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**Gender without sex(uality)? Exploring the
relationship between gender and sexuality at the
empirical sites of asexuality and sexual abstinence**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the
Degree of PhD in Sociology

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July 2017

Abstract

This thesis is a case study of the relationship between gender and sexuality at the empirical sites of asexuality and sexual abstinence. Whilst this relationship has been theorised in a number of ways, there has been limited empirical research on how this relationship ‘works’ in practice, with extant studies focusing largely on transgender. I suggest that asexuality and abstinence represent an interesting site to explore this relationship since they represent, for want of a better term, a *lack*, *absence* or *negative* sexuality (in that there is a lack of sexual attraction to others, or there is an abstention from sexual activity). The study is also warranted due to the insufficient sociological research on abstinence, as well as the limitations of the literature and research in the nascent interdisciplinary field of asexuality studies.

Through conducting qualitative research (using interviews and notebooks) with 33 participants who identified as asexual or abstinent, I found that gender and sexuality were experienced as entangled in the lives of participants. With reference to the socio-structural context of hetero-patriarchy, I trace how ideas about sexual desire, sexual activity and sexual agency are (still) gendered, and how this impacts on both the construction of abstinence and asexuality as concepts, as well as in the experiences participants had as asexual people or as people who were practising abstinence. I also explore how sexuality was central to participants’ understandings of gender, and how this affected their gender identities, gendered appearances, and experiences of gendered embodiment. Ultimately, this thesis argues for the importance in theorising and researching gender and sexuality together, and in particular, for the importance of ‘gendering’ sexualities research.

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Acknowledgements

I've racked up many debts of gratitude over the past four years.

To my participants, who are really the heart of this thesis - thank you for sharing your stories with me, and for supporting this project.

To my supervisors, Dr Matt Dawson and Dr Francesca Stella - thank you for being the absolute dream team! Francesca, thank you for coming on board the project: your knowledge and expertise have been invaluable, and I feel that my work is so much the better for your guidance. Thank you for your warmth and kindness, and for pushing me to think further and deeper. Matt, who has been with me since the beginning: I probably owe you a box of tissues for all the crying I've done, eh? You are the kind of academic/human being I aspire to be one day. From the absolute bottom of my heart, thank you for being such a supportive, reassuring, generous, and kind mentor (and friend).

To my best friends Sharon Greenwood and Karen Young - thank you for weathering this storm with me, through all the crises and meltdowns. Thank you for always listening, for being wise and brilliant, and for 'getting' me so completely. I love you both dearly. Sisterhood is powerful!

To my friends in the PhD community at Glasgow - thank you for being a great bunch of folk, and for all the solidarity (and hilarity) that has kept me going. To Minna Liinpää - thank you for being a super considerate officemate, and all round lovely person. And to the sociology department at Glasgow which first nurtured my incipient sociological imagination - thank you for an enriching and intellectually stimulating past ten years!

To my family - mum, dad, Gavin and Kelsi - thank you for ensuring I keep my feet on the ground as I write my "big story", and for rightly ripping it out of me when I use too many "university words". Love youse.

And last but certainly not least, to my partner P, without whose unfailing support this thesis would certainly never have been completed. I'm really sorry for making you into a PhD widow at times. You have taken up so much of the

slack when I've been lost in the PhD fog, and I know it hasn't been easy. Thank you for holding my hand through all the bad, and for always being there to celebrate my successes. Thank you for distracting me when I needed it, and for engaging with my ideas when I needed that too. Thanks for your material contributions to this thesis - for the painstaking transcription work and the meticulous proof-reading. And thank you for reminding me that the goal is 'done' rather than 'perfect'. Your labour - intellectual, physical, emotional - has been immense and I am so very thankful for everything that you do and are. I love you.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandmothers, Lilian Wilson and Kathleen Cuthbert, both of whom I am named after, and both of whom I lost during the course of this PhD.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name: KAREN CUTHBERT

Signature: _____

1. Introduction

This thesis is an empirical case study of the relationship between gender and sexuality. This relationship has been theorised in a number of ways, but Stevi Jackson (2006: 107), who has been a key contributor to these debates, reminds us that ‘the empirical connections between [gender and sexuality] require exploration and should be neither presupposed nor neglected’. This thesis thus represents an attempt at such an exploration, based at the empirical ‘sites’ of asexuality and abstinence.

As well as exploring the larger question of the relationship between gender and sexuality, this thesis also contributes to the growing interdisciplinary field of asexuality studies by adding a new perspective from the sociology of gender. It also adds a new dimension to this body of work by bringing asexuality into conversation with abstinence (a topic which has in itself been largely neglected by sociologists, despite its thoroughly gendered history), in an attempt to better understand the ways in which gender and sexuality are related.

In this introductory chapter, I aim to give a sense of the context in which this thesis has been produced. I consider how the relationship between gender and sexuality has been conceptualised in psychiatric, activist, and academic debates, both historically and in the present day. I offer examples of recent empirical work on transgender and gender non-normativity in which the relationship between gender and sexuality is being explored (either explicitly or implicitly), and situate my own research in relation to these. I argue that whilst these studies use the disruption of *gender* as a site through which to explore the relationship between sexuality and gender, my thesis takes the disruption of *sexuality* (in refuting the idea that everyone feels sexual desire, or through refusing sexual activity) as the starting point. I then outline the translation of these ideas into concrete research aims, and offer some thoughts on my approach to theory. The final section then outlines the structure that the rest of the thesis will take.

1.1.Theorising gender and sexuality

Tracing ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ throughout time is somewhat of a historicist minefield. Still, with this rather large caveat in mind, we can attempt to get a sense of how these concepts were thought of in historical settings.¹ In late 19th and 20th century sexology, ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ were taken to be symptomatic of one another, so much so that it is difficult to discursively separate them. This can be seen most famously in the discourse of ‘inversion’, where same-sex attraction was understood as a kind of gender atypicality. For example, Krafft-Ebing (1929: 399) described a woman who was attracted to other women as having ‘a masculine soul heaving in a female bosom’.

Underpinning this quote is the idea that sexual attraction can only be directed towards those ‘opposite’ us in terms of biological sex, and so same-sex desire is accounted for by characterising women who are attracted to other women as ‘really’ men (Devor and Matte, 2006).² These discourses retain some cultural resonance today - e.g. in the still prevalent figures of the effeminate gay man, and the masculine lesbian (Tredway, 2014; Willis, 2015). Indeed, even in contemporary biological and psychological research on ‘sexual orientation’, the inversion model retains some purchase (Rees-Turyn et al., 2008). Wilton writes: ‘scientific theories of homosexuality remain theories about gender’ (2004: 17) and ‘theorists of sexual orientation have been concerned with trying to identify markers of maleness or femaleness out-of-place in non-normatively sexually oriented persons’ (p20).

¹ The geographical scope of this thesis should be acknowledged here. Given that both my participants and I are situated in the UK, the literature and research drawn upon in this thesis is predominantly produced in the Global North – and in particular, in the UK, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Thus, when I talk about the relationship between gender and sexuality, this should be understood to refer to the relationship between gender and sexuality in *these particular societies*. I do however occasionally refer to settings/contexts outwith the Global North (particularly as I review the literature on abstinence in Chapter Three) in order to develop particular points.

² It is also important to acknowledge that ‘inversion’ is not the full historical story. Hennen (2008) shows how prior to the late 19th century (what we would understand as) male-male sexual relations and ‘effeminacy’ had remained largely separate and distinct since Greco-Roman times. For example, he points to the figure of the ‘fop’ and ‘dandy’ to demonstrate how ‘woman-like’ men still retained their ‘heterosexuality’. And then, 19th and 20th century sexologists did not always share the same views with regards to gender and sexuality. Magnus Hirschfeld, for example, argued that gender non-conformity and homosexuality were not necessarily the same thing (Tosh, 2014: 80). In screening candidates for gender affirmation surgery in the mid-20th century, psychiatrists and clinicians also attempted to distinguish between ‘real’ transsexuals (i.e. men who wanted to become women) and men who were repressed homosexuals (men who wanted to be a woman to have sex with men) (Valentine, 2007: 57-58).

Within the gay and lesbian movement there was, however, a backlash to this conflation of gender and sexuality, and the associated stereotypes that arose from this. Valentine (2007) suggests that gay men were particularly instrumental in rejecting these stereotypes, since their characterisation as effeminate was particularly stigmatising in a patriarchal society, and so attempts were made from as early as the 1950s to contest this conflation. This was done by gay men (and to a lesser degree lesbians) emphasising their conformity to gender norms. Gender normativity became (and remains) a key vehicle for claiming gay and lesbian citizenship - rights are afforded on the basis of sameness, of being just-like-everyone-else (Valentine, 2007: 54). Valentine argues that this cultural move has had two effects. One, it enabled the development of the modern transgender movement, articulated as distinct from lesbian, gay, and bisexual (although this was also facilitated by moves within psychiatry - see footnote 2). Gender non-normativity becomes 'unstuck' from homosexuality, and so 'trans' then becomes the container vessel for this. And two - more broadly - it instated an ontological distinction between gender and sexuality.³ They were now understood as two independent axes upon which a person could be situated in any number of ways. Although the 'conflation' model still retains relevance, the 'separation' model has now become orthodoxy in much 'grassroots political activism' and 'contemporary social theory' (Valentine, 2007: 15). In academic and activist spaces, the separation model is generally viewed as a matter of social justice since it allows us to respect identities, subjectivities, and orientations in their own right (i.e. not a symptom of something else).⁴ Indeed, one of my participants, Sam, who felt that their gender and sexuality were *not separate*, confided in me after the tape recorder was switched off that they were hesitant about articulating this view. This was because they were aware of the political efforts to disentangle the two, and they didn't want to 'shit on'

³ Whilst unacknowledged by Valentine, this move was also arguably facilitated by feminist theory, such as Oakley's (1972) conceptual separation of sex and gender. Such work allowed for gender to be untethered from the 'biological destiny' of the body.

⁴ The 'separation' model is also becoming increasingly visible within popular culture. For example, the women's lifestyle magazine *Marie Claire* featured a blog in 2015 entitled "No they're not the same: untangling the confusing web of gender and sexuality" (Mannion, 2015).

these efforts. Thus, speaking of one's gender and sexuality as linked can be experienced as a risky endeavour.⁵

However, whilst recognising the undoubtable gains that have resulted from this separation of gender and sexuality, some academics have begun to question this distinction through their empirical work.⁶ After tracing the history of the separation of gender and sexuality, Valentine (2007) then goes on to show how this model does not make sense in the lives of his participants, who were young, working-class, nominally 'transgender' people of colour living in New York: 'While the separation of gender and sexuality makes sense of many contemporary people's senses of self there are also contemporary gendered/sexual subjects whose senses of self are not accounted for by this distinction' (Valentine, 2007: 62). Valentine's participants might be designated 'transgender' by official classificatory systems, but had, in reality, much more complex subjectivities that involved a blurring of their embodied gendered and sexual lives. Their accounts and identities refuse easy categorisation, and Valentine reflects on how he entered the field trying to get people to talk about their sexual identity as distinct from gender identity, but found this distinction simply often did not make sense in the lifeworlds of his participants. For example, some participants identified as and lived as women, but also described themselves as 'gay' which indexed their attraction to male-bodied people. Valentine describes a tendency amongst activists and academics to characterise these subjectivities as outmoded and indicative of a kind of false consciousness, attributable to a lack of education regarding contemporary LGBT+ discourse (2007: 4-5). However Valentine urges us to see how this kind of characterisation enacts its own harms. Not only is there an erasure of lived experience, and an enactment of a narrative of 'progress' which stigmatizes racialized and classed

⁵ A year and a half after the interview took place, Sam attended a presentation I was giving about my research findings. Afterwards they approached me, and referring to my discussion of how some participants felt their gender and (a)sexuality were connected, Sam told me that it was great to hear that they were not the only one. Again, this attests to the feeling that in articulating these views, one is going against the dominant perspective (at least in some settings).

⁶ Much of this empirical work can be seen to be inspired by the work of certain queer theorists, notably Judith Butler, who has emphasised the importance of bringing gender into any theories of sexuality. Butler has written about how the dominant social structure ('the heterosexual matrix') works through demanding 'coherence' of bodily sex, gender, and sexuality (1990: 24). Butler's work is also influential in complicating the neat distinction between gender and sex by proposing that bodily sex is itself produced through the 'discursive means' of gender, and thus is not 'natural' (1990: 10).

subjects (2007: 245), but this also essentializes gender and sexuality in that they become fixed characteristics of individuals, leading to depoliticisation (2007: 239). Judith Butler (1994) has also commented that the separation of gender and sexuality leads to the restrictive, and analytically short-sighted, idea of ‘proper objects’ wherein the ‘proper object’ of lesbian and gay studies becomes sexuality, whilst the ‘proper object’ of feminism becomes gender.

Alongside Valentine, there have been a few other empirical studies which have challenged this separation model of gender and sexuality, at least at the level of the individual subject. Like Valentine, these studies have also tended to focus on the experiences and identities of people on the transgender spectrum, and/or people with non-normative genders. For clarity, I have identified four major ways through which the separation of gender and sexuality has been challenged in these studies:

1. Transformations in gender bringing about **shifts** in sexual identities and practices (Hines, 2007, 2010; Sanger, 2010; Nagoshi et al., 2012; Doorduyn and van Berlo, 2014; Latham, 2016)
2. Gender transition could be motivated by particular **sexual subjectivities**, as in the male-bodied people in Whitehead and Thomas' (2013) research who were seeking access to medical transition partly or wholly because they were sexually aroused by the thought of themselves as women⁷; or the trans people in Doorduyn and van Berlo (2014) for whom imagining themselves as fully embodied in their identified gender formed a significant part of their sexual fantasies
3. The importance of **relationality**: intimate relationships, sexual and romantic contexts, and positioning vis a vis others could impact on

⁷ Whitehead and Thomas report that these people were ultimately refused further referral by clinicians, since this was not seen as a sufficient or valid reason to transition (suggesting the clinical separation of gender from sexuality). The desire to transition due to being sexually attracted by the thought of oneself as a woman has been deemed ‘autogynephilia’ by the medical establishment, and has been pathologised as a kind of sexual ‘target error’ (Bettcher, 2014: 606). However, writers such as Serano (2007: 268) have argued that for many people, regardless of gender, and regardless of being cis or trans, our own gendered bodies *do* play a role in our sexual arousal. Bettcher (2014) expands on this by proposing a model of ‘erotic structuralism’ wherein sexual attraction can be understood as comprised of both attraction to a gendered other (‘the source of attraction’) as well as a ‘gendered eroticisation of self’ (‘the locus of attraction’).

transgender people's sense of gender and sexual subjectivity (Hines, 2007, 2010; Nagoshi et al., 2012), as well as provide a space in which gender could be enacted (Latham, 2016)

4. Some **identities** fused gender and sexuality, such as 'stud' identities (Kuper et al., 2014), 'genderqueer' (Saltzburg and Davis, 2010) and 'butch' as a kind of 'lesbian gender' (Levitt and Hiestand, 2004).

In 2005, Valocchi challenged sociologists to consider the following question: 'what happens when the relationship between gender and sexuality becomes an empirical question and individual subjectivities and practices are not assumed to be easily read off the dominant taxonomies or identity categories?' (2005: 753). The above studies, all located within or around the empirical site of transgender or gender non-normativity, draw out some of the ways in which the abstract separation of gender and sexuality is not a lived or experiential reality for some people. My thesis will ultimately do something similar, but I respond to Valocchi's provocation from a 'new' empirical location: that of asexuality and abstinence. I will sketch out the contours of this empirical location shortly, but first I offer a discussion of how gender and sexuality has been understood within feminist theory, as in some ways, this constitutes a distinct 'thread' in the story.

1.1.1. Gender, sexuality, and feminism

Whilst much of the above discussion has focused on the specificities of 'homosexual' or 'transgender', theorising within feminism has most often tended to tackle 'gender' and 'sexuality' in relation to women's oppression. This has generally meant much more of a systemic and structural focus (rather than 'gender' and 'sexuality' as attributes of the individual) and an attention to how their relationship creates and sustains inequalities. As such, feminist theorising has tended to consider gender and sexuality in their dominant, institutionalised forms (e.g. heterosexuality; patriarchy). Most feminist theorists have generally taken gender and sexuality to be interconnected, but there has been debate over the relative weight and precedence afforded gender vis a vis sexuality (and vice versa), and over the precise manners in which they are entangled (Richardson, 2007).

Some feminists have prioritised sexuality - for example, Catherine MacKinnon (1989) argues that gender is created through sexuality and specifically through heterosexuality. She writes: 'Women and men are divided by gender, made into the sexes as we know them, by the social requirements of its dominant form, heterosexuality, which institutionalizes male sexual dominance and female sexual submission' (1989: 113). She argues that sexuality is analogous to the role of 'work' within Marxism - it is the social process which creates gender divisions, just as the social process of work creates class divisions (1989: 3). It is 'sexuality that determines gender, not the other way around' (1989: 111). Monique Wittig (1992) has also argued that the category of 'woman' would not exist if it were not for the heterosexual regime; indeed, for Wittig, heterosexuality is so integral to 'woman' that she comes to the contentious conclusion that lesbians are *not* women. Chrys Ingraham (1996) has also argued that heterosexuality is the organising principle of the social, and gender (or rather, the gender divide) is something which only makes sense through the framework of heterosexuality - i.e. given human variation and diversity, why would we divide up humans into two 'opposite' sexes (or genders) if not to serve the purpose of heterosexuality?

However, others have challenged these arguments by prioritising gender over sexuality. Stevi Jackson (1999: 179) reverses Ingraham's argument and suggests that heterosexuality (based as it is on the idea of 'opposite sexes') *itself* only makes sense through pre-existing gender divisions - thus Jackson argues 'for the logical priority of gender' (1999: 174). Indeed, Jackson argues that it is possible to imagine a gender-divided society that is not ordered around heterosexuality⁸, but imagining a heterosexually ordered society without gender division is much more difficult. Richardson (2007: 466) offers some support to this point in suggesting that whilst we can 'think about gender without invoking sexuality' it is perhaps more difficult to understand sexuality 'outside of gendered discourses and scripts' (i.e. because we do understand sexuality in such gendered terms). Richardson suggests that sexuality may be more 'determined' by gender, than gender is by sexuality.

⁸ Jackson uses the illustrative example of the dystopian novel *Walk to the End of the World* where 'men use women as slave labour and as producers of children, but not as sexual partners within a personal relationship' (1999: 185).

However, some scholars (typically associated with queer feminist theory although not representative of all queer feminist theorists) have rejected the idea that gender emanates from sexuality, or vice versa. Instead they have argued for an analytical framework in which gender and sexuality are acknowledged as *related*, but ‘form the basis of two distinct arenas of social practice’ (Rubin, 1984: 308). The reasons for doing so can be perhaps located in their concern with sexualities and genders beyond the ‘normative’. In reviewing Rubin’s work, Butler (1994:11) argued that Rubin’s proposal for separating the two concepts was at least partly motivated by a desire to contest the views of ‘sex negative’ feminists such as MacKinnon, who, in linking sexuality to gender, could only see sexuality as a site of oppression. By contrast, those such as Rubin argued that sex and sexuality could be envisaged and experienced as sites of transgression and pleasure. Similarly, Sedgwick (1990) argued that if we unhooked sexuality from gender, we could expand our entire understanding of sexuality: it would no longer be organised solely by one’s own gender and the gender of the person to whom you were attracted, but could feasibly include attractions and desires based on many different dimensions. Indeed, within much queer theory, gender is seen as something that ‘shackles’ or ‘constrains’ sexuality (Martin, 1994) which has led to accusations of queer theory as anti-social and masculinist (Hammers, 2015a).

For my own part, since my thesis is empirical rather than theoretical, and based on personal experiences of asexuality and abstinence, the ways in which I discuss the relationship between gender and sexuality are guided by the accounts of my participants. Rather than making grand theoretical pronouncements, or coming down on one side or the other of the causality and directionality debate, I see my thesis as an illustration of the various ways in which gender and sexuality *can be* or *might be* connected through the specific example of asexuality and abstinence. In this sense, my research is more akin to the empirical examples discussed in the previous section than to broader theories of gender and sexuality in the abstract (but still remaining informed by these debates).

1.2. Asexuality...and abstinence?

Having outlined how the relationship between gender and sexuality has been theorised, I now turn to the details of the ‘sites’ through which I will explore this relationship. By ‘asexuality’ I mean the sexual subject position that has emerged over the past two decades and which is commonly understood to refer to a lack of sexual attraction. It is sometimes referred to as the fourth sexual orientation, following heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality (Carrigan, 2016). By (sexual) abstinence I mean the act, practice and/or decision not to engage in sexual activity, for a sustained amount of time. (I go into more detail with regards to definitional issues in Chapters Two and Three, respectively). Asexuality and abstinence are, of course, different phenomena. Not only do they have different relations to sexual attraction and sexual activity (asexuality is defined by a lack of sexual attraction but not necessarily a lack of sexual activity, whereas sexual attraction may exist in abstinence, but by definition, sexual activity must not), but they also seem to be different *kinds* of thing. Asexuality can be seen as an *identity* and/or an *orientation* (based on a subjectively-sensed lack of sexual attraction) whereas abstinence generally refers to the *practice* or *behaviour* of abstaining from sexual activity. I am acutely aware that discussing asexuality and abstinence in tandem is contentious. Distinguishing asexuality from abstinence or celibacy (see Chapter Three for further discussion of these terms) is something that those within the asexual community has long seen as important. The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) says the following on their website: ‘Unlike celibacy, which people choose, asexuality is an intrinsic part of who we are’ (AVEN, 2017). The distinction is made for various reasons: a desire to accurately reflect asexual persons’ experiences, to improve precision in meaning, and to have one’s identity validated in its own right. But there is also a sense in which it is strategically useful to distance asexuality from the language of ‘choice’. As we have seen in debates over homosexuality, the construction of homosexuality as ‘innate’ rather than a ‘choice’ has been instrumental in the struggle for de-pathologisation, and for the claiming of gay and lesbian citizenship rights (Sheldon et al., 2007; Lewis, 2009). Asexual activists are engaged in similar struggles: these include attempts to separate asexuality from diagnoses of ‘hypoactive desire disorder’ (Jay, 2008); pushes to include ‘asexual’ as a sexual

identity category in the upcoming UK census⁹ and in UK equal opportunities monitoring (Broughton, 2015); and to have asexuality included as a ‘protected characteristic’ in employment non-discrimination legislation in the US (Jay et al., 2013). Thus, there is much at stake.

By including abstinence alongside asexuality, I therefore do not intend to conflate the two, and I keep them distinct in my analysis throughout. However, I explore *both* abstinence and asexuality in this thesis because of a commonality in one regard: both are in some way defined *against* sex and/or sexuality. Asexuality is a *lack* or *absence* of sexual attraction, whilst abstinence is about sexual *inactivity* and *abstaining from sex*. This is a novel space in which to explore the relationship between gender and sexuality, since it involves, in some sense, a ‘negative’ sexuality or sexual subjectivity.¹⁰ The empirical work by Valentine et al., detailed above, productively use non-normativity with regards to gender to think through that relationship between gender and sexuality. Here I want to begin from a site in which norms of sexuality are in some way (and to varying degrees) disrupted through refuting the idea that everyone is sexual, or through making the decision not to be sexually active. Judith Butler (1993: 182) discusses how heterosexuality is presupposed in ‘real’ forms of masculinity and femininity, whilst a ‘damaged, failed or abject gender’ is attributed to homosexuals (i.e. the heterosexual matrix) - but ‘homosexuality’ still represents an ‘active’ or ‘positive’ relationship to sexuality. I am interested in the workings of this relationship when the deviation from the norm is not just from heterosexuality, but from ‘sexuality’ (through identity, feelings, or practice) altogether. I now go on to outline the translation of this interest into more concrete research aims.

⁹ ‘Academics, therapists, and sexuality educators call for inclusion of asexuality in the UK 2021 census’ (<http://www.asexuality.org/?q=openletter>)

¹⁰ This is, of course, an imperfect characterisation. Asexuality is often considered a sexual orientation in its own right, rather than a lack of sexuality (Decker, 2014: 5). There have also been attempts within the asexual community to reframe asexuality not as a negation or lack of sexuality, but as a positive identity, as exemplified in the widespread usage of ‘ace’ rather than asexuality. Scott et al. (2016) also point to how ‘non’ identities (i.e. identities defined in relation to what they are not) are still ‘positive’ identities. Abstinent people are also heterosexual or homosexual or bisexual – they do not lose their ‘sexuality’ upon becoming abstinent. It is not my intention to challenge any of the above points, but rather to find a way in which I could conceptualise asexuality and abstinence together. Furthermore, this ‘negative’ characterisation does not imply anything about how asexual and abstinent people *personally* or *morally* feel about sex and sexuality.

1.3. Research aims and approach

My research aims are as follows:

- 1) To explore the gendered experiences of asexuality and abstinence
- 2) To explore the ways in which gender is experienced and made sense of by those who are asexual and abstinent
- 3) From this, develop a more empirically informed understanding of how gender and sexuality might be related.

My specific epistemological and ontological approach, as well as my approach to analysis, is outlined in Chapter Four. However, I wish to make some general remarks here. Beyond my grounding in feminism, I do not follow any one theoretical line. That is, this is not a Bourdieusian thesis, or a Foucauldian thesis, or a symbolic interactionist thesis. Rather, I use theories and concepts somewhat eclectically as part of a kind of toolkit to help me understand the stories of participants. Indeed, Bourdieu (1990:28) said the following:

I have a very pragmatic relationship to authors; I turn to them as I would to fellows and craft-masters, in the sense those words had in the medieval guild—people you can ask to give you a hand in difficult situations.

