

# **Asexuals negotiate the 'onslaught of the heteronormative'**

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## **Abstract**

Although theorising and research about asexuality have increased in the past decade, there has been minimal attention given to the emotional impact that living in a hetero- and amato-normative cultural context has on those who identify as asexual. In this paper, I address this research gap through an exploration of the 'work that emotions do (Sara Ahmed) in the everyday lives of asexuals. The study is based on 15 individual interviews with self-identified asexuals living in Aotearoa New Zealand. One participant in the study used the phrase, 'the onslaught of the heteronormative' to describe how he experienced living as an aromantic identified asexual in a hetero- and amato-normative society. In this paper I consider what it means and feels like to experience aspects of everyday life as an 'onslaught'. In particular, I look at some participants' talk about experiencing sadness, loss, anger and/or shame as responses to/effects of hetero- and amato-normativity. However, I suggest that these are not only 'negative' emotional responses but that they might also be productive in terms of rethinking and disrupting hetero- and amato-normativity.

**Key Words:** Asexuality, emotion, heteronormativity, amatonormativity, family, single.

## Introduction

Romantic asexual, aromatic asexual, grey-asexual and demi-sexual are just some of the identity categories which sit under the umbrella of asexuality. Since the founding of the online site AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network) in 2001, we have seen the growth of asexuality as an identity category and a primarily online asexual community. While AVEN defines an asexual individual as a person 'who does not experience sexual attraction', the terms above highlight a diversity in the ways asexual identified people experience and define their asexuality. This diversity includes different kinds of attraction, different ways of desiring and seeking out interpersonal relationships, and a range of intimacies, physical and otherwise (Gupta and Cerankowski, 2017). One of the primary differences is between those who identify as romantic and aromantic, based on the presence or absence of romantic attraction. While neither experience sexual attraction, romantic individuals experience romantic attraction and often desire intimate, non-sexual relationships. For individuals who identify as grey-asexual or demi-sexual, sexual attraction is a possibility in special circumstances, for example, once a relationship has developed (Carrigan, 2011). Thus while lack of sexual attraction is a common feature of asexuality, it is not a universally shared definition (Scherrer, 2008). It is also important to acknowledge the fluidity of asexual identities with people often moving across various identifications over time. Przybylo argues that given the range of asexual identification and experiences, 'it is useful to think of asexuality in the plural as "asexualities" – an intricate identity that is not possible to contain within one definition' (2019:11).

Academic attention to asexuality has increased slowly but steadily in the past decade. While much of the scientific scholarship has been instrumental in legitimizing asexuality (Bogaert 2004; Brotto et al., 2010; Prause and Graham, 2007), Ela Przybylo argues that 'it does so through the reproduction of normative, essentialist, and harmful notions about (a)sexuality and difference' (2012:239, see also Flore, 2014; Gressgard, 2013). For many asexualities scholars positioned in social constructionist approaches (particularly poststructuralist and queer informed by critiques of sexual essentialism), the focus has been the on the potential challenges of asexuality to western 'sexusocieties' in which sexuality and sex play central roles (Przybylo, 2011: 446). Przybylo, for example, argues that asexuality 'holds the tools for substantively challenging sexusociety. This challenge should not be formulated in terms of a massive attack by one force on another, but rather as a continuous eroding away of sexusociety from within' (2011: 457). For Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, 'asexuality as a practice and politics radically challenges the prevailing sex-normative culture' (2014: 661).

There have, however, been some critiques of such scholarship, described by Matt Dawson, Susie Scott and Liz McDonnell as 'the political literature on asexuality' (2018: 376). Dawson and colleagues are particularly critical of the claim that asexuality has the potential to be 'radically transformative'. This is because this literature is not based on empirical data and,

furthermore, that the ‘political claims tend to see asexuality as “a single axis of identity with little consideration of social relations of gender, race, class and disability”’ (Cuthbert cited in Dawson et al., 2018: 378). For Dawson and colleagues (2018), how ‘resistance’ might occur in the lives of asexual people is an empirical question, yet they note that such empirical explorations are rare.

