage and control their sexuality, sexuality has become a product of, and both feeds into the medicalisation of sexual behaviour. As gender now accommodates a "proliferating visibility of alternative chosen lifestyles" (Addison, 2008: 266) beyond that of male and female, the concept of gender non-conformity exists, grows and informs the social structuring of gender, within what was once a binary gender framework.

Social structuring creates and shapes a set of what Bourdieu identifies as "lasting dispositions". Bourdieusian theory posits that dispositions are also shaped by past events. They inform actions, and by doing so, they shape societal structures. Dispositions influence and condition our self-perception of our 'place' in society. Dispositions therefore, create a legacy upon the self, as well as upon society. Valerie's understanding of other people's expectations in relation to courtship is evident in the narrative below:

In social situations with peers, there was an expectation that I would start liking boys. It came up really young – I'm supposed to start liking boys at 6/7/8 maybe, like as soon as I was put into regular social situations with boys, I had that understanding (Valerie)

Among the key dispositions which informed the actions of the participants in the stages of becoming and resolution were the processes they engaged with which during the assimilating and searching for explanations phases – that of pathologising their questioning of the relevance of sexual attraction and behaviour as central to fulfilling a need to belong. Again, these dispositions (pathologising, seeking medical and psychological advice and treatment), evident in subcategory 'Searching for explanations' (Section 6.5.2) in the stage of resolution, demonstrate a reaction by the participants to the social structure of the medicalisation of sexual behaviour.

7.4.2 Habitus: The embodiment of societal structures in the context of becoming

According to Panagiotopoulos (1990), the concept of habitus was constructed by Bourdieu as a method of demonstrating that the habitus of acting subjects functioned as an internal compass, guiding their practice. Bourdieu explains habitus to be:

"Enacted belief, instilled by the childhood learning that treats the body as a living memory pad, and automaton that 'leads the mind unconsciously along with it', and as a repository for the most precious values, is the form par excellence of the blind or symbolic thought" (Bourdieu, 1990: 69)

In short, habitus is a complex term used to capture the way in which we embody the world around us. According to Bourdieu, a person's habitus allows her or him to develop embodied ease in navigating cultural and practical action in specific ordered ways. For example, in the becoming stage, assimilation (Section 6.4.1), it is evident that participants engaged in a process of integration and incorporation of sexual knowledge, alongside the development of a level of understanding about sexuality. This occurred in order to facilitate the process of becoming part of a sexualised community – participants engaged with this mechanism to enable themselves to navigate the cultural and practical action of connecting with others in a sexualised world.

The extent to which this is achieved is influenced by capital and capital is explored in Section 7.4.4. According to Bourdieusian theory, social structuring represents a process of social arranging. The interaction of structures and arrangements both emerge from, and predict the actions of members within that society.

During the process of transcending sexualisation, the becoming stage reflects a period where participants emerged as social beings, capable of forming attachments with others. During this period, expressions of sexuality were considered omnipresent by participants, observed regularly within their interactions. Diane reflects of people fancying other people at school and how this developed into her peers expecting her to start fancying others:

*“And then other people started fancying people and It was like
“Who do you fancy, who do you fancy?”, and I was like, “No one”
(laughs and breathes heavily), that was like my first kind of sign”
(Diane)*

A fundamental drive to form lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships was met with what is defined within the data as a collection of behaviours representing sexuality, evident in the narrative presented in section 6.3.1. No alternative was offered or accessible for connecting on that lasting, positive and significantly interpersonal level, other than that of the discourse of sexuality, this was in itself problematic.

Participants were initially limited by the constraints of existing models of sexually based attraction and relationship formation, which rendered sexual practices at the core of partnership formation. The limitations imposed upon them were inherently linked to forming lasting, positive bonds with other people and fulfilling a need to belong. For the participants such experiences constituted “a rupture between the symbolic and reality” (Addison, 2008: 266) and played itself out as a situational bind. At the same time, the experiences galvanised participants to transcend what appeared to be a sexualisation of relationship formation, but what was actually characteristic of an era of the scientific study of sexuality; and the socialisation of procreative behaviour, where relationships between men and women were encouraged to be based on procreation, and had to be both moral and sexual in nature (Foucault, 1979). The following section explores how structural factors shaped the bodies and behaviours of the participants of this study.

The habitus that participants brought to their positions is one that was informed through subjective interpretation of a process of sexualisation, and medicalisation, where something is 'made' sexual either in quality or character (APA, 2007), and anything that deviates from a specific sexual standard, can be corrected. What participants perceived to be an omnipresence of sexuality, was in fact participants encountering a form of sexualisation of social connection, and a medicalisation process which seeks make excuses, evident in the narratives of section 6.4.4, (Reframing), and to address the barriers to achieving this type of connection, evident in the narratives of 6.5.3 (Searching for explanations).

Human beings are fundamentally and pervasively, driven by a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Human behaviour is highly motivated toward establishing and sustaining belongingness, connecting on a social level informs this process. In this study, the formation of those intimate bonds that are symbolic of belonging were imbued with sexuality.

Power (1999) suggests that the primary habitus, inculcated in childhood can be more durable than one or more secondary habitus learned later in life. The dispositions acquired in childhood are said to mould the body, and generate a number of practices (Thompson, 1991). Some of these practices can be observed in the narratives of the participants during the stage of becoming; Sophie for example in a long-term relationship with her boyfriend, for whom she had very strong feelings, but feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the sexual component of their relationship, continued to remain in sexual relationships:

"... So, I did sleep with people, and I just thought "I'm not really enjoying this". (Sophie)

Habitus guides the disposition-formation process and dispositions inform habitus. There is a gradual inculcation of childhood experiences, some of which form the basis of habits, acquired in early childhood, when a child is relatively unaware of their own free will or their power to alter or rethink them. Some habits seem to be human nature to the child (Robinson, 2015). In the narrative above Sophie appears to be engaging in a degree of what Robinson (2015) identifies as a normative pressure to act in accordance with

dispositions, which are said to shape the body. Particularly if it comes from an entire community or an influential pocket within that community.

Within this study of asexuality, it is possible to identify some fundamental structural relations and their incumbent dispositions that are assignable to the process of transcending sexualisation. According to Bourdieu (1990), an unconscious process constructs and constitutes what is perceived as typical or normal. Social norms for relationship formation are closely intertwined with a number of structural relations, however for the purposes of this section, this has to be limited to an exploration of the systems of medicalisation, gender, patriarchy, and religion.

One of the contextually significant levels of macro structure which offer a lens through which transcending sexualisation can be explored is gender. Gender defines the ways in which we experience our own bodies, and how this plays out in actions. Participants entered the field having embodied male and female dispositions and using performances of masculinity or femininity. One example of this was evident in Sophie's reflections of early relationship formation:

"I sort of had inklings that it [not enjoying sex] might not be normal, but then a lot of what culture throws at you, especially if you're a woman, is that sex is a sort of thing that's quite passive and that not that many people are really bothered about anyway. The first time always hurts, you're always getting messages that are essentially you're not particularly expected to enjoy sex, basically (laughter) or certainly those are the messages that I saw. (Sophie)

Making sense of her sexual identity was complicated by the dispositions embodied as a young woman. Data suggests that for women there was greater flexibility to engage in gender non-conformity. There were narratives of participants (Valerie and Diane) engagement with aspects of androcentrism – there were no matching narratives among the male participants. On a societal level, in gender binary, men generally lose if they are perceived as feminine, as this is a devalued status. Bourdieu (1997) identifies that gender is a fundamental dimension of the habitus. The work of Bourdieu reflects a centrality of thinking of a traditional and resilient pattern of male domination and feminine submission (Silva, 2005). The incumbent disposition of hegemonic femininity is

constructed to serve hegemonic masculinity, and demands, amongst other things, that women are subordinate (Pyke & Johnson, 2003). Traditional and patriarchal societal expectations of femininity align themselves with notions of women being sexually attractive in appearance, but being sexually inactive, unless in a committed relationship (Tolman, 2002). Notwithstanding the radical feminism (anti-sex) versus pro-sex feminism debate (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010), these patriarchal expectations of femininity promote women as denouncing sexual attraction and desire (Bianchi, 2018). Hegemonic masculinity demands that sex and sexual desire be part of the identity of men and masculine individuals. Evident in the narrative of Richard below:

For example, I was at the gym on Saturday and somebody, you know, quite conventionally attractive, walked past and a few of my friends made a comment. (Richard)

Assumptions of women being 'without' sexual desire, and men as powerfully driven and sexually 'charged', align with patriarchal societal expectations of femininity and masculinity. A patriarchal system promotes gender division being played out through a set of expectations about male and female behaviour (as discussed in the following section). Embodying and participating as properly gendered heterosexual men and women is equated with normality (Sedgwick, 1990; Tolman et al., 2014). Given the trend regarding gender division where the ratio of males to females (7:1) within the sample of this study, it can be deduced that the embodiment of societal structures in the form of expectations of masculinity and femininity acted as an inhibitor for males, and a facilitator for females to transcend sexuality to fulfil a sense of belonging.

Alongside gender and patriarchy, is the existence of an agenda of medicalisation, first identified in Chapter 2. The application of scientific knowledge to everyday life, an agenda which, as presented in Chapter 2, began in Western societies during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, and appears to be based on and around the medicalisation of sexual behaviour. The exercise of medical authority over sexual behaviour has a long history. In the previous paragraphs we have considered aspects of participant's behaviour which reflect a legacy of the socialisation of procreative behaviour and the psychiatrization of perverse pleasure. Both processes are embedded within the deployment of sexuality, a mechanism which increasingly ensured sex was undertaken

with the sole purpose of reproduction, and that procreative practices were underpinned with morality. During this period, steps were taken to ensure that non reproductive, and non-moral sexual practices were restricted. This strategy created a legacy of the forbidden, the abnormal and the normal, which became inculcated and observable in the narratives of participants.

On a meso level, the education system, social networks, and family and friends influenced the primary and secondary habitus of participants. Shirley provides an example of family attitudes towards dating and relationships which has been a feature of her childhood and adolescence:

And parents and cousins and uncles, and big family you know they are always asking, you know, oh what about the boys, about this and about that. And if you don't go out with a guy there's that ... 'Oh maybe she's like That' you know ... 'maybe she's a lesbian' (Shirley)

In childhood, the primary habitus was formed through the practice of interactions, with family, friends and at school. Participants referred to being perceived as heterosexual from an early age, sometime in pre-school, self-identifying as heterosexual from an early age, and being surrounded by a culture of societal heterosexism. The operationalisation of participants' interpersonal relationships was embodied against a backcloth of structural relations informed by gender, medicalisation and for some, religion. Within these structures, there existed an interplay of learning, socialising, networking, connecting with friends and family dynamics which became embodied. Significant to this process, according to Bourdieu (1990) are the acts of how people relate to each other on every conceivable level, not just how they interact but how they move their bodies, their gestures, facial expressions, tones of voice, the places they connect, who they connect with, how they connected and so on. According to Bourdieu (1990), these practices are instilled by childhood learning which treats the body as a living memory pad. These practices are unique, individually embodied and therefore by nature, they generate individuality. Based on this theory of individuality, it can be deduced that just as there is no uniformity in terms of how individuals satisfy their individual needs for sleep or food or water, there will be no uniformity in terms of how individuals satisfy their individual need to belong. So, whilst some people may consider sexual behaviour as a central component of providing belongingness satisfaction, the sample for this study was

comprised of a group of individuals who were able to question the relevance of sexual behaviour as central to fulfilling a need to belong.

The embodiment of societal structures in the context of transcending sexualisation occurred through a process of society depositing itself within the individual, in the form of lasting dispositions. The dispositions imposed upon participants and the inculcation of these, occurred through a process of social structuring. All participants entered the becoming stage assuming heterosexuality, evident in the narratives of the becoming stage (Section 6.4). This was facilitated through the macro, meso and micro structures of medicalisation, gender and patriarchy and appears to have acted as an unconscious process which assigned participants to a specific path. However, social structures do not determine behaviour, they act as a navigational compass. The early processes whereby participants assumed a sexual self-identity laid the foundations for the development of an inner psyche, an individualised thought and action process, and an individualised set of behaviours. The interaction of capital and agency (addressed in the next section), created an alternative set of dispositions. These alternative lasting dispositions were informed through a framework which was no longer based on a centralized model of sexuality. They became enacted during the resolution and consolidation stages. The way the participants responded to the initial depositing, and the way they acted as agents, informed the outcome of the situational bind. The operationalisation of agency alongside an exploration of the relationship between the individual's habitus and different forms of capital will provide an explanatory framework for this.

7.4.3 The relationship between habitus and field in the process of transcending sexualisation

The field reflects the sexualised setting in which agents and their social positions are located, and the social trajectory of these positions. The study of field in this context helps to explain differential power. Power (1999) refers to fields as structural spaces arranged around types of capital, consisting of dominant and subordinate positions.

Participants in this study entered a field where a complex interplay of a social structuring of gender, sexualisation and medicalisation was operationalised. Lorber (1994) identifies gender to be a social institution embedded in all the social processes of everyday life (Lorber, 1994). According to Rissman (2004), it is the foundation on which inequality rests. Women and men become coerced into social roles and gendered paths, through

processes of comparison to those in structurally similar positions (Burt, 1982; Rissman, 2004). According to Butler (1988, 1990) gender is something we perform, and the sexed body is a product of binary gendered discourses. A series of acts together make up gender presentation and identity and these are commonly divided into masculine and feminine in character (Butler, 1988). Certain performative acts are associated with certain gendered expectations. Firstly, of note in this study is that within the sample, and commensurate with other asexuality studies, there are far more women than men identifying as asexual (Bianchi, 2018; Hinderliter, 2009). Butler (1990) proposes that heterosexual desire binds the masculine and feminine in a binary, hierarchical relationship. The purpose of gender being to construct women to be subordinate to men (Lorber, 1994). Social structuring renders participants acting in accordance with their gender informed dispositions. Not everyone adopts the dominant script, however, individual dispositions more often reflect exposure to norms, expectations, and opportunities that depend on gender and other social categories (Eckert & McConnell-Ginnett, 2013). Below are three examples of the workings of habitus (the inculcation of social structures) and field (the sexualised setting in which participants were located) in the process of transcending sexualisation.

The inherent workings of medicalisation on habitus in the field: Previous sections have illustrated how, through habitus, participants act in accordance with a medicalised model of sexual behaviour, in a sexualised setting. For all participants, sexual attraction and desire were universally assumed experiences. When an awareness of a sense of difference began to crystallise, rather than immediately resisting these discourses of sexual attraction and desire, initially, participants reacted to the discourses by questioning their own 'normality' and searching for explanations (Section 6.5.2). The questioning of their own sexual 'normalcy' reflects the impact of what Foucault (1979) referred to as the "psychiatrization of perverse pleasure" and "the socialisation of procreative behaviour" (Foucault, 1979), where anything that deviated from the normal universal experience could be diagnosed and cured, and where non-sexual forms of intimacy including non-coital practices are considered irrelevant. Medicalisation is located within the social process of transcending sexualisation, the data demonstrates that during the search for explanations there was always a tendency to pathologise. When participants finally resisted discourses of sexuality and pathology, they were able

to openly identify as asexual, however, in doing so, they were faced with a culture of non-legitimation of non-sexual relationships. Those relationships which did not conform to a standard of partnered sexual contact, could not be recognised or authenticated as lasting positive significant interpersonal relationships.