Thus, I draw on different authors, theories, perspectives, and empirical studies in different parts of this thesis to help me understand and unpack different aspects of my data, and to develop my arguments. In part, this is due to the different analytical ‘dimensions’ of my thesis. Stevi Jackson (2006) refers to four levels or dimensions at which gender and sexuality interact: structure, meaning, interaction, and subjects. This conceptual tool proved useful in helping me to understand the different levels at which it was possible to speak of asexuality and abstinence’s relationship to gender, and as such, my findings chapters are structured around these levels. Therefore, because in one findings chapter I discuss interpersonal relations, in another I discuss discursive constructions, and in another I discuss embodiment, the kinds of research and literature I draw upon in each will reflect the particular analytical dimension of that chapter.

Jackson also writes that the relationship between gender and sexuality might be different at any one level and so, because of all of this, I do not make claim to any comprehensive or all-encompassing explanations or conclusions. As stated above, as a case study of *one* empirical site of gender and sexuality's interrelationship, my focus is on illuminating aspects of this relationship at different levels, with some attempt to speak more broadly to gender and sexuality's interrelationship as a whole.

1.4. Outline of the thesis

This thesis begins with two chapters which delve into the historical and contemporary contexts of asexuality and abstinence respectively. In both chapters, I read the literature with a particular attention to gender. With regards to asexuality (Chapter **Two**), I categorise the existing research as either descriptive, ascriptive, or agentic, and situate my own research within the 'agentic' strand. I discuss how each of these strands engage with gender in different ways, but that there remains a need for an empirical (and importantly, sociological) study of asexuality and gender. With regards to abstinence (Chapter **Three**), I discuss how abstinence has a *particularly* gendered history, and that meanings of gender have been intrinsic to meanings of abstinence and celibacy (up to and including the sexual abstinence youth movement in the US). There have been a few recent studies specifically interested in exploring celibacy/abstinence and *masculinity*, and I discuss how my research builds on and expands this work.

In Chapter **Four**, I discuss the process of how I went from having research aims to having research findings. This reflexive chapter details my epistemological and ontological orientation to research; the particular methods I used, why I used them, and my evaluation thereof; an account of fieldwork, encompassing practical elements (what I did) but also the messy, complex, and unexpected issues that inevitably arise in the course of qualitative research; and my approach to data analysis. There is a discussion of ethics threaded throughout this chapter.

Chapters **Five**, **Six** and **Seven** constitute my findings and discussion chapters. As mentioned above, I have structured these around Jackson's four dimensions at

which gender and sexuality ‘meet’. Chapter **Five** (Relationships) is concerned with the dimension of ‘interaction’. Here I discuss the relational experiences of participants, but argue that while asexuality and abstinence are still obviously significant, the organisation of gender under hetero-patriarchy seems to structure relationships most significantly. Chapter **Six** (Masculinity and Femininity) is concerned with the ‘meaning’ dimension. Here I discuss how sexuality (or lack thereof) is bound up with constructions of gender (most commonly expressed in the binaries of masculinity and femininity). I go on to document how these emerge in the experiences of participants, with asexual and abstinent men having to contend with hyper-sexual masculine norms, and in contrast, how asexual and abstinent women navigate ambiguous and contradictory norms of femininity. Chapter **Seven** (Subjectivity and Embodiment) focuses on the level of the ‘subject’. Here I examine how gender and sexuality were rarely separable in participants’ self-understandings, including in how they experienced their bodies. I do not have a specific chapter on ‘structure’, since I discuss patriarchy and hetero-sexuality throughout (which I refer to as hetero-patriarchy¹¹), which encapsulate the ways in which gender and sexuality operate as *organising structures* that impact on every dimension of the social world. Furthermore, each of the chapters by necessity references the other dimensions, since the dimensions are cross-cutting and inter-related (Jackson, 2006: 108).

Chapter **Eight** forms the conclusion, where I pull the thesis to a close by drawing together threads from each of the three findings chapters, and discussing how these might inform our understanding of gender, sexuality, and their inter-relationship.

¹¹ My use of the term ‘hetero-patriarchy’ is intended to convey the ways in which male domination is intimately bound to heteronormativity, although I use a dash to allow for the possibility of conceptual separation.

2. Asexuality: context and literature review

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will review the extant writing and research on asexuality, specifically focusing on what these texts have to say about gender. I begin by discussing definitional issues, and consider the ways in which asexuality has been approached in different ‘strands’ of literature, suggesting that for expository ease we can characterise these strands as ‘descriptive’, ‘ascriptive’ and ‘agentic’ respectively. It is this latter body of ‘agentic’ literature that is increasingly coming to be known as ‘asexuality studies’ (Milks and Cerankowski, 2014), and in which my own thesis is largely situated. I therefore go on to offer a brief discussion of the definition and scope of asexuality as understood in this ‘agentic’ literature, as well as overview of the development of this field and the directions it has taken in the past decade, before examining the gendered contours of this literature more closely. I suggest that the psychological and sexological asexuality studies literature on the one hand, and the sociological, queer and feminist asexuality studies literature on the other, engage with gender in different ways and to different degrees, but that a fully gendered exploration of asexuality has yet to emerge.

2.2. Descriptive asexuality

Most people are familiar with the term asexual primarily in a biological context where it is used to refer to self-reproducing organisms (Hine and Martin, 2016). However, the concept has also been used occasionally with regards to human sexuality. Przybylo (2013a) traces a genealogy of scientific writings on ‘human asexuality’ which begins mid-century with Alfred Kinsey and colleagues (Kinsey et al., 1948; Kinsey et al., 1953) who used the term ‘X’ to describe individuals who reported that they did not respond to either heterosexual or homosexual stimuli (i.e. could not be placed on the Kinsey heterosexuality-homosexuality continuum). Later studies expanded Kinsey’s uni-dimensional model of sexual orientation, and here we see the term ‘asexual’ being used to describe those who scored low on measures of both ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ attraction and/or preference (e.g. Storms, 1980; Nurius, 1983; Berkey et al., 1990). In the case of Masters et al. (1988) asexuality was used to describe a pathological

subset of homosexuality, characterised by both a lack of sexual partners and a lack of sexual interest. In each of the above, however, ‘asexual’ and ‘asexuality’ has functioned largely as a kind of ‘placeholder’: a descriptive term to be slotted into sexological typologies, and of which there was a distinct ‘disinterest in exploring its definitions, parameters and implications’ (Przybylo, 2013a: 227). Asexuality emerges as a ‘by-product’ of these models, and thus goes almost entirely unmentioned upon.

In examining these texts, gender seems to be mentioned only in relation to the assertion that more women than men could be categorised as ‘X’ or ‘asexual’ (Kinsey et al., 1953: 472¹²; Nurius, 1983) although Masters et al. (1988: 355) found that the asexual as a ‘type’ was more prevalent amongst gay men than lesbians. However, ‘asexual’ as a descriptive term has also appeared in more feminist-oriented writings. Myra Johnson (1977) defended the rights of women to be ‘asexual’ (defined as lacking sexual desire) or ‘auto-erotic’ (defined as possessing sexual desire but preferring to satisfy that desire alone), and argued against the pathologisation of these in a context where both psychoanalysis and the sexual revolution has led to an increasing pressure on women to be sexually liberated. Johnson uses the term ‘asexual’ to describe the felt proclivities of certain women, rather than as an identity that they themselves have adopted (although she does not preclude this, either). Johnson also discusses how asexual women have always existed, but their framing has varied depending on the historical context - so the asexual woman has been variously cast as ‘the ascetic’, ‘the neurotic’, and ‘the unliberated’. In the early 1990s, psychologists and relationship counsellors Rothblum and Brehony (1993) also produced an anthology which resurrected the historical term ‘Boston Marriage’ which they now defined as ‘romantic but asexual relationships among contemporary lesbians’ (p5). Here, ‘asexual’ is used to describe certain relationship patterns between women rather than essentialising the individuals within these (who are shown to have diverse and varied connections to sex and sexual attraction).

While asexuality is being used to denote different things in the above texts, I want to suggest that what they do have in common is their use of asexuality as a

¹² Indeed, Kinsey and colleagues go on to suggest that this ostensible prevalence of women in the ‘X’ category might be challenged in future research if different measurements and instruments are used.

primarily descriptive term, used to describe either individuals or relationships that fulfil certain criteria (relating to behaviours, fantasies, preferences etc.).

2.3. Ascriptive asexuality

In contrast to the descriptive use of asexuality, above, we can also identify a number of texts which take as its focus asexuality as an *ascribed* attribute or characteristic. This work tends to have a keen critical focus on power, and brings to light the way particular bodies have been discursively constructed as asexual, as well as how these ascriptions have been rejected. In this literature, the bodies marked as asexual are always gendered, although often in contradictory and complex ways, and refracted through prisms of ‘race’, sexuality, able-bodied-ness etc.

For example, East Asian men in the USA are marked as ‘asexual’ or ‘unsexed’ in relation to the purported virility of the (white) American man (Fung, 2005; Kong, 2012). Lesbians are often also constructed as asexual. While ‘girl-on-girl’ is a theme that features heavily in pornography aimed at heterosexual male viewers (Webber, 2013), and the hypersexual ‘hot lesbian’ has become a common trope in advertising and in other media depictions, this is limited to certain ‘kinds’ of women: namely those that are young, femme, and slim, and whose actions can be accommodated within a hetero-patriarchal framework (Gill, 2009a; Jackson and Gilbertson, 2009). Indeed, alongside the ‘hot lesbian’ is an enduring narrative of ‘lesbian bed death’ where lesbian couples are thought to be much less interested in sex and have sex less frequently than their heterosexual and gay male counterparts (Iasenza, 2002; Nichols, 2004). When lesbians exist outside of the male gaze then, an ‘asexualisation’ (as opposed to sexualisation) would seem to occur. This can be linked to the construction of ‘sex’ itself as inherently phallogentric, rendering other forms (including that which happens between other women in the absence of men) impossible or unintelligible (Frye, 1990).

Fat people have also been ascribed an asexuality (Braziel and LeBesco, 2001; LeBesco, 2004). Sinwell (2014: 166), referring to media representations of the ‘fat asexual’ argues that fat people are ascribed asexuality ‘not because they do not experience sexual attraction but rather because they are not sexually

attractive; they are not allowed to have a sexuality because if they were, normative codes of sexual desirability would be threatened' (emphasis in original). However, it is clear there is also a gendered and racialised element to this: for example, fat *women* are especially considered asexual (Murray, 2004) but reading Shaw (2006) we can see that this is contingent on whiteness, as fat black women are often subject to hypersexualisation, and are often associated with excess or unruly sexuality. Hawkins Owen (2014) also discusses how historically, whiteness (as a relation to blackness) has been constructed as asexual; it was partly through asexuality that ideologies of racial superiority were operationalised, as asexuality was bound up with ideas of self-restraint, prudence and mastery - all attributes which signified a particular suitability for government (and ability to govern over others). Here, asexuality is not sutured to marginalised bodies as in other examples but rather it is something operationalised by white elites. However, it remains a function of power in that it is a way of subjugating and disempowering certain groups.

Disabled persons have also been ascribed an asexuality (Milligan and Neufeldt, 2001; Shakespeare et al., 1996). In this regard, Kim (2011) notes that asexuality has not only been assumed (often due to assumptions about bodily capability) but it has also been framed as a 'moral imperative' rooted in an explicitly eugenicist politics: that is, disabled people ought to be asexual. This moral imperative has frequently translated into violent regulatory regimes; in particular, disabled women's bodies have been targeted for reproductive control since as Waxman (1994: 156) puts it, 'the very nature of disabled woman's biological and social bond with a child results in the societal fear of that child becoming physically, socially, psychically, and morally defective'.

Understandably, this ascription of asexuality has been resisted by disability activists and scholars as a matter of human rights and social justice, often through the declaration of asexuality as a myth (Milligan and Neufeldt, 2001) or as a form of 'internalised oppression' (Goodley et al., 2012: 331). Taken as a whole, this literature on the ascription of asexuality highlights the way in which asexuality has been used in various ways as a form of biopower (Foucault, 1978): that is, as a gendered and racialised technology of control in the policing and regulation of bodies.

However, from around the mid 2000's, we can discern yet another body of literature emerging that takes as its focus asexuality as form of self-identity, and which has largely arisen in response to asexuality as a growing social movement. Rather than a descriptor in a sexological typology, or as a technology of power, we might think of asexuality being used here in a more agentic sense - a term individuals have taken up to describe themselves (and their *felt* lack of sexual attraction) and around which communities of belonging are being built. I will now go on to expand upon the definition and scope of 'asexuality' as understood in this context (and by extension, as understood in this thesis), and offer a brief history of the development of this field, before looking at specific texts in more detail through the lens of gender.

2.4. Agentic asexuality: definitions, scope and the development of asexuality studies

Within asexuality studies, asexuality is often understood as a sexual orientation indexing a lack of sexual attraction to others. However, this definition belies much diversity. Indeed, Chasin (2011) has suggested that rather than a sexual orientation akin to heterosexual or homosexual, asexuality might be better understood as a 'meta-category' more like 'sexual', under which contains a multitude of different orientations and identities. Whilst many people do use 'asexual' as a categorical identity term, it is also often conceptualised as one end of a spectrum, with 'sexual' at the opposite end. Many people who would consider themselves 'part of' asexuality nevertheless would place themselves somewhere on the continuum *between* asexual and sexual. Distinct identities have emerged to describe different relations to sexual attraction, such as 'demisexual' (which means experiencing sexual attraction only towards someone with whom you have developed a strong emotional connection) or 'grey-sexual' or 'grey-A' (which means rarely experiencing sexual attraction, but doing so on occasion) (Decker, 2014). Within asexuality discourse, there is also a conceptual split between romantic attraction and sexual attraction, so that they are seen to function on two independent axes. Whilst a person may not experience sexual attraction, they may still feel romantically attracted to others, and this romantic attraction is generally directed along gender lines: so, for example, if a person identifies as 'homo-romantic' this means they are romantically attracted to people of the same gender as themselves. There is also the possibility that

someone may not experience any romantic attraction, and so the term 'aromantic' reflects this. Figure 1 is a somewhat crude diagrammatic representation of this diversity, with lines indicating a plethora of permutations regarding identity (note how within this schema it is also possible to be sexual yet aromantic). My use of the terms 'asexual' or 'asexuality' throughout this thesis should be thought of as encompassing this diversity, and many of my participants were grey-A or demi-sexual rather than 'categorically' asexual. However, they all did identify as somewhere on the asexual spectrum, or felt they could be encompassed by asexuality as an umbrella term.

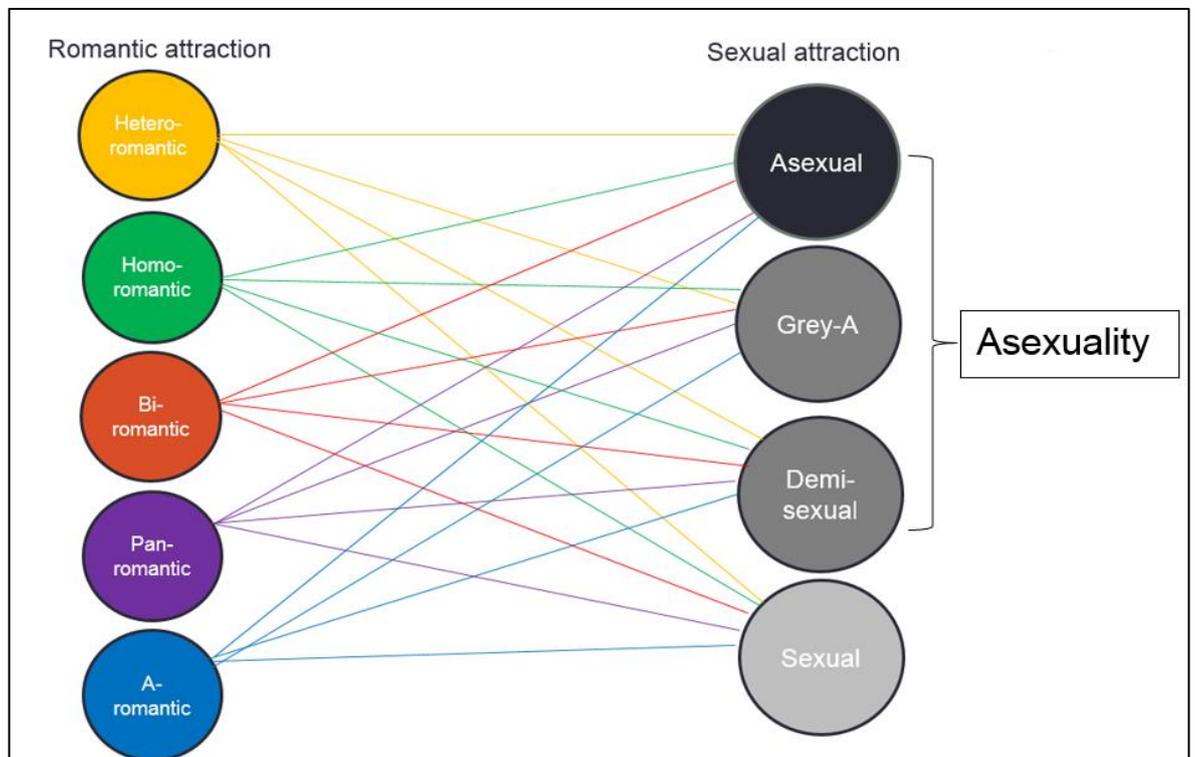


Figure 1 - Diagrammatic representation of asexuality

The ‘origin’ story of agentic asexuality often begins with the establishment of The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)¹³ in 2001 (AVENwiki, 2015). It is not the case that asexuality as a way of self-identifying did not exist prior to this (Scott and Dawson, 2015: 4), but rather that we might think of it as a crystallization of this term in a way that had not been seen before (Milks and Cerankowski, 2014: 1-2). In turn, the psychologist Antony Bogaert is widely cited as ‘founding’ the academic study of asexuality with his 2004 article (e.g. Carrigan et al., 2013; Przybylo, 2013a). Somewhat ironically though, Bogaert’s research focused not on those who identified as asexual but rather he estimated how many people in a national sample might be considered asexual as determined by a proxy indicator. In this sense then, I would argue that this paper has more in common with the ‘descriptive’ literature discussed above than later research in this field.

However, research with self-identified asexual persons themselves was quick to follow, beginning with Prause and Graham (2007). The title of their article - ‘Asexuality: Classification and Characterization’ - neatly sums up much of the existing research on asexuality conducted from a psychological or sexological perspective, propelled as it is by a positivist impulse to encapsulate the phenomenon of asexuality, and to define the contours of a putative ‘asexual person’. As such, the sexual responses of asexual persons have been studied, using psychological and sexological questionnaires (Prause and Graham, 2007; Brotto et al., 2010; Brotto et al., 2015; Yule et al., 2017) as well as in laboratory and clinical settings (Brotto and Yule, 2011; Prause and Harenski, 2014). Asexual persons’ mental health and ‘psychopathology’ has also been studied (Yule et al., 2013; Carvalho et al., 2016) and attempts have been made to discern so-called ‘biological markers of asexuality’ such as handedness, finger length ratio and

¹³ AVEN exists primarily as a website with information about asexuality but also with a number of highly-populated web forums in which members discuss a huge range of topics relating to asexuality. AVEN features in many people’s stories of how they first found out about asexuality, and eventually came to an asexual identity (Scherrer, 2008; Carrigan, 2011). It has been formative in crystallising asexuality as a form of positive self-identity and in building a sense of an asexual community. However, AVEN is by no means the whole asexual population, or even the whole online asexual population: as asexuality becomes increasingly visible and diffuses through pop culture, and as media platforms emerge beyond the traditional forum-based format, diverse and multiple representations, communities, understandings, and belongings have formed (Renniger, 2015). Asexuality is also increasingly included within the LGBT+ rubric, which opens up new spaces and opportunities for identification and visibility.

birth order (Yule et al., 2014a). This data is then frequently held up against a yardstick based on data from non-asexual people.

There is also concern over who is defined as asexual in research, which has led to the development of the ‘Asexual Identification Scale’ - a survey meant to ‘provide a valid measure independent of whether the individual self-identified as asexual’ (Yule et al., 2015: 149). Various hypotheses are also put forward regarding the aetiology of asexuality: these have included theories about exposure to pre-natal hormones (Bogaert, 2004; Yule et al., 2014a), disruptions in adrenal maturation (Brotto et al., 2010), pathological forms of childhood attachments (Yule et al., 2013), and different brain functioning (Prause and Harenski, 2014). These studies are brought together to inform the recurrent question in this literature: what *is* asexuality? There is an enduring interest regarding whether asexuality should be properly considered a paraphilia (an ‘atypical’ or ‘abnormal’ sexual attraction), a sexual dysfunction, or a sexual orientation in its own right with the consensus currently (although tentatively and with qualification) on sexual orientation (Bogaert, 2006; Brotto and Yule, 2017; Cranney, 2016). This research is however clear in stating that asexuality should not be seen by clinicians as something that needs to be treated, even if it is a paraphilia or sexual dysfunction.

The import of this work should not be diminished: as Przybylo (2013a: 235) reminds us, searching for causation and locating asexuality in the body can lend asexuality a legitimacy in mainstream debate by drawing on the power of ‘science’.¹⁴ However, in locating asexuality in the body, there is also a sense that asexuality is something ‘gone wrong’: a deviation from, or at least a difference from, a ‘normal’ state of affairs - e.g. a ‘normal’ or ‘default’ pattern of adrenal maturation, or of childhood attachment, or of brain functioning, that presumably do not result in asexuality. Although there is a sense that these deviations or differences ought to be respected, by positing them as deviations or differences, there remains an Othering of asexuality, and a retention of sexual attraction and desire as the norm. Critical commentaries have followed

¹⁴ A parallel can be drawn here with the search for the ‘gay gene’ or the ‘gay brain’, which can serve to ‘naturalize’ homosexuality, and thus support citizenship claims (Sheldon et al., 2009), although there is also a prominent critique of these ideas within LGBT activism (e.g. Cohen, 2014).

these studies such as that of Przybylo (2013a) but also Hinderliter (2009), Chasin (2011; 2016) and Flore (2014a) who problematize much of the concepts, measurements, and implicit assumptions of these studies.

Alongside this asexuality research from the psychological and behavioural sciences, a separate sociological strand has developed. Here the focus has not been on categorising and explaining the objective existence of asexuality, but rather on attempting to engage with the lived experiences of asexual persons. Through empirical research, Kristin Scherrer (2008, 2010a, 2010b) and Mark Carrigan (2011, 2012) both explore how an asexual identity comes to be formed, and what asexuality means in people's lives, as well as the kind of relationships asexual persons might have, and the difficulties they face within these. This literature has added depth and nuance to the study of asexuality, not to mention an important humanizing element, but critiques of these works are also beginning to be made, as some draw upon different sociological traditions in order to more adequately conceptualise asexuality. For example, Scott and colleagues (Scott and Dawson, 2015; Scott et al., 2016) have used Symbolic Interactionism to explore how asexuality is formed relationally rather than as an individual act or choice. My own published work (Cuthbert, 2017) uses the concept of intersectionality to further interrogate the process of asexual identity formation by suggesting there is often an implicit white male able body - and the freedoms this entails - being assumed in accounts of how people come to identify as asexual.

Research on more specific elements of asexuality are also beginning to emerge, such as work exploring the experiences and motivations of asexual-identified persons involved in BDSM (Sloan, 2015) as well as the beginnings of work situated outwith Anglo-American society such as in Wong's (2015) study of 'asexual marriage' in China¹⁵ and Batričević and Cvetić's (2016) overview of asexual activism in Croatia. Literature aimed as training material for health and well-being practitioners has also emerged, focussing on how to offer affirmative and non-pathologising support to asexual service users, based on qualitative data

¹⁵ The understanding of asexuality deployed in this study is a broad one. Wong does discuss the globalising reach of 'asexuality-as-identity' discourse, stemming from AVEN, but in much of the online forum posts analysed, asexuality was often understood as an affliction, and was seen as an inability to fulfil the sexual imperatives of a 'healthy' relationship. Asexual marriage with others who felt similarly were often sought as an ethical solution to this 'problem'.

from asexual people themselves (Pinto, 2014; Foster and Scherrer, 2014; Gupta, 2015; Steelman and Hertlein, 2016).