While still relatively small, the number of empirical, qualitative studies into the lives of asexuals have been growing. Much of this attends to the ways in which people come to identify as asexual and negotiate this identity in the context of sexsociety (MacNeela and Murphy, 2015; Mitchell and Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Scherrer, 2008). One focus has been on the experiences of friendship, relationships and intimacy of self-identified asexuals (Dawson et al., 2016 & 2019; Gupta, 2017; Haeffner, 2011; Van Houdenhove et al. 2015; Vares, 2019). More recently there has been increasing attention to the intersections of asexuality with gender (Cuthbert, 2019; Gupta, 2019; Przybylo 2014; Vares, 2018) and disability (Cuthbert, 2017). Given the centrality of the internet in the development of the asexual community, there has also been some research on the role of AVEN and other online sites in fostering the growth of this community (Dawson et al., 2018; Gupta, 2017). The majority of these studies investigate how their asexual-identified participants navigate a cultural context of compulsory sexuality in various ways. ‘Marginalization and resistance’ (Gupta, 2017), ‘freedom or foreclosure’ (Dawson et al., 2019), reproduction and/or disruption (Vares, 2018), are some ways of conceptualizing how asexual persons manage/negotiate sexsociety and sexual normativity. For Dawson et al., (2016, 2018) the findings from such empirical studies complicate the theoretical claims made by the ‘political literature’ that asexuality is ‘radically transformative’. Kristina Gupta also suggests caution with making claims about the extent to which the practices of asexuals ‘have the potential to fundamentally challenge the system of “compulsory sexuality”’ (2017: 1000).

Research with asexuals about their everyday lives indicates that marginalization and discrimination are common experiences for many asexuals (although this is not always the case, see Dawson et al., 2018). In her study, Gupta found many ‘negative impacts’ that had been reported in earlier scholarship: ‘pathologization, isolation, unwanted sex<sup>1</sup> and relationship conflict, and the denial of epistemic authority’ (2017: 993). However, she also suggests that her participants ‘challenged, resisted, or defied the privileging of sexuality and the marginalization of asexuality’ in particular ways (2017:100) (see also Dawson et al., 2016; MacNeela and Murphy, 2015; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015; Vares, 2018, 2019). Gupta concludes that some of the practices used by individuals in her study may alter some aspects of compulsory sexuality but do not offer a fundamental challenge to the system, while others could substantially transform sexual norms by validating various norms of non-sexuality (2017: 1009).

In this paper, I add to the empirical investigations of the ways that asexual identified people negotiate sexual- and hetero-normativity, but extend the focus to emotions and the ‘work that emotions do’ (Ahmed, 2014). In the empirical literature to date, there is often mention of the various emotions asexual participants experience in particular contexts. Experiences of pathologization and isolation are often framed as ‘negative impacts of compulsory sexuality’ (Gupta, 2017: 996). However, there has been less attention to the emotional complexities and contradictions experienced by asexuals, their sense making of these emotions/experiences and their effects. This paper thus contributes to an absence in asexualities studies and to the growing body of scholarship that includes attention to the material/emotion/affect. I suggest that a focus on emotion and affect allows us to deepen our understanding of the attachments of some asexuals to sexual- and hetero-normativity. It also, at the same time, ‘can reveal fractures and tensions that are both emotionally and discursively worked out as [asexual-identified] people reconsider and reassess their attachments to what was once common sense to them’ (Smith et al., 2018: 2).

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed argues that it is ‘important to consider how heterosexuality functions powerfully as a series of norms and ideals, but *also through emotions that shape bodies as well as worlds*: (hetero)norms are investments, which are “taken on” and “taken in” by subjects’ (italics added) (2014: 146-7). Ahmed’s work thus facilitates an exploration of the ‘bodily resonance[s] of a heterosexual status quo’ (Hemmings 2005: 549-50) for those who identify as asexual. Ahmed argues that, ‘heteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort’, which also becomes a form of comforting for those who inhabit it (Ahmed, 2014: 148). For example, for heterosexual subjects, the process of heterosexualizing public spaces (which repeat different forms of heterosexual conduct) often goes unnoticed. However, for ‘queer subjects’, faced with the comforts of heterosexuality, discomfort may result. Ahmed continues:

*Queer lives do not suspend the attachments that are crucial to the reproduction of heteronormativity, and this does not diminish ‘queerness’, but intensifies the work that it can do. Queer lives remain shaped by that which they fail to reproduce. To turn this around, queer lives shape what gets reproduced: in the very failure to reproduce the norms through how they inhabit them, queer lives produce differing effects. [...] The gap between a script and a body [...] may involve discomfort and, hence may ‘rework’ the script (italics added) (2014: 152).*

I locate asexuality within queer, that is, as anti-normative rather than anti-heteronormative, although there are debates around whether asexuality can be seen as queer (see Cerankowski and Milks, 2014; Colborne 2018; Przybylo, 2019; Przybylo and Cooper, 2014). Ahmed’s conceptualization of emotion enables an exploration of how it feels for those who identify as asexual to experience the pull of/attachment to sexual- and hetero-normativity.