The inherent workings of patriarchy on habitus: Patriarchy as a social product of gender, is a system where men are considered to hold primary power: an ideology which informs a culture of social power created by men to serve men (Butler, 1990). Wright (2015) identifies that it has a built-in heteronormative bias, where heterosexuality is considered the norm. This was played out in the data in a number of ways. Firstly, transcending the sexualised world, existed within a framework of embodied heteronormative discourses. Heterosexism was found to privilege heterosexuality, and tolerate other sexual behaviours, whilst failing to accommodate non-sexual practices within lasting, positive, significant interpersonal relationships. Participants entered the becoming stage assuming heterosexuality facilitated through the structure of patriarchy which acted as an unconscious process (Bourdieu, 1990) to construct and constitutes a normality of heteronormativity among the participants. An examination of the concept of habitus in relation to patriarchy this is unsurprising, as they embody the cultural and practical action of relationship formation. Following the situational bind, many participants then pathologised their experience and proceeded to explore the potential for same-sex exclusively or same-sex combined with opposite sex sexual attraction. These second and third lines of enquiry for participants, reflect an embodiment of a system which privileges the norm and tolerates a deviation from the norm, so long as a sexualised framework can be imposed onto said deviations. A system which people who do not conform to the dominant norms of ideal relationships – the formation of lasting, positive significant interpersonal relationships in the absence of sexual practices, becomes rendered as abnormal and even subjected to intense scrutiny and control. This lucidly represents the inherent workings of structural factors of gender, patriarchy and medicalisation, and how they shaped the bodies and behaviours of the participants of this study.

The inherent workings of religion on habitus: Religion provides another structural relation which carries incumbent dispositions. The ultimate commitment in the belonging sense is marriage, which is emblematic of (sexual) relations between men and women, and more recently between same sexes. This disposition fed directly into the construction of

a sexualised model of relationship commitment, where the value of belonging or commitment to the relationship came only from sexual behaviours to the exclusion of other characteristics. For Bourdieu, habituses are specifically embodied indicators of differential practices (Robinson, 2015). Organised religion and its dispositions, which moulded the participants both challenged and facilitated the process of transcending sexualisation. For a number of participants, due to an exposure to a common religious sentiment, sexual intercourse was considered something that was held off until marriage. For other participants, belonging/commitment was held to a standard that equated to sexual intimacy. In this sense, commitment and belonging to the relationship were sexually objectified.

7.4.4 The influence of cultural capital in the field

The above sections have outlined how the process of becoming was informed by habitus within the influential fields of gender, patriarchy, medicalisation and religion. Theoretical consideration of habitus and field in the previous sections gives rise to the question why, for the participants in this study such experiences constituted “a rupture between the symbolic and reality” (Addison, 2008: 266) and played itself out as a situational bind. Particularly, when data suggests that many participants shared a set of lasting dispositions informed by a Western gender habitus. The habitus and field, and the social role are believed to make social action understood and appreciated (Krais & Williams, 2000). The predicted outcome would have been that participants entered and navigated the becoming stage to continue on a sexual trajectory, however this wasn't the case. Social structures however, far from determining behaviour, act as an internal compass (Panagiotopoulos, 1990). The application of Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital can provide some key considerations of participants' actions following on from the situational bind.

Participants were initially limited by the constraints of their absence of a sexual component within their experiences of attraction. The limitations imposed upon them were inherently linked to forming meaningful bonds with other people and fulfilling a need to belong. As Paula points out:

“ ... and you started to feel like “I'm going to be alone”. Like, the fact that I don't want to have sex means that no one will ever – I will never be more important than anyone else to anybody” (Paula)

This section will go on to show how they endlessly improvised throughout the process to fulfil their need to belong and connect with others in meaningful ways, to end up with different models of attraction, more nuanced models, that became barely recognisable to those used within a sexual framework.

Whilst social structuring and the fields of gender, patriarchy, medicalisation and religion both navigated and constrained the behaviour of the participants, the participants acted as agents within the field. They were able to exercise their own free will to move forward. According to Bourdieu (1986) cultural capital as a concept indicates the knowledges, advantages and privileges that come with membership in a social group or class. Pennell (2016) identifies that although Bourdieu's theory on cultural capital can be interpreted in a number of ways, it is often viewed through the lens of the white middle class; largely representative of the sample within this study (See Section 5.5.3). In this framework, those who did not fit these criteria would be viewed as having a deficit and therefore, there is a possibility they may have been unable to progress to identifying as asexual. Pennell (2016) identifies six forms of cultural capital that can be found in queer communities; aspirational, familial, navigational, resistant, linguistic and transgressive. I propose these six forms used by Pennell (2016) are applicable to the participants in this study, as they emerge in the field, from the becoming stage as a group who are initially questioning the relevance of sexual behaviour as central to fulfilling a need to belong. The development of these forms of capital was cumulative – participants began to operationalise the different forms during the becoming stage. Throughout the resolution and consolidation stages their experiences provided them with a steady growth of each form of capital. The more capital they acquired, the greater their levels of agency. The progressive growth of their cultural capital acted as a facilitator to move them from subordinate positions in one field (the sexualised) to dominant positions in another field (the asexual).

Aspirational capital: Reflects an ability to hold onto hope in the face of uncertainty and potential inequality (Pennell, 2016). One example of this is the perseverance of participants during the becoming and resolution stages – searching for explanations and moving back and forth between seeking professional advice and engaging in identity-work. Participants were actively holding onto hope whilst losing the advantages that being sexual and engaging with sexual discourses provides. Advantages in the form of

lasting meaningful relationships, the fulfillment of the need to belong, acceptance from society. The ability to be able to persevere in the face of adversity provided them with, and demonstrates an accumulation of aspirational capital.

Familial capital: Reflects family history, community, memories and social networks and resources. Familial capital encompasses a broad definition of family (Pennell, 2016). Some participants had chosen families, meaning strong friendship groups that supplemented, or replaced the families they were raised with. One example of this is the asexual community, particularly AVEN. Where participants did not encounter familial capital – they were more likely to remain in the becoming stage. Scott et al (2016) refer to this as phenomena as ‘a story of non-becoming’

Navigational capital: Reflects the ability to steer through institutions that were not created with asexuals in mind: religion, marriage and childbearing for example on a macro level. Participants initial attempts at navigating the sexual world during the stage of becoming acted as a blue-print for their continued navigation through society as they progressed onto the consolidation stage. Data demonstrates how participants were continually faced situations which required a degree of navigation; conversations with friends, immediate and wider family, with clinicians, and with partners. Sometimes these situations were difficult, sometimes they were straightforward, some relationships seemed irreconcilable. The skills they acquired through these encounters provided them with adequate navigational capital to persevere.

Resistant capital: Reflects the knowledge and skills which developed through processes of oppositional behaviour, that queer become familiar with as a result of negotiating inequality (Pennell, 2016). Pennell (2016) identifies this as the most noticeable form of capital in queer communities, particularly where strong political activation exists. It can also be argued that simply by existing, queer people are resisting heteronormativity. Resistant capital allows queer people to enjoy life with greater comfort in the wider community, whether their resistance is overt or covert (Pennell, 2016). This form of capital represents the skills that participants develop by resisting the dominant heteronormative discourses, while dealing with pathologisation of their asexual identity and accusations that they are not human.

Linguistic capital: Reflects the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language or style (Pennell, 2016). The asexual community come from all cultures and nations, and have a diverse linguistic range to draw upon. They also have a specific asexual language which is constantly developing, and which could be used to signify recognition. Data demonstrates that as participants started to engage with asexuality discourse, the discovery of a new extended vocabulary allowed them to frame their past experiences in more meaningful non-sexual ways. Diane extended her vocabulary to facilitate the process of making sense and embracing the nuances within her experience of attraction. This provided participants with a linguistic capital and acted as a form of positive asexual affirmation.

Transgressive capital: Bourdieu (1993) identifies that social structures have a propensity to restrain actions and thoughts, highlighting them as inappropriate, incongruous, unachievable or displaced (Bourdieu, 1993). This form of capital reflects the ways in which minoritised communities proactively challenge and move beyond boundaries that limit and bind them, creating their own reality (Pennell, 2016). While in the early stages of the process of transcending sexualisation, habitus shaped and produced a set of practices commensurate with sexualisation, it did not determine a sexualised trajectory in the longer term, rather, it generated a set of practices that coincided with the social conditions that produced it (Power, 1990). These practices provided participants with an inbuilt 'skill set' that moved them on to resolution. They moved from an oppressive context where heterosexism failed to accommodate non-sexual behaviours and practices in affectionate relationships. In doing so they contributed to shaping asexual identities in significant ways. This is what Bourdieu identifies as practice. It signifies the relationship between habitus and human agency as it exists in the field. Participants moved into spaces within the field where they began to craft asexual identities. They arrived at a place where a centralised model of sexuality does not drive their relationship formation or their search for belonging. During the consolidation stage their narratives reflected a preparedness to wrestle for a recognition of the value of relationships that are not solely based on sexual attraction, sexual desire and sexual intimacy. Transgressive capital reflects the wealth of skills they have acquired whilst transcending sexualisation to reach asexuality.

7.5 Conclusion

In answer to the question “what are the social processes which inform asexual self-identity?”, using Bourdieusian social theory, this chapter outlines how the primary habitus is formed through social structures, lasting dispositions and the practice of interactions. According to Bourdieu, practices are unique, and individually embodied. In line with this theory, data from this study suggests that there is no uniformity in terms of how individuals satisfy their individual need to belong. So, whilst some people may consider sexual behaviour as a central component of providing belonging, the sample for this study was comprised of a group of individuals who from an early age were able to question the relevance of sexual behaviour as central to fulfilling a need to belong. The process of questioning and searching for explanations became operationalised alongside the process of acquiring cultural capital. This was cumulative, acting as a catalyst for participants to build and operationalise different forms of cultural capital along the way. The more capital participants acquired, the greater their ability to operate according to their own free will. The progressive growth of cultural capital acted as a facilitator to move them from subordinate positions in one field (the sexualised) to dominant positions in another field (the asexual).

Bourdiesian social theory, namely doxa, habitus, field and cultural capital have offered a lens through which the processes of asexual self-identity can be better understood. This work provides an empirical example that does not challenge existing theories but enhances them in terms of their applicability to contemporary phenomena such as asexuality. The application of Bourdieusian social theory has provided tools to flesh out some of the empirical and theoretical questions related to structure and capital. Questions such as “What are the experiences of people who do not align themselves to White, middle class social groups?” and “How do individuals who do not have adequate access to familial capital manage their experiences of non-becoming?” The application of the theory has also provided insights into the use and accumulation of various types of capital and the interaction of habitus and field on asexual identities. To date, this has been a relatively unexplored area. In this sense the application of Bourdieusian social theory has provided some new insights and thoughtful considerations into asexual self-identity.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

This chapter summarises the study, and draws out its main contributions to the knowledge base on self-identified asexuality. The strengths and limitations of the study are considered and recommendations for further research are made.

8.1 Summary of the study

This study aimed to fill a gap in the literature about the overall construction of asexual self-identity, captured through the perspectives of people who self-identify as asexual. In order to address the six areas of interest identified from the gaps in the existing research, an overarching research question of “What are the social processes involved in constructing an asexual identity” was presented. This was broken down into a number of specific objectives which have been addressed in greater detail in chapter 7. The data for the study was based on interview data from 21 participants who self-identified as asexual. For these participants, the process of self-identifying as asexual was informed by a central premise of transcending the sexualised world, represented by a core category of transcending sexualisation to fulfil a need to belong. Three conceptual categories were identified; (1) Becoming, (2) Resolution, and (3) Consolidation. These conceptual categories underpin the core category. Ten subcategories represent the three conceptual categories; assimilating, connecting, experiencing situational binds, reframing, disengaging, searching for explanations, contemplating asexuality, embracing the nuances, critiquing sexuality, and identifying as essentially asexual. The basic social process reflects a pattern of progression that for some, was found to be linear, but not for all. Bourdieusian social theory, namely doxa, habitus, field and capital offered a lens through which the collective action of participants and their engagement with the social processes of asexual self-identity formation could be appreciated in more detail. Initially, before the participants identified as asexual, the habitus they brought to their positions was informed through subjective interpretation of a process of sexualisation. Social structuring of gender, medicalisation, patriarchy and religion created a set of lasting dispositions on participants; these informed the habitus. The early experiences of the participants were individually embodied and therefore by nature, they generated individuality. Therefore, the practices that were instilled through social structuring were unique and individual. Social structuring facilitated a process of navigation and constrain in relation to the behaviour of the participants, and participants reacted to and resisted

sexualisation in very individual ways, during the three stages of transcending sexualisation, as they engaged with processes of assimilating, connecting, experiencing situational binds, reframing, disengaging, searching for explanations, contemplating asexuality, embracing the nuances, critiquing sexuality, and identifying as essentially asexual. What was key to their successful navigation (successful being an outcome of embracing their asexual identity), was their accumulation of cultural capital in the field, which allowed them to progress. The progressive growth of cultural capital acted as a facilitator to move from subordinate positions in one field (the sexualised) to dominant positions in another field (the asexual), and then to craft their asexual identities. Ultimately, they were able to arrive at a place where they understood their relationship formation needs and the way they connected with others did not have to be based on a centralized model of sexuality. They were able to impose their own asexual values, language and ways of behaving in relationships upon the supremacy of sexuality.

8.2 Thesis contribution to the current state of knowledge on self-identified asexuality

8.2.1 The first study to explore the process of asexual self-identity and to provide a grounded theory of asexual self-identity

Whilst other qualitative studies had used a range of methodologies in order to explore the experiences of members of the asexual community in terms of navigating sexuality (Prause & Graham, 2008; Brotto et al., 2010; Haefner, 2011; Carrigan, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Sloan, 2015; Dawson et al., 2016), and exploring the experiences of asexual individuals (Scherrer, 2008; Haefner, 2011; Carrigan, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Pacho, 2012; MacNeela & Murphy, 2014; Foster & Scherrer, 2014; Sloan, 2015; Robbins et al., 2016), to date, no research has generated a theory of asexual self-identity intimately tied in with the evidence; a theory that is consistent with the empirical data. To date, no other study has offered a theoretical model of asexual self-identity. Further, this theory is relevant for everyone irrespective of sexual identity, as it explains some of the complexity of the experiences of self-identified asexuals.