Particularly from within the humanities, queer and feminist perspectives on asexuality have also arisen in the past five years or so. Compared to the more social scientific work discussed above, this work often untethers asexuality from individual identities or subjectivities to explore asexuality as a tool, technique or *idea*. For example, much of this work is concerned with ‘potentiality’ - exploring, through theoretical and conceptual discussion, whether and how asexuality might disrupt ‘normativity’ with regards to gender, sexualities, relationships etc. (Cerankowski and Milks, 2010; Fahs, 2010a; Przybylo, 2011; Gressgård, 2013; Chu, 2014; Kahn, 2014; Flore, 2014b). As part of this, the discursive formations of asexuality as a social movement, as well as the strategies and techniques drawn upon by asexuality activism have also been examined and critiqued (Kim, 2010; Chasin, 2013; Gupta, 2014; Cerankowski, 2014). From a similar ferment, literary, filmic and cultural analyses of asexuality are also beginning to proliferate. Przybylo and Cooper (2014), drawing on the work of queer theory and historiography, argue for the need to read ‘asexually’, and to thus uncover that which has previously been hidden from view when reading through a sexual (heteronormative or homonormative) lens. They argue that there is need to revisit history, literature, and theory in search of ‘asexual resonances’ (an understanding of asexuality which goes beyond that of identity). This can be seen in the work of Ero (2011), Gupta (2013), Arkenberg (2014), Barounis (2014) and Fedtke (2014), as well as those who have explored asexuality as a queer literary technique (Hanson, 2014; Grossman, 2014). Przybylo (2013b) also contends that asexuality can work as a ‘method’ to afford us a fresh perspective in sexualities research; and in socio-legal scholarship, Emens (2014) demonstrates how an asexual reading of law brings into sharp relief our assumptions about compulsory sexuality.

Overall, this body of ‘agentic’ asexuality research and literature has been important in reflecting and making visible the ways in which ‘asexuality’ as a concept is shifting: rather than something merely descriptive, or a label imposed from the top-down, increasingly asexuality is discursively available as a subject position. The increasing academic attention paid to this ‘agentic’ meaning of

asexuality is generally viewed by much of the asexual community as positive in that it is perceived to be part of the larger task of educating and informing people about asexuality (many of the asexual participants in my research stated that this was their main motivation for participating). However, I want to suggest that this agentic literature perhaps neglects the ways in which asexuality *continues* to be ascribed to certain bodies, and how it is implicated in processes of marginalisation. If nothing else, attention to this aspect of asexuality would help us as sociologists understand different agentic experiences of asexuality (for example see footnote 17, p43). This thesis attempts to bring the agentic more into conversation with ‘power’, as I consider how ascriptions of asexuality work in gendered ways, and how this affects the gendered experiences of asexual people. I now turn to reviewing this agentic literature specifically in terms of gender.

2.4.1. Gender in the psychological and sexological asexuality literature

Gender has featured in the psychological and sexological asexuality literature predominantly as a variable, similar to that of age or ethnicity, to be plugged into various statistical models. Specifically, it has functioned as a variable in relation to the prevalence of asexuality, as well as the characteristics of asexual persons. Although the findings in these studies are largely ambiguous, some explanations have also been proposed to account for these ostensible gender differences. Gender is largely conceived of in binary terms, and these are taken as read: i.e. there are objectively distinct ‘male’ and ‘female’ populations.

2.4.1.1. Prevalence

Gender (or, perhaps more appropriately, sex) has been considered in terms of both the estimated population-wide prevalence of asexuality, as well as the demographic make-up of the self-identified asexual population. In an analysis of the 1990-1991 British NAT-SAL (National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, a national probability survey with over 18,000 participants), Bogaert (2004) argued that 1.05% (n=195) of participants (and thus of the general population) could be reasonably thought to be ‘asexual’ given the number of people who chose the option of “I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone

at all” in a question regarding sexual attraction. However, of this figure, Bogaert notes that 71% were women and only 29% were men, which he takes as an indicator that more women than men are asexual. This was a finding echoed in Høglund et al.’s (2014) survey of Finnish adults, which again used proxy indicators of asexuality. However, this finding has not been replicated in similar secondary analyses of national probability surveys. Aicken et al. (2013) conducted an identical analysis to that of Bogaert of NAT-SAL II (2000-2001) but found no significant differences with regards to the gender of those who could be thought of as asexual. In the US context, Poston and Baumle (2010) have conducted a similar analysis of the National Survey of Family Growth, a national probability survey undertaken in 2002. Again, particular proxies (relating to behaviour, identity and attraction) were used to indicate asexuality, but the number of men and women scoring as asexual on each of these dimensions was very similar.

Psychological and sexological studies which have recruited from the community of self-identifying asexuals have tended to include notably more women respondents than men - for example, 71% of 187 asexual participants in Brotto et al. (2010) were female. Citing Wolchik et al.’s (1985) findings that men are more likely than women to respond to sexualities research (and thus the larger number of women respondents in their research could not be explained away in this regard), Brotto and colleagues argue that ‘our findings may reflect a true population gender difference in the prevalence of asexuality’ (ibid.: 615). However, I would suggest that this tells us less about the actual demographic make-up of the asexual population, and more about sampling sites and processes. When we look at research which includes asexual participants alongside heterosexual and non-heterosexual participants, we see that the numbers of women participants are larger for all groups - for example, Yule et al.’s (2013) study included 282 asexuals, 80% of which were women, but of the ‘heterosexual’ group (n=333) 67% were also women, and of the ‘non-heterosexual’ group (n=191), 79% were women. We can see very similar numbers in Yule et al. (2014a).¹⁶ We do not take these figures to indicate that more women than men are heterosexual, and more women than men are also non-

¹⁶ Here, 81% (n=265) of asexual participants were women, but so were 72% (n=500) of heterosexual participants and 76% (n=204) of non-heterosexual participants.

heterosexual; rather, they suggest something about the sampling processes, sampling sites, as well as perhaps gendered social differences in engaging with research. Brotto et al's (2010) contention that men are more likely to respond to sexuality research is also perhaps less applicable in this situation, since this claim is based on research measuring genital arousal in laboratory settings, whereas the above three studies were questionnaire-based and asexual respondents were recruited from online asexuality websites and forums where they were already actively engaging with these topics. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that women are more likely to participate in online questionnaire-based research than men (Smith, 2009).

What is of greater interest is that a number of asexual respondents to these psychological and sexological studies appear to reject the binary understanding of gender placed before them. Brotto et al. (2010) report that out of an original 214 respondents, 13% (n=27) did not respond to the question about gender, which was in a forced choice format ('male' or 'female'). These respondents were thus excluded from the analysis, since they did not fit within this dichotomy of 'male' or 'female' (at least in terms of their responses). Similarly, Yule et al. (2014b) conducted a survey with 534 asexual participants, but they report a 'large number' chose neither the 'male' or 'female' options presented to them. They do not specify exact figures, but the figure was large enough to make excluding these respondents unfeasible. Instead, the authors chose not to differentiate their analysis in relation to gender at all. Of course, we cannot take this as evidence that there are more non-binary and/or trans persons within the asexual community, or even that a significant amount of respondents to these surveys were non-binary and/or trans. What they possibly suggest however, is that respondents did not want to give this information, or they felt the options available did not describe them, or perhaps even if the options did describe them, they were rejecting the view of gender as the dichotomous sex categories of male and female. These possibilities are intriguing, but the opportunities for exploring them are shut down in the above studies as this data is treated as 'deviant' with regards to statistical modelling.

However, a 'census' of users (n=3430) of three popular online asexuality communities (Miller, 2011) gives a greater sense of this potential gender

diversity amongst asexual people. Respondents were given several different options to choose from (including male and female but also options such as bigender, trigender, pangender, genderqueer, genderfluid, genderneutral, androgynous, two-spirit, questioning, unsure/confused, 'I don't have a gender identity' as well as the option to write in their own responses) and they could also check more than one descriptor. 60% of respondents checked only the 'male' or 'female' boxes, but 40% either checked male or female in combination with other descriptors, or did not check male or female at all, instead opting for other descriptors. A separate question also asked respondents if they considered themselves trans - 80% did not, 10% did, and 10% were unsure. This census suggests that there might be a range of gender identities - at least amongst those active on online asexual communities - that go beyond the dichotomy of 'male' and 'female'. In an even more recent survey conducted by members of the AVEN team (n=14,210 of which n=10,880 identified as asexual) there was a similar result with regards to gender, although the breakdown is much less detailed (Asexual Census, 2014). 62% of asexual respondents identified as woman/female, 11.9% as man/male and 26.1% as 'other'. However, the 'non-asexual' respondents to this census had a very similar gender breakdown. Again, this chimes with the point made above: that the fact that more women and 'other' identified persons responded to a survey does not mean there necessarily *are* more women or 'other' identified persons (asexual or otherwise), but this may be an artefact of the recruitment and sampling process.

2.4.1.2. Characteristics of asexuals

As mentioned previously, several studies compare psychological and physiological characteristics of asexual persons with those of non-asexual persons. Results have generally also been broken down by gender - both intra-group (amongst asexuals) and inter-group (between asexuals and non-asexuals). Prause and Graham (2007) found that while there was differences between asexuals and non-asexuals in terms of their 'scores' on scales of sexual desire and arousability, there was no gendered differences amongst the asexual participants. By contrast, and using different measurement scales, Brotto et al. (2010) found that asexual men scored similar to non-asexual men with regards to sexual desire and arousability, but that asexual women scored lower compared to their non-asexual counterparts. This lead Brotto and Yule (2011) to test this in

a laboratory setting, by comparing the genital and subjective arousal of asexual and non-asexual women - but ultimately finding no significant differences. The research on psychological and mental health also differentiates by gender, again making comparisons between asexual men and sexual men, and asexual women and sexual women (Yule et al., 2013; Carvalho et al., 2016). Findings here also tend to be ambiguous - although the general thrust seems to be that both asexual men and women score higher on psychopathological indicators than their sexual counterparts, what these indicators are vary by the study, and findings change depending on whether 'sexual' is disaggregated (e.g. asexual women have higher scores on certain indicators than sexual women in general, but have similar scores to non-heterosexual sexual women, suggesting differences may be related to identification with heterosexuality). Recent research on masturbation and sexual fantasy (Yule et al., 2017) found differences between asexual men and women (asexual men masturbated more and had experienced more occurrences of sexual fantasy) but asexual men and women were similar in that they were much more likely to report that their sexual fantasies did not include themselves when compared to non-asexual men and women. However, aside from this, the content of sexual fantasies was very similar across the asexual and non-asexual groups, and between genders.

2.4.1.3. Accounting for gender differences

Although the gendered picture of asexuality is - as we have seen - ambiguous at best, some explanations have been advanced in relation to possible gender differences. Reflecting on his finding which suggested that more women than men could be considered asexual, Bogaert (2004) argues that gender norms may mean that women are more socialized into asexuality than men (reminiscent of the 'ascription' of asexuality mentioned in previous bodies of literature, although here there is also a suggestion that this has been internalized to an extent). However, while this does to some extent recognise the social context of sexuality, my previous review of the 'ascribed' asexuality literature cautions us against treating women as a homogenous group. Some women may have been more socialised into asexuality than others. As an adjunct explanation, Bogaert also suggests that:

Women relative to men may be less likely to label males or females as salient sexual objects and hence may report themselves as having no sexual attraction to either sex because they may not be as aware of their own sexual arousal as men are, even when genital responses are occurring (2004: 281)

In other words, women are less able than men to recognise their own sexual responses. However, although this again may be accounted for in sociological terms (i.e. learning to recognise and attribute meaning to certain bodily sensations), it is clear from his referencing of two bio-sexological studies that Bogaert see this in essentialist terms and as something inherent in women's physiological make-up. Przybylo (2013a) argues that this suggests Bogaert does not think women are capable of being asexual in a truly agentic sense - i.e. women do have an underlying sexual response (objectively determined) but it is only that they are not interpreting it correctly. The same critique might be made with regards to Bogaert's suggestion that women are socialised into asexuality - he seems to be saying that women are sufficiently unable to resist prescriptive gender norms to be asexual and therefore are not *really* asexual (or are, at least, not asexual in the same way a man may be). As Przybylo puts it: 'this establishes men as simultaneously more knowledgeable observers of their own bodies and more trustworthy in their asexuality' (2013a: 236). Bogaert also suggests that measures of sexual attraction might be androcentric - an intriguing suggestion that hints at the socially constructed character of 'sex research' - but ultimately falls back on an essentialist position when he goes on to argue that women's sexuality might be better described as 'receptive' rather than 'proceptive' (and it is 'proceptive' that is taken as the default model in sex research). Again Przybylo argues that this serves to perpetuate a view of women's sexuality as passive and as something to be 'awoken'. Przybylo points out that this mirrors a trend in recent sexology that establishes differences between men and women's sexual responses, and associates women with receptivity (as opposed to sexologists in the 1960s and 1970s who strove to demonstrate similarity). This has potentially harmful gendered implications: 'it inhibits the possibility of women's sexual autonomy' and 'makes it difficult for women to viably refuse unwanted heterosex since receptivity becomes the new standard for women' (Przybylo, 2013a: 237).

In Bogaert's 2012 book, he turns his attention to the ostensible low adherence to traditional gender roles and identities within the asexual community, as discussed above. His 'hunch' is that asexual persons do not go through 'traditional sexual development', a process which he argues tends to 'make females more feminine and males more masculine' (Bogaert, 2012: 76). For Bogaert, this process of traditional sexual development (especially for women) involves becoming conscious of oneself as an object-of-desire, and consequently becoming appropriately masculine or feminine in 'attire, manner and language' (ibid.). The implication is if one lacks sexual attraction or desire, and does not engage with others in this way, there is less impetus for one to become more masculine or feminine. This is a highly problematic view, however. It implicitly assumes a model where 'opposites attract' - i.e. one that is inscribed with heteronormativity. It also assumes that gender identity and presentation are intrinsically tied to one's sexuality in a determinate fashion (according to a heteronormative view of sexuality), and cannot exist independently of each other. It also fails to take into account the dimension of romantic attraction; many asexual persons do feel romantically attracted to other people, and this is generally directed along gendered lines (Scherrer, 2008). As well as suggesting that a/sexuality determines gender, Bogaert also discusses how this relationship might be bi-directional. Here he suggests that exposure to certain combinations of pre-natal hormones may make asexual people develop 'brains that are neither masculine or feminine' which may then 'cause' asexuality (Bogaert, 2012: 79). This can then be compounded by psycho-environmental factors: for example, if a child does not have a strong identification with either gender, this may create an ambivalence to both and a sexual disinterest in all people later in life (ibid.: 80). In both 'directions' of this model, there is a suggestion that asexuality is 'genderless' (Bogaert's term), but this is not the same as 'gender diversity'. It also fails to account for the majority of respondents to the aforementioned surveys who did identify as 'female' or 'male' - in the case of the 2011 census, 60% of the sample identified exclusively as male or female, even when presented with several other options.

However, similar ideas have also been discussed by those writing from within a queer and feminist paradigm. Chasin has also discussed, in theoretical terms, the possibility of asexuality impacting upon gender, and vice versa. Chasin

argues that ‘it is possible that sexual attractiveness standards govern gender presentations and behaviours, and that without the desire to attract a sexual partner, asexual people may have more freedom to explore their own genders’ (2011: 716). Here, however, the onus is not on a natural developmental path structured by the logics of heteronormativity, but rather on heteronormativity as a social system, with certain gendered requirements. Emens (2014: 25) commenting upon this, suggests that this accords with the work of theorists such as Judith Butler who discusses how categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ are deeply bound up with heteronormativity (the heterosexual matrix). This would suggest that asexuals are able to escape this matrix, or operate in some way outside of it, since they are not constrained by sexual desire or sexual attraction. Chasin also argues that gender identity might induce one to asexuality, particularly if one has a non-normative gender identity. They suggest that trans people have historically been required to adopt asexuality in order to access certain medical services (which suggests an ascription of asexuality), or, as Emens argues, that trans people are treated as less sexual by society at large, which ‘could backform into some degree of asexuality’ (Emens, 2014: 25). Again this latter point suggests an ascription of asexuality that has then been internalized to some extent, with the assumption that in an ideal world where they are valued as equals, trans people would not (need to) be asexual. This point potentially undermines the agency of trans people who identify as asexual; additionally, it seems to be the case that trans people (particularly trans women) are frequently hypersexualised rather than seen as asexual (Davy and Steinbock, 2012). These contributions by Chasin and Emens are useful in highlighting how gender and a/sexuality might be intertwined - however they are based wholly on speculation rather than on empirically-grounded research with asexual people themselves. Additionally, in suggesting that asexual people can escape the heterosexual matrix (although it is not clear how this would ‘work’), we can see the valorisation of asexuality as anti-normative and transgressive in a way that appears again and again through the queer and feminist asexuality literature.

2.4.2. Gender in sociological, queer and feminist asexuality literature

Whereas the sexological and psychological literature on asexuality treats gender as a variable, queer and feminist asexuality literature has, in contrast, envisaged

gender as a set of oppressive social meanings and relations, which asexuality can help dismantle. This comes across most strongly in Fahs (2010a). Fahs argues that we should reincorporate into our feminist politics the voices of those early second wave feminists (such as Valerie Solanas and collectives such as Cell 16) who were against sex as a technique for liberation, but who have been written out of the broader feminist narrative. From an anarchist-feminist perspective, Fahs argues that the State uses the policing, regulation and normalisation of certain kinds of sex and bodies (particular women's bodies) as a way of extending control over its citizenry. Fahs thus argues that asexuality can be understood as a conscious and politicised act of dropping out of sex (contrary to dominant understandings of asexuality as not chosen) which would challenge State biopower, and in particular could 'undermine gender hierarchies by denying access to women's bodies' (2010a: 456). However, Fahs does also acknowledge that this would have different meanings and implications depending on the power (or lack thereof) the women who 'choose' asexuality have, suggesting 'race' and class might play a part (although no examples are given). Fahs also adds a caveat that asexuality does not necessarily represent liberation for women, suggesting that there may be uncomfortable parallels with conservative political currents that aim to 'strip women of their sexual agency' (ibid.: 458). Fahs also suggests that asexuality might also reinforce Cartesian dualism, where a rational mind is separated from an irrational body, which numerous feminist theorists and philosophers have shown to be a highly gendered concept given women's association with the latter.

Elsewhere, Przybylo (2011) and Gressgård (2013) have suggested that asexuality might further radicalise Butler's theorising of the heterosexual matrix. For example, Gressgård (2013: 186) suggests that asexuality takes the questioning of 'the normative continuity of sex, gender and desire - the coherence or unity that makes gender intelligible within the regime of sexuality' even further, a point which chimes with Chasin (2011) and Emens' (2014) contention that asexuality operates outside of the heterosexual matrix. Other queer and feminist scholars discuss how asexuality can denaturalise and disrupt institutions such as the family and marriage, and normative relationship patterns and forms of intimacy (Scherrer, 2010a; 2010b; Gressgård, 2013) which we can assume would have gendered consequences. The impact of asexuality on feminism as a movement

for gender liberation has also been discussed, with the suggestion that asexuality can push sex-positive feminism to be more inclusive, and challenge its erotic chauvinism which privileges transgressive sexual acts (Cerankowski and Milks, 2010; Chu, 2014). However, I would suggest that while there is nothing wrong with envisaging queer political goals for asexuality, these texts fail to pay sufficient attention to how asexuality itself might be lived and understood by those outwith queer and feminist academic circles. As Scott and Dawson (2015: 8) succinctly argue in relation to this strand of literature in general, ‘marginalised in this analysis is the recognition of the lived experiences of asexual people as people’. Hinderliter (in Bishop, 2013: 205) makes a similar point when he cautions against academics commandeering asexuality by ‘privileging those who want their relationships to subvert the social order at the expense of those whose dreams are more conventional’.

In contrast, sociological writings on asexuality have been almost entirely silent regarding gender. When gender appears, it is in terms of conveying a piece of interesting data, rather than exploring the gendered dimensions of asexuality in any way. For example, Carrigan (2012) notes that some asexual women have been subject to gendered sexual harassment by heterosexual men, due to the confluence of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. His analysis extends no further than this, however. Scherrer’s empirical research also fails to engage with the concept of gender, noting only that the distinctions some of the asexual participants drew between the sexual and the non-sexual were based on an androcentric understanding of penile-vaginal intercourse (2008). Other qualitative studies such as that by Van Houdenhove et al. (2014) involved interviewing asexual women about their relationships, but the fact they were asexual *women* seems entirely irrelevant to the analysis. Sloan’s (2015) discussion of asexual BDSM practitioners also proceeds without mention of gender, despite the fact that issues of consent and sexualised power relations are central to this discussion. Wong (2015) also does not discuss gender in the context of asexual marriages in China; expectations around ‘sexual fulfilment’ are seen to affect men and women equally. Even work which is grounded strongly within the sociological tradition and is otherwise rich, nuanced and insightful, does not consider gender in their analyses (e.g. Scott and Dawson, 2015; Scott et al., 2016; Dawson et al., 2016).

There are two exceptions to this trend. Przybylo (2014) conducted qualitative interviews with three asexual men and specifically addressed the question of masculinity. It is unclear how these men were recruited, although Przybylo notes that all were affiliated with the asexual community. The predominant theme that emerged from these interviews was the idea that masculinity involved performance work, central to which was a construction of an active heterosexuality: 'both a private and public performance of the male sexual drive is central to being a man' (2014: 233). The three participants all discussed the difficulties they had experienced in negotiating this terrain, including feigning interest in sex and 'playing along' to fit in; dealing with 'accusations' of homosexuality when their lack of interest in sex became apparent to others; and questioning their own masculinity, given the seeming necessity an interest in sex is to 'manhood'. While Przybylo's study is the first to directly explore gendered experiences of asexuality, there are still some key gaps. Firstly, as a post-structuralist, Przybylo's main focus is on discourse - i.e. how asexual men relate to, or distance themselves from, the 'male sexual drive discourse'. As such, the analysis remains at a discursive level, without exploring the embodied gendered experiences of asexuality. The study also focuses exclusively on masculinity rather than gender as a broader concept. Only those who identified with the terms 'man' or 'male' or 'masculine' were interviewed, which as Przybylo themselves admit, foreclosed those with more diverse or non-binary gender identities. Przybylo also slips into valorising asexuality for its radical potential with regards to gender; it is argued that through their asexuality, asexual men challenge the male sexual drive discourse, denaturalising the idea of the all-powerful masculine sexual imperative. Przybylo also argues that asexuality 'questions the centrality of sex in ideals of masculinity' (ibid.: 239) but while this might be the case in an abstract, theoretical sense, from the data presented, it seems that the men's experiences were rather ones of marginalisation from the concept of masculinity, rather than prompting a radical broadening of its parameters. Additionally, from the data provided, it is not clear that the men interviewed saw their existence as asexual men in such politicised terms, suggesting again a top-down dictation of what asexuality should be. Przybylo's research is also limited in its small number of participants.

MacNeela and Murphy (2015) also foreground the topic of gender. The authors conducted an open-ended internet survey with 66 respondents who identified as asexual, recruited through an 'internet community'. As social psychologists, the authors' aim was to explore how asexuality was integrated into an understanding of the self; from the outset asexuality is taken for granted to be a fundamental threat to the 'self-concept' and one that must therefore be accommodated or reconciled. In their discussion of how disclosures of asexuality were received by others, the authors do indeed show how respondents had to engage in significant 'identity work' in the face of 'denial narratives': i.e. being told that asexuality was impossible, transitional, or symptomatic of something else. However, MacNeela and Murphy's assumption of asexuality as a threat to the self-concept does seem to be based on a normative view of the self as sexual. Referring back to the literature on 'ascribed' asexuality, it may however be the case that for some, identifying as asexual may not be experienced as a 'threat' if asexuality is to some degree already integrated into one's sense of self.¹⁷ Furthermore, according to MacNeela and Murphy, much of the 'threat' asexuality poses stems from the idea that asexuality is incompatible with 'heteronormative expectations for gender roles' (ibid.: 808). Thus, in order to achieve a sense of self-coherence, asexual persons must work to 'fit' their asexuality with their gender (which is premised on certain expectations about sexuality). From the data presented, as in Przybylo (2014), it is true that some respondents talked about how they felt asexuality was difficult to reconcile with ideas about masculinity, and some also talked about how the expectations placed on women regarding marriage and motherhood was a source of tension.

However, it may be the case that the authors are over-stating the 'queerness' of asexuality. For example, the authors fail to take into consideration how asexuality might be built in to certain normative understandings of femininity - something which also seems to come out of their own data when respondents describe how disclosures of asexuality are often met with the response that a lack of interest in sex is characteristic of women more generally (MacNeela and Murphy, 2015: 802). It is also not clear how significant these tensions were in the lives of participants, or in their broader understanding of asexuality i.e. it is not

¹⁷ It may be the case however that claiming an agentic asexual self-identity when asexuality is already ascribed may prove difficult in different ways, as I discuss elsewhere in my research with disabled people who self-identify as asexual (Cuthbert, 2017).

clear from the data that these tensions do constitute a threat. MacNeela and Murphy's formulation implies heteronormativity is central to the self-concept, and while there is surely a dynamic between an undeniably heteronormative social milieu and one's understanding of oneself, it does not follow that this is a deterministic relationship without room for agency and alternative meaning.

As with other empirical asexuality research, a third (n=18) of MacNeela and Murphy's respondents also rejected traditional gender identities (identifying variously as genderqueer, neutrois, agender, bigender, both genders, androgynous or gender-neutral). Many of these respondents did also see their asexuality and their gender as linked: some talked about how questioning their sexuality prompted a parallel questioning of their gender, and some talked about how asexuality afforded them a freedom in terms of gender expression, since they did not have to be concerned about being sexually attractive to others. The authors frame non-traditional gender identities as a way of defusing the 'threat' asexuality posed to the self-concept: that is, the difficulties involved in negotiating asexuality and normative masculinity, or asexuality and normative femininity, would not seem to apply if one had a non-traditional and/or non-binary gender identity. Again, however, this conclusion does not seem to be supported by the data. While respondents did talk of a connection, it is not at all clear that respondents would conceptualise their identity formation in such a way; such a claim also reduces respondents' gender identity to a 'strategy' rather than a complex, embodied and lived phenomenon. MacNeela and Murphy also make the claim that asexuality was reconciled with gender in the adoption of complex sub-identities and relationship preferences (*ibid.*: 808), but there was no empirical basis provided for this, or discussion of how this 'worked'. It is also not specified what sub-identities or relationship preferences was meant. While making some inroads in the empirical study of asexuality and gender, MacNeela and Murphy's research involves several unsubstantiated claims and problematic theorisations, and is also restricted by the method deployed: i.e. respondents could write in open-ended text boxes, but this did not provide space for clarification, probing and follow-up.