It also enables attention to what is produced when one fails to inhabit or feels a 'sense of out-of-placeness' (Ahmed 2014: 148) in a heteronormative culture.

It is also important to acknowledge the intersection of heteronormativity with amatonormativity. This term was coined by Elizabeth Brake (2012) to refer to the privileging of exclusive, enduring amorous relationships associated with, but not limited to, marriage. It is based on the assumption that, 'a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it *should* be aimed at in preference to other relationship types' (italics in original) (Brake, 2012: 88-89). Brake argues that the amorous relationship (which is socially privileged) need not be characterized by sexual exclusivity and therefore can include 'couples who maintain an enduring amorous relationship but refrain from sex' (2012: 90), as with some romantic identified asexuals. Nonetheless, the assumption that valuable relationships must be marital or amorous devalues friendships and other caring relationships. Like Mark Francis (2016), Brake argues for extending understandings of care, intimacy and love from couple-centric connotations to terrains of collectivity and friendship.

Earlier I quoted Przybylo (2011) and her argument that asexuality can challenge sexusociety, but that this is best thought of as a continuous eroding away of sexusociety. In this paper I offer a glimpse of the various ways in which some self-identified asexuals are shaped by but also erode or chip away at not just sexusociety, but also hetero- and amato-normativity. I do this by exploring the emotional attachments of some asexuals to aspects of these, as well as how their 'failure to reproduce the [various] norms through how they inhabit them' produces differing effects (Ahmed, 2014: 152).

## **Methodology**

Recruitment of self-identified asexuals living in New Zealand took many months (March to August 2016). While the aim of the study was to recruit 20 people only 16 responded to recruitment posts and 15 agreed to participate. A number of online sites were used, for example, AVEN, a queer youth support group, a student recruitment website and Asexuals New Zealand Facebook. The post was addressed to self-identified asexuals, over the age of 18 years, who were willing to talk about their experiences. Ten of the participants responded from the latter. Although previous studies have recruited primarily through AVEN, for this project only one participant responded to the AVEN posts.

The participants were self-identified asexuals, living in New Zealand and between 18 and 60 years of age. Of the thirteen participants who identified as romantic asexual (including grey-romantic), ten were hetero-romantic, two were bi-romantic and one identified as 'simply asexual', although she desired a partnered relationship with a man or woman in which there was no 'sex'. Here 'sex' referred to penile-vaginal penetration, however, for some other participants it included a range of sexual practices such as oral sex, touching the genitalia and

breasts, that is, in contrast to the dominant heteronormative discourse in which 'sex' is equated with penile-vaginal penetration

Twelve participants lived in one of New Zealand's largest cities (Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin or Hamilton), with the remaining four coming from smaller towns. With respect to ethnicity, the majority were Pākeha, one was Māori<sup>2</sup> and one Iranian. The participants discussed in this article all identify as Pākeha. Interviews were conducted either in person (10) or by phone (5). Some participants asked for a phone interview and for others, my travelling to their location was not practical at the time. At the time of the interviews participants occupied a range of socio-economic positions in terms of their employment: 6 were students; 2 were administrators; 2 were mothers; 1 was unemployed; 1 was a therapist, 1 was a teacher, 1 was a nurse and one an academic. The interview guide covered a range of broad topics, some of which were only applicable to particular identifications (for example, aromantic or romantic). These included how participants came to identify as asexual and their past and present relationships with family, friends and partners. For romantic identified asexuals, there were questions about how participants found and/or negotiated a relationship in which there was no 'sex' (defined in different ways as indicated above). Participants weren't asked specifically about their emotions but were, in some instances, asked about how they responded to a particular comment and/or action from others. The interviews lasted between 35 – 120 minutes.