8.2.2 A re-contextualisation of asexuality

Przybylo (2012) has identified that a wealth of scientific studies have sought to discover the truth of asexuality in and on the body, and that “science, in collusion with other social forces, is defining what asexuality is and how it functions” (Przybylo, 2012: 225). One such way this is evident is the research focus on asexuality as a sexual phenomenon. Up until this study was conducted, previous studies explored asexuality through the scientific study of sex. This study offers a re-contextualization of asexuality, by the application of Bourdieusian social theory and the belongingness hypothesis. By doing so, this work articulates an alternative perspective of asexuality. This work does not deny the relevance of a scientific study of sex as a method for exploring asexuality, however, it demonstrates that across the previous work in this field there has been an overall under appreciation of the desire for interpersonal attachment/belongingness as an integrative construct of asexual self-identity.

8.2.3 A detailed diagrammatic and theoretical representation

Studies focussing on the social processes of asexual self-identity formation have been limited. Whilst previous research by Robbins et al (2016) explored the asexual self-identity process by identifying primary patterns of social behaviour, this is the first study to use empirical findings to present a detailed diagrammatic representation of the social processes which inform asexual self-identity. This work makes an original contribution to asexuality research by offering a fresher and deeper understanding of the studied phenomena. It presents a theoretical principle behind asexual self-identity, showing how asexual self-identity works in practice. By doing so, this work makes the concept of asexual self-identity tangible, demonstrating how it operates on a theoretical, practical and functional level.

8.2.4 An exploration of the impact of situational binds

Whilst other studies have alluded to some of the challenges which self-identified asexuals may face, these studies underestimate the complexities of the real-life situations in which many people find themselves, this is the first study of asexuality that explores the impact of situational binds on the emotional and social wellbeing of individuals who later go on to self-identify as asexual.

8.2.5 New and useful considerations

The application of Bourdieusian social theory and the belongingness hypothesis provide insights worthy of consideration in terms of the possible mechanisms which inform different identity outcomes, for example, the influence of cultural capital and the absence of uniformity in terms of how individuals satisfy their individual need to belong.

8.3 Strengths and limitations

8.3.1 Strengths

In order to address the six areas identified from the gaps in the existing research in chapter 3, an overarching research question of the social processes involved in constructing an asexual identity, and a number of smaller objectives were identified.

- To establish how asexuals define their asexual identity.
- To understand the processes that inform the construction of the identity.
- To understand how embracing the identity impacts upon relationships with others.
- To understand how embracing the identity impacts upon health and wellbeing.

It is considered a strength of this study that all foreshadow questions and objectives have been adequately addressed.

It is also considered a strength of this study that it has provided a lens through which the medicalisation of sexual behaviour can be explored. This work has the potential to be highly influential in terms of illustrating how sexual behaviours – or in the case asexual behaviours are judged as requiring medical interventions. An overly medical approach to sexual behaviour ignores the nuances of the social and interpersonal dynamics of relationship formation, instead replacing diversity within attraction and relationship formation with uniform expectations of performance and desire (Hart & Wellings, 2002).

8.3.2 Limitations

In the UK and on a global level, there is an awareness that LGBTQ people of colour and black, Asian and minority ethnic groups face significant discriminatory challenges with their intersectional identities from multiple groups in society. Currently, there is very little data on these experiences in the asexual community. The absence of an ethnically and socially diverse sample therefore make this a weakness of the study.

A second limitation of this work is that the sample were self-selecting and comprised of asexuals who embraced their asexual identity. The recruitment flyer asked for individuals who embraced an asexual identity and it is assumed that because of the use of the word embrace, it was answered by people who were generally at a certain point in their journey; a point where their attitude towards their identity was one of positivity and optimism. It is considered a limitation that by doing so, this study does miss a whole group who would tell their story differently.

8.4 Reflexivity

The process of reflexivity facilitates and encourages researchers to embrace and talk about the ways in which our own personal feelings become entangled in our research (Denzin, 1997). Not only are we expected to understand this, we must also demonstrate in our work how we have managed this in every stage of the conduct of our research. Reflexivity improves transparency in the researcher's role, by placing an onus on the researcher to be explicit about themselves.

In Chapter 1, I outlined my position as the researcher. I was able to identify that I would not come to this study from a place of pure objectivity. This section provides evidence of my consideration of the reflexive process and my own awareness of my place in the study. Of the dispositions I brought to the study, (Chapter 1), were, identifying as White, identifying as a woman who has loved other women, having a lifelong experience of indirect discrimination through exposure to heteronormativity, having a rich experience of belonging to a sexual minority identity, associating negatively with the word 'lesbian', experiencing homophobia, both internalised, and externally experienced, a difficult personal journey to self-identity and coming from a privileged background, with liberal well-educated parents.

This is how I dealt with some of these dispositions in the conduct of my research. The following reflexive section has been informed through the work of Valandra (2012). Firstly, I thought about the underlying assumptions I held in relation to what I might find in this study. For example, I was aware that some asexuals did not experience sexual attraction and did not engage in sexual behaviour, I assumed that this was problematic and distressing for many asexuals. I also assumed that most asexuals might have distressing experiences of negotiating sexual activity and behaviour. I now realise I had been looking

at this work through the lens of a non-aseual woman and therefore from a sexual perspective. I had been so busy trying to take account of my sexual minority status that I over looked the influence of my sexual status. By privileging sexual behaviour as an area of interest in this study, I realised that I was looking at asexuality through the lens of sexuality and that my habitus was one that had been informed through a sexualised framework. These fundamental assumptions influenced the questions in my early interview guides. Being able to recognise these assumptions early on in the interview process helped me to consider a broader focus regarding the interview questions – one which was less focused on exploring the sexual behaviour/sexual preferences aspect of asexual identity formation and more focused on exploring the ‘whole story’ of asexual self-identity.

My professional midwifery experiences also influenced my analysis. I have worked in midwifery research and midwifery education for fifteen years, prior to this, in midwifery practice for ten years. I have engaged in aspects of midwifery practice and theory such as bonding and attachment during the course of my career. I brought to this study a belief and an understanding that bonding and attachment were innate biologically driven mechanisms. As social connections alongside the importance of belonging and attachment emerged in the process of data analysis, I considered how the context of bonding and attachment and belonging intersected with my own professional experiences. This was particularly important in considering the central theoretical premise of bonding and attachment being biologically informed; a premise, challenged by my supervisor. Through reflexive analysis, it became clear, that the importance lay in ensuring that my interactions with the data were not driven by a need to prove that bonding, attachment and belonging were essential constructs. The emphasis of the importance of allowing the data to speak for itself influenced my decision to focus on the role of attachment, bonding and belonging as opposed to their underlying mechanisms.

As part of the research process, my beliefs, life experiences, morals and values, and my opinions also influenced the study’s design. I had to question myself, “How do I fit in? How do my life experiences shape the way I experience other minority identities?” It was important to document some aspects of self-discovery within my personal journal, so I could revisit them, as new insights and experiences emerged for consideration in relation

to my interactions with the participants. Reflexive analysis provided clarity for me in my role, as both apart from the individual experiences of study participants, and yet a part of the collectively shared experiences of a minority identity. Through this process, I was able to professionally position myself as a researcher in the context of the study. I recognized that my own experiences with a non-conforming sexual identity would vary in some ways from those of the study participants. However, our shared history as minority identities and individuals who have faced oppression made it important to provide safe spaces in which their voices could be respectfully heard.

8.5 Testing the theory: Criteria for grounded theory studies

In Chapter 4, Section 4.6, the key criteria that should be considered with respect to credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness of constructivist grounded theory are identified. This section revisits these criteria. Charmaz (2006) outlines four domains and nineteen questions to investigate the criteria for a constructivist grounded theory study. Charmaz (2006) encourages the researcher to ask questions in relation to the research achieving intimate familiarity with the setting or topic (Charmaz, 2006). Rich and sufficient data is required to provide the intimate familiarity which Charmaz (2006) alludes to. In addition, the researcher is encouraged to ensure that the categories portray the fullness of the experience being explored, and that all meanings within the data have been revealed, and links have been drawn between “larger collectivises or institutions and individual lives, when the data so indicates” (Charmaz 2006: 183). Charmaz (2006) also encourages the researcher to ensure that theory makes sense to the participants or people who share their circumstances, that there data is sufficient with respect to the claims being made and that there has been a systematic process of comparing between observations and categories, and the categories cover a wide range of empirical observation. A strong combination of originality and credibility increases resonance, usefulness and the subsequent value of the contribution (Charmaz, 2006), which explains why, in the Table below, the first two domains are the most populated.

Table 8.1: Testing the theory for grounded theory studies

Domains (Charmaz, 2006)	Criteria for grounded theory studies
Credibility	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A systematic search and a thematic synopsis of the literature (Chapter 3) supports this study, this has been peer reviewed and published in a scientific journal. Undertaking the review of the literature facilitated an adequate familiarity with the setting and the topic. I was mindful however, of how extant ideas may be inform my research. Through constant self-awareness, I was able to appreciate other asexual theories without imposing them on the data. 2. Data collection strategies yielded a range and depth of observations across the asexual community; a variety of identities, experiences and attitudes informed the final theoretical model, and a point of saturation was recognised at around 19-20 interviews. 3. A process of member checking was undertaken with 4 interviewees about the emerging theory and a presentation was delivered to a wide audience of which, it later emerged, consisted of some who self-identify as asexual, and some who identify as sexual, to gain some feedback about the plausibility of the findings and the analysis. 4. A process of memo writing, reading and re-reading, and coding operationalized through data matrices and diagrams (available in the appendices) support the principles of constant comparison.
Originality	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is an absence of a detailed grounded theoretical model outlining the social process informing asexual self-identity across the existing body of empirical work on self-identified asexuality, therefore, the categories and subcategories offer a new insight into the study of asexual self-identity. 2. The theory of asexual self-identity provides a conceptual rendering of the data that furthers our understanding of the studied experience. 3. The study has multiple layers of social and theoretical significance; two of the most significant are, theories of belongingness provide greater insight into asexual self-identity construction than theories of sexuality and asexuality discourse is doxastic. 4. This study on asexual self-identity challenges, extends, and refines current ideas about asexuality. By exposing the relevance of

	<p>belongingness theory to the phenomena, asexuality becomes less associated with the scientific study of sexual practices, and more associated with our fundamental drive to belong. The work undertaken here is original and unique by the way it offers a re-contextualization of asexuality. The application of Bourdieusian social theory and the belongingness hypothesis articulate an alternative and unpublished perspective of asexuality.</p>
Resonance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The exposure of this work to external audiences throughout the duration of the study provides one example of an attempt to ensure the categories portrayed a fullness of the studied experience. Emergent and developing themes underwent testing with a mixed audience in 2018, in the final stages of theory development, through the delivery of a presentation of the asexual model itself within the University setting. Throughout the process of data collection, the researcher requested feedback from four interviewees on a shortened version of an emerging theory about asexuality self-identity. Subsequent revision and reworking of the theory resulted in the development of a substantive theory as presented in Chapter 6.
Usefulness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This study presents an overall asexual self-identity theory (Chapter 6). According to Charmaz (2006), a substantive model or the research findings themselves serve as an indicator of the usefulness of the study. The grounded theory methodology process, if followed correctly, should meet the threshold for trustworthiness (Charmaz, 2006). In addition, given the presentation of subcategories, categories and a substantive model of asexuality to participants, the publication of a paper, and full engagement with the process of academic supervision, every effort has been made to ensure the usefulness of this research.

8.6 Implications of the study

8.6.1 Research

Further research is required in a number of areas which have been summarised in Chapter 7, Section 7.3.5 and repeated below;

Pennell (2016) identifies that although Bourdieu's theory on cultural capital can be interpreted in a number of ways, it is often viewed through the lens of the white middle class; largely representative of the sample within this study (See Section 5.5.3). In this

framework, those who did not fit these criteria would be viewed as having a deficit and therefore unable to progress to identifying as asexual. This study has revealed gaps in our understanding of how individuals who are not within the white middle-class category but do not identify with a centralised model of sexuality in their experiences of relationship formation and belonging navigate the field.

8.6.2 Policy and practice

Relationships education, and relationships and sex education should be directed towards encouraging a culture that values lasting positive and significant interpersonal relationships with or without sexual behaviour at all ages. Alternative models of attraction and relationship formation do exist and relationship education should encourage individuals to think more broadly about relationships and how they could be constructed in more meaningful ways.

8.6.3 Health service delivery

The findings from this study have significance to the field of mental health. A significant percentage, 38% of the sample identified engagement with psychology, counselling, and/or antidepressant medication. Previous studies with similar findings conclude that belonging to a minority identity is associated with mental health vulnerability, and understanding the relationship between the two is challenging.

In this study, identifying as asexual meant that participants became embedded within a phenomenon of contrasting experiences; from reassurance and satisfaction to concern and anxiety. Equally, the decision to suppress one's asexual identity was also stressful, evident in Chapter 6, Section 6.6.3 Subcategory: essentially asexual. The use of situational binds in this work illustrates the true conflict experienced by self-identified asexuals during the becoming stage. This research highlights that the situations faced during this stage are less about discrepant levels of attraction and more about participants believing they were placing themselves at risk of being unable to form lasting, positive, significant interpersonal relationships. This work suggests that the threat of fulfilling a need to belong, is the interface of mental health and asexuality. However further research is required to explore this in more detail. At present there is an assumption that belonging to a minority identity creates a vulnerability which leaves someone susceptible to mental illness however, this study presents self-identified asexuals differently. Anxiety, fear,

sorrow, and concern were borne out through their narratives, not in relation to their asexual identity, but in relation to the inner conflict they experienced pre-identity, when dealing with other people about discrepant levels of interest in sexual behaviour. Despite the recognition of oppressive sexual context, the vulnerable asexual did not feature in this study. Their narratives reflected a willingness and confidence to wrestle for a recognition of the value of relationships that were not solely based on a typical sexual model. Given these findings, the emotional wellbeing of people who identify with an asexual narrative should be a matter of concern for health and social care professionals and researchers.

In relation to healthcare, anecdotal evidence, taken from AVEN, suggests that a number of self-identified asexuals choose not to disclose their identity to healthcare professionals through fear of their asexual status being pathologised, problematised or judged. Given that asexuality has been identified through studies as a poorly understood concept, this may be due to lack of understanding on behalf of healthcare providers. The work provides health professionals and practitioners working in clinical settings with some insights of the social processes which inform the identity as well as the features of an asexual identity, to facilitate culturally competent care. A strand of work focused upon facilitating cultural competence in this context is therefore considered a worthy endeavour following on from this study.