Overall then, there are some key issues with how sociological, queer and feminist literature have approached gender and asexuality. The queer and

feminist literature is undermined by a lack of empirical engagement, and as such, projects too many political meanings onto the canvas of 'asexuality'. The sociological literature has failed to consider gender entirely or treated gender as an interesting aside. When gender *is* the focus, these studies tend to be methodologically limited, continue to over-state the non-normativity of asexuality, and focus either on just one aspect of gender (e.g. masculinity) or make problematic assumptions (e.g. that non-traditional gender identities are a strategic choice).

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have traced how asexuality is operationalised in different strands of literature and research, suggesting we can distinguish between descriptive asexuality, ascriptive asexuality, and agentic asexuality. It is this category of agentic asexuality that I have suggested can be understood as 'asexuality studies'.

Gender appears very little in the descriptive literature but rather more so in work discussing how asexuality is ascribed to certain bodies, and this is often contextualised amidst processes and relations of racialisation, disablism, fatphobia, and heteronormativity. With regards to agentic asexuality, I have discussed how the field of asexuality studies is currently riven in two distinct disciplinary directions: firstly, the psychological and the sexological, and secondly, the sociological, queer and feminist-oriented. Each of these address gender in distinct ways: gender appears in the psychological and sexological literature as a variable among many to be studied in relation to the phenomenon of 'asexuality'. When gender differences are discerned, this tends to be accounted for in relation to psycho-physiological processes that either make women more likely to be asexual, or for asexual people to eschew traditional forms of masculinity and femininity. In sharp contrast, the queer and feminist literature sees gender not as a binary attribute belonging to individuals, but rather as an oppressive social institution which privileges some at the expense of others and, since heteronormativity is so entwined with this, asexuality is envisaged as a way of opening up new possibilities to live and experience gender, as well as challenge the domination of men over women. However, sociological literature has been largely silent on the issue of gender. This is

perhaps due to an understandable tendency to focus exclusively on asexuality in an attempt to offer a sociological perspective amidst proliferating psychological and sexological research. There has been some limited steps taken towards addressing asexuality and gender, but as I have argued, these have been lacking in some significant ways. Methodologically, a much larger qualitative sample is required. A more expansive deployment of gender is also needed in order to explore the suggested gender diversity of asexual persons, as well as moving beyond an exclusive focus on the 'discursive'. There is a need to move away from an abstract academic pondering of how asexuality might be subversive to actually engaging with the way it is lived and felt on the ground. Any theorisation that is produced also needs to be more firmly grounded in participants' accounts, and assumptions relating to theoretical or disciplinary perspectives need to be interrogated, or at least reflexively engaged with.

My research is intended, in part, to address these gaps. It is intended to sit within asexuality studies ('agentic asexuality') but also considers the ascription of asexuality in exploring how masculinity and femininity are constructed through sexuality. My research is feminist given the themes I choose to pursue, but it is also primarily a sociological study in its empirical engagement and my attempts to seek meaning and understanding in the broader socio-historical context whilst still being firmly rooted in the voices of participants. I now turn to discussing the specific context of 'abstinence'.

3. Abstinence: context and literature review

3.1. Introduction

As with the term ‘asexuality’, there are also different ways of conceptualising ‘abstinence’, and so this chapter will begin by exploring these ideas, and outlining how I use the term in this thesis. I will first of all discuss why I use ‘abstinence’ as opposed to alternative terms, and then explore the parameters of abstinence, considering *what* the abstention refers to, as well as issues of time and choice.

Once I have clarified the definitions and scope of abstinence, I then turn my attention to the literature. To be clear: outside of the theological and historical scholarship on abstinence/celibacy in doctrine and scripture (particularly with regards to Christianity), there is an overall paucity of literature on abstinence. However, where more social-scientific studies *do* exist¹⁸, gender often features prominently in these: for example, studies are often about abstinent *men* or abstinent *women*. This is, I suggest, due to the fact that abstinence is already a gendered concept in that it relates to the organisation of sexual relations in hetero-patriarchal societies, and therefore to disentangle or disaggregate it from gender is difficult (although see footnote ¹⁹). Thus, my focus in this chapter is on abstinence and gender specifically, and I examine this through three key areas.

First I discuss how abstinence and related concepts have been implicated in the patriarchal control of women (through coercive practices and social norms), but I go on to discuss how abstinence *also* has a historical association with women’s

¹⁸ This should not be understood as comprising a coherent body of literature, however. Whereas we can identify a body of work known as ‘asexuality studies’, work on celibacy and abstinence is somewhat more disparate and fractured, and until now, little attempt has been made to bring them into conversation with one another. Constructing a ‘literature’ from these texts was, to use Kamler and Thomson’s (2006: 28) wonderful expression, somewhat akin to ‘persuading an octopus into a glass’.

¹⁹ Literature in which gender features less prominently tends to be related to work on the priesthood (which is of course a gendered order in and of itself). This work explores: conditions for the maintenance of celibacy in priests (Sipe, 1990); the differences between married and celibate clergy (Swenson, 1998); how monastic institutions benefit from and ensure the maintenance of celibacy (Qirko, 2002); how priests who break their vows of celibacy frame their actions as moral (Anderson, 2007); and how celibacy impacts on the health and wellbeing of priests (Baumann et al., 2017).

liberation, particularly in the first and second waves of feminism. I then discuss more recent empirical work on women's sexual abstinence, as well as work by feminist theologians who continue this theme of abstinence-as-liberatory for women by emphasising new dimensions of liberation, and even re-conceptualising the meaning of abstinence. However, as in the previous chapter wherein I questioned the tendency found in the literature to frame asexuality as queer, I add a cautionary note here too by suggesting that abstinent women themselves do not necessarily see abstinence in the same politicised ways. Furthermore, I also complicate the abstinence-as-liberatory perspective by examining how the cost of this liberation has at times been 'masculinisation' (either discursively or literally) since abstinence has often been thought to hold and carry particular powers that are incompatible with womanhood and femininity.

Following on from this, I go on to discuss abstinence and masculinity directly, and how, perhaps counter-intuitively given our dominant contemporary understandings of masculinity in the West, practising abstinence is often thought to increase one's masculinity. I use the practice of *Brahmacharya* amongst Indian Hindu men as an example, but also suggest that this applies to men in the West, as empirical research shows that abstinence can be operationalised in ways that bolster hegemonic forms of masculinity.

Thirdly, I discuss a contemporary movement of sexual abstinence - evangelical Christian youth in the US - which has particular gendered resonances. I show how this movement is about gender as much as it is about not having sex, and while the obvious reading is to see it as upholding patriarchal gender norms and patterns of relationality, those pledging sexual abstinence see it as a counter-cultural and anti-normative act. I argue then that this encapsulates much of the content of this chapter: celibacy and sexual abstinence are ambiguous, and *have been* and *can be* practised and produced in ways that both challenge and uphold (gendered) power relations - often simultaneously.

3.2. Definitions and scope

In this thesis, I use the term 'abstinence' as opposed to 'celibacy'. In general discourse, they tend to be used synonymously as meaning the practice of

abstaining from sexual activity, although celibacy often has additional religious connotations.²⁰ All of the participants in my research who had made the decision not to have sex preferred the term ‘abstinent’ because of how loaded celibacy was with regards to religion and in particular, with the abuse scandals within the Catholic Church. However, in reviewing the literature, I include literature on ‘celibacy’ in order to provide a broader picture. I also consider some work on ‘virginity’. Abstinance and virginity mean different things (the latter referring to never having had sex, usually penile-vaginal sex) but because they both refer in some way to the social experience of *not having sex*, at points I have found it illuminating to bring in literature on virginity. Indeed, several of my participants were both abstinent and virgins, and for some being a virgin was understood as an important part of their abstinence (i.e. it was important not only that they abstained from sex, but that they did not have sex in the first place).

3.2.1. Parameters of abstinence

3.2.1.1. Abstaining from what?

It is important to discuss what I mean exactly by the ‘sex’ from which people are abstaining. This was something I left up to participants to define for themselves i.e. it was up to them to decide if they felt abstinent was a term that described them. This arose out of the fact that ‘sex’ can mean different things to different people (see Byers (2009) for an illustration of this amongst college students) and I did not want to impose an arbitrary definition on participants (especially since definitions of sex tend to be heteronormative, cis-normative, and disablist). In most cases, participants saw sex as something relatively bounded (although not necessarily phallogentric) comprising any intimate encounter with other people involving breast, genital or anal contact. Kissing on the mouth was generally excluded from definitions of sex, although some acknowledged it was in the ‘danger zone’. Most participants also excluded (solo) masturbation from their definition of sex.

²⁰ Historically, ‘celibacy’ has also been used to mean ‘single’ or ‘never-married’ (e.g. see this usage in Kiernan (1988)) but today the popular meaning has largely shifted to mean abstaining from sexual activity (Butterfield, 2015).

3.2.1.2. Time

The issue of time also needs to be taken into consideration. Research involving those who are abstinent have generally set a requirement that participants have abstained from sex for a minimum amount of time (e.g. six months in the case of Donnelly et al., 2001). I did not set such limits because again, I felt that they would be arbitrary. What I was focused on was people who saw themselves as choosing not to have sex, regardless of how long or short a time they have been doing so. My interest was in what Mullaney (2006) calls ‘markedness’ - that is, a conscious awareness that one is choosing not to have sex, rather than *just happening* not to have sex. Or to put it another way, Scott et al. (2016) distinguish between ‘becoming a non’ and ‘non-becoming’, where the first refers to actively taking up a ‘non’ identity (such as asexual, abstinent, non-meat-eater etc.) and the second refers to a state of unmarkedness. This thesis is concerned with those who have become a ‘non’. Participants did however vary with regards to anticipated future behaviour (some felt they would be abstinent forever; others could conceive of a time in the future when they were no longer abstinent), as well as with regards to the reasons they had for becoming a ‘non’. Some of these reasons are explored in the findings chapters, but suffice to say here what was key with regards to inclusion in the research was a *sense* of oneself as abstinent, or as practising abstinence.

3.2.1.3. Choice

The idea of choice is usually regarded as central to what it means to be abstinent or celibate. That is, you have *made the decision* not to have sex. As we have seen in Chapter One, it is because of this that some in the asexual community distance themselves from celibacy and abstinence because, for them, asexuality is innate rather than something chosen. However, there is also a sense in which abstinence and celibacy can be conceptualised as ‘involuntary’: like asexuality it is not seen as a choice, but neither is it experienced as innate. Rather, it is seen as something which is imposed against one’s will. There are different situations in which this occurs. In her discussion of ‘imposed’ or ‘coercive’ celibacy, Abbott (2001) includes being in institutions where celibacy is mandated (if not observed) such as prisons, hospitals or care homes, or being part of a certain social group for whom celibacy is mandated (again if not

observed) such as unmarried women and widows. Abbott also includes imposed celibacy due to impairment or disability - when a person is prevented from having sex because of bodily restrictions, or disabling social barriers. Donnelly and colleagues (2001; 2008) explicitly use the term 'involuntary celibacy' but they use it to mean those who want to have sex, but are unable to due to a lack of a willing partner. They further proposed distinguishing between those who are 'single involuntary celibates' (those who were unable to find a partner) and those who were 'partnered involuntary celibates' (those who had a partner but their partner could not or did not want to be sexually active with them). Whilst no further academic attention has been forthcoming on the issue of involuntary celibacy, the term (shortened to 'InCel' and used in the sense of 'single involuntary celibates') has recently found traction in some online communities, and has attracted media attention after some perpetrators of college shootings in the US were found to be involved with these communities (Dewey, 2015). These communities tend to be male-dominated, and have significant cross-overs with the 'pick-up artist' (PUA) subculture (O'Neill, 2015).²¹

In this thesis, my focus is not on these groups. Rather, I concentrated on recruiting those who felt they were choosing not to have sex, or had made the decision to be abstinent. This was due to a pragmatic need to draw boundaries to ensure this project remained do-able, and because the issues involved with regards to 'involuntary' celibacy or abstinence might be different than those pertaining to celibacy or abstinence which is more freely chosen. However, I do want to suggest here that the boundary between voluntary and involuntary celibacy is perhaps more blurred than is suggested in the above literature. For example, although not explicitly problematising this boundary in his discussion, Terry (2012) discusses two celibate participants for whom this boundary seemed more porous. One man talked about how he was celibate because his wife did not want to engage in sex (i.e. he would be a partnered involuntary celibate under Donnelly and Burgess's (2008) schema) but he also claimed agency by stating that he had *made the decision* not to go elsewhere for sex, and also to stop asking his wife for sex (Terry, 2012: 883). Another man felt he had

²¹ O'Neill (2015) describes PUA as a 'community industry' based on internet forums, and commercial seminars and workshops, designed to help heterosexual men become more successful in their goal of seducing women. PUA culture is generally characterised by a high degree of misogyny.

originally made the decision to be celibate, but now felt his celibacy was involuntary because being sexually abstinent had resulted in him finding it difficult to relate to others (Terry, 2012: 876).

Additionally, Mullaney (2006) - although not writing on the topic of sexual abstinence specifically - also suggests that abstinence can be 'contingent'. By this she means that people may become abstinent not because they *want* to be, but because they *do* want to be part of a particular group or community of which abstinence is a condition of membership. We can thus see how celibacy may be involuntary, but this might be brought about by a voluntary choice to be part of a certain group (although, of course, the 'choice' to be part of a group may also be constrained or enabled by other factors). Priests are perhaps an illustrative example here. The idea of contingent abstinence can thus help us to bridge the dichotomy of the voluntary and involuntary in recognising the socially and relationally embedded nature of our decisions.

Thus, whilst this thesis has a focus on what might be termed 'voluntary' abstinence or celibacy, or those who are *choosing* not to have sex, I also acknowledge that choice never occurs in a vacuum, and elements of both choice and constraint are likely to be present (and, as I will illustrate in later findings chapters, this was the case for many abstinent participants). It may therefore be better to conceptualise abstinent as a continuum, with poles of 'voluntary' and 'involuntary'. With this caveat in mind, I now turn to discuss the literature on abstinence that can be situated *closer* to the voluntary end of the continuum (but perhaps never *entirely* voluntary), beginning with women and abstinence.

3.3. Women and abstinence

In this section, I discuss women and abstinence, both historically and in the present day. I begin by noting that abstinence, celibacy, and associated terms need to be viewed in the broader context of patriarchal control over women's bodies and sexualities. Nonetheless, much of the literature on abstinence and celibacy discusses how celibacy is (or has been) considered empowering for women. I discuss these arguments through the loci of 'historical women' (of the late 19th and early 20th centuries) and 'contemporary women' (from the 1960s onwards). However, I add a cautionary note to this celibacy-as-liberation

literature by suggesting that for some women, celibacy is not experienced in such radical ways, and that often to be a celibate woman was (and, in some cases, still is) to give up one's social (and sometimes bodily) identity as a woman linking back into the patriarchal context discussed above. This section on women and abstinence is longer than the following sections on masculinity and the abstinence youth movement because the literature here is spread out over a longer historical time period, but also because in the few recent sociological studies on abstinence, the focus has exclusively been on men and masculinity, and I wish to redress that balance somewhat. Furthermore, the arguments relating to celibacy as a feminist act are often minimized or made invisible in feminist histories (Fahs, 2010) so I felt it important to give space to them here.

3.3.1. Abstinence and patriarchy

Controlling and restricting women's sexual activity has been and continues to be central to the organisation of patriarchy. Women's sexual 'purity' has functioned as a commodity in the traffic and exchange of women, and in ensuring patrilineal descent (Abbott, 2001).²² Historically much effort has thus been expended upon ensuring that women do not have sex until they have been properly subsumed into the patriarchal order through marriage. Thus, sexual abstinence (usually in the form of virginity) has been demanded of women and girls - sometimes literally imposed through practices of cloistering, chastity aids and virginity tests, but more often through the operation of social norms (Abbott, 2001). Today, the persistence of the sexual double standard ensures that women's sexuality continues to be constrained to some degree (Bordini and Sperb, 2013). Whilst expectations of virginity and abstinence have arguably loosened, women are still subject to much more restrictive norms than men when it comes to sex, and 'slut' and 'whore' remain feared and punitive epithets (Farvid et al., 2016).

My point here is that historically speaking, abstinence has been, for the vast majority of women, part of their *subordination* as women, rather than liberating. The literature I discuss below on how abstinence is empowering for

²² Thus, rape came to be understood as a property crime perpetrated against another man (Burgess-Jackson, 1996: 44-49). Until recently, this has persisted in the legal judgement that rape within marriage was impossible.

women does not always take this into account. Of course, choice plays a part in this - in the above, women's abstinence is not freely chosen but is rather socially mandated. By contrast, abstinence seems to be experienced as empowering when it is a decision a woman herself has made. But, returning to my discussion earlier about how choice never occurs in a vacuum (and thus voluntary and involuntary abstinence cannot be so easily separated), it is important to acknowledge this wider context in which abstinence *has* been used a technique of control over women's bodies in any discussion of how empowering abstinence can be for women.

3.3.2. Abstinence as liberation: historical women

Celibacy²³ does however also have a historical association with progressive politics and with women's liberation in particular (Kahan, 2013). For white middle-class women, celibacy has at times represented independence and access to the public sphere in a way that would be otherwise unattainable. However, it is important to note that women's access to the public sphere has been contingent not just on their sexual abstinence, but also through the status of 'singlehood' i.e. being unpartnered (Vicinus, 1985). The ideology of 'separate spheres' worked to confine married women to the private realm of the home during the Victorian era (Jackson, 1992); furthermore, the idea of coverture in marriage meant that a married woman's personhood was literally subsumed by her husband's (Dolan, 2003). Remaining single then was a way of retaining one's independence and ability to participate in the public sphere, but celibacy was an imperative element of this - to be single was to be celibate (Vicinus, 1985: 5). Many suffragists and early feminists undertook vows of celibacy in order to carry out their political activism unimpeded by the demands of marriage, pregnancy and child-rearing (DuBois, 1999; Abbott, 2001)²⁴; but celibacy was also about making a political statement in and of itself. Figures such as Christabel Pankhurst and Lucy Re-Bartlett, writing in the early 20th century, advocated the adoption of celibacy and singlehood as a way of protesting men's licentious and immoral sexual behaviour, and their abusive treatment of women (Jeffreys,

²³ From here on in, I switch to using the term celibacy since this is the term used most often in the literature I discuss.

²⁴ Celibacy did not free women entirely of their duties in the private sphere - for example, of the care of elderly parents or relatives which often fell to unmarried women (Finch and Mason, 2003: 76).

1985). Celibacy was also associated with the forging of intimate and often co-habitational partnerships between women, as in the phenomenon of 'Boston marriages' (Rothblum and Brehony, 1993). But as alluded to earlier, celibacy in this context was both racialised and classed. As feminist historians have pointed out, the separate spheres ideology which confined middle-class women to the home was not a reality for large numbers of poor and racialised women (Dill, 1988; Glenn, 1992); and if working-class women remained single and celibate, this was often because it was a condition of their employment as domestic servants (Sarti, 2008). Being able to live independently outside of marriage was also something which required not inconsiderable resources (Vicinus, 1985).

However, Kahan (2013) draws our attention to a context when celibacy was mobilised as a tool of liberation for poor and racialised people (including but not limited to women): the Black Harlem Renaissance of the 1930s. He discusses the figure of Father Divine, a spiritual and community leader who promoted celibacy as a way of creating a new narrative about black bodies and thus affording black bodies entrance into the public sphere. Celibacy was seen as a way of challenging the idea of an out-of-control black sexuality (predatory men, promiscuous women), as well as alleviating the white fear of miscegenation. In doing so, Father Divine and his followers were able to 'circumvent the institutions of racism' (Kahan, 2013: 91) to some extent, and were able to enjoy some economic success as well as instantiate some degree of 'mixed race' living in Harlem. Therefore, as a political tool, celibacy has not only been used by those with privilege.

In much of the aforementioned examples, celibacy seems to have been used as a way of claiming a place at the table on the master's terms. That is, to gain access to the rights enjoyed by white men, in certain cases celibacy was employed as a strategy to move marginalised bodies from the private to the public/civic sphere but without necessarily challenging the dichotomy of the public and the private (with the caveat that women can never fully escape the private sphere). Sexual relationships were understood as something that mired particular bodies in the private sphere (the natural space of the private sphere as opposed to the cultural space of the public/civic sphere), and so the way of getting round this was to disavow sexual relationships altogether. In many ways,

the celibacy here might even be thought of as ‘contingent’ to return to Mullaney’s term; celibacy was not necessarily desired in and of itself, but was chosen as a way of finding space within a (sexist and racist) system. Again we can see the possible blurring of the involuntary and voluntary.

In other historical settings, celibacy has also been implicated in moves for gender equality, but with a concomitant attempt to dismantle the public/private dichotomy. This can be seen most clearly in the case of two religious groups. The Shakers were a sect rooted in Quakerism which was founded in England in the mid-18th century, and then flourished in celibate communes on the East Coast of the USA where men and women lived together as platonic ‘siblings’. The Shakers’ commitment to celibacy was based upon a scriptural reinterpretation of the Fall in which: ‘God had punished Adam and Eve equally, so their sexual longings, not Eve’s special wickedness [as a woman], were at the crux of His fury’ (Abbott, 2001: 149). As a result, sex was seen as the root of all evil, and the way in which to witness the regeneration of Christ was for humans to abstain from sexual activity and thus from generating themselves (Collins, 2001: 109). The practice of celibacy was thus motivated by the theological and eschatological beliefs in mutual culpability and equal responsibility, and this translated into gender equality in practice within Shaker society. Furthermore, the Shakers also conceptualised God as being both male and female, and celibacy was also a way of emulating that union of the masculine and feminine (Kitch, 1989). Heterosexual intercourse and its reproductive consequences were seen to create divisions between men and women, since it was through reproduction that women became associated with nature and the private sphere (predating Shulamith Firestone’s argument by a century), and it was through reproduction that artificial barriers were erected and hierarchies instated between women and men, nature and culture, home and work (Kitch, 1989: 112). Celibacy, however, was seen as an act of unification:

Celibacy...undermines the need for symbolic opposition between male and female, even though it requires the physical separation of men and women. Celibacy also eliminates the need for symbolic differences between home and work, nature and culture, and other symbolic pairs. It actually provides the basis for the symbolic merger of the sexes (Kitch, 1989: 112).

Here, celibacy is being positioned as a way in which the ‘ideology of separate spheres’ is at least theoretically undone.²⁵

Kitch also discusses another 19th century American religious sect - the Koreshans - who took the idea of unification through celibacy further and developed the idea of the androgynous being in which gender no longer existed. Since heterosexual intercourse was based upon, and thus reified, gender difference (e.g. the attraction of ‘opposites’), in Koreshan thought celibacy was seen as a way of spiritually recreating/reproducing ‘a being in whom the falsely divided male and female powers and characteristics - the result of lust in Eden - are reunited’ (Kitch, 1989: 96). However, Kitch goes on to make the important point that in this drive for androgyny, the universal ‘neutral’ figure that emerged happened to bear much of the characteristics associated with masculinity so that women’s identities and ways of being were, once again, subsumed (Kitch, 1989: 203-204).

3.3.3. Abstinence as liberation: contemporary women

Some of the arguments advanced by suffragists and first-wave feminists regarding celibacy re-emerged in some strands of early second-wave feminism. It is important not to overstate this: second-wave feminists of varying theoretical orientations tended to see their political project as freeing women’s sexuality from the grip of patriarchy through challenging the sexual double standard, and encouraging women to explore their sexualities, including through lesbianism, clitoral orgasms, masturbation, and non-monogamy (Gerhard, 2001).

However, as Fahs (2010: 446) points out, ‘left out of this master narrative of liberation’ are those feminists who felt this focus on sex and sexuality as tools for liberation was detrimental. These feminists often had a close association with anarchism. For example, Valerie Solanas (2004[1967]) argued that sex was a distraction and a ‘non-creative waste of time’ which used up energy that might otherwise be spent mobilising and organising. Dana Densmore (1969: no pagination) of the Cell 16 anarchist collective put it: ‘The guerrillas don’t screw. They eat, when they can, but they don’t screw. They have important things to

²⁵ The Shakers were of course far from representative of the mainstream of Christianity with regards to their interpretation of scripture, and subsequently, their views on gender.

do that require all their energy'. Sex, according to Valerie Solanas, was male propaganda designed to distract women and to keep men in existence: 'when the female transcends her body, rises above animalism, the male, whose ego consists of his cock, will disappear' (2004: 60 [1967]). Furthermore, sexual desire was itself reconceptualised. Densmore (1969: no pagination) argued that there is nothing qualitatively distinct about sexual and erotic desire:

Usually what passes for sexual need is actually desire to be stroked, desire for recognition or love, desire to conquer, humiliate or wield power, or desire to communicate...erotic energy is just life energy and is quickly worked off if you are doing interesting, absorbing things.