The interviews were transcribed by a university transcription service. I then reviewed them, listening to the audio recordings and making any required corrections in the transcripts. The analysis of the interviews is informed by a feminist poststructuralist approach that, drawing on the work of Foucault, understands subjectivity or identity as constructed in discourse (see Weedon, 1987; Gavey, 1989, 2019). I first employed a form of thematic analysis informed by the poststructuralist framing of language as constitutive of meaning and meanings as social (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I began by coding the interesting features of the transcripts. These codes were then collated into potential themes. One substantive thematic category I identified in the talk of romantic identified participants was the difficulty of 'finding somebody' and negotiating the 'dating game' (see Vares, 2018). Another substantive thematic category related to participants' experiences of friendship, relationships and intimacy, particularly non-sexual intimacies and 'new' relational forms (Vares, 2019). In some of the interviews participants talked about their emotions, for example: the hurt from online abuse on dating sites/apps; the loneliness in not being able to find a partner; the pain of loving someone but having the relationship break up because 'sex' became too difficult; and the pleasure and happiness of finding a relationship in which there was no 'sex'. These are mentioned in, but not the focus of, my earlier publications. This paper thus addresses some participants' talk about their often ambivalent and contradictory emotions. However, it is worth noting that most participants didn't talk about their emotions.

My analysis is also informed by Ahmed's work in which she argues that emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produced at the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they were objects (2014: 10). Ahmed does not simply want to interweave the individual and the social, but to explore the way they take shape through each other, or even how they shape each other. Emotions move us and connect us to bodies, to places, and to things. Thus, 'emotions involve different movements towards and away from others, such that they shape the contours of social as well as bodily space' (Ahmed, 2014: 209). For Ahmed, emotions are performative and generate effects (2014: 84). In what follows, I look at the work that particular emotions do in the everyday lives of some of the participants in my study, focusing on 'the everydayness of compulsory heterosexuality' (Ahmed, 2014) and amatonormativity, and what is produced in particular everyday contexts. I focus on participants' talk about ambiguous emotional responses to/negotiations of living in hetero- and amato-normative contexts, particularly around a sense of not belonging. This involves charting the complexities and tensions around some participants' articulations of feeling sadness, loss and shame at being excluded from the 'happy family'/partnered relationship, as well as their refusal to be oriented to such emotions.

When presenting extracts from interviews I have omitted word repetitions and all speech hesitations (i.e., all terms such as 'um' and 'ah'). The presence of three consecutive dots [...] indicates a portion of speech has been cut. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

### **Negotiating the 'onslaught of the heteronormative'**

The 'onslaught of the heteronormative' was a phrase used by Philip (aged 49) to describe living as a self-identified aromantic asexual in a heteronormative culture. His framing of the heteronormative, connects with academic scholarship in which heterosexuality is constituted as 'normal' and 'natural' and where the ideal outcome of a sexual attraction between the 'opposite sexes' is a monogamous relationship which produces children. Philip talked about how representations of the heteronormative ideal - the 'happy family' - are inescapable because they are everywhere. As an aromantic asexual, Philip had no desire for a partnered, romantic relationship. He had been involved in setting up an asexual support group (no longer in operation) and active in promoting the visibility of asexuality in New Zealand (for example, at Pride Fairs and other LGBTQ events). However, in the following extract Philip indicates how he lacks a community that can 'shield' him from the onslaught of the heteronormative and gives one illustration of this 'onslaught':

Philip: I haven't been able to form a little group or a little community to shield me, like gay people do, like lesbian, like trans people do, to shield from the onslaught of the heteronormative. You fall in love, you get married, you have kids, you know it's just reflected everywhere, in books, in films, on

television and adverts, just there's no escaping from it. Sometimes as I get older, perhaps less so but yeah, certainly early in my life, that was very difficult. You know, I still [laughs], I still cry, if I'm walking down the street and I see an advert, you know and it's a happy family. You know, there's the man and the woman on the beach and they've got two kids and you know, the older one's a boy and the younger one's a girl and they're just really [indecipherable]. I quite often just give them the finger. I will stick two fingers up to them. I'll just think, stuff you.

In the first part of the extract, Philip talks about not being able to shield himself from the onslaught of the heteronormative through having a 'little group or a little community [...] like gay people do, like lesbian, like trans people do'<sup>3</sup>. Aside from online groups, there are currently very few groups in New Zealand where asexuals can meet in person (participants spoke of one in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city). In part, this is because of the relatively small number of asexuals in New Zealand (a population of 4.9 million); the online location of asexual community, the often private nature of asexual identity and/or seeing this aspect of identity as not that significant. For Philip, asexuality was central to his identity. The current lack of a support group in the city in which he lives, and not having offline contact with other asexuals, work to deprive Philip of the shielding effect which such contact could provide. The effect of having an asexual support group was spoken about by one other romantic identified participant:

Olivia: In Auckland, there's an asexuality meet up every three months or so and I've only been to one but it was really, really cool because it was like, I can talk to all these people and we can talk about how none of us want to have sex and it was great because like with all my friends, I'll be talking about what they're doing with their boyfriends and I'm like, "please shut up".