Finally this work has implications in relation to the education of society. Given that asexuality is largely shrouded in misunderstanding and negativity, as well met with doubt and questioning (Conger, 2012), how non asexual members of society consider asexuality is important. This study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of contemporary sexual norms. It challenges existing ideas which associate asexuality with an absence of, or lack of sexuality, and presents an alternative framework for considering the decisions made by self-identified asexuals to adopt the identity.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Asexuality Matrix

Author	Purpose of study	Methodology and Method	Participant Information	Core findings about asexuality (a/sity)				Strengths and Limitations
				Definition of a/sity used	Characterisations of asexuality	Process	Outcome of a/s identity	
1. Prause and Graham 2007 Study 1 (a and b)	To better characterize individuals who self-identify as a/s and to provide exploratory data for future hypothesis-driven research	<p>Mixed methods: Qualitative Study 1a: Semi structured interviews (sexual development and definitions of a/sity).</p> <p>Study 1b: Measures of sexuality: SDI (sexual desire inventory), Sexual inhibition and excitory scales, (SIS/SES)</p>	4 self-identified a/s recruited from flyers in a Midwestern town in the US requesting women or men who identify as a/s	<p>“Defined in many different ways” (Prause and Graham 2008)</p> <p>Many definitions are provided for the reader; (1)Lacking interest or desire for sex (American Heritage Dictionaries 2000) (2)Individuals who do not experience sexual attraction (Jay 2003) (3)Never felt SA to anyone at all (Bogaert 2004) (4)Did not prefer either homosexual or heterosexual activities (Nurius 1983)</p>	Diversity of behaviours and experiences	I consider myself a/s because of a recognition that I had; (1) No feelings of desire and never getting any pleasure from the act of sex (2) A curiosity about sex in adolescence leading to experiencing the act and not feeling any pleasure from it (3) Worry and pathologising (4) Wishing for ‘normality’	No data available on this	<p>(S) The first study to investigate characteristics of those who self-identify as a/s. Mixed method approach, Low numbers for the qualitative component.</p> <p>(L) Only a single item defined people as a/s or sexual and the reliability of the item is unknown.</p> <p>By using pre-existing data (from study 1), other constructs for a/s were not assessed. The question used to identify a/s was on direction of attraction, and didn’t include level of attraction</p>
Prause and Graham 2007 Study 2		<p>Mixed methods: Quantitative Study 2: Online questionnaires. Sexual history quest (SHQ), Sexual arousability inventory (SAI), Sexual orientation quest (SOQ),</p>	Convenience sample of 1146, through under grad. Psychology course and online ads on AVEN: 41 a/s	<p>Based on findings from study 1: Individuals who identify as a/s have a specific lack of sexual desire (SD), although may not lack motivation.</p> <p>SD is conceptualised as the cognitive or felt component of sexual arousal</p>	<p>Romantic differences in the face of sexual indifference</p> <p>Diversity of behaviours and experiences</p> <p>Legitimacy</p>	Difficult to elucidate from quantitative data		<p>For study 2, researchers are relying on self-identification as asexual, and recruiting from AVEN, means they more likely fit the AVEN definition and maybe strongly influenced by AVENs discourse. The measures were not designed to be used on a/s individuals, thus their validity in this population is unknown</p>

Author	Purpose of study	Methodology and Method	Participant Information	Core findings about a/sity				Strengths (S) and Limitations (L)
				Definition of a/sity used	Characterisations of asexuality	Process	Outcome of a/s identity	
2. Scherrer 2008	To understand the a/s identity/identities	Online survey: qualitative – 160 respondents: 102 appropriately completed questionnaires	Recruited from AVEN AVEN define a/s as 'a person who does not experience SA'	Scherrer (2008) doesn't define per se but in the opening paragraph refers to 'individuals who do not experience SA or desire'	Romantic differences in the face of sexual indifference Diversity of behaviours and experiences Legitimacy	(1) Seeing their a/sity as an essential aspect of themselves (2) Facilitated by AVEN and having an understanding of the self as lacking in sexuality (3) Rejecting the cultural ideology of sexuality as biologically based and ubiquitous	(1)Invented own language to describe themselves (2)Were able to redefine culturally agreed on sexual acts (such as masturbation and cuddling) as non-sexual (3)The romantic dimension of sexuality became more explicit (making the a/s identity into something it is, rather than something it isn't)	(S) Identities and lived experience of a/s are captured in great detail. (L) Researchers are relying on self-identification as asexual, and recruiting from AVEN, means they more likely fit the AVEN definition and maybe strongly influenced by AVENs discourse
3. Brotto et al 2010	To examine a/s using a mixed-methods methodological design	Validated questionnaires online: Study 1 explored the sexual, personality, psychopathology, and interpersonal functioning of a group of asexuals recruited via AVEN. Study 2: Semi structured interviews by telephone	Recruited through AVEN: Study 1: Asexual men (n = 54) and women (n = 133) from AVEN Study 2: n = 15 (from AVEN)	Brotto et al allude to this; current definitions focus on SA, sexual behaviour and lack of sexual orientation or sexual excitement in their opening paragraph. They then go on to provide an overview of researchers past and resent and their definitions/findings.	Romantic differences in the face of sexual indifference Diversity of behaviours and experiences Legitimacy	(1) Always being different (not experiencing intense sexual urges like friends did) stemming from puberty (2) No recollections of onset of SA during childhood (3) Discovering AVEN (4)May develop from a central mechanism that prevents activation of neural receptors by androgens (5) Possible lack of cognitive causal attribution and physiologic arousal not becoming directed towards any target (Bem 1996) Extrinsic Arousal Effect	(1)Identity and their experiences became explained and explainable (2)The a/s label explained them and their experiences completely (3)A great sense of relief upon discovering AVEN, particularly in finding that many others had also experienced a non-distressing lack of sexual attraction like them	(S) Very good subjective insight into the a/s experience again using a mixed method approach (L) Researchers are relying on self-identification as asexual, and recruiting from AVEN, maybe strongly influenced by AVENs discourse. The measures were not designed to be used on a/s individuals, thus their validity in this population is unknown

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4. Carrigan 2011	To understand a/s in their own terms to gain understanding of lived experience of a/s, and offer subjective adequate grounding for future studies	Qualitative; (1)Thematic analysis of various online forums (Undertaken first) (2)Semi structured interviews (some but not all) (3) Open-ended online questionnaire (27 questions) (4)Remaining interviews	8 participants for interview, (half through AVEN, half through LGBT groups) 130 completed questionnaires	No definition given: Carrigan does refer to the front page of AVEN and their definitions of 'Someone who does not experience SA' and highlights it is an umbrella term, not taken to be an exhaustive description of the attitudes and orientations prevalent in a/s community, and it acts as a common point of identification rather than a shared identity (Carrigan 2011)	Diversity of behaviours and experiences Romantic differences in the face of sexual indifference	(1)Never experiencing SA, realising not like others, feeling different, thinking something is wrong (pathologising), surfing the internet, clicking on a/s, finding AVEN (2)Adolescent experience (not fancying anyone) giving rise to a sense of difference, self-questioning and diagnosing pathology, self-clarification through acquisition of an online community (3)A sense of difference which fails to be an active concern due to an awareness of temporality (there is time yet, I've got other things to concentrate on first, career, studies etc.) (4)Assuming pathology, accessing therapy	(1)It was like coming home feeling not alone (2)Self-clarification (3)Counteracted messages that asexual don't exist (4)No more pathologising and ambiguity (5)Self-clarification, self-acceptance , and just a minor difference (7)Awareness of emerging issues (age and the world is designed for couples) (8)Wanting to meet a/s partners, a/s dating	(S) Offers very good insights into the differences across the a/s identity. (L) Researchers are relying on self-identification as asexual, and recruiting from AVEN, means they more likely fit the AVEN definition and maybe strongly influenced by AVENs discourse
5. Haefner 2011	What are the intrapsychic scripts a/s use to negotiate romantic relationships	Qualitative: Two online surveys were posted on AVEN	64 participants	The term a/s as it is being used in this research, to describe people without sexual desire.	Romantic differences in the face of sexual indifference Diversity of behaviours and experiences	(1)Feeling something different from others (2)Feel alienated, outsider (3) Pathologising (4) Trying other sexual identities (5) Assuming their experience of no attraction was the norm (n=3) (6) Using rationalisations (high standards, late bloomer)	(1)Freeing, liberating, (2)No longer felt an obligation to live up to anyone else's standards (3)Being true to self, Finding other asexuals (3)Validation that that sex isn't the main factor in a relationship, could be end of that relationship, (4)dilemma to tell or not, Fear of telling people because they won't understand (5)Providing explanations to others that go beyond lack of SA, so 'it's not fear of sex or lack of RA'	Researchers are relying on self-identification as asexual, and recruiting from AVEN, means they more likely fit the AVEN definition and maybe strongly influenced by AVENs discourse

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6. Sundrud 2011	To explore the social construction of a/s identities through everyday narrative performances and critically examine the marginalizing effects of heteronormative discourses	Qualitative: Semi structured interviews: Ethnographic oral histories with three self-identified a/s to explore narrative performances that constitute the a/s identity	3 self-identified a/s, who were recruited through AVEN	As defined by AVEN, a/s do not experience SA	Diversity of behaviours and experiences Romantic differences in the face of sexual indifference	(1)Feeling different from others Seeking therapy (2) Pathologising (3)Having the heteronormative dream (4)Becoming gay - but not wanting to have gay sex (5)Trying to be sexual (6)Displeasure - therefore, an acceptance that a/s was the best home for one's sexual identity (7)Experimenting with sex and felt dissatisfied (8)It was AVEN that just...I just feel like the breadth there of different stories and personal experiences, that was what made me realize I'm more like these people than other people, so I must be a/s (9) Choosing to experiment with a/s to see if a 'good fit'	(1)Narrative of displeasure became normal (2)Potential of a/s gave meaning to repeated breaches of sexual norms. (3)Came out as a/s lesbian (4)Sense of community (5)Had fun. (6)Liminal identity offers opportunities to foster new paradigms for being both a/s and lesbian. Spontaneous communitas. (7)Empowerment (8)Overcome with emotion when discovered AVEN (9)Came out, celebratory, liminoid narratives of hope that framed a/s as positive (10)Belonging. Being through the lesbian coming out, and the asexual ... there's a lot of ways you can define a relationship	(S) The detail in the data and the detailed examination of the narratives by the author is a strength. (L) Small sample size is a weakness and recruitment through AVEN

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7. Morag Allison Yule 2011	An investigation into the biological markers of a/s and the development of the a/s identification Scale (AIS)	Mixed methods: Part 1: Quantitative: Analysis of variance, ANOVA. Tukey's multiple comparisons test. Part 2: Responses to the open-ended questions in Stage 1 were examined to identify prevalent themes and ideas – discriminate analysis to identify which concepts best discriminate between a/s and non a/s	(Part 1) 1284 people aged between 19 and 72; 315 men and 969 women (Part 2) One hundred thirty nine individuals who self-identified as a/s were recruited from the AVEN website during the months of August and September 2009 and presented with the eight open-ended questions developed above in an online survey	In opening paragraph, Yule (2011) states "Human a/s is defined as an absence of SA to anyone". Then goes on to document other definitions by (1)Prause and Graham (2008), 'Lack of sexual desire or excitement' (2)Lack of sexual behaviour (Rothblum and Brehony 1993) (3) Lack of sexual orientation (Storms 1980)	Search for legitimacy Diversity of behaviours and experiences	Suggested to be a contributory factor; The influence of a prenatal environment	(1) Could be assigned a diagnosis of HSDD (Hypoactive Sexual desire Disorder), under the current model of disorders of low sexual desire, an a/s (2)The current study strongly suggests that a/s should be conceptualized as a sexual orientation, and not as a sexual dysfunction	(S) Provides more insight into a/s including a biological component which shows further development in this field of study beyond that of subjective insights. Assist other researchers in the process of recruitment process (L) A/s recruited via AVEN may not reflect the entire a/s community

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8. Brotto and Yule 2011	To compare genital (vaginal pulse amplitude; VPA) and subjective sexual arousal in a/s and non-a/s women.	Quantitative: Participants assigned to sexual orientation group according to self-identification. Use of Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI), Detailed Assessment of Sexual Arousal (DASA), Sexual Desire Inventory (SDI), Film Scale, Psychophysiological Recording Sexual stimuli: 3 minute neutral film followed by 8 minute erotic film	38 women (19 and 55 years) (10 hetero, 10 bi, 11 homo, and 7 a/sexual), Recruited through postings on local websites (e.g., Craigslist), on the AVEN, through the university's human subject pool, and through advertisements in the community	Abstract, 'asexuality can be defined as a lifelong lack of SA'. In opening paragraph 'Human asexuality is loosely defined as the absence of SA' – then the 3 definitions above are also documented	Diversity of behaviours and experiences Romantic differences in the face of sexual indifference Legitimacy	No data for this	(1)A/s who are prompted to seek therapy at the request of a distressed non a/s partner should not be the recipient of taught sexual skills (2)There needs to be a process of negotiating lack of SA to reach agreement on what level of activity will sufficiently appease both partners	(S) Findings have implications for the conceptualisation of a/s (L) Small sample size, and the sample of a/s women may not represent all a/s women given that they agreed to the viewing of erotic stimuli. The measures were not designed to be used on a/s individuals, thus their validity in this population is unknown

Key

Asexuality = a/sity

Asexual = a/s

SD = Sexual Desire

SA = Sexual Attraction

HSDD = Hypo Sexual Desire Disorder

S = Strengths

L = Limitations

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9. Gazzola and Morrison (2012)	To investigate the types and sources of discrimination experienced by a/s	On line survey using a number of measures – Heterosexist, Harassment, Discrimination and Rejection Scale: to measure the source and frequency of discrimination experienced by lesbian women. Outness Inventory: To measure the degree to which gay men and lesbian women have disclosed their sexual orientation to others	39 individuals (26 women, 6 men, 2 spirit, 3 other) 37 identified as a/s (12 of these also identified as other sexual orientations) From the US, UK, Finland, Germany, Norway Austria and Philippines	Gazzola and Morrison (2012) state that they propose a definition of sexual orientation that applies to a/s: the aspect of one's personal and social identity that indicates the presence or absence of targets of one's SA or behaviours	Diversity of behaviours and experiences	N/A	(1)Experience a variety of discriminatory behaviours (2)15% heard verbal insults on account of ones a/s identity (3)13% exposed to derogatory names used for their a/s identity (4)85% disclosed orientation to at least 1 person	(L) Results not widely generalizable as the sample was limited to those who have internet access and was mainly Caucasian (82%). 59% of the people who accessed the survey did not complete it in its entirety The measures were not designed to be used on a/s individuals, thus their validity in this population is unknown