Sexual desire can therefore be channelled in other ways, or even conditioned away entirely (Solanas, 2004 [1967]; Dunbar, 1968; Densmore, 1969). Indeed, the boundaries between celibacy and asexuality (as we understand these terms today) become blurry; Dunbar's essay in which she talks about de-conditioning herself from sexual desire through celibacy is in fact titled 'Asexuality'.

This emphasis on celibacy was not carried forward into feminist writings of the 1970s and 1980s (Echols, 1989; Gerhard, 2001), although we can discern the impact of these ideas on some feminist writing that followed. For example, the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists (LRF), who were political lesbian separatists, argued 'giving up fucking for a feminist is about taking your politics seriously' since 'every woman who lives with or fucks a man helps to maintain the oppression of her sisters' (Leeds Revolutionary Feminists, 1981). Whilst the LRF are talking about sex with men as the problem (compared to Densmore et al. who saw sex *in general* as the problem), there was still a general de-prioritising of the importance of sex overall. This accords with the broader movement of political lesbianism in which lesbianism was seen as a political commitment to devote one's energies to other women, rather than an expression of sexual desire (Campbell, 1980). More broadly, whilst not calling for a systematic program of celibacy or separatism, feminist scholars such as Catherine MacKinnon (1989) developed these ideas in theorising that sexuality was a site of oppression for women under hetero-patriarchy, and thus no women could experience sex and sexual desire as fully consenting agents (even with other

woman since lesbianism also reproduced patriarchal patterns of dominance and exploitation).

Celibacy was again taken up as a feminist issue in the 1990s although in a much more marginal way. Whilst the central argument still related to celibacy as a way of resisting patriarchy, a new emphasis on celibacy as a radical form of relationality also emerged. Sally Cline (1994) conducted research with a number of women in the UK and North America who had adopted a celibate identity. She discusses how a number of the women conceptualised their celibacy as a feminist act. Reflecting the arguments detailed above by earlier feminists, her participants saw celibacy as a way of resisting male domination that was seen to operate through heterosexual intercourse. For many of the women, celibacy was about declaring 'no' in a context when women's refusals are not taken seriously (1994: 50). Celibacy was also conceptualised in terms of resisting 'sexual consumerism' wherein sex is seen as a commodity that 'women can buy into if they are the right shape and weight' (ibid.: 21). Related to this, their celibacy was also bound up with a rejection of conventional forms and expectations of femininity - not only in terms of appearance, but also with regards to how being properly 'feminine' involved willingness to co-operate in heterosexual sexual activity (ibid.: 8). In rejecting sexual relations with men and restrictive norms of femininity in their adoption of celibacy, 'a woman learns to control her own life, to take risks, to grow up, to make decisions, to live on her own, to value other women' (Cline, 1994: 40). Celibacy was seen as a way of nourishing and honouring one's self; here Cline quotes Mary Daly's definition of a spinster: 'she who has chosen her Self, by choice neither in relation to children nor men; who is Self identified - a whirling dervish, spinning in a new time and space' (Daly, as quoted in Cline, 1994: 86-87). One of Cline's participants did in fact talk about celibacy not as an act, but as a time and a place where she can 'exist' outside the psychic demands of hetero-patriarchy. However, this choosing of one's self was not seen to be about autonomy and independence in terms of masculinist understandings (i.e. operating without restraint or without reference to others). Rather, it was an autonomy and independence that was deeply enmeshed in a feminist ethics of care, relationality and responsibility (ibid.: 112-113). Indeed, it is argued that it is the radical non-possession (of others, by others) and the non-exclusivity of celibacy that allows one to love more fully and outwardly

(ibid.: 140). This emphasis on the radical *relationality* of celibacy also appears in the work of feminist theologians. Janette Gray, feminist academic and member of the Sisters of Mercy religious order, argued that celibacy allows women to relate to each other in ways beyond those identities which patriarchy has bestowed upon them:

‘celibacy gives voice to those other women who have been silenced in the male-sexualised universe, where woman is only sex-partner and heir-producer - the sisters, granddaughters, aunts, nieces, cousins, nannies and women friends’ (Gray, 1997: 155).

Lisa Isherwood, a queer feminist theologian, similarly discusses how celibacy can be seen as a fundamentally relational practice which ‘does not show one how to live alone but how to love together and to extend the edges of one’s world beyond the family’ (Isherwood, 2006: 70)²⁶. In pushing and even dissolving the ‘edges’, we can again see the notion expressed by the Shakers and the Koreshans, more than a century earlier, of breaking down the binaries between the private and the public, the personal and the communal. Isherwood also relates this to patriarchal capitalism, wherein celibacy can be understood as a revolutionary deprivatisation of women and women’s bodies through the dissolution of the family, which forms a cornerstone of the capitalist mode of production (Isherwood, 2006: 171).²⁷

In these understandings of celibacy, celibacy is not a negation or denial of the body or indeed of sexuality unlike in the writings of early second-wave feminists (cf. Solanas’ call for women to transcend their bodies). Cline argues that celibacy as *negation* is a masculinist conceptualisation; instead, the kind of celibacy she and her participants practice is characterised by abundance; it is a ‘passionate celibacy’ or, as Gray (1997: 153) puts it, ‘feminine jouissance’. Celibacy is (re)conceptualised as a holistic appreciation of the entire body, beyond a narrow focus on the genitals. And unlike Dunbar et al. who saw their celibacy as asexuality, the women in Cline’s research rejected the suggestion

²⁶ This understanding of celibacy, however, is not an exclusively feminist one. Sipe (1990) suggests that this is built into a priestly understanding of celibacy as facilitating a non-exclusive expansive love for all humankind, and celibacy as enabling a priest to devote himself wholly to those he ministers.

²⁷ Although unacknowledged by Isherwood, the family is also central to the (real existing) socialist mode of production (Stella, 2015).

that they were asexual. They actively claimed a sexual identity, but one based upon an expanded understanding of sexuality that encompassed other parts of the body, the mind, and the emotions (Cline, 1994: 83). Gray makes a similar point: when we understand celibacy as sexuality, we can see that ‘sexual attraction, warmth and energy permeate all human relationships’ and that there is a ‘diffusion of the erotic throughout the entire body’ (1997: 151). Similarly, Isherwood, drawing on Audre Lorde’s writings on the erotic, suggests that ‘celibacy is a call...to an embodying of eros in and through women’s bodies’ (2006: 116). In *this* sense, this chimes with what Densmore et al. argued decades earlier about sexual energy being nothing more or less than life energy.

3.3.3.1. The elasticity of celibacy

Cline, Isherwood and Gray all seem to suggest that celibacy is an orientation towards living and relating, rather than a simple abstention from sexual activity. Because of this, then, we come to the argument that ‘genital abstention’ is neither *sufficient* nor *necessary* for celibacy. Cline and her participants argue that it is not *sufficient* because simply not having sex does not mean one is living in a celibate way, where celibacy is understood as living without possession, or living ‘without giving yourself up’ (Cline, 1994: 72). As one of her participants put it: ‘if you have an emotional focus directed towards someone else you are not celibate [even if you do not engage in sexual activity]’ (ibid.: 79). Cline refers to this genital abstention without the celibate ‘mentality’ as chastity. Celibacy, of course, *can* include chastity - and for all of Cline’s participants it *did* include chastity since chastity was seen to greatly facilitate celibacy, but at the same time, chastity was not *necessary* for celibacy. If one led a celibate life (in the sense of cultivating the mind-set described by Cline’s participants), then there could be space for sexual activity. Isherwood also writes: ‘there are those who understand celibacy to be a relationship to community that will not be broken even if they form sexual relationships’ (2006: 73). A feminist praxis could therefore accommodate both celibacy-with-chastity and celibacy-without-chastity, but chastity-without-celibacy has tended to be related to forms of hetero-patriarchal domination (i.e. when sexual abstinence is imposed on a person without it being a choice they make).

The empirical work of Cline, and the theoretical contributions of Gray and Isherwood, thus implicitly introduce the idea of celibacy as an *identity* rather than ‘just’ something people choose to do. If celibacy is understood as an identity in the sense of inhabiting a certain place or way of being in the world, then (as we have seen) this might allow space for sexual activity (in the narrowly defined sense) to take place without posing a disruption. Sociologically, the ideas of ‘being’ without ‘doing’, and ‘doing’ without ‘being’, are certainly not unknown to us (Mullaney, 2006: 31-32). As an example, Mullaney points out that people who have misused alcohol in the past still often think of themselves as ‘alcoholics’. Conversely, we are not unfamiliar with the idea of the ‘social smoker’ where one does without being (i.e. smoking is confined to a particular context without impacting on who one is - one is a social smoker but this does not make one a *smoker*). In the case of celibacy, we could think about this in terms of having sex not necessarily making a person non-celibate.

3.3.3.2. ‘Mundane’ celibacy?

Although Cline stresses the politicised dimension of celibacy, it is important to note that many of her participants cited what we can think of as more ‘mundane’ reasons for their celibacy. For example, some were dissatisfied with sex. Others relished the freedom celibacy gave them from feeling anxious about their sexual attractiveness. Some women felt that the physical and mental energy required for sex could not accord with their domestic labour, childcare and paid-work responsibilities. For some women, celibacy was a refuge from physical or sexual abuse - either in the sense of pre-emptively protecting oneself, or protecting oneself from re-living trauma. Some women openly described their celibacy in terms of bitterness, resentment or spite towards men and/or their male partners, or in terms of ‘testing’ their male partners. It is true that we may, in reading these accounts, be able to relate these back to a wider explanatory context of hetero-patriarchy and gender inequalities, and a large number of women did indeed do this. However, for some, the personal remained the personal. Some other women also simply felt that they got the ‘buzz’ they needed from work, or other parts of their life, rather than seeking it in sex. Cline (1994: 110) is right when she argues that ‘motives’ or ‘causes’ of celibacy are very rarely singular; and further, rather than a ‘list’ of multiple motives, we should see them as intertwined. However, Cline takes the view overall that the

intentions behind acts are less important than the consequences. She argues that the ‘fact’ is, in a patriarchal society with deeply entrenched gender inequalities, celibacy *is* a political act - regardless of the celibate woman’s politics (ibid.: 53). This resonates with the work of much queer theory where acts, relationships, bodies or identities that fall outwith a particular norm are ‘read’ through a politicised lens, as in the queer accounts of asexuality discussed in the previous chapter. In the same way, some have also made the argument that celibacy is queer: as we have seen, Isherwood (2006) argues that celibacy expands restrictive understandings of sexuality, while Kahan (2013) views celibacy as queer because of its indeterminacy regarding the hetero/homosexual binary, and its refusal to be fixed in place. However, as some have pointed out (Scott et al., 2015 - in relation to asexuality but applicable here too), this privileges transgressive interpretations over the interpretations and meanings and everyday experiences that people themselves may have, which may or may not match these radical readings.

3.3.4. The incompatibility of womanhood and abstinence

As well as problematising the radical potential of celibacy through the possible disjuncture between theorists of celibacy and celibate people themselves, the empowering aspect of celibacy might also be questioned by the ways in which celibacy has also been seen as incompatible with womanhood. This has occurred in different ways in different historical eras.

Bernau (2008) writes that prior to the 18th century, it was women (rather than men) who were seen as sexually voracious with an uncontrollable sexuality, and so to have control over one’s body by abstaining from sex was a distinctly masculine quality (and indeed virtue). Of course, as we have seen, celibacy in the form of compulsory abstinence or virginity until a socially sanctioned time has long been part of women’s subordination (and thus seen as ‘properly’ feminine behaviour), but going beyond this by choosing lifelong abstinence (usually in the form of lifelong virginity) meant rescinding one’s womanhood. As the influential Church father St Jerome put it: ‘the woman who dedicates herself to Christ rather than the world, ceases to be a woman, and is called a man’ since ‘we all aspire to the condition of perfect manhood’ (Bernau, 2008: 34-35). Similarly, Myra Johnson (1977: 98) writing of this tradition in early and

medieval Christianity says: 'a woman, otherwise viewed as wicked, might become more like a man, and thereby gain salvation, if she elected a life of celibacy and asceticism'. Voluntarily giving up sex was seen as a triumph against sinfulness - something for all to aspire to, but a feat only a man could achieve. As a result of this masculinisation, celibacy often allowed medieval and early modern women 'to ascend to heights of intellect and earthly power that they were rarely permitted to contemplate' (Blank, 2007: 154), although it is important to acknowledge the possible opprobrium they faced too, at least as single women (Hill, 2001).

From the 18th century onwards, a shift occurred in which (at least white) women were no longer seen as sexually voracious but as asexual, with no sexual desire to speak of at all (Bernau, 2008: 56). Despite this, celibacy (again beyond the expected period of virginity) was still seen as 'incompatible' with womanhood due to its continued construction as masculine. Bernau documents how in the late 19th century, women who chose a life of celibacy were deemed 'viragints' by the medical profession, and were said to be living in a pathological state of 'masculo-femininity' (Bernau, 2008: 20). Whilst in earlier periods, women adopting celibacy was often seen as something laudatory (because it was about becoming more masculinised), in the late Victorian era of sexology where gender increasingly came to be understood in biological terms, women becoming masculinised through the adoption of celibacy was generally seen much less favourably since it meant women eschewing their biologically-determined roles of wife and mother.

There are also contemporary non-Western and non-Christian examples where celibacy is gendered as masculine. Kawanami (2001) discusses how within Theravada Buddhism (the dominant form of Buddhism in Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Laos and Myanmar), celibacy is masculinised by its association with spiritual power (in that celibacy is an essential step on the road to liberation from suffering and attachment). Conducting an ethnography with celibate Buddhist nuns in Myanmar, Kawanami writes that women struggle to be recognised as legitimate, since women and their bodies are seen as especially ensnared within the cycle of birth, suffering, attachment, and re-birth. Thus:

Celibate practice implies the shedding of femininity, which consequently allows the nun to transcend both the notion of female sexuality permeating Buddhist texts and the limitations prescribed to her by her reproductive faculties. By renouncing womanhood altogether, a nun is finally free to pursue her spirituality (Kawanami, 2001: 137).

In a different context in South Asia, in the rural Himachel Pradesh region of North India, women can choose to renounce sex and marriage and become *sadhins*. They continue to live and work in their villages, but adopt the appearance and social role of men; she lives ‘as if’ a man (Phillimore, 1991: 337). Furthermore, *sadhins* are seen not only as celibate but as asexual - as having no sexual desire to restrain in the first place. Phillimore (1991: 347) suggests that this is related to the need to incorporate women into the patriarchal order; that is, the disruptive threat of women’s choice not to marry (and her potentially uncontrolled and unattached sexuality) must be neutralised and contained through her construction as asexual. Therefore, when it comes to women, the autonomy and independence associated with celibacy must be curtailed in some way. Not only does she have to give up her social role as a woman (since to be a celibate *woman* is a threat), but she also must be ascribed asexuality (because she still has the body of a woman).

In this section on women and abstinence, I have attempted to show some of the complexities of the relationship between womanhood, abstinence, liberation, and subordination. For most women, abstinence has historically been experienced as compulsory; but abstinence can also be empowering for some women, particularly when it is ‘chosen’. And yet, choices always take place within wider contexts, and so we can see the ways in which the choices taken by women to be abstinent are often ways of responding to their subordination as women (e.g. gaining more access to the public sphere; not having to enter into deleterious relationships with men). In looking at the construction of abstinence as a concept, we can also see that if abstinence is empowering, then the reason for this might be because of the way abstinence is constructed as masculine (and within patriarchy, masculinity is seen as inherently superior to femininity, as well as imbued with notions of power, choice and agency). Thus there may also be broader societal ‘costs’ involved (in that such meanings are inadvertently affirmed) in order for some women to experience abstinence as empowering.

However, for other women (who still see themselves as making the choice to be abstinent), abstinence is not political, and so to insist on seeing women's relationship to abstinence only in these politicised and dichotomous terms is limiting.

3.4. Abstinence and masculinity

In this section, I expand on my previous discussion by directly exploring the relationship between abstinence/ceibacy and masculinity with regards to men themselves. I begin by first of all examining celibacy's association with 'optimal' masculinity in the *Brahmacharya* tradition of Hinduism. I then turn to research with celibate men in the US and New Zealand from different subcultures who account for their celibacy through the framework of hegemonic masculinity. Sociologists of masculinity have long argued that being recognised as 'masculine' (at least in its hegemonic form) is contingent upon being (hetero)sexually active (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 2005; Pascoe, 2007) but the literature presented in this section complicates this narrative somewhat when celibacy comes to be understood as a source of power.

3.4.1. Brahmacharya

Within Hinduism, like with other religious traditions with ascetic aspects, there is a strong association of celibacy with spirituality. *Brahmacharya* refers to a way of living that leads to Brahma (the supreme God-head); but it specifically means celibacy, or more accurately, *semen-retention* through avoiding intercourse, masturbation or even nocturnal emissions (Alter, 1995). Semen is thought to be the 'internalization of truth', the essence of vitality - and any loss is seen to be enervating, resulting in a man becoming a less perfect version of his previous self (Alter, 1997). However, Alter (1997) makes clear that celibacy is not virtuous because of some behavioural standard, but it is the presence of semen in the body that makes one 'virtuous' and therefore the most masculine. Alter (1997) discusses how an entire cottage industry has sprung up around the practice of *Brahmacharya*, with a proliferation of self-help guides enumerating rules around food, exercise, and sleep designed to help men bring their faculties under control and conserve their semen. Furthermore, the goal is not simply to conserve semen through restraining desire, but finding a place of equipoise

where desire no longer exists (i.e. a kind of asexuality). Perhaps counter-intuitively, at least from our Western perspective of masculinity, men who have fathered a lot of children are liable to have their masculinity questioned and disparaged, since they are seen to be depleted of semen (Alter, 1997). This also leaves women within Hinduism in a difficult place, both in terms of being celibate (since celibacy is understood as semen-retention) and of attaining the same kind of spirituality as men (since this requires celibacy) (Khandelwal, 2001). Reddy (2003) makes the crucial point that this construction of masculinity must be located in the context of British colonialism. She discusses how British colonialists in India constructed a hyper-masculinised self-image against the effeminate Indian Other. Indian nationalists in the late 19th century mounted a challenge to colonial rule by reconstructing Indian masculinity as cultivation of the spirit (realised through disciplining the body and mind through sexual abstinence) rather than in terms of a baser Western masculinity (focused only on the body). Reddy (2003) also emphasizes how *Brahmacharya* has wider nationalistic resonances in present-day India, discussing how it is frequently used in right-wing Hindu nationalist discourse in terms of a moral cleansing of the nation, usually through invoking a sexualised Muslim Other. This is an important reminder that celibacy should not be understood in individualised terms, but rather as connected in important ways to wider social structures such as constructions of 'race' and the nation.

3.4.2. Abstinence and masculinity in the contemporary West

This theme of celibacy as a kind of exalted masculinity also appears in some recent sociological studies on celibate men in the West. In these cases, masculinity is bolstered not through reference to the retention of semen in the body, but through the personal qualities or characteristics that abstaining from sexual activity represents. Haenfler (2004) in his study of Straight Edge²⁸ men in the US abstaining from sex, Wilkins (2009) in her study of young celibate Christian men in the US, and Terry (2012) in his study of celibate men in New Zealand, all discuss how the men would emphasise the control, discipline, and self-restraint required to be celibate. Whilst they explicitly distanced themselves from what they saw as the hegemonically masculine (having lots of

²⁸ Straight-edge is a punk subculture in which members abstain from alcohol, drugs, promiscuous sex and eating animal products.

casual sex), the authors argue that nevertheless the ways in which the men framed their celibacy also constituted a *claim* to hegemonic masculinity. Self-control and self-discipline have been historically central to constructions of Western masculinity, especially when juxtaposed against the putative irrationality and emotional excesses of femininity. Furthermore, all authors point out that a theme in their participants' accounts was the *difficulty* of celibacy. Whilst this was seen as something they could overcome with enough self-mastery, it was important to stress the difficulty of celibacy in order to position themselves as still in possession of sexual desire. Diefendorf (2015) in her study of evangelical Christian men in the US who were abstaining from sex until marriage, also discussed how 'confessing temptation' in their support groups and with their accountability partners worked as a way of enacting masculinity by affirming the presence of their sexual desire. In these empirical studies, the discourse of choice was also prominent. Terry (2012) and Wilkins (2009) both argue that framing their celibacy as a choice allowed men to present themselves as agentic and in control, and thus could claim an intact masculinity. But celibacy was also seen to facilitate greater emotional intimacy with women (Terry, 2012; Wilkins, 2009). In some respects, this represents a deviation from the traditional construction of masculinity as unemotional and sex-driven, but Wilkins (2009: 360) argues that it still represents a claim to masculinity in the context of the 'new man'. They were able to position themselves as having a more enlightened kind of masculinity vis a vis 'other' men, which continues to play into masculinity as hierarchical and exclusionary. Wilkins (2009) uses the above to argue that masculinity is an exceedingly flexible construct in that it can be stretched to include what is often seen as the anti-thesis of masculinity: not being sexually active. However, whilst I agree on the flexibility of masculinity, this chapter has shown that celibacy and sexual abstinence have in fact long been associated with masculinity, given the social and spiritual power it has been thought to imbue or represent, as well as the association with agency and choice. These are themes that emerge in the chapter on Masculinity and Femininity, where I suggest that abstinence might be seen as a form of 'masculine prestige' in and of itself.

I now turn to examine (more explicitly) the social context of which many of the young evangelical men in the above research were a part of: the sexual abstinence youth movement.

3.5. Sexual abstinence and young people

Sexual abstinence amongst young people in the United States has, over the past two decades, cohered into a popular, well-resourced, and institutionally supported social movement in a way that the celibate and sexual abstinence practices discussed in earlier sections have not. Emerging from evangelical Christian organisations in the 1990s (and still rooted within and resourced by these), sexual purity groups aimed at teenagers and young adults such as *Silver Ring Thing*, *True Love Waits*, and *Pure Freedom* have been active in the public sphere in promoting their message of sexual abstinence until marriage. Young people are recruited to sign and make public virginity pledges, buy and wear jewellery proclaiming their pledges, attend meetings and events ranging from weekend retreats to rallies to stadium-size live shows, and participate in prom-like purity balls (Gardner, 2011). The amount of young people involved in the abstinence movement is difficult to gauge, but according to self-reporting in the National Survey of Family Growth (2006-2010), 7% of males and 12% of females in the US under the age of 25 pledged to remain abstinent until marriage - although most also go on to break these pledges (Paik et al., 2016). The growth of this movement is also tied in to the spread of abstinence-only sex education in the United States. Driven by the moral panics around teenage pregnancy, the Reagan Presidency made the first steps towards federal funding of abstinence education in 1981, which was significantly increased and solidified in 1996 under Clinton's welfare reform acts, and then later by the Bush administration. Between 2000 and 2009, abstinence-only sex education programs in the US received more than \$200 million dollars in federal funds (Williams, 2011). Abstinence-only sex education was somewhat displaced as a priority under Obama's presidency (Paik et al., 2016) but has again been resurrected by the Trump administration (Klein, 2017).

Whilst most academic research focuses on the *efficacy* of abstinence pledges and abstinence-only education (e.g. Bersamin et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2014) or the motivations young people have for being abstinent (e.g. Abbott and Dalla,

2008; Long-Middleton et al., 2013), a small number of scholars have examined the gender politics of this movement (Valenti, 2009; Browning, 2010; Fahs, 2010b; Gardner, 2011; Gish, 2016; Miller, 2017). Unlike celibacy which has historically been conceptualised as *liberating* for women, but also representing a gendered *transgression* (in that women who are celibate have been masculinised, or forced to adopt the social role of men) abstinence in the contemporary youth movement in the US is 'being used as a tool to reinforce gender norms and heteronormative assumptions about relationality' (Browning, 2010: 159). Indeed, some have argued that the abstinence movement is really about the return to traditional gender roles based on ideals of feminine passivity and modesty, and masculine honour and responsibility (Valenti, 2009: 24; Gish, 2016: 12). Abstinence until marriage is framed as proper behaviour for *both* young men and young women, but also as a way of reinforcing the polarity of masculinity and femininity. Behavioural standards are thus set for both young men and young women - but as feminist writers have pointed out, how gender is understood within the movement is fundamentally patriarchal, and thus constitutes a special kind of harm to young women (Valenti, 2009; Fahs, 2010b). For example, Fahs (2010b) points out that purity balls which young girls attend with their fathers as their 'dates' operate in the most literal of patriarchal terms: after a daughter makes an abstinence pledge, the father also pledges to 'cover my daughter as her authority and protection in the area of purity' (p132). Fathers become moral guardians of their daughters' bodies, and this is often symbolised by the daughter giving a key to her father with the intention that he will pass it along to her future husband on her wedding day. In this way, 'the culture of chastity encourages women to construct themselves as sexual property, becoming, in the most literal sense, the sexual property of their fathers and their husbands' (Fahs, 2010: 137). Moreover, the sexual abstinence being advocated is only acceptable within certain parameters. It is about abstaining from sex before marriage (rather than within marriage), and there is a normative expectation that young people *will* marry. Thus sexual abstinence has a time limit; it is not intended to be a life-long choice and is acceptable only if there is an end goal of heterosexual union, again pointing to the fact that sexual abstinence in this context is less about sexual abstinence, and more about cultivating the right kind of gendered relationships.