One aspect of the onslaught of the heteronormative that Philip discusses is the 'happy family' and its ubiquitous representation in popular culture<sup>4</sup>. I have found Ahmed's (2010) framing of the happy family as a 'happy object' useful for reflecting on Philip's talk about his experience. In her book *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Ahmed explains that objects can be physical and material things, but they also include values, practices and styles. Happy objects, like the happy family, become 'happiness pointers' or a means to happiness - if we follow their lead we will be able to find happiness (Ahmed, 2010: 26). In a hetero- and amato-normative context, falling in love with someone of the opposite sex, having a committed relationship or getting married and having children are 'about the possibility of a happy ending; about what life is aimed toward, as being what gives life direction or purpose' (Ahmed, 2010: 90). The family as an object, not only promises happiness but also directs us toward certain 'good' life choices (the heterosexual nuclear family) and away from others (non-heterosexual relationships and different relational forms).



For Ahmed, 'a good life, involves the regulation of desire. It is not only that we desire happiness but that happiness is imagined as what you get in return for desiring well' (2010: 37). Ideas of happiness thus 'involve social as well as moral distinctions insofar as they rest on ideas of who is worthy as well as capable of being happy "in the right way"' (Ahmed 2010: 13). In western contexts, the reproduction of hetero- and amato-normativity through the happy family deems heterosexual men and women who engage in romantic, monogamous relationships that produce children, as worthy and capable of being happy. This 'happiness script', Ahmed argues, is powerful even when we fail or refuse to follow it (2010: 91). A failure or refusal can result in a gap 'between the affective value of an object and how we experience an object' (Ahmed, 2010: 41). Philip's failure to follow this happiness script produces sadness and often tears (although there have been less tears as he has gotten older). At another point in the interview Philip explains how the sadness he feels, results from missing out on the promise of happiness offered by the happy family:

Philip: I can look at, you know romantic sexual relationships, marriage, family, children, all that kind of stuff as a source of problems, but it's obviously a huge source of great joy and, you know, meaning and I don't have access to that at all. It's [...] pretty hard for me [...] seeing people you know, fall in love, form relationships, maybe even get married, although marriage is odd. [...] I don't have that and, yeah, that makes me sad. That makes me sad. It's just like, here's something that's core, a core experience for so many people, and I don't have that.

Philip's framing of the heterosexual family as 'a huge source of great joy' is informed by the relentless constitution of this relational form as the primary route to, and source of, not just happiness and joy, but a 'core experience'. To situate the heterosexual family as 'core' is to essentialize it as something that is fundamental to human experience. While asexuality challenges such essentialism, it is not possible for self-identified asexuals to be unaffected by this hetero- and amato-normativity which constitute a desire for being 'happy in the right way' (Ahmed 2010: 13), that is, through a loving, heterosexual family. For Brake, this construction of marriage and the family as the only sites of 'real' care and love 'relegates friendship and solitudinousness to cultural invisibility' (2012:89) and informs Philip's sense that he cannot have what marriage and the family provides.

The desire for the happy family was experienced by many participants from an early age and for Angela and Aidan, was signified by the 'picket fence'. For example, 'I've always had that, like kind of white picket fence, it's just like ingrained into your head as a kid' (Aidan), and 'I wanted the stuff that I read about in books [...] I wanted children, I wanted a house, I wanted the garden with a picket fence' (Angela). For Aidan and Angela, as romantic-identified asexuals, there is the possibility of a partnered relationship and thus a promise of happiness.

Angela, for example, was in a partnered, non-sexual relationship with a non-asexual man – with the house and the garden. She also has children from an earlier marriage (see Vares, 2019). For Philip, as aromantic-identified, this pathway to happiness is not available and, in spite of being critical of the hetero- and amato-normative family, he still experiences a profound sense of loss. It is also important to acknowledge that such experiences and feelings are not specific to those who identify as asexual.