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10. Prims 2012	A study of the cultural denial of a/s and depression, self-esteem, and self-concept clarity in the a/s community	Quantitative: Qualtrics, an online survey webpage, was used to create the survey. The survey used the Zung Depression scale (Zung, 1965) to measure depression, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) to measure self-esteem, and Campbell's Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell, 1996) to measure self-concept clarity. In the survey the scales were converted to utilize a seven point Likert scale for precision of measurement and consistency between questionnaires	I found participants through AVEN, and various other social networks where there is a strong A/s community such as Tumblr and Facebook. The survey pool consisted of 1000 participants. On average, a/s who participated in the survey had identified as a/s for three years, with the shortest being two weeks, and the longest being 35 years. A/s n= 817, Non a/s (Sexual and 'other') n= 183	In the abstract, Prims states 'Asexuality, or a lack of SA to any gender, is a relatively new topic in scientific literature' Prims (2012) States in the introduction that The a/s community currently defines and a/s as a person who does not experience SA, though this definition may not fit all forms of a/sity. A/s is commonly understood as a spectrum. Asexuals never experience sexual attraction. Gray-asexuals rarely experience sexual attraction, and demisexuals only experience sexual attraction to those with whom they have already formed a strong bond."	Diversity of behaviours and experiences	No data found to represent this	(1)Being told "you are a late bloomer" or "you have not met the right person" (2)Identity challenged by friends and family (3)Least likely to have identity challenged by authority figure or their significant other (5)Self-concept clarity fell in the normative range (6)Self -esteem: a/s who had their identity challenged were not significantly different from sexuals (7)Higher self-esteem than the participants who did not identify as a/s, and the other a/s group (8)The longer that participants identified as a/s, the lower their levels of depression	(S) Findings have implications those with low self-esteem, depression, lack of self-concept. The first study to examine these psychological components (L) Recruitment through AVEN may affect the a/s discourse, and the length of time given for identifying as a/s may have affected the recruitment. Sexual group was small in size (n= 183)

11. Pacho 2013	To identify and examine how a/s constitutes a radical disruption of the approaches of social science to identity and epistemology	Qualitative: Analysis of data collected from the forum of AVEN, a focus on the first three years of the existence of the network. Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA)	Postings on forums by members of AVEN	Pacho makes the statement at the start of the paper "A/s stands for the lack of SD"	Romantic differences in the face of sexual indifference	(1)Questioning – should I see a psychiatrist (2)Pathologising (3)Not finding a place for oneself in the sexual society (4)Uncomfortable and unaccepted	(1)Realisation and acceptance of non-mainstream sexual motivations (2)Feeling a/s less repulsive, or more 'normal' (3)Consider a/s as a personal freedom (4) Realisation and acceptance that 'sexual identity' is not tangible may even change several times over lifetime (5)I don't think that it can be used as gospel, but rather, a guideline, or perhaps a measuring instrument for how an individual feels about this (6) A sense of social location	(S) Offers some subjective insights into asexual identity within the broader construction of sexuality (L) The researchers has used data selected from AVEN forums and this may not inform a broader understanding of the issue beyond AVEN. The data may be subject to selection bias. Internet users are a specific group with a higher likelihood of sense of community and shared experiences and meanings.
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12. Yule et al (2013)	An exploration of mental health correlates and interpersonal functioning comparing asexual, heterosexual and non-heterosexuals	<p>Recruited through postings on local websites, through AVEN and through a large university subject pool</p> <p>Completion of online questionnaires assessing mental health correlates and interpersonal problems</p> <p>Measures used were;</p> <p>Brief Symptom Inventory (Distress) Inventory of Interpersonal problems (Interpersonal Distress)</p>	1293 individuals (majority of asexuals recruited from AVEN)	Defined as an absence of SA to anyone or anything – recruitment through AVEN so self-identified	<p>More likely to report having a mood disorder than heterosexual participants</p> <p>More likely to note that they had an anxiety disorder</p> <p>A/s men scored higher on somatism, depression, and psychoticism than non-heterosexual counterparts</p> <p>A/s women scored higher on interpersonal problem domains – vindictive cold, socially avoidant, non-assertive and exploitable personality styles</p> <p>A/s may have had avoidant attachment styles as young children – which in turn might have led to problems developing intimate relationships in later life.</p>	<p>A/S who lack SA but have never heard of asexuality are more isolated distressed or confused than those who belong to an a/s community</p> <p>Potentially increased suicidality among asexual individuals</p>	A/s may experience difficulty in negotiating a lack of SA within society	<p>(S) A study which provides evidence that a/s may be associated with higher prevalence of mental health and interpersonal problems</p> <p>(L) Recruitment through AVEN may affect the a/s discourse, did not assess individuals who lack SA but have not found an a/s community</p>

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13. Foster and Scherer 2014	To explore the experience of self-identified a/s in clinic settings	<p>Qualitative Study:</p> <p>These data are a subset of a larger project investigating a/s identity conducted with 102 participants (Scherrer, 2008) via Internet survey.</p> <p>Of these 102 participants, 86 individuals responded opted to answer the mental health and health questions and are used in this analysis</p>	<p>86 a/s-identified people who completed online survey including the following questions;</p> <p>“Do you usually disclose the a/s identity to a therapist?</p> <p>Why or why not?”</p> <p>“Describe a recent trip to a mental health professional (therapist, counsellor, psychologist, etc.) where the a/s identity felt salient or important”</p> <p>“Have you ever sought medical advice specifically regarding the a/sity?”</p>	For the purposes of this article we understand a/sity as a lack of sexual attraction and as a viable sexual orientation along a human a/s spectrum	<p>Legitimacy</p> <p>Diversity of behaviours and experiences</p>	<p>(1) Considered seeking medical advice/pathologizing</p> <p>(2) Feeling incomplete (not whole)</p> <p>(4) Connecting with other a/s people was helpful for their identity development</p>	<p>(1) Many respondents engaged in an involved decision making process to determine, first, if their identity is salient to their health or mental health issues, and second, to assess their feelings of safety in disclosing their a/sity</p> <p>(2) I explained that I was a/s and even gave him (GP) some AVEN pamphlets in case he has other patients. He agreed that my a/sity wasn't really anything to do with my depression</p>	<p>(S) A well designed study – good recruitment. The first to examine experiences with clinicians and health professionals, the first study to explore culturally competent care as an area for development</p> <p>(L) Limited to a/s who are active on the internet and these are likely to be female, young, well-educated and urban (Eckman et al 2006, Ross et al 2006). Internet users are a specific group with a higher likelihood of sense of community and shared experiences and meanings</p>

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14. McNeela and Murphy 2014	This study explored how self-identification as a/s is managed, both as a threat to the self-concept and a source of personal meaning	An exploratory qualitative design was used to elicit data on the subjective experience of a/s Open-ended questions were used in an online survey of self-identified a/s individuals contacted through an internet community The findings were interpreted using identity process theory Transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's method	78 people completed the survey – 12 were discarded for being under 18 The final sample comprised 66 participants	McNeela and Murphy (2014) refer to a/s as a complex self-categorisation, it is consistent with preferences for romantic, non-sexual relationships with the same or opposite gender, with an aromantic orientation, or a preference somewhere between these	Romantic differences in the face of sexual indifference	(1)I spent a lot of years wondering what was wrong with me...wasted a lot of time trying to figure out how to be in a sexual relationship (2) Confusion (3) Considered the possibility I was mentally ill because I couldn't understand people's obsession with and desire for sex (4) Realising a/sity was integral to me	(1)Discovery that a/s lacked social credibility, not visible or believable in the heteronormative cultures where participants typically lived (2)Disbelieved or refuted, angry disbelief from others, conveniently forgetting (3)Once the label was found, a/s relationship preferences were negotiated (4)A/s is very much closeted, incapable of discussing it with other people, even close friends or family members, leaves me feeling isolated, I don't have a local support network who understands what I am going through (5) Disclosure could be stimulating and enriching (6) More confident and certain (7) I don't believe it brought me to anything positive, it's a disability I have to work around (8) Satisfying identification and source of personal meaning (9) Rewarding, good fit (10) Helped to see what was wrong with society (11)Avoiding relationship difficulties (12)Distant from mainstream culture	(S) A well designed study – good recruitment. Provides further understanding of the a/s experience (L) Recruitment from AVEN and excludes non internet users, recruited individuals with a sense of community support and may be in a stronger position when it comes to managing self-identity than non-internet users
15. Yule at al. 2014	An internet study investigating the relationship between self-identification as a/s, and biological markers of sexual orientation (handedness, no. of older siblings and self-measured finger lengths) comparison to other orientation groups	Quantitative: Survey Monkey: Demographic information, physical and mental health functioning, sexual functioning, sexual behaviour. Edinburgh handedness Inv., No of older brothers and sisters, and Finger length ratio ANCOVA & Tukey's Multiple Comparison test	1283 individuals between ages of 19 and 72. Recruited from AVEN, Craigslist and University subject pool. Men (n=314). 190 hetero, 64 non hetero, 60 a/s. Women (n=969). 500 hetero, 256 a/s.	In opening paragraph, Yule et al (2014) state "Human a/s is loosely defined as an absence of SA to anyone or anything" They then proceed to give the 3 definitions; (1)Prause and Graham (2008), 'Lack of sexual desire or excitement' (2)Lack of sexual behaviour (Rothblum and Brehony 1993) (3) Lack of sexual orientation (Storms 1980)	Legitimacy	Suggested contributory factors; (1)Pre-natal environment/ stress may be important in development of a/s (2) Hyper androgenization of the prenatal environment: right-handedness is genetically determined	(1)Should be regarded as a sexual orientation (Taken together, in light of the conceptual and theoretical support of classifying a/s as a SO, (Bogaert 2006b), laboratory evidence that a/s women respond physiologically to other SO groups (Brotto and Yule 2011), and the current findings which illustrate some of the biological pathways implicated in the development of homosexuality are indicated in the development of a/s, we conclude that a/s is likely best conceptualised as a unique sexual orientation)	(S) A well designed study, recruitment was good, a variety of avenues for recruitment including non-internet. 1 st study to provide empirical evidence of biological correlates (L) Interpretation of sibling data complicated; unable to distinguish between maternal and paternal half siblings paternal half siblings would not be relevant to mat. immunisation hypothesis

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16. Yule et al 2014	To investigate the relationship between a/s masturbation and sexual fantasy	<p>On line study.</p> <p>Quantitative: Measures;</p> <p>Q: Which option below best describes your SO: A/s, Hetero, Bi or Homo?</p> <p>Diagnostic criteria for HSDD</p> <p>Q: Masturbation and fantasy. Are you sexually active with yourself?</p> <p>Q. Which of the following best describes your sexual fantasies?</p> <p>Chi Square analysis</p>	<p>1283 individuals between ages of 19 and 72. Recruited from AVEN, Craigslist and University subject pool.</p> <p>Only 923 agreed to participate in Masturbation and fantasy.</p>	<p>Yule et al (2014): Human a/s is defined as a lack of SA, and research suggests that it may be best conceptualised as a sexual orientation</p>	<p>Diversity of behaviours and experiences</p> <p>Search for legitimacy</p>	<p>No data found to represent this</p>	<p>No data found to represent this</p>	<p>(S) A well designed study, recruitment was good, a variety of avenues for recruitment including non-internet. Greater insight provided of the patterns of sexual behaviour of a/s and non a/s (L) Sample size of males was relatively small, so Did not analyse men and women separately. The measures were not designed to be used on a/s individuals, thus their validity in this population is unknown</p>

17. Van Houden- hove 2014	To assess how many individuals could be identified as a/s based on each of the criteria and combinations of lack of sexual behaviour, lack of SA and self id.	Quantitative using a survey. Demographic information was gathered and information about criteria for identifying as a/s; using a categorical approach based on the Laumann et al 1994 sexual orientation measure. SA, SD, SI (Self-identification). Towards who do you feel SA? How do you define yourself? Have you ever had sex? Romantic orientation was also explored by the question, "Apart from SA, romantic attraction is being described, which refers to falling in love, the longing and need for a relationship. We would like to know whether you sometimes feel romantically, nonsexual attracted toward others. Do you feel romantically attracted toward girls=women, boys=men, or both?" Participants could answer on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Only toward women to 5=Only toward men); they could also answer this question with I do not feel any romantic attraction	567 Participants recruited through the Dutch, Spanish, English, forums of AVEN	See below: participants who recognised themselves as below* were invited to complete the survey	Diversity of behaviours and experiences Romantic differences in the face of sexual indifference	(1)Not experiencing any SA toward others (2)Not experiencing SD (3)Calling oneself a/s (4)Not behaving sexually with a partner (5)Not masturbating (6)Not having had negative sexual experiences in the past	No data found to represent this	(S) A well designed study, recruitment was good. Findings provide more evidence of a need to understand the associations between self-identity, SA and SB (L) Recruitment relied on online communities. Broad definition of a/s was used to recruit, rather than specifics about SA, or SD taken from previous research findings.
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*A/s is commonly described as a lack of experiencing SA. A/s people don't feel sexually attracted to other people – neither men nor women. Most a/s people indicate never having experienced SA. Yes there can be quite some variation within the a/s population: some have or wish to have a relationship, others don't; some are (or have been) sexually active, others are not. SA was assessed with the question 'Towards whom do you feel sexually attracted', using a 5 point Likert scale: 1 only to women to 5 only to men. They could also answer I don't feel SA to anyone

Author	Purpose of study	Methodology and Method	Participant Information	Core findings about a/sity				Strengths and Limitations
				Definition of a/sity used	Characterisations of asexuality	Process	Outcome of a/s identity	
18. Brotto et al (2015)	<p>To explore the similarities and differences between a/s and those meeting criteria for HSDD</p> <p>Using measures of sexual desire and behaviour, sex-related distress, personality, and psychopathology, the aim of the current study was to compare individuals scoring above the cut-off for a/s identification (AIS >40) (n = 192) to sexual individuals (n = 231). The sexual group was further divided into a control group (n = 122), a HSDD group (n = 50), and a group with symptoms of low desire that were non-distressing (n = 59).</p> <p>Different definitions proposed, a/s is defined by AVEN as occurring when a person does not experience SA, whilst recognising there may be variation among a/s.</p>	<p>Quantitative:</p> <p>Measures: Female Sexual Functioning scale, Sexual Functioning Index, Toronto Alexithymia Scale, Beck Depression Inventory, Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding</p>	<p>Complete data were obtained from n = 668, age 15 and 79 yrs.</p> <p>162 men, 505 women.</p> <p>Recruited from AVEN, Craigslist, and Clinic postings at sexual therapy clinics, University human subject pool.</p> <p>Placement in the a/s group was based on the AIS measure. The sexual group divided into control HSDD, and subclinical HSDD on the basis of their responses to items addressing the HSDD criteria, as outlined by the former <i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition</i>, and asking participants to indicate whether the symptom was true or false for them. Relevant to the current study, sexual orientation, education, ethnicity, presence of sexual concerns and treatment thereof, and relationship status and length were explored.</p>	<p>Human a/s is defined as a lack of SA to anyone or anything (Brotto et al 2015)</p>	<p>Legitimacy</p> <p>Diversity of behaviours and experiences</p>	<p>No data available for this</p>	<p>No data available on this</p>	<p>(S) Recruitment from a range of avenues. Has highlighted some significant findings for facilitating process which discriminate between a/s and HSDD</p> <p>(L) Small numbers in HSDD group, unable to include gender as a factors in analyses as more female than male data. The measures were not designed to be used on a/s individuals, thus their validity in this population is unknown</p>

APPENDIX B: Table of included studies for thematic synopsis (Pages 279 – 289)