However, Gardner (2011) complicates this reading of sexual abstinence being used to uphold gender and sexual normativity. She argues that a big part of the evangelical abstinence movement's success has been its ability to appeal to the secular, whether that be through using sex to sell abstinence (the reward for abstinence is touted as amazing sex within marriage), emphasising the health benefits of abstinence (and de-emphasising the religious argument), or tapping into the rhetoric of 'choice', which chimes with dominant discourses of liberal individualism as well as with feminism. The refrain of 'my body, my choice' - long associated with pro-choice activists - is frequently invoked by young women making the choice to control their own bodies by remaining abstinent (Gardner, 2011: 82). Thus, whilst the abstinence movement tends to be vehemently anti-feminist, it successfully uses the rhetorical strategies of feminism.²⁹ Modesty in dress, demeanour, and behaviour is also reframed as a kind of power that women have *over* men in that they can protect men from being overcome by the sexual desire that is thought to be constantly besieging their (men's) bodies and minds (Gardner, 2011: 84). In this way, young men are positioned as embattled and constantly in danger of succumbing to temptation, whilst young women themselves become moral guardians. The conservatism of the sexual abstinence movement is also complicated by the way in which those within perceive themselves to be 'subalterns under attack by an oversexualised secular culture' (Miller, 2017: 4). Miller argues that those in the sexual abstinence movement see themselves as 'rebels refusing heteronorms', since in their eyes, normative dominant heterosexuality today is characterised by non-monogamy, casual sex, sex outside of marriage, non-reproductive sex, and the mixing up of gender roles - against which they craft an oppositional identity. They see themselves as definitively on the 'outside', and their struggle has high stakes: no less than the moral and civilisational fortunes of the (American) nation (Moslener, 2015). Whilst most feminists would characterise the gender and sexual relationships promoted by those in the abstinence movement as *normative* given their traditionally conservative nature, Miller (2017: 12) argues that 'the evangelical virgin...[is] a sexual subject position that embraces anti-normativity'. Gardner (2011: 86) too suggests that 'what may appear to be a re-inscription of traditional gender roles is understood as a powerful act of agential liberation

²⁹ Parallels may be seen with the European Far Right's use of feminist discourse, and even indeed, their claiming of feminist identities (Farris, 2017).

from a repressive regime of liberalism' (Gardner, 2011: 86). Therefore, the contemporary sexual abstinence youth movement in the US can be seen as simultaneously representing order and tradition, *as well as* subversion with regards to gender and sexuality (depending on one's perspective). In this way, then, this reflects some of the themes discussed earlier in the chapter: celibacy and sexual abstinence as both representing a potential social *disruption* but also shoring up certain gendered and sexual norms.

3.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I clarified how I am using the term abstinence in this thesis, and outlined the parameters of this term. Whilst my thesis focuses on abstinence that is experienced as voluntary, I argued that this distinction between voluntary and involuntary is less clear-cut than some of the literature assumes, and it may be better to envisage a continuum or spectrum of abstinence.

Through examining the literature on abstinence, I showed how rather than being 'additive' to abstinence, gender is often central to both the meaning and practice of abstinence. Abstinence can be seen to occupy a complex and perhaps contradictory space within patriarchy: in the sense of regulating women's behaviour it can be seen as central to women's subordination, but it can also be adopted by some women who wish to find ways of resisting or circumventing gender inequalities (as well as by some women who do not see it in these terms at all). But I have also discussed how abstinence is also often constructed as 'masculine' (at least with regards to abstinence as a choice). Whilst abstinence can be empowering for women, precisely because of this association with masculinity, it may be at the cost of gendered opprobrium or reneging part of their socially-recognised identities as women.

This association with masculinity is the reason why I suggested that despite how we might think of celibacy as the antithesis of hegemonic masculinity in Western contexts, abstinence can be mobilised as a resource in service of the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. I outlined some recent empirical examples where this seems to be the case. I also discussed how the sexual abstinence youth

movement in the US can be seen as being fundamentally about the gendering of relationships (and, in particular, controlling young women's bodies) and this can be seen as either conservative or subversive, depending on one's viewpoint. Overall, whilst abstinence is thoroughly and inescapably *gendered*, there is no straightforward story of liberation or oppression (and for some, it is a matter of neither liberation nor oppression).

This chapter also illustrated that whilst there has been a small amount of empirical research on sexual abstinence, it has been focused on *either men or women* (e.g. Cline, 1994; Terry, 2012), and has tended to be located within particular religious and subcultural groups in which sexual abstinence is practised (e.g. Wilkins, 2009; Diefendorf, 2015; Browning, 2010). My research thus adds to and expands upon understandings of how sexual abstinence is gendered by involving people of a variety of genders, as well as from a variety of contexts (i.e. not limited to one particular subculture). In addition, by bringing sexual abstinence into conversation with asexuality, I attempt to explore more deeply the ways in which sexuality, sex and desire are constituted through gender.

4. Designing and conducting the research

‘A research design is an *action plan for getting from here to there*, where ‘here’ may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and ‘there’ is some set of conclusions about these questions’ (Yin, 1994: 19; emphasis in original).

After giving a sense of the ‘here’ in previous chapters (the context of the research, what the existing literature tells us, the rationale for the research), and with future chapters poised to give some sense of the ‘there’ (my ‘findings’), this chapter is devoted to discussing the journey in-between. It not only details the route I devised to get me from ‘here’ to ‘there’, and my experiences travelling on this path, but also the construction of the ‘there’ itself - i.e. how it is that I can ‘know’ what I ‘know’. Through reflexive commentary, and making myself visible as a researcher, I aim to show how the ‘there’ is not a pre-existing destination, but one that has been actively constituted through the process of research. Stanley (1990: 13) asserts that critical feminist research should ‘give an account of the conditions of its own production’, so it is my hope that this chapter goes some way towards achieving this goal.

This chapter is split into four main sections. In the first, I address the research paradigm in which I am situated, and the theoretical traditions that inform my work. These, combined with the aims of my research, led me to develop a particular research design which I also discuss in the first section. In the second section, I discuss my choice of particular methods, and the kinds of data that emerged from these methods. In the third section, I give an account of fieldwork - that is, how the research ‘played out’. In the fourth, I discuss how the data was managed and then analysed. A discussion of ethics is also interwoven throughout this chapter in recognition of the fact that questions of ethics never occur in isolation, but are relevant throughout the entire life of a research project.

4.1. Research paradigm and research design

To reiterate from the introduction, my research aims are:

- 1) To explore the gendered experiences of asexuality and abstinence

- 2) To explore the ways in which gender is experienced and made sense of by those who are asexual and abstinent
- 3) From this, develop a more nuanced, and empirically informed, understanding of the interconnections between gender and sexuality.

These aims developed out of my interest in the substantive topic, but they were also influenced by my particular epistemological and ontological assumptions about the world as well as my political and theoretical convictions. My desire to explore *gendered* experiences (and how *gender* is made sense of) indicates, first of all, my feminist conviction of the necessity of ‘attending to the significance of gender and gender asymmetry as a basic feature of all social life’ (Cook and Fonow, 1988: 5). My desire to explore *gendered experiences*, and how gender is *made sense of*, indicates the importance I place on subjective accounts. This is borne from an assumption that ‘knowledge’ is always situated (Haraway, 1988), and so subjective accounts are in effect the *only* kind of ‘knowledge’ available to us. However, I am also rooted in a constructionist perspective.³⁰ This means that I do not see these subjective accounts as accounts *of* a pre-existing and objective thing called ‘reality’, but that reality *is* precisely these accounts and understandings (Blaikie, 2000: 116). Therefore, in my research, I am not assuming gender to be a ‘fact’ that people simply understand in different ways, but rather that ‘gender’ is constructed through these understandings themselves. However, it is important to note that if something is constructed, it does not mean it is not *real*. This can be interpreted in two ways. First, ‘gender’ has significant material *consequences*: constructions of gender (and even the idea that gender *exists* at all) structure how we organise our social world in a very real way. Second, constructionism does not [have to] deny the phenomenal world, or the ‘stuffness of life’ as Turner (2008: 507) puts it. However it is not that we are simply confronted with the reality of ‘stuff’, but rather it is how we see (or don’t see), interact with, and give meaning to that ‘stuff’ that *constitutes* our reality. As Crotty (1998: 43-44) puts it: ‘We do not create meaning. We construct meaning. We have something to work with. What we have to work with is the world and objects in the world’.

³⁰ I use the term ‘**constructionism**’ as distinguished from ‘**constructivism**’. Although they are often used synonymously, Gubrium and Holstein (2008: 8) suggests that constructionism implies the social element of meaning-making in a way that constructivism does not.

So for example, we can think about the role of the body in the construction of 'sex' and 'gender'. We can say that in some sense the 'fleshiness' of our bodies exist with particular phenotypical features, but our bodies do not exist *as* bodies - they do not 'materialise' as such (Butler, 1990: 153) - until we construct them as bodies, and we have an understanding of what bodies mean. As an example of how we construct bodies, Laqueur (1990) argues that there is no fact of sexually dimorphic bodies (even though we may 'see' it as irrefutable today) by tracing how for much of Western history, it was obvious the body only had one sex. This also gives a sense of how constructions do not occur individually, on a whim, but are always socially embedded. As Crotty argues:

'It is clearly not the case that individuals encounter phenomena in the world and make sense of them one by one. Instead, we are all born into a world of meaning. We enter a social milieu in which a 'system of intelligibility' prevails... Our culture brings things into view for us and endows them with meaning and, by the same token, leads us to ignore other things.' (1998: 54).

It is through our interactions in the social world that we construct, reproduce, sustain (and sometimes challenge) meanings, but these meanings are always temporally and spatially specific - at different types and in different places, different things are brought into view.

It is in how I respond to these meanings as a researcher that the theoretical and political element of my research paradigm emerges. Namely, I am attentive to and critical of how social constructions and webs of meaning are always imbued with power relations, and exist to serve particular interests. Much of the methodological literature describes this perspective as 'critical theory' or 'critical theories' (e.g. Lincoln et al., 2011: 102)³¹, and generally encompasses feminist, anti-racist, Marxist, queer etc. political positions. My own worldview is particularly influenced by intersectional queer feminism. However, while Lincoln et al. (2011) suggest that 'constructionism' and 'critical theory' constitute two separate paradigms, I prefer Crotty's (1998: 60) characterisation of constructionism as an epistemological and ontological perspective *out of which* several different theoretical paths can emerge, of which critical theory is one.

³¹ This use of 'critical theory' is much broader than the 'Critical Theory' associated with the Frankfurt School.

Indeed, as Marshall (2008: 688) argues, critical theories such as feminism *must* be constructionist at base, since the alternative would mean accepting the status quo as natural and unchangeable. As such, critical approaches are also normative and *interested* (Marshall, 2008: 688) - rather than acquiescing to the relativism that some forms of constructionism might promote, at heart there is a contention that social constructions that oppress and exploit are ethically wrong. Constructionism allows us not only to trace the construction of meaning, but through making visible the ‘malleability of social forms’, we can also ‘reveal a potential for change’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011: 353).

4.2. Methods

For my specific methods of data collection, I chose to use a combination of semi-structured interviewing (face-to-face, but also via Skype, email, and phone) and ‘notebooks’. The research with each individual participant proceeded as such: interview→notebook completion over 4-6 weeks→ a second interview to discuss the notebook.³² In this section, I discuss my initial rationale for selecting these methods, but also my reflections on how my understandings and expectations shifted as the research progressed. More practical and processual descriptions of the fieldwork are detailed in the ‘Conducting fieldwork’ section.

My decision to interview was fairly straightforward: I wanted to explore subjectivities, understandings, and experiences at a depth and complexity not afforded by quantitative methods, or even necessarily by some qualitative methods (Lewis, 2003: 56-57). The addition of the notebook was designed to augment this exploration, but also to address some perceived limitations of the interview format, and (perhaps over-ambitiously) to provide an *epistemologically different* kind of data. I discuss these below after a brief interlude to clarify what I mean by ‘notebooks’.

The idea of using notebooks as a format was inspired by Thomson and Holland’s (2005) use of ‘memory books’, wherein they issued blank notebooks to participants, and participants were asked to fill the notebooks with material that they saw as relevant to their identity. This resulted in participants filling

³² I undertook 33 first interviews, and of the 33, 12 participants went on to complete notebooks, and 8 of the 12 participated in follow-up interviews.

their notebooks with writing, drawings, photographs, magazine and newspaper clippings, and everyday paraphernalia such as ticket stubs, postcards etc. Diaries have long been a feature of qualitative research (Alaszewski, 2006), but I was intrigued by Thomson and Holland's combining of the more traditional diary format with images both created and curated, and other cultural objects. I liked the flexibility offered by this approach; participants are not limited to one kind of expression, and so this may reduce the pressure to be 'artistic'. Rather than 'memory books', I have called mine 'notebooks' to pre-emptively counteract the possibility that participants thought they were being asked to exclusively document past experiences/memories, rather than what was current and ongoing in their lives.

I felt that using interviews alone could be limiting. Bowes-Catton et al. (2011) and Barker et al. (2012) have written about how interviews are constrained by available discourse (which tends to operate in binaries and is structured by hetero- and mono-normative logics). They suggest that this can be problematic when researching with people who have non-normative genders and sexualities, since these participants might have identities, subjectivities and forms of embodiment that are difficult to convey through language in the interview setting. They suggest that using more creative methods might be a way of overcoming this, by facilitating expression through mediums other than language. Related, Gauntlett (2007) and Galman (2009) have also argued that creative methods are particularly good at facilitating the expression of multi-dimensionality when it comes to experience and identity. Galman (2009: 200) suggests that creative methods can move us beyond the 'single-dimensioned clarity' of prose/speech and allow for 'multiple - even contradictory - interpretations to occur simultaneously' (ibid.). Others have also discussed how visual methods can be more attuned to the phenomenological, and can allow the researcher to 'tap into' the viscerality of being in a particular (kind of) body (Orr and Phoenix, 2015). As I view gender and sexuality as *both* embodied and part of wider discourses and social meanings through which the social world is organised (Jackson and Scott, 2002: 1-2), this combination of the 'notebook-interview' thus seemed to fit well with this perspective.

I also had an idea that ‘creative’ methods could be more empowering for participants, since they are generally participant-led and can potentially disrupt the researcher-researched hierarchy (Del Busso, 2011). This more participatory approach was to be bolstered by my use of a second, follow-up interview wherein I envisaged that participants could talk through the content of their notebooks, and interpretation could be approached collaboratively.

4.2.3. Evaluating notebooks and interviews

Some of these assumptions and expectations were upended as my research progressed, whilst others were borne out. To start, much of the data in the notebooks *did turn out to be* textual (in the sense of words, as opposed to more visual) data. As such, the notebook can be viewed as an extension of the interview, and of the kind of data gathered there. However, this was *not all* it was: the written text in the notebooks often offered a kind of data not present in the verbal interview data. For example, in the notebooks, participants would recall in-depth memories, or would ruminate for pages on a topic that seemed relevant to them. With semi-structured interviews, there is less time and space for such participant-led trajectories. The notebooks also allowed participants to record experiences and thoughts as they occurred on an everyday basis and which might have been forgotten or deemed irrelevant in the more formal interview setting (Kenten, 2010). For some participants, it was also clear that they were much more comfortable writing than talking, and these participants created long, rich, complex accounts that were absent in their interviews.

But participants did also create and/or curate a great deal of non-textual/non-written data. And this format did seem to convey some things not so readily accessible through words or text. A selection of some of this data is included in Appendix A. This more visual-oriented data was particularly useful when it came to the issue of embodiment (and so I draw upon them the most in Chapter Seven). These images often convey an immediate and visceral sense of how things *felt*: for example, what sexual responses feel like in one’s body (see Appendix A image A1); the ‘weight’ of an asexual identity (A2); how gender feels different in different spaces (A4); the sensory bombardment of sexualised imagery everywhere one looks (A5); or the feeling of claustrophobia caused by people’s assumptions when you have an asexual identity (A7). The multi-

dimensionality of experience and identity were also more obvious in the data from the notebooks. For example, in Adeline's diagram (A8), Adeline expresses what can be seen as contradictory but interwoven impulses (desire to escape the male gaze/desire to be seen by men) but this was not a tension that manifested itself in the interview, where a more unified narrative was presented. However, with some other participants, contradictions and multiple interpretations *did* emerge in the verbal interview data.

While these visual creations were effective in conveying embodiment and sensate experience, embodied accounts *also* emerged through the writing in the notebooks. For example, Adeline wrote: *'Every time I leave the house, I feel attacked by people's eyes. Is this because I'm a woman? Do men feel like this?'* And, while these kind of embodied expressions did not occur so frequently in the interviews, as I reflected back I was struck by how much the *interview itself* was an embodied encounter. As I discuss in the 'Conducting fieldwork' section below, these embodied encounters created their own kinds of data.

Given all of the above, I do not want to claim that the notebooks allowed for different kinds of *knowledge* to emerge, since in many instances there are parallels with the verbal interview data. We can perhaps instead say that they facilitated a different kind of voice (Thomson and Holland, 2005), or an 'alternative perspective' to that of the interview (Kenten, 2010). It is also worth noting here that I did not see the notebook as facilitating any kind of triangulation with the interview data (Spowart and Nairn, 2014), since my concern was not about being able to access 'the truth' or 'consistency' of accounts. Variations, ambiguities, and contradictions were welcomed as part of the 'kaleidoscope of impressions and textures' that form the 'messiness' of qualitative research (Law, 2004: 6).

Whether the notebook was more empowering for participants is unclear. Participants who completed the notebook and then the follow-up interview did talk about how it was a positive experience, largely because it had allowed them to spend some time thinking about things they might not otherwise consider, and the space allowed them to generate new insights. However, these are of course the responses of participants who not only *opted* to do the notebook, but *completed* it, and were engaged enough in the research to participate in a

second interview. But in some instances, even when a participant took part and seemed to enjoy taking part, there was a sense of unease or indignation generated by the task, as expressed by Julia: *'after I finish writing these thoughts about my experience as a woman, I will probably discard a lot of the distinctions I talked about and return to thinking about myself as a human, also just as myself. It was still very interesting to reflect upon my experience as a woman and it gave me new perspectives on myself and my relation to others'*. For Julia, the notebook's missive to reflect on her gendered experiences represented a disruption to her usual 'gender blind' worldview.

The notebook also seemed to generate guilt in some participants who agreed to take part but later withdrew. I received some emails from participants who were extremely apologetic about withdrawing and told me that they felt bad about not completing the task after saying they would do so. And I can only speculate why a few participants initially agreed to participate in the notebook element but never got back in touch - it may be related to the notebook itself and what it required of participants, but life circumstances may of course have got in the way (or they just no longer wanted to do it). A couple of participants declined to take part because they felt their creative skills would not be up to scratch - in these cases, the notebook seemed to be experienced as something exclusionary and inaccessible since they interpreted it as requiring some kind of creative 'literacy', despite my attempts to reassure them that this was not the case.

It is also not clear that the second interview (wherein we discussed the notebooks) helped to destabilize the researcher-researched hierarchy. It was certainly the case that I encouraged participants to share their thoughts regarding the creation and inclusion of particular notebook content. These discussions often offered new insights: for example, when I asked a participant why they had not talked about their demisexuality in the notebook, this led into a discussion about how it was not a particularly central part of their identity, and it just didn't feel relevant to their gender. Since the focus in the first interview had been centred on demisexuality, without the notebook and second interview, I might not have come to understand that for this participant, taking their life and identity as a whole, demisexuality was not a major factor. It is also true that the dynamic was different in the second interviews - generally

they were more relaxed since we had met before, and participants asked me more personal questions, to which I was happy to respond. However, the power differential between us still remained, given the fact that the participants were producing the notebooks for *my* research project, and I would ultimately have the ‘final say’ in interpreting and presenting the content (Stacey, 1988). It is not accurate to say then that the second interview disrupted my authority as a researcher. It may also have been the case that some participants felt intimidated or put-off by the prospect of meeting with me and going through content that might make them feel vulnerable or exposed. Indeed, one participant who had previously been interviewed face-to-face opted to use email for the follow-up interview since it would allow them to feel more comfortable.

4.2.4. Skype, phone, and email interviews

In the above, I have discussed the differences in data generated by the interview and the notebook. It now seems appropriate to pause here and reflect on the differences (and similarities) generated by different interview *modalities*. While my initial plan was to interview face-to-face, and the majority of interviews (n=24) were indeed conducted this way, some participants requested an alternative modality (Skype (n=4), phone (n=1), or email (n=4)) due to time constraints, or personal comfort levels. Telephone and email interviewing have been used in qualitative research since at least the 1990s, and continue to be used in a variety of qualitative research contexts today (e.g. Burnard, 1994; Trier-Bieniek, 2012; Murray and Sixsmith, 1998; James, 2017). More recently, researchers have begun to use video-conferencing technologies such as Skype as another medium through which to conduct interviews (Seitz, 2016).

The Skype interviews in my study were largely similar to the face-to-face interviews, since they were synchronous, and included both visual and audio content. The difference of course was spatial dislocation, which meant that the setting for two of the Skype interviews proved to be problematic (as I discuss in ‘Conducting fieldwork’). The telephone interview was also synchronous, but non-visual. In both mediums, and similar to the findings of other researchers such as Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) and Deakin and Wakefield (2014), the data generated was comparable to the face-to-face interviews, and lasted a similar amount of time. Both the Skype and telephone interviews were subject to

technology problems at points (lost signals; disconnecting unexpectedly due to problems with connections) but unlike Seitz (2016) who suggests that this disrupts flow and thus impedes the formation of rapport, I found that interview dynamics were not particularly affected by modality, with rapport more dependent on personality, shared interests etc.

The email interviews were qualitatively different from both the Skype and telephone interviews, since they were text-based, and asynchronous. Typically, the email interviews would begin by me emailing some questions, to which participants would respond in as much detail as they were able. I would then follow-up on particular points, and ask some more questions, typically limiting these to 3-4 per email in order to preserve interactivity and avoid survey-like responses (Gibson, 2010). The amount of time taken to 'complete' each interview varied considerably: the shortest involved emailing back and forth over a few weeks; the longest over a period of three months. Response-times were affected by a variety of contingencies, both in my life, and in the participants' lives. The data from the email interviews was, without exception, extremely rich and reflective. This is a quality that several others have noted, and it is typically attributed to the fact that both the participant and researcher have the time and space to consider and construct their responses, with reference to previously exchanged emails (James, 2017). Some of the most intimate interviews in my research were conducted via email - perhaps due to the relative anonymity provided (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006), and/or perhaps due to the longitudinal relationship fostered by email interviewing (Golding, 2014). The nature of the email data was similar to some of the written content in the notebooks, although these narratives were more directly guided by my questions.

4.3. Conducting fieldwork: an account of process

4.3.1. Participant criteria

The criteria for participation was that participants should recognise themselves in one or more of the following descriptors, which were placed (in varying combinations - see below for more on this) on my recruitment posters:

- Don't feel much (or any) sexual attraction or desire
- Choosing not to be sexually active
- Identify as asexual or celibate
- Consider yourself abstinent or celibate

These descriptors were intended to be as inclusive as possible, to encompass people who identified with a particular *identity* or *term*, as well as those who understood it more as a *decision* they had made, or a *behaviour* they were engaging in, as well as those who had the experience of *feeling* a certain way. Participants had to be over 18 to simplify the ethical approval process, and live within the UK (although one participant ended up being located in Canada)³³, since I planned to primarily conduct face-to-face interviews.

4.3.2. Recruitment

4.3.2.1. Why not AVEN?

At the beginning of my research, I made the decision not to recruit my asexual participants from AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network). This was because the majority of research on asexuality to date has recruited from AVEN, and is therefore over-sampled. AVEN does not by any means constitute the entire asexual population, and some asexual persons have previously expressed their negative feelings regarding AVEN. For example, there is a Tumblr set up by asexual-identified persons entitled “I can't AVEN”³⁴ which documents their problems with AVEN; others within the ace community have also written about the ‘rift’ between ‘asexual Tumblr’ and AVEN (Asexual Agenda, 2013). Indeed, at one asexual awareness workshop I attended, run by a university LGBTQ+ group, participants described AVEN as ‘so 2006!’ and spoke about how ‘the internet has evolved!’. Thus, I wanted to recruit from a wider variety of sources

³³ The location criterion was evident on my recruitment flyer, but this participant had just relocated to Canada and was keen to take part via email, so I made the decision to continue (particularly since they identified as both asexual and abstinent, and I was eager to explore this relationship).

³⁴ This is a play on the internet meme “I can't even” which depicts a state of speechlessness, either from joy or exasperation/frustration.

(and also more 'general' sources rather than asexual-specific spaces) in the hope of perhaps capturing more diversity amongst asexual-identified persons (e.g. people who may be less a part of the online asexuality community).

4.3.2.2. A bricolage of sources, and recruitment in three stages

The recruitment process was guided by purposive sampling. Mason (2002: 127) describes purposive sampling as a process of 'taking stock' wherein the researcher periodically and systematically reflects upon existing participants and emerging data, and is thus able to judge the kind of participants, events, settings etc. that need to be worked into the research in order to address the research questions. In my case, this meant my recruitment proceeded in three broad stages (a pattern clearer to me now in hindsight than it admittedly was at the time) as I took stock and interacted with my data.