However, as Margaret Wetherell argues, although affect does display strong pushes for patterns, it also signals trouble and disturbance in existing patterns (2012: 13). We see this in the extract above. The sadness and tears that Philip experienced when proximate to the happy family indicate the power of existing patterns or pathways of hetero- and amato-normativity. However, there is a negotiation process in this ‘affective moment’ (Wetherell, 2012) with Philip challenging the ‘onslaught of heteronormativity’: ‘I quite often just give them the finger. I will stick two fingers up to them. I’ll just think, stuff you’. This physical gesture (to a public advertisement) is one of challenge and refusal (‘stuff you’). It signifies Philip’s resistance to being banished from this narrative of happiness. In other words, there is a reconfiguring of this ‘affective moment’ and ‘what should happen next’ (Wetherell, 2012: 141). Philip raises two fingers to assert not only his anger at, but also his resistance to, being moved to sadness by such representations. Thus, in this instance Philip’s sadness and sense of loss produces a momentary refusal to be oriented to sadness by this ‘onslaught’. For Ahmed, there is potential in such moments for transforming the scripts or discourses of hetero- and amato-normativity. I return to this below.

### **‘You must be unhappy’: ‘Asexual-singles’ negotiate the couple imperative**

For Philip, as an aromantic-identified asexual, there was no desire for a romantic, partnered relationship, thus the happy family was not a possibility. For many romantic-identified asexuals, the happy family was desired and also a possibility with respect to a partnered (usually non-sexual) relationship, potentially with children. Angela, for example, was in a partnered, non-sexual relationship with a non-asexual man and Kathy had recently been widowed (her partner had also been non-asexual) (see Vares, 2019). However, the majority of the romantic-identified female participants were single or unpartnered at the time of the interviews. As indicated above, being single or unpartnered while desiring a partnered relationship is not specific to romantic identified asexuals (although desiring a non-sexual partnered relationship is more likely to be experienced by those who identify this way).

Gabriella and Olivia used the term ‘asexual-single’ (as does Mark Frances<sup>5</sup> 2016) and spoke of belonging to an asexual-singles online support group. While the asexual-single is a new figure, the constitution of the single person as lonely and unhappy has a longer history. In spite of recent changes to the meaning of singleness (for example, as autonomous and independent), Reynolds et al., (2007) argue that it remains a ‘deficit identity’ defined by lack. This lack relates

to being positioned 'outside of family life and ordinary intimate relationships' (Reynolds et al., 2007: 333), with intimate relationships defined as sexual, amorous and partnered. For Brake, it is the privilege accorded by amatonormativity to enduring amorous relationships which results in those outside such relationships being 'subjected to pervasive negative stereotyping' (2012: 92).

Thus, while not unique to asexuals, for the romantic-identified participants there were some specific challenges. Many had given up on dating or 'finding somebody' (see Vares, 2018) and imagined this would not change in the future, unless they were 'lucky', for example:

Hallie: I'm pretty much going to stay single for the rest of my life, or I might be lucky enough to meet someone who's unable to have sex so doesn't desire it.

For some female participants being single was framed as a source of unhappiness, for example, Kaitlyn indicated that, 'although I'm happy not to have sex<sup>6</sup>, I'm unhappy not to be in a relationship'. In contrast, Sarah 'didn't hate being single' and Gabriella explained that:

Gabriella: I'm quite happy as I am being single [...] I've got very close friends [...] I do value close relationships with people, I do value being a useful part of my community, and I like giving empathy and care and support to people, that's why I do the job that I do.

Through identifying her broad social and professional networks, Gabriella challenges the positioning of the single as lonely and isolated, as did Sarah. She also makes a case for the significance of friendships, as does Brake when she argues that, 'friendships and adult care networks are on a par with amorous relationships in their function and emotional significance [...]. The lack of amorous love [...] does not make such caretaking, affection and intimacy less valuable' (2012: 95).

However, as the interview with Gabriella continued, she talked about the responses of partnered/married others to her unpartnered status:

Gabriella: People have this fear of singleness. I think they kind of go, "oh you must be unhappy because I would be". [...] I get so irritated when people go, "well if I was in your situation I would be unhappy therefore you must be unhappy", and I'm like, "don't do that, that's really dismissive and really rude and you need to actually look at where a person is and appreciate where they're at and what's going on".

The persistent construction of the single as lonely and unhappy (Cobb, 2012) informs the response of others to Gabriella's singleness. By locating singleness as something to fear, it is positioned as threatening to the amorous/romantic couple imperative underpinning heteronormativity (and increasingly homonormativity) and the happy family. In this construction, friends, family and other relationships cannot provide the 'real' happiness that comes from a sexual and/or amorous partnered relationship (see Francis, 2016; Brake, 2012). To deviate from the amorous partnered relationship is thus to be threatened with unhappiness. Gabriella's partnered friends state that *they* would be unhappy if single. The assumption is that Gabriella *must* therefore be unhappy because happiness is not possible unless one is partnered. Ahmed argues that what is at work here is a subtle mode of encouragement and direction, 'So it's not "don't do this". It's "do this, because this would make you happy"' (Schmitz/Ahmed 2014: 103). It is also important to note that as Gabriella publically identifies as asexual<sup>7</sup>, the couple imperative at work here is for a romantic/amorous partnership regardless of the absence of sex. This highlights the continuing dominance of a couple imperative in which 'sex' can be irrelevant to the constitution of the happy couple. It is being in a partnered, amorous relationship (with or without sex) that is presented as the solution to the unhappy/lonely (asexual or non-asexual) single. In other words, to be single is to be unhappy and this can only be overcome by no longer being single (Cobb 2012: 8).