Author and Country	Method of investigation	Method of analysis	Sample size	Recruitment strategy	Study setting	Results	CASP (2013)
1. Prause N, Graham CA (2007) United States US	1 st part of a mixed method study: Interview	Thematic approach	4 participants who identified as asexual	Recruited from flyers requesting women or men “who identify themselves as asexual” to participate in an interview	Study setting is not clear: Recruitment took place in a mid-western town in United States	4 themes emerged which help to characterise asexuality; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of sexual behaviours and what behaviours were perceived as asexual • Attempts to define asexuality • Lack of motivation for engaging in sexual behaviours • Concerns about being different from others Despite definitions of asexuality suggesting that asexuals experience lower levels of sexual motivation and activity, the data suggests that some asexuals show a ‘willingness to engage in unwanted but consensual sexual behaviours’ (Prause and Graham p 346)	B: Medium
2. Scherrer KS (2008) US	On line survey: responses to open ended questions	Open and focused coding as described by Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (1995)	102 participants who identified as asexual	Participants recruited from asexuality.org, also known as the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network, (AVEN)	Online environment: AVEN	3 themes emerged describing the ‘distinct aspects of asexual identities’ (Scherer 2011, p621); <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The meaning of the sexual • Essentially asexual • The romantic dimension 	B: Medium

Author and Country	Method of investigation	Method of analysis	Sample size	Recruitment strategy	Study setting	Results	CASP (2013)
3. Brotto LA, Knudson G, Inskip J, Rhodes K, Erskine Y (2010) Canada	2nd part of a mixed method study: Interview	Content analyses (van Manen, 1990) were used to explore the interview material	15 participants who identified as asexual	Participants recruited from AVEN	All interviews were conducted via telephone (Setting not stated)	10 themes emerged from the data which provide some meaning to the experience of being asexual; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions of asexuality • Feeling different • Distinguishing romantic from asexual relationships • Asexuality is not another disorder “in disguise” • Overlap with schizoid personality • Motivations for masturbation • Technical language • Negotiating boundaries in relationships • Religion • A need to educate and destigmatise 	B: Medium
4. Sundrud JL (2011) US	Interview	Drawing upon oral history and ethnographic methodologies, this thesis examines the narrative performances of self-identified	3 participants who identified as asexual	Participants recruited from AVEN	All interviews conducted via telephone with Skype (Setting not stated)	4 themes which represent the social construction of asexual identities were explored; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The breach of heteronormative expectations 	B: Medium

Author and Country	Method of investigation	Method of analysis	Sample size	Recruitment strategy	Study setting	Results	CASP (2013)
		asexuals and explores four themes within each narrative				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The creation of commonality among individuals within the asexual community • The negotiation of heteronormative discourses within the family • The construction of future oriented liminoid narratives of asexuality <p>Having the confidence to claim an asexual identity came as a result of the empowered experience of the stages of 'breach, crisis and redress' (Sundrud 2011, p110) where 'breach' represents the breach of sexual normativity that goes alongside the acceptance and adoption of the asexual identity. Sundrud (2011) identifies that this process unites the asexual community</p>	
5. Haefner C (2011) US	On line questionnaire	Grounded theory	64 participants	AVEN	Online environment AVEN	3 areas emerged from the data which help to better understand how asexuals negotiate romantic relationships; using Sexual Script Theory (SST) (Gagnon and Simon (2005))*	B: Medium

Author and Country	Method of investigation	Method of analysis	Sample size	Recruitment strategy	Study setting	Results	CASP (2013)
						<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Naming the norm (correlating to cultural scripts): an internal understanding that the asexual experience is different from the cultural norm • Naming asexuality in relationship (interpersonal script): an internal process which may never be acted on, but influences the way an asexual seeks out or acts in a romantic relationship • Naming asexuality for self (intrapsychic scripts): an internal process which influences the way an asexual feels about themselves 	
6.Carrigan M (2011) United Kingdom UK	(1) Collection of data from online forums (2)Semi structured interviews (3) Open-ended online questionnaire	Thematic analysis Provisional data analysis was ongoing in relation to each of the 3 methods, and the interdependent analytical process that this facilitated allowed elaboration and refining of	8 participants for interview 130 completed questionnaires	Half through AVEN, half through LGBT groups	Study setting unclear	Asexuals are united by the common experience of socio cultural affirmations of sexuality as the norm, and the denial and rejection of asexuality, however the asexual community is very diverse, and a variety of attitudes and orientations towards sex and romance exist within the community	A: High

Author and Country	Method of investigation	Method of analysis	Sample size	Recruitment strategy	Study setting	Results	CASP (2013)
		emerging understandings of asexual identities and experiences					
7.Galupo MP, Davis KS, Gryniewicz AL, Mitchell RC (2014) US	Online questionnaire	Thematic analysis	285 participants who identified as non-heterosexual	Notices on social networking sites, Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter and LGBT online communities. Snowball recruitment methods were also employed	Study setting: online environments Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter and LGBT online communities	Identified themes relating to sexual orientation identity included; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salience of identity: <i>self-identification was very important and many participants articulated a conceptual disconnect between their sexual orientation and their sexual orientation identity</i> • Social identity: <i>Participants acknowledged the social context with regards to identity</i> • Identity development and change: <i>Participants acknowledged the shifts in orientation identity and gender identity</i> • Identity development and change: <i>Participants acknowledged the shifts in</i> 	A: High

Author and Country	Method of investigation	Method of analysis	Sample size	Recruitment strategy	Study setting	Results	CASP (2013)
						<p><i>orientation identity and gender identity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identity and the body: <i>Participants (particularly those with plurisexual and transgender identities) questioned the definitions of sexual orientation on the basis of sex</i> 	
8.Pacho A (2012) UK	Analysis of data collected from AVEN	Qualitative data analysis	N/A	N/A	Online environment: AVEN	This study explored a virtual community of asexual individuals. Findings revealed diversity among asexuals, and 'linguistic insufficiency' (Pacho 2013) to articulate the multiplicity of asexuality	B: Medium
9.MacNeela P, Murphy A (2014) UK	Open ended questions in an online survey	Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis	66 participants who completed the survey and met the inclusion criteria	AVEN	Online environment: AVEN	Findings supported the depiction of asexuality as acceptable privately and the public rejection of asexuality as a valid social identity. There was variation in asexual sub-identities and relationship preferences	B: Medium
10.Foster and Scherrer (2014)	Survey data collected through an internet survey	Grounded theory	86	AVEN	Online environment: AVEN	Whilst some asexuals conceptualised their asexuality as healthy, some described some concerns about the 'cause' of	B: Medium

Author and Country	Method of investigation	Method of analysis	Sample size	Recruitment strategy	Study setting	Results	CASP (2013)
US						<p>their lack of sexual attraction. Most participants anticipated negative interactions with health providers, some describing feelings of distrust. Disclosure encounters (real and anticipated) were described as stressful. Interactions with providers were found to be both positive and negative. Findings indicate that asexuals feel that practitioner knowledge of asexuality is 'impoverished' (Foster and Scherrer 2014, p 428)</p>	
<p>11. Van Houdenhove E, Gijs L, T'Sjoen G, Enzin P (2015)</p> <p>Belgium</p>	Semi structured interviews	Interpretive phenomenological analysis	9 asexual women	AVEN and posts on several health and lifestyle related websites	Interviews took place either at the office of the first author or a quiet space in a hotel lobby	<p>The themes emerging from exploring how asexual women experience their asexual identity, sexuality and relationships;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coming to an asexual identity • Experiencing physical intimacy and sexuality • Experiencing love and relationships <p>For the asexual women in this sample, the internet and more specifically, AVEN seemed to have</p>	B: Medium

Author and Country	Method of investigation	Method of analysis	Sample size	Recruitment strategy	Study setting	Results	CASP (2013)
						had an important role in the discovery and acceptance of their asexual identity	
12.Sloan LJ (2015) US	Interviews: face to face and online	Not provided	15 self-identified asexuals	10 through AVEN, 5 through attendance at a BDSM club	Interviews in person: study setting not given. Remaining interviews: study setting online	The experience of asexuals who practice BDSM highlights that sexual attraction may not be a ubiquitous component of BDSM. BDSM asexual practices can be adapted to navigate sexual expectations and redefine sexual behaviours away from attraction and pleasure and towards insight, trust, courage self-discipline and attunement	B: Medium
13.Fox J, Ralston R (2016) US	Semi structured interviews and a paper questionnaire	Grounded theory	33 LGBTQ participants (2 of these were asexual: 1 hetero-romantic and 1 gray-sexual	Flyers posted to community centres, college buildings, library notice boards, coffee shops	Study setting not provided	Four overarching themes relating to how social networking sites serve as informal learning environments for LGBT individuals were identified; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional learning • Social learning • Experiential learning • Teaching others Informal types of learning are common among LGBT users of social media. LGBT individuals	A: High

Author and Country	Method of investigation	Method of analysis	Sample size	Recruitment strategy	Study setting	Results	CASP (2013)
						valued online learning during the coming out process and for identity development. Online role models were particularly important for asexuals as asexuality is rarely portrayed in the media	
14.Dawson M, McDonnell L, Scott S (2016) UK	Research diaries	Not clear: other than a symbolic interactionist perspective	Initially, 50 participants responding to a posting to take part in asexuality research were invited to complete a diary. 27 agreed to do so. This study is based on the diary entries of those participants	Posting a call for participants on AVEN, Huffington post, LGBTQ groups, public spaces, announcements posted via 'various internet fora'. Snowball sampling	Not applicable	In an exploration of the use of practices of intimacy among asexual people, 3 key themes emerged; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendships • Sex as a practice of intimacy • Exclusion from practices of intimacy These findings emphasize that the ways in which asexuals practice intimacy should be understood within the context of the relationship in which it is part	A: High
15.Scott S, McDonnell L, Dawson M (2016)	2 qual methods, biographical interviews with 50 people, of	Thematic analysis using NVivo 10	50 asexuals however, the focus of this paper is on a notable subset of the sample who	Recruited through AVEN , Tumblr and Twitter, but also the local press, community centres and LGBTQ groups	Not applicable	Scott et al (2016) present the findings as a model of a 'non-becoming trajectory' (Scott et al 2016, p283). Although the participants volunteered to take part in a study about asexuality,	A: High

Author and Country	Method of investigation	Method of analysis	Sample size	Recruitment strategy	Study setting	Results	CASP (2013)
UK	whom 27 kept two-week diaries		resisted strong associations with a strong ace identity (n=7)			because they felt the term asexual described them in some way, findings highlight that for some, asexuality is not always experienced as a social identity. Asexuality was not a central feature of the lives of the 7 participants in this sample, because it was negatively defined. Some saw it as an insignificant aspect of their lives. On the whole it was rejected as a core identity	
16.Robbins NK, Low KG, Query AN (2016) US	On line Questionnaire	Phenomenological approach	169 self-identified asexuals	Recruited from three online asexual communities (AVEN, Apositive.org, Asexuality Livejournal)	Study setting: online environment AVEN	An analysis of the coming out narratives of self-identified asexuals; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motives for coming out as asexual (<i>Sub themes: Response to pressure, Salience to identity and Discovering asexuality</i>) • Motives for withholding asexuality identity from others (<i>Selective disclosure, Fear of coming out, Non-salience to identity</i>) 	A:High

Author and Country	Method of investigation	Method of analysis	Sample size	Recruitment strategy	Study setting	Results	CASP (2013)
						<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explaining indifference about coming out • Negative reception of asexual identity (<i>Reactions of disbelief, Dismissal of asexuality</i>) • Positive reactions to coming out as asexual • The role of the internet in coming out as asexual • Reflections after coming out <p>Robbins et al (2016) present a model as a descriptive tool to capture the varied experiences of asexuals during the coming out process. This model is as follows;</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identity confusion 2. Discovery of terminology 3. Exploration and education 4. Identity acceptance and salience negotiation 5. Coming out 6. Identity integration 	

APPENDIX C: Letter of ethical approval

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Catriona Jones
School of Health and Social Work
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Hull
Via email

**School of Health and Social Work
Research Ethics Committee**

T: 01482 463336
E: E.Walker@hull.ac.uk

REF 283

14th August 2017

Dear Catriona

REF 283 – A Grounded Theory of Asexuality

Thank you for your responses to the points raised by the School of Health and Social Work Research Committee.

Given the information you have provided I confirm approval by Chair's action.

Please refer to the [Research Ethics Committee](#) web page for reporting requirements in the event of subsequent amendments to your study.

I wish you every success with your study.

Yours sincerely



Professor Liz Walker

Chair, SHSW Research Ethics Committee

Cc file

APPENDIX D: Study information sheet



INFORMATION SHEET (6th July 2017)

Title of study: A grounded theory of asexuality

You are invited to take part in the above named study. Before you decide if you want to take part it is important to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve.

Please take time to read the following information carefully. If there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information please contact me or my supervisors. Our details are at the end of this form. Take time to decide whether or not to take part and thank you for your consideration.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to explore asexuality through self-identified asexuals. The study aims to explore how asexuals come to the decision to identify and exist as asexuals, and how this affects their lives. For the purpose of this study the researcher uses the term asexual to mean anyone who embraces an asexual identity or anyone who self-identifies as asexual. This research is aimed at providing greater understanding of asexuals and the asexual community.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you wish to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. You can withdraw by contacting Catriona Jones; contact details at the end of this document. Withdrawal is possible up until your interview has been analysed. Once analysis of your interview data has begun (anticipated to be about a week after the interview) it will not be possible to identify which aspects of analysed data were from your interview.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be interviewed by Catriona Jones (Researcher) to share your experience. For this I will ask for your permission to audiotape the interview, which will last for between 60 to 90 minutes.

What do I have to do?

If you decide to participate you will attend for the interview at a time arranged for you, to take place either via Skype or telephone, within the grounds of the University of Hull or at a public venue that suits you in terms of travel and privacy.

What is being discussed?

You will be invited to share your experience regarding the topics of the study namely your asexual identity. The interview will be completed in a flexible manner to suit you. The conversation will be recorded, but its full content will not be made available to anybody except Catriona Jones (Researcher). Parts of the transcribed interview however may be

shared with my two PhD supervisors (listed at the end of this document). The recordings will be destroyed as soon as transcription and analysis is finished if you request this. You will be given the opportunity to see and approve the transcribed interview if you wish to confirm this represents what you said at interview.

What are possible disadvantages and risk of taking part in the study?

As the study aims to achieve a better understanding of asexuality, it is not expected that any participants will be disadvantaged by taking part. It is recognised however that the subject of asexuality may be intimate for some, and you should remember that you can leave the study at any point.

The study is intended to give self-identified asexuals the opportunity to think and discuss their identity in a safe space, free from judgement. The researcher has a background in health care and has worked around issues of sexual health, sexuality and wellbeing, and will help find a way for participants to discuss personal experiences in a way that is comfortable to them. A list of supporting services will be made available to all participants, should matters arise which cause them concern. The researcher will respond to any questions regarding participants responses after interviews take place and will remove participants data from the study after interview should this be requested.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Hopefully taking part in this research can be seen as an opportunity for you to think more about your identity and from this point it might help you to gain more confidence in yourself or perhaps highlight issues you never thought of specifically before. Think of the interview as a way to air your views about your identity. The more honest you are about feelings and experiences relating to identifying as asexual, the better for the research.