In the first stage, I used flyer A (Appendix B) which included the word 'asexual', and I targeted fairly general sources (i.e. not asexual or abstinent specific spaces). These were: university LGBT+ societies, communities and libraries throughout Glasgow, and through my own social networks, wherein I asked people to share posts via social media. These sources were selected primarily because of locality. I recruited 14 people this way. Notably, only one participant contacted me after seeing my poster in a community centre - the majority came from the LGBT+ societies, and through my own contacts (the participants recruited this way were hitherto unknown to me). However, I found that this sample was very asexual-heavy: of the 14, 12 identified with the term asexuality in some way. Two further participants were also recruited somewhat unintentionally, after I gave a guest lecture on my research-in-progress for a university undergraduate sociology society. At the end, two people approached me and asked if they could take part (both of whom identified with the term asexual).

Six months into my research, I therefore had 16 participants, but only two who had not used the term asexual to describe themselves. I thus made the decision to try and recruit from more celibacy or abstinence specific spaces (thus entering into stage two), but still using flyer A (which mentions asexuality).

Many of my attempts here were unsuccessful - I posted on a variety of online abstinence and celibacy support forums, on relevant Reddit sub forums, on a celibacy online newsletter, and even advertised on celibacy dating websites. I also paid a small amount to advertise my flyer on Facebook for a short space of time (it was 'targeted' to those who had interest in, or shown interest in, topics related to celibacy, abstinence, chastity, singlehood etc.). Whilst the metrics told me that I had received hundreds of page views, I was not successful in recruiting any participants via this route. A breakthrough came when I found a UK-based dating site for people searching for 'platonic' relationships, and the administrators agreed to send an email to all their members which advertised my study. I was thus able to recruit 10 more participants. These participants were more geographically dispersed throughout the UK, and six of these still identified as 'asexual' in some way, but two identified as abstinent, and two as abstinent as well as asexual.

At this point, I felt that the sample was still too dominated by those identifying as asexual. In stage three, I decided to go back to a more general source (this time a popular online classified ads site), but this time I used flyer B (Appendix C) which omitted the word asexual. I ended up recruiting the final seven participants this way, all of them located within central Scotland. Six of these participants were abstaining from sex, and one was asexual.

I decided to stop at thirty-three participants. Bowen (2008) calls for researchers to be more transparent when it comes to discussing the decisions around ending data collection, so I offer some brief reflections here. Despite the principle of 'data saturation' being held up as the gold standard in qualitative research (Morse, 1995), I do not feel that I reached this point. This was for several reasons. After almost eleven months and forty one interviews, many of which contained distressing content and affected me psycho-somatically, I felt I had reached what Wray et al. (2007) call 'researcher saturation' - something they suggest should be taken seriously. Time and resources were also a factor, as recognised by Green and Thorogood (2004: 103) when they write: 'we are likely to run out of time or money before 'saturation' has happened'. With a limited period of funding, and institutional deadlines, I had to make a decision to stop fieldwork somewhere. However, I did also feel that whilst new stories were still

emerging from the interviews, the data I had gathered was sufficient to answer my research questions (Marshall, 1996: 523). Furthermore, as O'Reilly et al. (2013: 194) point out, not attaining saturation does not mean one's findings are invalid, but rather that 'the phenomenon has not yet been *fully* explored' (my emphasis). With my research perspective rooted in social constructionism, I argue that it is never possible to really capture a 'totality' with regards to a phenomenon and further exploration is always possible (Malterud et al., 2015).

4.3.2.3. A word on gender and sampling

Whilst I deliberately altered my recruitment strategies in order to achieve more of a balance between asexual and abstinent participants, I made no attempt to balance the sample with regards to gender. I understand gender not as a binary but rather as a complex and fluid spectrum (and indeed many of my participants identified as queer or non-binary³⁵), so categorising my participants into men or women and striving to find equal numbers did not sit well with this worldview. There is of course value in seeking the experiences of those who experience the world in different gendered ways, since patriarchal structures mean that those deemed 'women' and those deemed 'men' are understood and treated differently, but I wanted this to emerge more organically from the data. I also felt that who responded to my recruitment flyer was an interesting finding in itself, particularly because previous research has indicated a high number of non-binary persons, and much more women than men, in asexual communities and a higher number of non-binary persons and women participating in asexuality research (see Chapter Two).

4.3.3. Participants

I have included a table with participant demographic data in Appendix D. Although Morse (2008) criticises qualitative researchers for unconsciously

³⁵ Non-binary is a term used by those who feel that they do not fit into the binary gender system of man/woman male/female. People may identify directly as non-binary, but non-binary can also work as an 'umbrella' term, encompassing multiple identities with different relations to the gender binary. For example, *agender*, *gender-neutral*, *genderless*, and *neutrois* are terms used by those with no gender. Those who feel they move between genders often identify as *bigender* or *genderfluid*. *Demigender* (as in demi man/boy, demi woman/girl) denotes a partial identification with a particular gender. Those who see themselves as disrupting the male/female binary might refer to themselves as *genderqueer* or *genderfuck* (Barker and Richards, 2015: 166).

adopting quantitative criteria and listing the often irrelevant demographic ‘variables’ of their participants, I have chosen to do so to facilitate reading and contextual understanding in the data chapters. The demographic information was gathered by asking participants about age, education level and occupation (as very crude proxy indicators of class), ethnic identity, and whether or not they self-identified as disabled since I did not want to make any assumptions about participants (Patton, 2002: 351). I also included questions about preferred pseudonyms, and preferred gender pronouns (see ‘Interview Schedule and Content’ below). I have not included gender categorisations in the table, since in many cases these were complex and belied simple classification. The same could be said for sexual identity, but I have included this in the table since this functioned as a criterion in my purposive sampling strategy. At the risk of flattening out people’s complex realities, 21 participants could be considered as on the asexual spectrum (although some with reservations), and 12 participants could be considered abstinent (although a couple of these talked about wondering if they were also asexual).

The asexual ‘dominance’ of the sample deserves a word here. The term ‘asexual’ is one that is gaining cultural currency due to ‘asexuality’ becoming a visible identity. The asexual community also has a large online presence, and calls for research participants are often circulated across various platforms, and people are mobilised to participate as part of the perceived need for greater visibility within academia and the research community. In contrast, there is no single agreed upon term or identity to describe abstaining from sex, or to describe a general disinterest in sex; nor is there an identifiable community around which people coalesce. These factors mean that recruiting the non-asexual participants becomes much more difficult.

Some other points about the sample should be noted here. Just under less than half the sample were students. This can be partly attributed to the fact that I recruited through a university society, but also because those identifying as on the asexual spectrum (who made up the majority of the sample) tend to be younger, and over-represented in higher education (Asexual Census, 2014). Of those in work, the majority were in what are considered ‘professional’ or ‘creative’ or ‘knowledge-based’ occupations, although there were some people

who did manual work, and some who were unemployed or were unable to work because of disability. The average age of the sample was 29, with an age range of 18 to 53. The sample was very white heavy, although seven participants stated ethnic identities other than white. Four of these seven however still had some identification with white (for example, as part of a 'mixed' identity). Seven participants also self-identified as disabled (having mental health problems, being on the autistic spectrum, or being dyslexic or dyspraxic).

4.3.4. The research process

When a person contacted me (in the majority of cases via email) expressing their interest in my research after seeing a recruitment flyer, I sent them an information sheet (Appendix E) and asked them to get back in touch if they were still interested after reading through it.³⁶ We then organised a time and place for the interview, or in some cases negotiated the medium through which the interview would be conducted.

I conducted a first interview with all 33 participants. 23 participants then agreed to take part in the notebook component, but in the end only twelve of these returned the notebook to me (which still constituted more than a third of my sample). I provided participants with a range of options regarding the notebook, including using paper notebooks I provided, their own notebooks, or electronic or digital notebooks. I also provided participants with pre-paid envelopes which would allow them to return material to me. I provided participants with an information/instruction sheet for the notebook as well as a list of prompts (Appendix F) which they could choose to employ or ignore as they saw fit. I also stressed verbally the flexibility of the format, in terms of the materials they used, the content they included, or the mode of expression they chose. In the end, seven of the twelve who completed the notebooks chose to use the paper notebooks provided (and one of these also provided me with a link to a Pinterest board they had specifically created). These notebooks contained a lot of prose, diary entries and 'ruminations', but also drawings and collages, and a list of

³⁶ In total, I sent out 65 information sheets to interested persons, and of these, 33 eventually became participants.

songs. Two participants used cloud storage in order to let me access a collection of files they had compiled: these included photos, word documents with their writing, drawings they had scanned in, and links to articles, opinion pieces and videos (created by others). One participant posted a collection of prose/diary pieces back to me, which were written on the backs of old leaflets, and one participant emailed me a word document directly. One participant gave me a zine and a CD of music they had written and performed with their band.

Of the twelve participants who completed the notebooks, eight of them went on to complete follow-up interviews. The remaining four were either unable to participate in an interview, or felt that they had nothing much else to add. Of these eight follow up interviews, 5 were conducted in person (all of these participants had been interviewed face to face in the first interview), two via email (both of whom had been interviewed face to face in the first interview), and one via phone (who had previously been interviewed via phone).

4.3.5. Interview contexts

The research was conducted between October 2014 and August 2015. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in a variety of settings, depending on participant preference and availability of venues. These were: private interview rooms on university campuses, participants' homes, coffee shops, pub beer gardens, parks, and my university office. The interviews conducted in public places presented some challenges: I was conscious of other people being around, often in close proximity, so I felt more circumspect in the way I was phrasing questions given their sensitive nature. The coffee shop, pub, and park interviews also presented problems later when it came to transcription due to the noise levels. In general, I felt the interviews conducted in private spaces were more relaxed, and allowed for more ease and rapport, partly as we were more able to discover commonalities (e.g. the presence of pets, Judith Butler books on the bookcase etc.).

I conducted the Skype and phone interviews either in my own home, or in my university office, and participants, on their end, were also in their home and/or private spaces. However, the setting for two Skype interviews in particular

posed some problems. I interviewed Christopher via Skype whilst he was staying for a short while at his parents' house. His parents were in another room, but Christopher would occasionally resort to typing his answers in the instant-messaging window rather than saying them out loud when he was referring to things such as his sexual history. This made for somewhat of a strange dynamic, as there was silence while he typed and I waited, and I would then ask a follow-up question, carefully worded to be 'parent safe' (e.g. rather than referring to him not having sex, I would refer to 'his decision'). In Kartik's case, he was based in the UK, but was visiting his parents who lived in Zimbabwe, and it was from there that he spoke to me on Skype. Part of Kartik's story involved him negotiating the idea of being gay, but as he explained, in the Zimbabwean context, this was an 'unspeakable, unsayable thing'. I tried to take the lead from Kartik in terms of the words I used, and I was extremely conscious of his feelings of safety and comfort. As a result, some of my questions were phrased obliquely, again referring to 'feelings' and 'decisions' rather than specifics.

4.3.6. Interview schedule and content

In the demographic questionnaire administered before the interview, I asked participants to write down a preferred pseudonym, since I am conscious of the power dynamics implicated in researchers naming their participants (Lahman et al., 2015). However, less than half of the participants elected to do so; everyone else either left it blank or verbally deferred to me. In those cases, I have chosen names that seem to accord with what I know of that person and that hopefully do not stray too far from the ethnic origins of their actual names. Two of my participants were adamant that they wanted me to use their real names. Both participants felt a great deal of pride in their identities (for example, one of these participants thanked me for providing them with 'the opportunity to speak out for asexuals') and thus they felt that retaining the connection with their real names was important. I have therefore honoured these requests, based as they were on informed consent and an understanding of the ramifications of this

choice.³⁷ On balance, I felt that to remove this autonomy from participants would do greater harm than the small risk of identification (Moore, 2012).

I also asked participants which pronoun they would like me to refer to them as in the research. The practice of asking about rather than assuming anyone's preferred gender pronoun is a foundational element of my trans and non-binary inclusive feminism, and of the feminist political and theoretical communities of which I am part. A few of my participants who had non-binary gender identities actually commented on this, and told me that they were glad that I was asking about pronouns. Speaking in the educational context, Wentling (2015: 473) suggests that educators 'reconsider pedagogical practices that assume students' pronouns based on gender presentation or forenames' and that '[a]sking all students to explicitly name their pronouns disrupts the linguistic hegemony embedded in taken-for-granted gender attribution processes'. I would argue that this practice is one that should be extended to the research context in the interests of cultivating more inclusive research. However, an attendant risk is potentially alienating participants for whom the idea of gender pronouns is situated out with their habitus. Some of my participants vocally puzzled over the question, or left it entirely blank, whilst others seemed mildly offended that I would even ask the question in the first place (i.e. isn't it *obvious?*).

Before participants signed the consent form (Appendix G), I made sure that they were aware of the kind of topics and questions that might be raised in the interview. I explicitly talked about how I had some questions that could potentially be distressing (for example, questions relating to negative sexual experiences). My aim was to make space for negotiated and more meaningful consent rather than just a blanket agreement - participants had the chance to exclude any topics they were uncomfortable with at the start, or could choose for me to make 'prefatory announcements' before I broached particular topics in the interview (Patton, 2002: 370). My interview schedule was developed from my research questions, and I asked questions which explored personal histories of sex and sexuality, participants' current 'situation' at the time of the interview, identities and labels that were meaningful for them and how these

³⁷ I explained to these participants that people may be able to identify them in any publications arising from the research, and thus their confidentiality would be compromised.

might have come about, how they conceptualised and described their gender, how they related to masculinity and femininity, and possible intersections between their gender and sexuality/experience of sex (see Appendix H for interview schedule).

4.3.8. 'Disclosing myself'

The idea that researchers should [be willing to] open themselves up to their participants has become a pillar of feminist methodological practice (Reinharz, 1992: 32). This can be seen as part of the bigger feminist challenge to the positivistic research paradigm and the ideals of neutrality, objectivity and detachment (Valentine, 2002: 116). Self-disclosure is understood as an ethical feminist practice which facilitates a more egalitarian research relationship (Oakley, 1981; Bristow and Esper, 1988: 78), although it is often also (perhaps contradictorily so) framed as a way of encouraging participants to 'open up' to a greater extent (e.g. Reinharz and Chase, 2003: 78). Self-disclosure is particularly recommended and practised in 'sensitive' research settings (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007) and in sexualities research in particular: for example, Ryan (2006:156) argues that it is 'naïve' to expect participants to tell their sexual stories without reciprocity on the part of the interviewer.

However, others have written about how some participants might not appreciate researcher self-disclosure, since it could be seen to violate the norms of the research encounter e.g. the researcher is there to listen to the participant (Ribbens, 1989: 414). It could also be interpreted as another instance of hierarchy, as the researcher assumes 'greater category entitlement to provide information about a particular topic than the interviewee' (Abell et al., 2006: 241). There is also the simple fact that participants might just not care!

With all this in mind, I decided to neither advertise nor hide my personal positioning with regards to sexuality and gender. I did not want to 'declare' my sexuality and gender identity in my recruitment materials or in initial communications, partially because I would struggle to pin them down in any succinct way, but also because I didn't want to foreclose anyone's participation through my particular identifications. However, in the interviews, I did

communicate to participants that I was happy to answer any questions that they might have about me. The vast majority of participants took me up on this offer, generally asking why I was personally doing this kind of research, with some asking me directly ‘are you asexual?’ or ‘are you abstinent?’ or some variation. I answered honestly, but my answers varied according to context: e.g. if a participant asked if I was abstinent I would explain that I wasn’t, but would not launch into a discussion about my complicated feelings and identifications with queer, demisexual and grey-A, unless they asked further. For other participants, this was the trajectory the conversation took and I was happy to be open about these things. As Reinharz and Chase (2003:78) advise, rather than an ‘abstract commitment to self-disclosure’, what is more useful is contextual sensitivity - thinking about ‘whether, when and how much disclosure makes sense’ with regards to each participant.

However, as Ryan (2006: 158) reminds us, researcher disclosure is about more than just personal narratives; it also occurs through dress, body language, and interpersonal dynamics. Whilst my sexuality could be disclosed through personal narrative, my gender (or at least my gender presentation), was ‘disclosed’ to participants through these other markers. Recently, a number of writers have enjoined us to take our bodies as researchers more seriously, and have highlighted the ways in which participants engage with our embodied presences in specific research contexts (e.g. Ellingson, 2006; Sharma et al., 2009; Zubair et al., 2011; Norris, 2015). In my case, whilst there were undoubtedly numerous ways in which my embodied presence impacted on the research encounter of which I am unaware, there were some moments in which I did become conscious of how my body was ‘implicated as [a] site of knowledge production’ (Ellingson, 2006: 199). Riach (2009) describes these as ‘sticky moments’ where the ‘situatedness and assumptions of interview protocol and research context [are] actively questioned or broken down’ and when ‘I, as ‘the researcher’ appeared to be used as an artefact that affected [the participant’s] production and communication of knowledge’.

For example, Julia, who identified as a woman but vehemently rejected all things ‘feminine’, began criticising women who engage in make-up and beauty practices. At this point, (although always already present), my own body comes

into *sharp focus* as she seems to remember me, and (indicating my moderately femme appearance - smart-casual dress, make-up, waist length hair) says: “I don’t mean *you* though, I’m not saying you’re shallow or anything”. I smiled weakly, unsure how to respond to her exceptionalising me, and *felt* the encounter much more uncomfortably from there on in. I had the sense that my embodiment - and Julia’s reflexive engagement with my embodiment - from that moment served to shut down particular avenues of conversation (i.e. questions I might have otherwise asked), and constrain the discursive space. In subsequent interviews, I started altering my appearance: I stopped wearing make-up, and avoided wearing much jewellery, or spending too long doing my hair.

This example demonstrates the importance of engaging with embodiment since it highlights, amongst other things, the intersubjectivity of the research encounter as the participant draws my body into the narrative (Norris, 2015: 1003). It also highlights, as Ellingson (2006: 305) argues, that stating one’s categorical identifications is not enough (e.g. that I’m genderqueer/agender but woman-presenting to the world, and varying levels of femme) but one has to think about how these play out in the field, interrelationally.

The above alludes also to how participants *placed me*, and thus the importance of participant reflexivity (Riach, 2009). After Reeta asked about my personal motivations at the beginning of the research, whenever she talked about ‘asexuals’ as a group, she would use the word ‘we’ to indicate that I was part of it, and knew exactly what she was talking about. Sam made a disparaging joke about straight people (after me telling them I was queer-identified), to which I laughed, and it was clear that I was being placed (and placing myself) as ‘not one of those straight people’. However, in Connor’s case, the experience was one of radical alterity: halfway through my questions, he stopped, clearly bemused, and said ‘you don’t have a clue about this, do you?’ I responded to this interlocution by explaining that no I didn’t, and that was why it was really good to hear his story. This was an interesting interjection on many levels. Connor could be seen to disrupting the traditional interviewer-interviewee hierarchy, displacing me as the ‘expert’. The ‘this’ to which he suggested I did not have a clue about was multi-faceted: he was describing a situation of being young (Connor was ten years younger than me), being raised in a religious context,

being male, being working class, and being abstinent. Through the questions I ask, Connor is reflexively situating me as an ‘outsider’.

4.3.9. Affect

Following feminist scholars who are insisting that we take our emotions as researchers seriously and incorporate these into our work (Blakely, 2007), as well as a growing empirical interest in the impact of research *on researchers* (Bloor et al., 2007; Coles et al., 2014), I reflect here on the affective experience of the research.

I found the research process to be emotionally exhausting in unexpected ways. I was setting out to explore issues of gender and sexuality which are often de-facto deemed ‘sensitive’ by institutional ethical standards (e.g. University of Glasgow, 2014) but since I was not *specifically* researching traumatic experiences or contentious views, I was (naively) unprepared when I did encounter these. As Emerald and Carpenter (2015: 744) state: ‘we may not know the vulnerabilities we touch in ourselves’. A number of participants discussed experiences of child sexual abuse and sexual violence as they constructed their sexual selves, and as someone who has been affected by these things too, I struggled with my emotions and embodied reactions during and after the interviews. My on-the-spot response was to remain silent about my own experiences. Post-hoc, my justification is that since sexual violence (whilst incredibly relevant) was not the *focus* of my research, self-disclosure on my part seemed less necessary. I also got the sense with at least some participants, sharing my experiences out of a desire for ‘feminist consciousness raising’ would not have been welcomed. But there was also the bald fact that these were things I couldn’t, and didn’t want to, talk about in that moment.

Another participant expressed what I interpreted as misogynistic views with regards to women and sexual consent, and I was deeply troubled by how I responded (or did not) to this. Despite political identification with Sara Ahmed’s (2010) concept of the ‘feminist killjoy’ which constitutes a wilful refusal to sustain the comfort of others, I found myself ‘only nodding and smiling’ as Bell (2011) describes himself acting in research encounters with homophobic

participants. Bell alludes to the complexity of encounters like these, and of our conflicting motives as researchers/people: our silences may be borne from an ethical stance we have as researchers to respect participant accounts, but those silences might also be violations of one's other politically-informed ethical principles, leaving us, as he succinctly put it, 'feeling dirty'.

Hearing these stories in real-time, and then again and again as I transcribed, and then reading them over and over as I coded, induced a lot of psycho-somatic anxiety, as other qualitative researchers have reported (McCosker et al., 2001). I had to find strategies to deal with this, which included debriefing with my partner and close friends, taking plenty of breaks as I transcribed and coded, and eventually arranging for others to carry out the remaining transcription.

4.4. Data management and analysis

All data was stored securely as per the Data Protection Act 1998.³⁸ Where limitations to this security presented themselves (such as copies of emails being retained on email servers regardless of 'local' deletion), potential participants were informed of this before they consented to take part.

4.4.1. The process of coding (and analysis)

I did not approach coding and analysis as two distinct processes. Like Miles et al. (2014: 72), I understood coding as part of the analysis: 'coding *is* analysis...coding is deep reflection about and, thus, deep analysis and interpretation of the data's meaning'.

I began my analysis by experimenting with two different qualitative data analysis packages - Nvivo and Quirkos - but found both to be limited in their own ways (e.g. Nvivo lacked Quirkos' visual element, but Quirkos lacked a feature for integrating annotated notes). As such, I developed a somewhat idiosyncratic coding procedure using a series of Word documents that seemed to make more intuitive sense to me. I developed this procedure to include several different elements that I felt I needed to understand, organise, and categorise the data,

³⁸ Paper data was stored in a locked filing cabinet. Electronic data was stored locally on my PC in a password protected folder (not Cloud storage).

such as visual elements (e.g. the use of colour, the way data is displayed), annotations, narratives, and a hierarchical coding frame.

After becoming overwhelmed by my initial attempts to code *all* of my data, regardless of relevance, I decided to take a more focused approach by coding specifically in relation to my research questions. I would comb through each individual transcript and notebook, and highlight anything that seemed relevant to the research questions. My research questions were generally broad and flexible enough so that even unexpected findings could be accommodated within that structure. I would then open up a Word document for that participant, and would paste segments of text from the transcript/notebook material together under various code headings, which tended to be descriptors of what I perceived to be ‘going on’ in that segment of data (see Figure 2). When a particular thought struck me as I was undergoing this process, I would use the comment feature in Word to create a memo for myself. I continued this process for each individual participant, refining, and revising codes as I went.

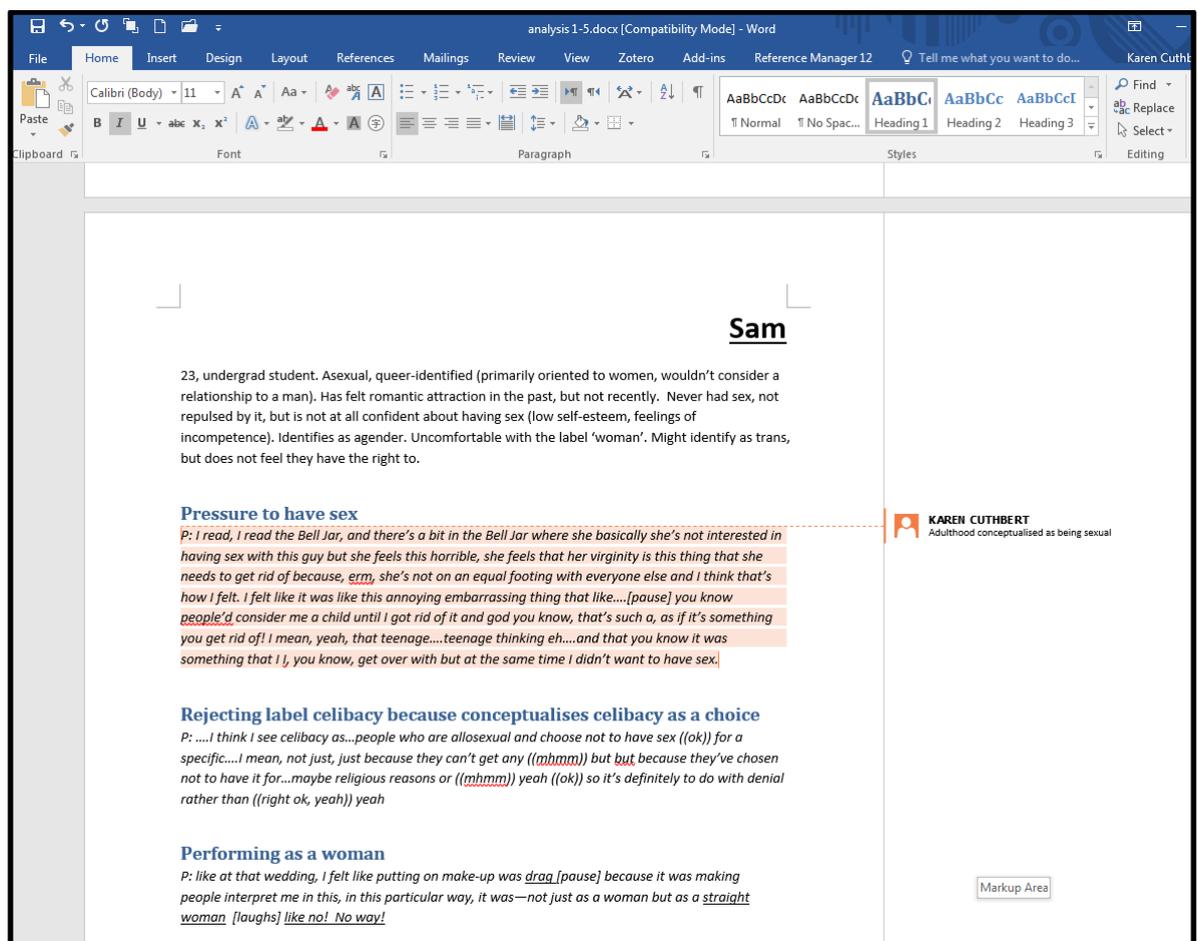


Figure 2 – Analysis: initial steps

I then compiled the list of codes I had made for each participant, and further coded *these* - designating them as one of four categories broadly pertaining to my research questions (see Figure 3). These were: how gender is experienced/lived daily; asexuality/abstinence impacting on (experience of) gender; gender impacting on (experience of) asexuality/abstinence; and ‘other’ (i.e. material that seemed relevant but which was not easily categorised under the other three headings).