In the context of others' assumptions and directives about her single status, Gabriella resists being banished from the coupled narrative of happiness by talking back to those who attempt to do so. However, as indicated above, affects can signal trouble and disturbances in existing patterns, as well as a strong push for patterns (Wetherell, 2012). On the one hand, Gabriella feels both happy with her single status and irritated with the assumptions others make about her supposed unhappiness. On the other hand, Gabriella also experiences shame for being unpartnered and employs a 'personal deficit' narrative (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003) to try to explain her singleness:

Gabriella: There's quite a lot of feelings of shame when you see everybody else around you partnering up, and it seems like the easiest thing in the world [...]. I sit there and I think, "okay I don't think I'm a bad person, I'm reasonably bright I've got a good career, I don't have any you know bad addictions or bad habits or anything. I eat too much pizza but that's about it, you know, and I've got good friends and good relationships. Why am I not partnered, what's wrong?" That can be quite a strong impulse in our society and our culture now, and it has taken quite a lot of unthinking for me to get out of that habit. As I say I don't particularly angst about the fact that I'm unpartnered, I angst about what other people think about me being unpartnered, which is pretty much the same thing I guess, but the root cause of it is other people's perceptions not mine.

In the 'personal deficit repertoire' the 'focus is on the personal characteristics of the single woman and a strong link is made between these characteristics and membership in the category' (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003: 498). Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) argue that while the single is a deficit identity, this is more so the case for women given the gendered construction of singlehood (see Reynolds et al., 2007). Dominant discourses of femininity continue to privilege being in a sexual, partnered relationship (preferably with children) as normative. While women can and are expected to work and be in a relationship, to not do the latter is to fail in a crucial aspect of normative femininity. Gabriella, like the women in Reynold and Wetherell's research, reflects on her personal characteristics in relation to her unpartnered status.

However, alongside Gabriella's deficit narrative is both a declaration of acceptance/happiness with being single, as well as shame. It is the presence of others, who are partnered and assume she must be unhappy as a single, that produces shame. As everybody else has succeeded in partnering up, to not be able to do so (whether one wants a partner or not) is to fail and 'to be witnessed in one's failure is to be ashamed' (Ahmed, 2014: 103). Shame, for Ahmed, is about how one appears before and to others:

The view of this other is the view that I have taken on in relation to myself; I see myself as if I were this other. My failure before this other hence is profoundly a failure of myself to myself. In shame, I expose to myself that I am a failure through the gaze of an ideal other (2014: 106).

For another participant, Madison, who also identified as romantic asexual, while being around partnered family members doesn't produce a sense of shame, it does produce a sense of estrangement:

Madison: The only like negative sort of stuff I feel [...] is being around family members, like cousins, like siblings who are so very obvious in their happy sexual relationships. It's the whole wanting to belong thing again and when [...] everyone's sort of paired off with someone and you're sort of sitting alone, you're just like oh, okay.

Thus for both Madison and Gabriella, it is being with other partnered others – those who conform to hetero- and amato-normativity - that produces 'negative' feelings and a desire to belong for Madison, and anger and shame for Gabriella. For Gabriella, it is specifically being viewed by others as single, that produces a sense shame for her failure to be partnered. Nonetheless, she grapples with this shame, acknowledging that it is not really hers but socially produced and then settling with framing these as being the same thing. How do we make sense of these ambivalent responses? Rather than frame Gabriella's shame as simply negative and a failure to reproduce the norms of hetero- and amato-normativity, Ahmed suggests that

the 'effects of failure to embody an ideal are not just negative' (2014: 154). Elspeth Probyn also frames shame as productive. She draws on 'productive' in the Foucauldian sense, that is to say generative, neither good nor bad (Probyn et al., 2019: 325). She argues that:

When one feels a sense of shame it is a profound intra-subjective moment that has the capacity to undo something of the person – that provokes a deep psychic emotional disturbance which is productive in every sense. Feeling shame produces a new sense of self even if it is only momentarily; it produces a profound reflection on the self (2019: 325).