It is hoped this study will engage with people who will come to see themselves as pioneers of the asexual world in terms of what they have contributed to research and evidence.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information which is collected about you during the course of the study will be kept strictly confidential. Any information about you and the data you will provide will be anonymised so that you will not be identified in any way. Your interview data once transcribed, and the consent form will have an identifier number. A database with the identifier number and your name and contact details will be stored in a separate locked filing cabinet. Your contact details would be referred to and matched if you wished to withdraw from the study. This can be done by making contact with me the researcher, either by telephone or by the email address provided on this sheet. Once analysis of your interview data has begun (anticipated to be about a week after the interview) it will not be possible to withdraw your data.

Your contact details would be referred to and matched also, if through clinical judgement of the researcher any safeguarding issues arise that may necessitate referral to an appropriate professional. This can be done in a timely and sensitive manner ensuring that your health is not placed at risk in any way. In addition, the researcher has a professional and legal duty to breach confidentiality if they have any serious concerns about the safety of any children or adults or they come across during the study. This means that they would have to share any concerns with professional colleagues or appropriate agencies if they considered that the welfare of any child or adult was in danger. This can be done without your consent.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The anonymous results will be used as part of the fulfilment of my PhD study and conference presentations. It will also be used for publication so that a wider audience will be informed of the findings.

Who is organizing the research?

The research is being organised as part of a PhD at the University of Hull.

Who has reviewed the study?

The Ethics Committee within the School of Health and Social Work, Faculty of Health Sciences, of the University of Hull have reviewed and approved the study.

Contact for further information

Catriona Jones, Lecturer (Midwifery), Senior Research Fellow: Maternal and Reproductive Health
School of Health and Social Work
University of Hull
Hull
HU6 7RX
Email address: Catriona.Jones@2013.hull.ac.uk

Principal Supervisor: Professor Mark Hayter PhD, Ba (Hons) MMedSci, RN, Cert Ed, FAAN
Professor of Sexual and Reproductive Health
Head of Department of Nursing
Editor; Journal of Advanced Nursing
Faculty of Health and Social Care
The University of Hull

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and your signed consent form to keep

APPENDIX E: Participant Consent Form

A grounded theory of asexuality

Please highlight or mark with an 'X' the appropriate box and insert your name and date in the space below.

	Yes	No
I have read and understood the information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions. Where requested I have been fully informed about the purpose of this study		
I understand the circumstances outlined in the information sheet in which confidentiality may be breached by the researcher		
I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. This applies until data analysis has taken place, in which time it will not be possible to withdraw my data		
I understand that the information collected as part of this study may be looked at by individuals from the University of Hull		
I understand this original consent form will be held at the University of Hull site		
I give my consent for this interview to be audio recorded		
I give my informed consent to be a participant in this grounded theory study of asexuality		

Name of Participant

Date

APPENDIX F: Axial Coding for subcategories 2 – 10

Sub-category 2: Connecting

Focused Codes/sub-categories	Axial coding to Sub-category	
The sociable teenager.	Doing 'sociality'.	Connecting to others.
Socialising.		
Hanging out.		
Going on dates.		
Engaging with LGBT groups/societies.	Joining groups.	
The positive feeling of fitting in.		
Part of a society.		
Experiencing painful break-ups.	Being in/being out of relationships.	
Moving on from a break up.		
Having girlfriends.		
Growing to love someone.		
Falling deeply in love.	Loving/being affectionate/experiencing affection.	
Like a 'family' love.		
Beauty and love.		
Experiencing love.		
Having crushes.	The experience of queer friendships.	
QPR/Hyper platonic.		
Demi romantic.		
Hanging out with friends.		
Having close/best/family-like friends.		
A pure form of friendship.		

Sub-category 3: Experiencing situational binds

Focused Codes/sub-categories	Axial code to Sub-category	
Loving partners BUT finding the act of sex repulsive.	Acknowledgement of discrepant levels of desire for sex in relationships (May lead to relationship breakdown/loss).	Situational bind.
Enjoying being in a relationship and not wanting to have sex.		
The continuum of attitude towards sex.		
Liking other people in the absence of a 'crush'.	Discrepant levels of 'attraction' within peer group.	
Liking (not fancying) other people.		
Questioning what a 'crush' is when it seems so clear to other people.		
Awareness of an attraction but not wishing to take it further.	Recognition of a neutrality about the idea of physical intimacy with a partner.	
Being in a relationship but experiencing a slow build up to feeling sexually motivated.		
Having the biology but not the mentality.		
No desire to self-satisfy.	Awareness of not doing what 'others' seem to be doing.	
No interest in dating.		
Enjoying the company of others but not wanting it to be considered as a date.		
Sex is not biologically possible at the start of a relationship.		
Alarmed to find out that being in a relationship means having to have sex.		
Guilt.	Other peoples sexual expectations.	
The worry of loneliness/lack of belonging.		
Becoming single.		
Awkwardness.		
Living a lie.		

Sub-category 4: Disengagement (from the conventional framework of human sexuality)

Focused Codes/sub-categories	Axial coding to Sub-category	
Dissociating from the gender conformity.	Re-thinking meanings of sexual identity.	Disengagement.
Changing of sexual identity.		
Understanding non monogamy.		
Contemplating the fluidity of sexuality.		
No longer creating opportunities for oneself.	Distancing from sexuality.	
Withdrawing from social interaction.		
Alienation		
Relationship break down/breaking up		
Took myself off to have a think		
I just stopped dating		
The acceptance of being alone		
The ease of not being in a relationship		

Sub-category 5: Reframing

Focused Codes/sub-categories	Axial Coding to Sub-category	
Applying mainstream labels.	The understandable/acceptable context of lack of interest.	Reframing
A throwback from childhood.		
Core beliefs and values.		
Other influences (School, religion, tropes about female identity).		
Engaging in a semi sexual relationship.	'Acting' out a sexual identity.	
Assuming an alternative sexual identity.		
Continuing in relationship as 'normal'.		
Asexual definition didn't fit.	Asexuality is not where I completely belong.	
Dis-satisfied with definition of asexual.		
Partial fit with asexual definition.		
Between definitions.		

Sub-category 6: Questioning/Searching for explanations

Focused Codes/sub-categories	Axial coding to Sub-category	
Researching sexuality.	Seeking advice online.	Questioning/searching for explanations.
Talking to others on Ace communities.		
Connecting with LGB allies for support.		
Connecting behaviour to identity		
Looking for distinctions between relationships and close friendships.	Critiquing previously accepted 'norms'.	
Querying romance.		
Querying romantic attraction.		
Critiquing heterosexuality.		
Re-Interpreting wider messages about sex.		
Am I, Am I not asexual.	Seeking advice from others.	
Asking friends about sex.		
The sex therapist encounter.		
Doctor/health care.		
Gathering expert opinion.		

Sub-category 7: Integrating (of asexuality int experiences)/Contemplating asexuality

Focused code/sub Sub-category	Axial Code to Sub-category	
Tumblr/Tinder/Google search/feminist forums/AVEN.	Discovering/re discovering/encountering/re encountering the word.	Integrating/contemplating.
On a radio broadcast.		
From a friend/peer group.		
Magazine articles.		
LGBT groups/GSA club.		
Understanding sexual journey by looking back.	Aligning own experiences to asexuality.	
It's been with me all my life.		
It all made sense.		
That's exactly how I feel.		
A gradual integration over time.		
Increased understanding of self through asexuality.		
No other conclusion to draw.		
It made so much sense to me.		
Not choosing asexuality (Asexuality chose me).		Living with the label.
Living with asexuality's lack of visibility.		
Aligning asexuality with feminism.		
The sense of relief.		
No going back.		
Pondering about the future.		
Being who you are.		

Sub-category 8: Embracing the nuances (of relationship formation)

Focused Codes/sub-categories	Axial coding to Sub-category	
Identifying as agender.	Different gender expressions.	Embracing the nuances.
Pan romantic.		
Non binary.		
Androgyny/dressing across both genders.		
No acceptable definition form romance.	Romantic, physical and sexual attraction.	
Accepting the fluidity of asexuality.		
Accepting the malleability of asexuality.		
Blurred lines between platonic and friendship.		
Contradictory explanations.		
Different intimate connections.	Rewriting the sexual scripts.	
Working with a new language.		
Emerging vocabulary.		
5 component model of attraction.		
A new approach to sex education.		
Negotiating the multiplicity of asexuality.		
A kind of 'dual' queerness.		
'Semi' partnerships work best for me.		

Sub-category 9: Critiquing Sexuality

Focused Codes/sub-categories	Axial coding to Sub-category	
I'm supposed to be dating.	Realising that everyone else has expectations.	Critiquing sexuality.
One day I need to get married and have children.		
Feeling like I had to fancy someone.		
Being set up on dates.		
Noticing how sexual everything is.	Omnipresence of sex.	
Should be concerning for all – but it's not.		
Linking sexuality to the core of being human.		
Telling some people but not others.	Selective disclosure.	
Knowing who will be accepting of it.		
Forgiving peoples lack of understanding.		
Accepting that other people don't get it.		
Being comfortably under the radar.		

Sub-category 10: Essentially asexual

Focused Codes/sub-categories	Axial coding to Sub-category	
Born this way.	Intrinsically asexual.	Essentially asexual.
Runs in the family.		
How it describes me.		
The core of my being.		
The essence of asexuality.		
Defining yourself in a negative.	'Without' sexuality (the non-powerful statement).	
The nowhere supporters club.		
Marginalising yourself within a marginalisation.		
United by a lack of something.		
Acknowledging the limitations to a don't do identity.		
I exist and asexuality is real.	The asexual experience.	
Making asexual connections.		
Critiquing sexuality.		
Appreciating the omnipresence of sexuality.		
Articulating sexual preferences.		
Dealing with others interpretations of asexuality.		
Missing out on something.		
Disclosure or non-disclosure.		

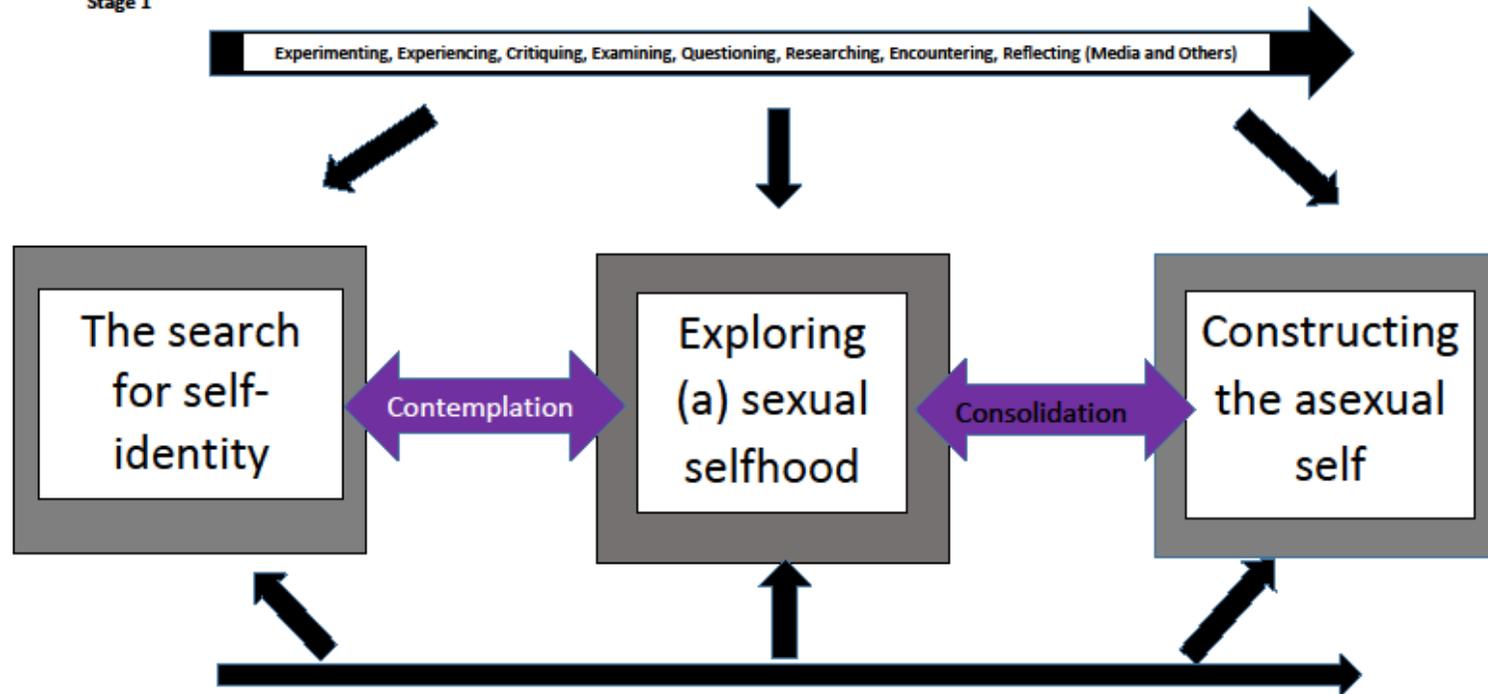
APPENDIX G: All Categories and Properties