Gabriella talked of doing 'quite a lot of unthinking for me to get out of that habit' of blaming herself for her unpartnered status. In other words, Gabriella reflects on the work that her self-blame and shame do in such contexts, as well as the work/'unthinking' she has done to undo this pattern/habit.

### **Some concluding thoughts**

The emotional experiences and sense making of Philip and Gabriella discussed above, capture the onslaught of hetero- and amato-normativity they experience in their everyday lives as self-identified asexuals. They describe some moments when they experience sadness, loss, shame and irritation/anger at not being able to follow the happiness script or path. What I find useful about Ahmed's path metaphor is her description of how 'paths are followed by being created and are created by being followed. The more people follow the path, the clearer it becomes, the easier it is to follow. Happiness seems to be about doing whatever, "you're free to do whatever", but actually it becomes about the narrowing of a set of possibilities' (2006: 16). This also means that new paths are created when asexuals and others turn from, or are unable to stay on, well-trodden hetero- and amato-normative paths. This can be an effect of painful emotions, a feeling of not belonging or discomfort, and/or being directed away from the heteronormative path/line. Carlstrom and Andersson argue that as a result, 'new objects or bodies, which were previously not visible or achievable within the heteronormative lines, appear to be achievable' (2019: 1319). In the past two decades, we have seen the widening and deepening of non-normative paths created by self-identified asexuals, among others. It is often not without pain that such paths are created and this must not be overlooked or negated. However, sadness and shame can have effects and produce refusal and anger toward, as well as 'rethinking' of, the 'onslaught' of heteronormativity. This is not an assertion of the radical challenge of asexuality for as Ahmed cautions, 'maintaining an active positive of 'transgression' not only takes time, but may not be psychically, socially or materially possible for some individuals and groups given their ongoing and unfinished commitments and histories' (2014: 153). Nonetheless, I would suggest that the participants' experiences discussed here illustrate how the everyday lives

of some self-identified asexuals ‘gesture towards’ (Gressgard, 2013) or ‘erode away’ (Przybylo, 2011) hetero-, sexual-and amato-normativity.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> While it isn’t clear what is being referenced by Gupta, it is possible she is referring to ‘unwanted but consensual sex’.

<sup>2</sup> Māori are the indigenous people of New Zealand; Pakeha is the indigenous term for non-Māori.

<sup>3</sup> Philip’s experiences in queer contexts have been difficult. While some asexuals have been welcomed into LGBTQ groups (see Dawson et al., 2018), others, like Philip, have experienced exclusion. For example, Philip spoke of the ‘stone cold’ response of the audience when he spoke at a ‘queer conference’ – the lack of engagement and a refusal to acknowledge the asexual subject/asexuality (‘it went down like a shit sandwich’). At a Pride Fair he attended in 2010 Philip spoke of feeling shamed, humiliated and isolated. He describes this as ‘horrific’ because those who identify LGBTQ ‘know what it’s like’ to experience shame, humiliation and isolation in a heteronormative culture’.

<sup>4</sup> See Przybylo’s (2019) *Asexual Erotics* in which she explores how popular cultural representations of sex are entangled with whiteness, youth, normativity, able-bodiedness, coupling and heterosexuality.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Francis employs the term ‘asexual-single’ in his analysis of three films which ‘intentionally or unintentionally’ consider asexuality (*Bill Cunningham New York*, 2010; *(A)sexual*, 2011; and *Year of the Dog*, 2007). He argues that these films produce the figure of the ‘asexual single’ by overtly establishing ties between asexuality and singlehood and representing the ‘asexual single’ as isolated, disconnected and lonely (Francis 2016: 28). Although they ‘never condemn the asexual-single’, they do ‘cast doubt on how such a person could thrive in a culture in which consummated romantic relations are the norm’ (Francis, 2016: 31).

<sup>6</sup> Kaitlyn had unwanted but consensual penile-vaginal penetration with some previous male non-asexual partners.

<sup>7</sup> For those romantic-identified female participants who had not disclosed their identity to their family or friends, questions about their single status were common. The response was to give some broad reasons to avoid further discussion on the topic:

Helena: I mean that question like why don’t you date sort of thing, why are you single or why don’t you put yourself out there or anything, I just sort of say I don’t want it at the moment, I’ve got other things to focus on, or things like that.

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