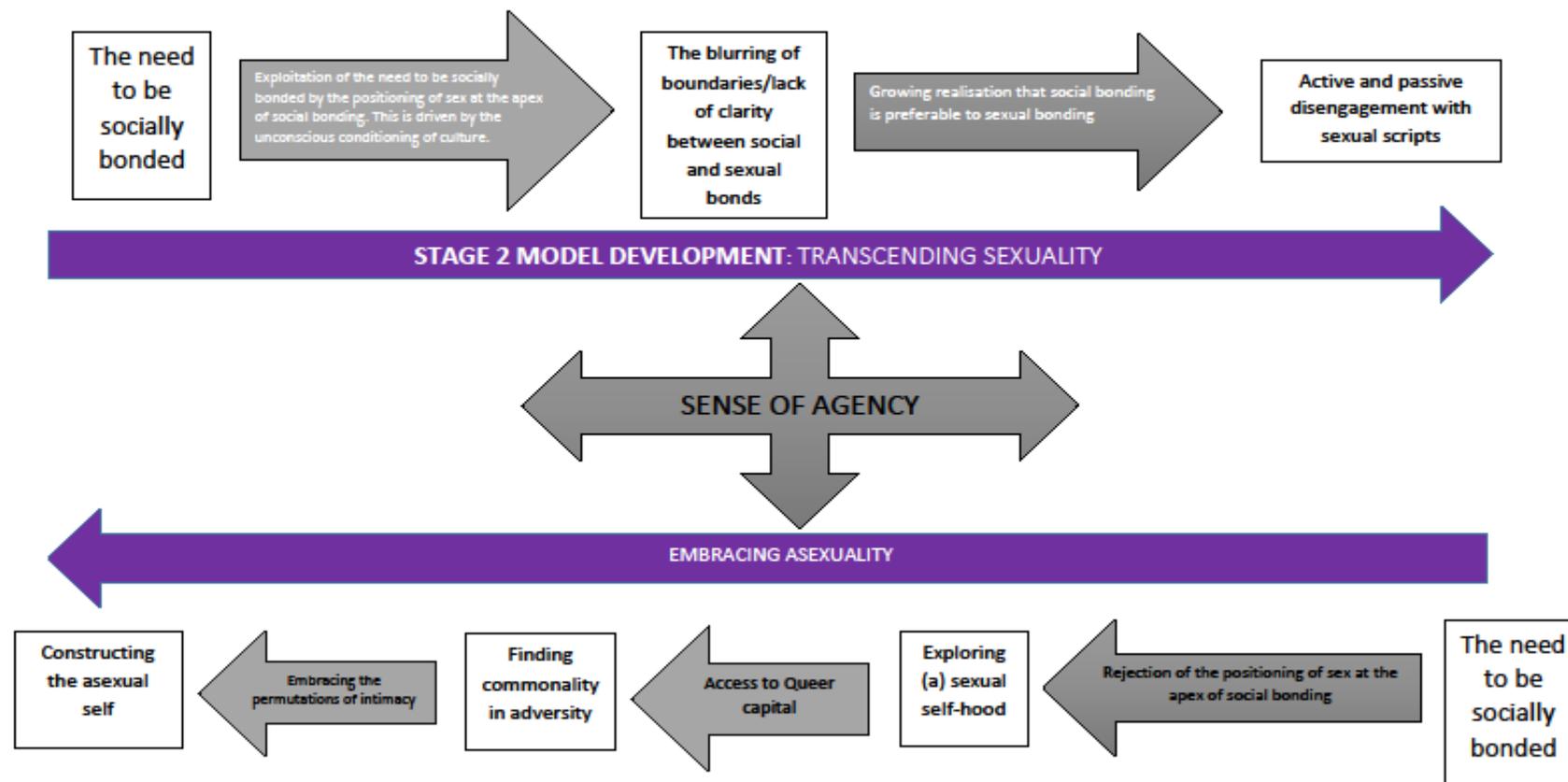
Categories	Sub-categories	Properties of the sub-category			
Becoming	Assimilating	Making sense of oneself in a new sexual world		Weighing up own and others relationships	Working out if you are different and how
	Connecting	Connecting with friends	Connecting with others and becoming unconnected	Connecting through a group or society	Connecting through dating
	(Experiencing) Situational binds	Conflict about discrepant levels of desire for or interest in sexual activity		Discrepant levels of 'attraction' within peer group	
	Reframing	The acceptable context for the situational bind			
Resolution	Disengagement	Re-thinking meanings of sexual identity		Stepping away from sexuality	
	Searching for explanations	Seeking advice from medical professionals		Searching the internet	Friends and allies
	Contemplating asexuality	Discovering asexuality		Aligning ones experiences to asexuality	
Consolidation	Embracing the nuances	Alternative expressions of love and affection		Making sense of friendships/relationships	Rewriting sexual scripts
	Critiquing sexuality	Expectations	The omnipresence of sex		Selective disclosure

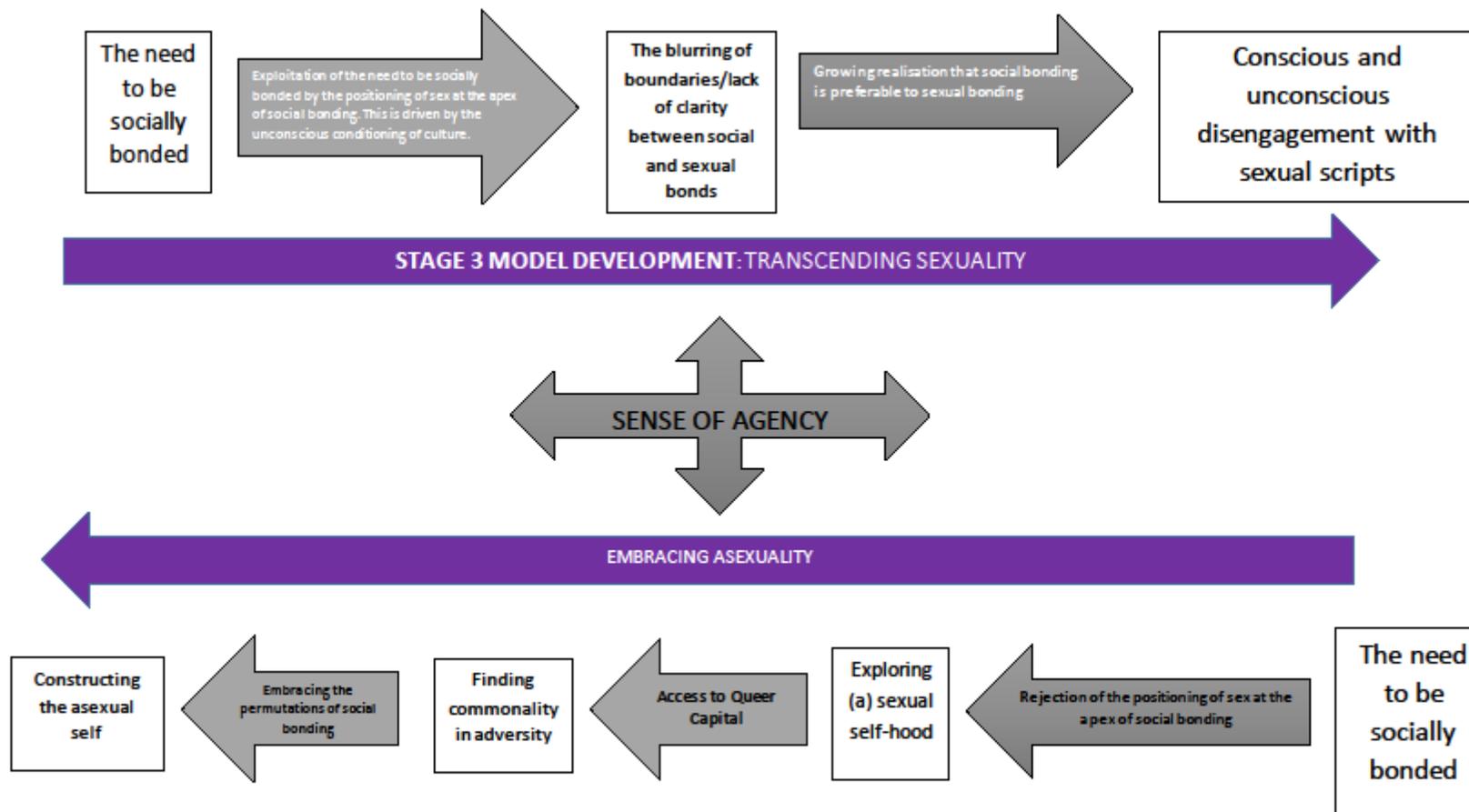
APPENDIX H: STAGES OF MODEL

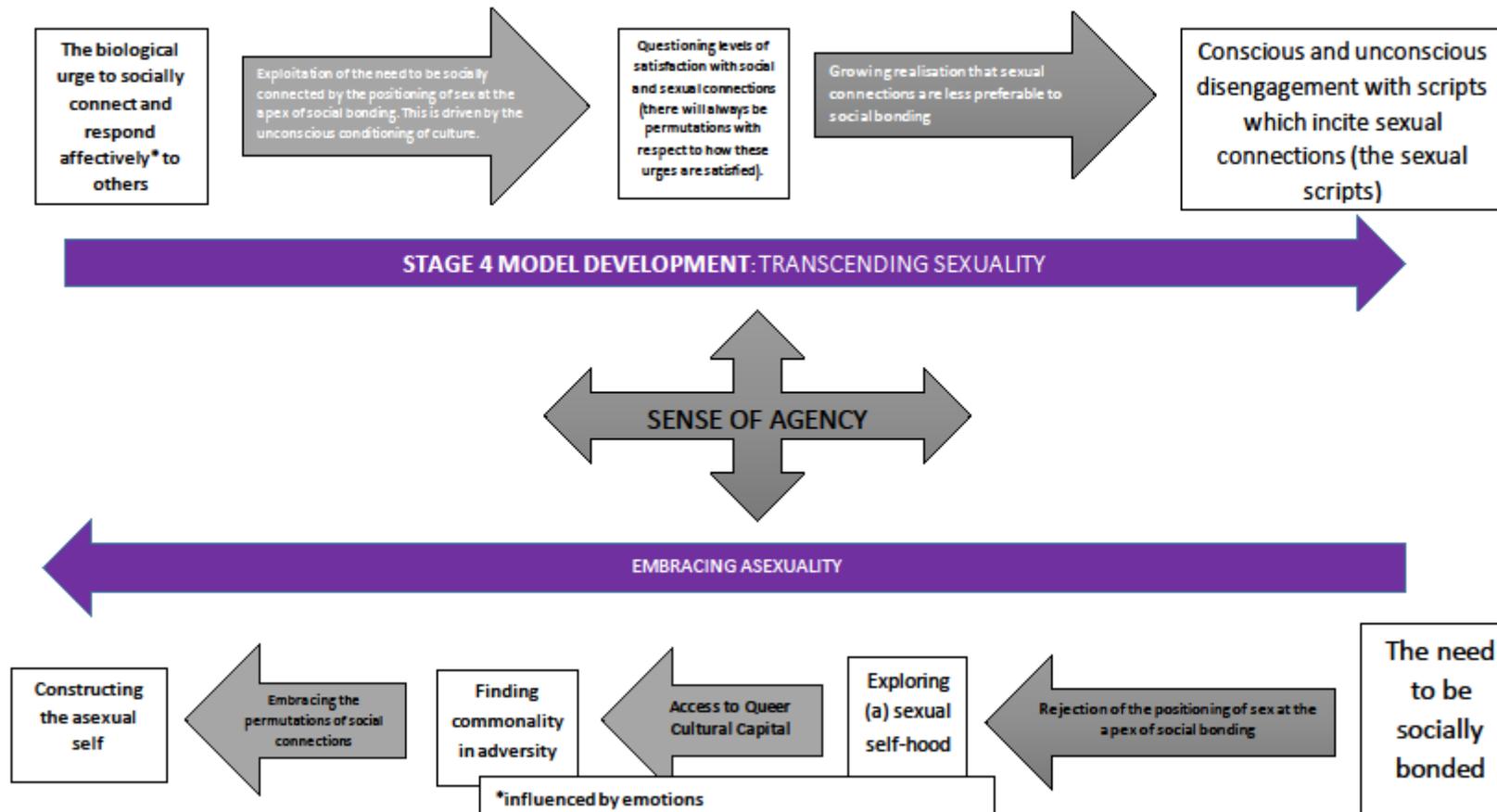
APPENDIX H: STAGES 1 – 6 OF MODEL DEVELOPMENT

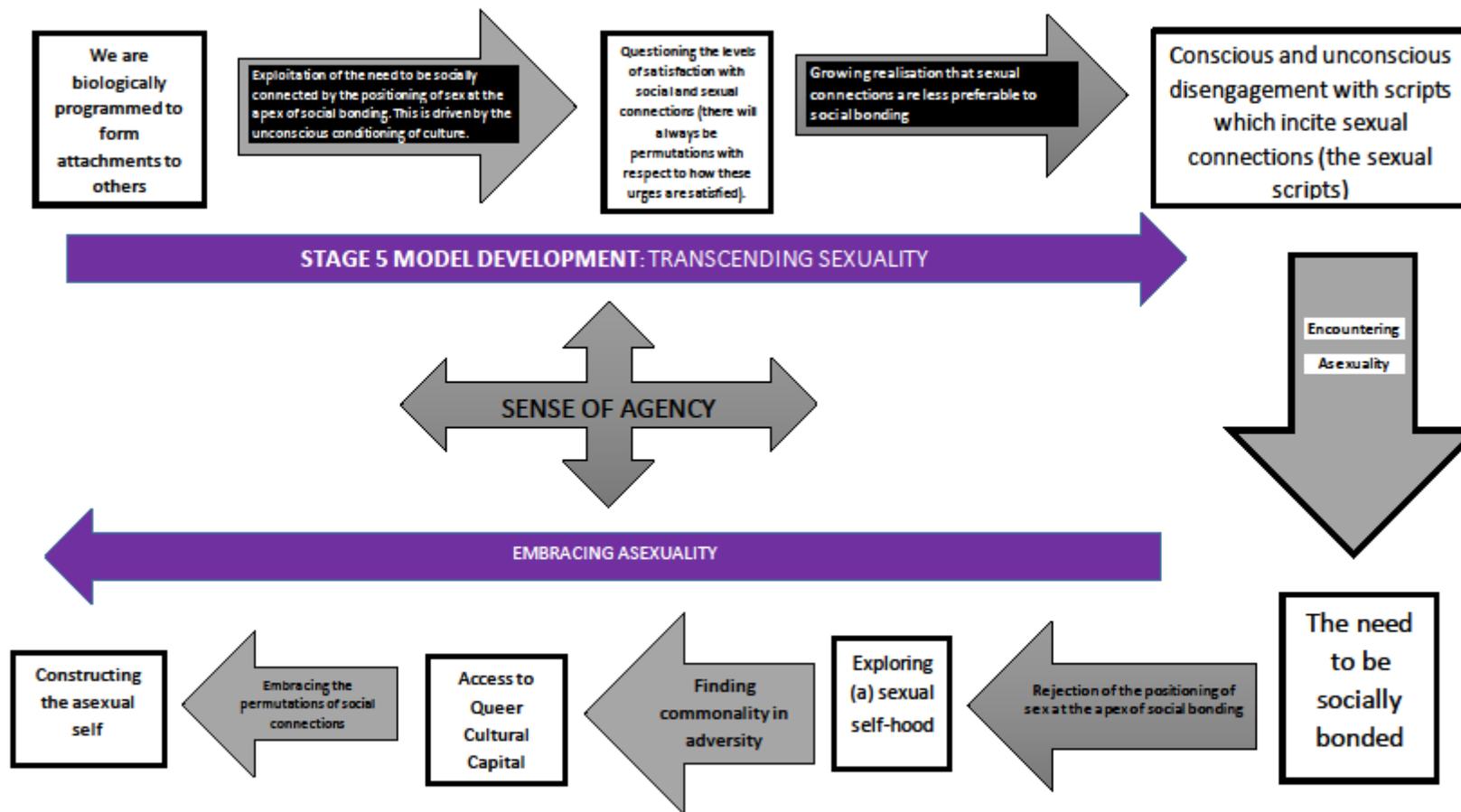
Stage 1











STAGE 6 MODEL DEVELOPMENT: TRANSCENDING SEXUALITY