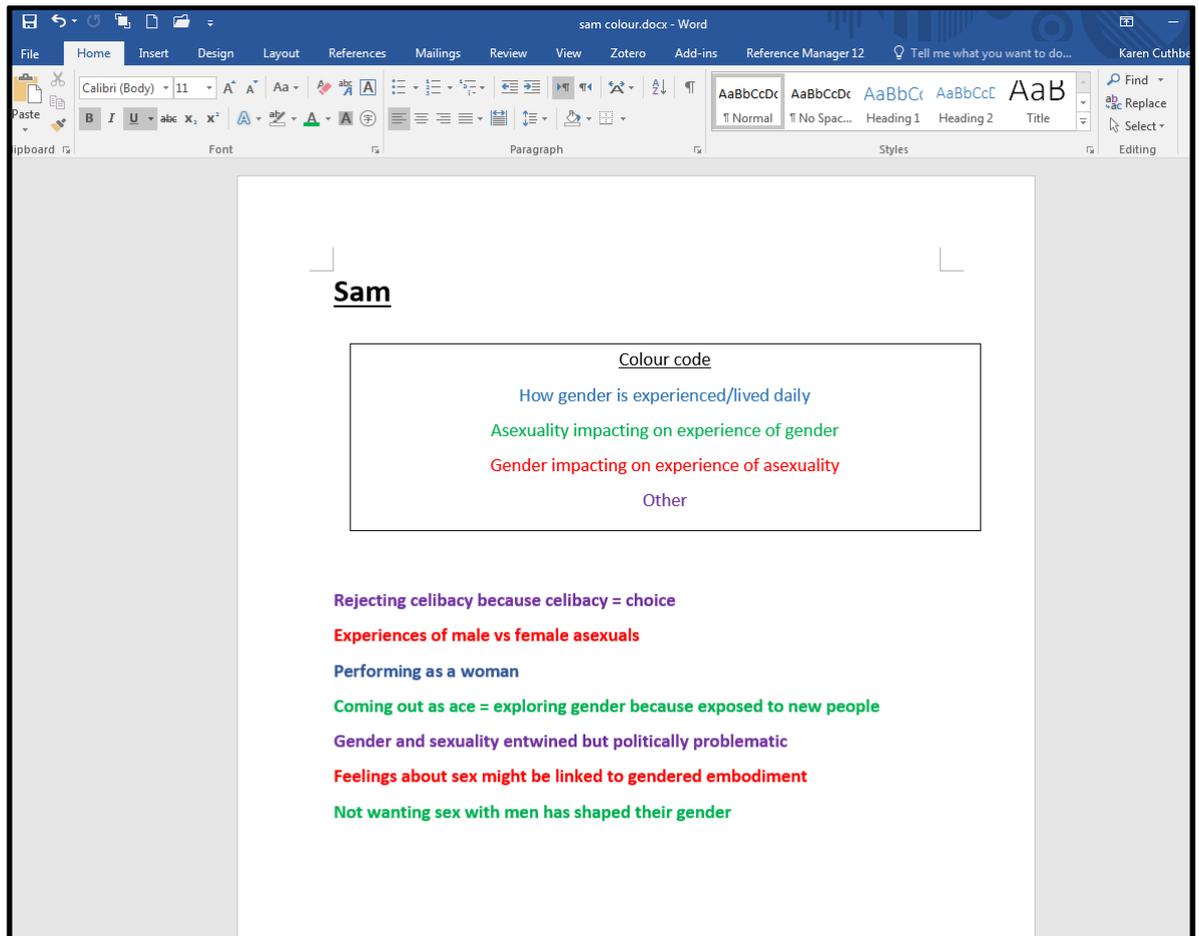


Figure 3 – Analysis: coding the codes

I would then open up another document, and for each individual participant, I wrote a short narrative under each of these four headings, exploring how the participant’s account related to that heading, which forced me to articulate why I was coding things in a particular way, allowing me to develop connections across accounts (see Figure 4).

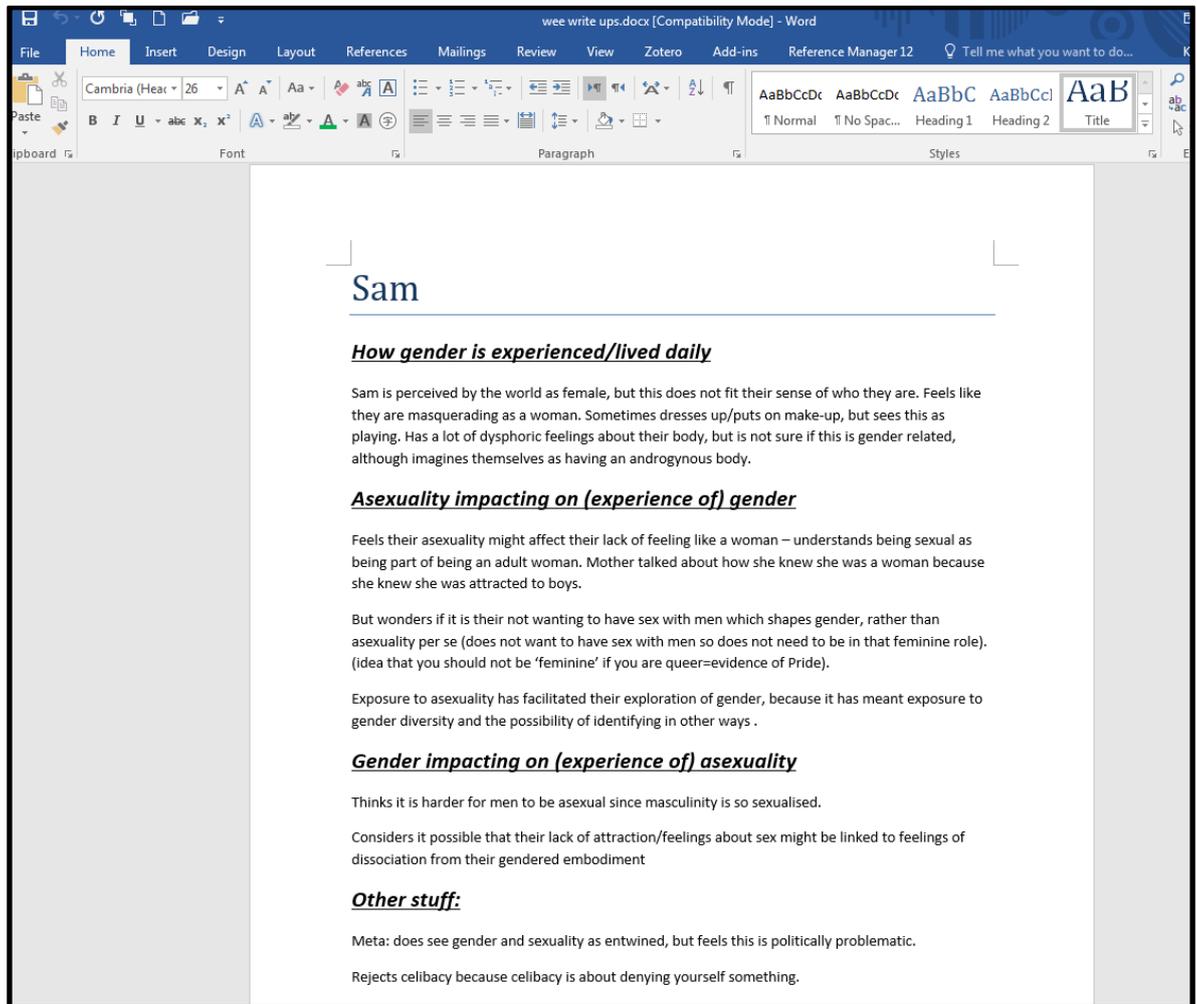


Figure 4 – Analysis: narratives

The next step was then to construct a framework in which I synthesised all of this material, and which gave me a blueprint for writing up my data chapters (see Figure 5). I began with one of the research question headings (e.g. asexuality impacting gender) and then detailed all of the different ways in which asexuality seemed to impact on gender *across the whole data set*, organising this hierarchically, and specifying which participants this applied to. From this, I then developed the tripartite structure of my data chapters by examining this framework and discerning three main thematic areas: relationships, masculinity and femininity, and subjectivity and embodiment.

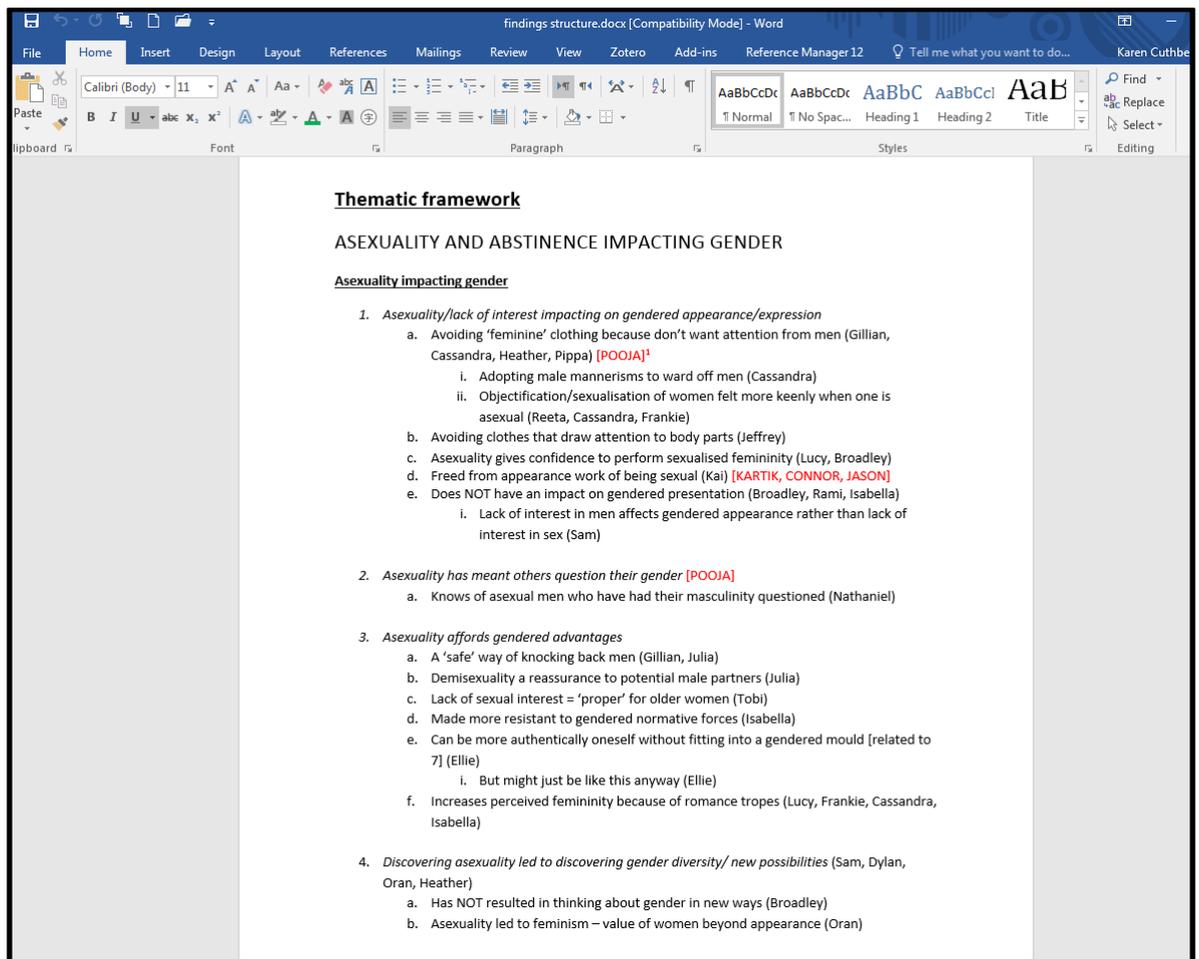


Figure 5 – Analysis: constructing a framework

Although this only became clearer in hindsight, the reasoning strategy I use in my analysis could be described as ‘abductive’. The philosopher CS Peirce suggested abductive reasoning proceeded as such:

Some event, X, is observed

But if some explanation, Y, were in place, then X would be a matter of course

Therefore it is plausible that X is actually a case of Y

(as quoted in Shank, 2008)

Timmermans and Tavory (2012: 172) describe abduction as a ‘continuous process of conjecturing about the world that is shaped by the solutions a researcher has “ready-to-hand”’, by which they mean knowledge of theories and other empirical cases that the researcher can bring to bear on the analysis. In this

sense, my analysis was guided by theory as much as it was by data. The explanations I reached for were informed by my knowledge of feminist theory, sociological concepts and existing research, but these were only able to emerge through a deep and sustained engagement with the data itself.

4.4.2. Analytical focus

My approach to coding and analysis can be encapsulated by what Holstein and Gubrium (2011) refer rather grandly to as ‘the constructionist analytics of interpretative practice’. By this they mean an approach in which attention is paid to two different ‘sides’ of interpretation: the ‘substantive whats’ and the ‘constitutive hows’ (2011: 352). In my research, I pay attention to *what* participants’ experiences are and *what* they are telling me about their lives. For example, in Chapter Five, I discuss the ways in which asexual and abstinent women often have their declarations of self-identity dismissed or re-interpreted by more ‘authoritative’ voices.³⁹ However, I also pay attention to *how* participants put together their narratives - that is, identifying the underlying discourses⁴⁰ that both *shape* participants’ accounts, but which are also *used by* participants in particular ways to claim certain subject positions and identities. I also pay attention to how narratives are shaped in the interactions between the participant and myself as a researcher. As an example, in Chapter Six, I discuss how certain discursive constructions of masculinity shaped how the abstinent men in my research conceptualised themselves and their situation. But I also discuss how they actively deployed and reinterpreted these discourses in strategic ways⁴¹ - as well as how these must be considered in the context of an interview setting, with particular gendered power contours.

³⁹ This does not mean that I am engaged in naturalistic documentation: the ‘whats’ are not pre-given but emerge through my own critical feminist lens in which I have interpreted participants’ accounts as instances of a phenomena which I have identified as a ‘problem’ (i.e. the erasure of women’s voices and discrediting of their testimony under a patriarchal social system). Here the abductive reasoning strategy that guided my analysis comes into focus.

⁴⁰ By discourses I am referring to the ‘institutionally supported and culturally influenced interpretive schemas (discourses) that produce particular understandings of issues and events’ (Bacchi, 2005: 199).

⁴¹ This dual focus on the ‘*power of discourse to delimit the meanings of topics of analysis*’ as well as the ‘*power to make/deploy discourses*’ (Bacchi, 2005: 207) allows me to account for participants’ agency whilst also retaining a critical attentiveness to the socio-political structures of meaning that we all find ourselves within.

Holstein and Gubrium (2011: 352) argue that paying attention to both the ‘substantive whats’ and the ‘constitutive hows’ helps us to avoid the ‘unrepentant naturalism of documenting the world of everyday life as if it were fully objective and obdurate’, but also avoid the ‘indifference to the lived realities of experience’ that can be discerned in much scholarship on discourse. Throughout the analysis and writing process, there was an oscillation in my focus between the ‘whats’ and the ‘hows’, where one would be temporarily foregrounded whilst the other would take a backseat (although would never be entirely out of focus). But there is also an important sense in which they can never be fully separated since discourses (the stuff of ‘hows’) come to have a real impact on *what* it is that we experience (for example, discourses about women’s sexuality affect the real-life interactions women have with men), and also how and if we can even name and give voice to those experiences. Discourses constitute the world in a particular way, but those discourses are also lived and felt.

4.4.3. The ethics of (discourse) analysis

Given that a part of my analysis involves the analysis of discourses in participants’ accounts, I thought it prudent to address the ethics of doing so. Hammersley (2014a) has recently argued that discourse analysis of interviews violates the principle of informed consent, since participants think that what they say will be used as information or evidence about broader experiences or views by the researcher, rather than scrutinised as a performative act in itself (i.e. discourse analysis). Hammersley argues that if they knew this, participants would probably not agree to participate. Hammersley’s argument is not that we need to avoid discourse analysis of interviews, but that we need to stop the pretence that we are doing research ‘with’ our participants rather than ‘on’ them, and be more honest with what he sees as our deceptions. Admittedly, I have struggled with feelings of discomfort in identifying (often quite unflattering) discursive constructions at work in participants’ accounts, and have grappled with the legitimacy of me doing so, especially when I profess to approach research from a feminist ethical perspective. But my decision to retain this aspect of my analysis stem from four points. First of all, as Taylor and Smith (2014) argue in their response to Hammersley:

‘Participants may well be interested in and value a systematic approach which treated their seemingly mundane interview talk as tied to the organisation of social reality, rather than simply an ‘opinion’ or ‘view’.

That is, it is somewhat presumptuous for Hammersley to assume that participants would be angry or upset about having their accounts analysed in terms of discursive constructions. Indeed, in a previous research project on asexuality (Cuthbert, 2013), I distributed copies of my final dissertation to participants who had requested it, despite my enormous anxiety over how it would be received. To my surprise, one participant, whose account I had used to highlight white privilege and the invisibility of race in ‘asexual discourse’, got back in touch to tell me that he liked my analysis, and it had helped him to think about things that he hadn’t thought about before. This is not to claim that all participants would respond as such, but rather, we do not know how our work will be received. Secondly, this also highlights the point made by Taylor and Smith that when we are conducting discourse analysis of interviews, we are not scrutinising individual ‘performances’ as such, but using them to illuminate aspects of wider society. The participant who wrote back to me seemed to understand and appreciate this distinction. In conducting my analysis for this project, I have again strove to keep this focus in mind.

Thirdly (and this is, perhaps, the central point of Hammersley’s argument) I do not feel that the information sheet I gave to participants omitted crucial information about my intent. I wrote that I was conducting:

“research which looks at how people who do not feel sexual attraction towards others, and/or who choose not to be sexually active, think and feel about their sexuality and gender, and the kind of experiences that they might have”.

I then go on to say:

*“My research takes a **social** (rather than psychological or medical) approach and it is my goal to ‘ground’ my research in the lived experiences and perspectives of participants” (emphasis in original)*

Admittedly, these descriptions are somewhat vague, but at the risk of post-hoc justification, ultimately my analysis *does* focus on how people think and feel about their sexuality and gender, and my analysis is grounded in participants

accounts (although I then make links ‘back up’ to sociological and feminist theory). There is also a need to keep the information accessible, although I do agree with Hammersley (2014b) that this is not *necessarily* a barrier to telling participants that you are taking a discursive analytical approach.

However, I want to end by also suggesting that the issue Hammersley raises is an issue not just confined to the ‘hows’ of discourse analysis. Even when one is concentrating on the ‘whats’, the researcher still has to interpret and situate the participant’s account in terms of sociological theory and concepts and so it is never just a straightforward ‘recording’ of experience, and one might ask just how aware participants are of this. This does not ultimately solve the problem of the ethics of interpretation and analysis, but it does highlight the wider need for a critical reflection on what informed consent really means, and how much that process can be separated from what comes later in the analysis.

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter has situated my research in a particular epistemological, ontological, political, and theoretical context as well as provided a rationale for my use of particular methods, and offered an account of how the research was carried out, and then how the data was analysed. I have also used this chapter as a way of writing myself into the research to highlight its interactional and relational quality, as well as my own situated-ness; but without seeing this as a problem or limitation in any way. I make no pretence to an impossible objectivity, but I do believe I can still make claim to rigour, transparency and ethical integrity. It is my hope that what I have written in this chapter will help the reader understand how I am able to make the claims I now go on to make in the following three data chapters.

5. Relationships

5.1. Introduction

This chapter is the first of three data chapters and focuses on the substantive topic of relationships. Whilst all of the experiences reported by participants could be considered ‘relational’ in that they are situated in webs of social relations and shared meanings, this chapter specifically examines the affective and intimate ties and interactions that participants had with others. As such, this chapter focuses on the ‘interactions’ dimension of Jackson’s (2006) multi-dimensional model of gender and sexuality (although as noted in Chapter One, reference will be made to all four dimensions throughout since it is impossible to understand each in isolation).

Through focusing on relationships in this chapter, I show the everyday and tangible ways in which gender, and asexuality and abstinence, meet and interact. The underlying argument that this chapter makes is that much of the experiences described by participants can be understood in terms of the gendered power configurations of hetero-patriarchy. It is often gender (by which I mean one’s relative positioning in hetero-patriarchal configurations) which structures one’s relational experiences, rather than asexuality or abstinence per se. As such (and more so than in other chapters), I present the experiences of participants in this chapter as less differentiated by asexuality or abstinence. It is not my intention to *conflate* these experiences (I specify participants’ individual identifications and self-understandings throughout) but rather, I wish to draw out many of the similarities in participants’ accounts.

The chapter is split into three main sections. In the first, I discuss the partner relations of participants. In the second, I move on to look at relations with peers and peer groups. In the third, I shift from looking at relationships with specific groups to examining a *particular* relational experience which arose time and time again in participant accounts, and which I have termed ‘epistemic injustices’.

5.2. Partner relations

In this section, I discuss some of the points that emerged from participants' accounts regarding partner relations, and the ways in which gender, and asexuality or abstinence, were bound up in these. My definition of partner relations is broad: encompassed within it are all relations and encounters (and indeed *potential* relations and encounters) which are understood to relate to the realms of 'dating', 'sex', 'romance', 'intimate partnerships' etc. The vast majority of both asexual and abstinent participants had had experience of partner relationships (in various forms), either at the time of interview, or at some point in the past. Whilst acknowledging that some participants were in, or had been in, same-sex or queer relationships⁴², my discussion focuses on relationships and relational experiences with partners who could be considered 'opposite sex' (for want of a better term). This is because these were by far the most common, and so themes and patterns readily emerged across participants' accounts. Furthermore, it was in these relationships (particularly relationships women or non-binary AFAB⁴³ people had with men) that the gendered power dynamics of asexuality and abstinence became most visible.

The section has two halves: in the first, I discuss experiences of sex reported by asexual women and asexual non-binary (AFAB) persons, and suggest that these

⁴² This was the case for roughly six participants, all of whom were asexual women, or AFAB (see footnote 43 below). The power dynamics that characterised participants' accounts of 'heterosexual' or 'opposite sex' relationships were absent from participants' discussions of the relationships they had with (other) women, or with (other) AFAB people. However, in four out of six cases, the partner was also asexual, which may have impacted on the power dynamics of the relationship.

⁴³ Throughout my data chapters I will use the terms 'AFAB' (assigned female at birth) and 'AMAB' (assigned male at birth). These terms are intended to help disaggregate the experiences of non-binary/agender/genderqueer participants since experiences tended to differ depending on the gender one had been assigned at birth, and the gender one had been/was socially perceived as (e.g. a man or a woman), even if the participant did not themselves identify with that gender. The terms AFAB and AMAB are not problem-free since it could be seen as grouping participants according to their physiological designation at birth, and could therefore be interpreted as negating the participants' own sense of gendered self in favour of a biological understanding of gender. This is not my intention (I am not at all suggesting that non-binary folk are 'really' men or 'really' women) but I felt some differentiating terminology was necessary in order to tease out the nuances of participants' experiences. Furthermore, AFAB and AMAB are fairly common terms, particularly within online trans and non-binary spaces. Additionally, some of the non-binary participants specifically used AFAB and AMAB in relation to themselves, or more broadly talked about their experiences being raised and socialised as a boy or a girl. However, as was pointed out to me, it is possible that a person might be - for example - AFAB but is now perceived as a man, and yet still identifies as non-binary (thus gender assignment at birth, how one is gendered by others, and gender identity are not necessarily the same). This was not the case for any of the participants in my research, but it remains an important point.

can be understood through the gendered frame of ‘sexual acquiescence’. In the second part of the section, I will discuss the ways in which both asexuality and abstinence can be used as a kind of ‘gendered capital’ - that is, a particularly gendered resource - in the dating and relationship arena. I talk about how asexuality as a concept is used by some asexual women to keep themselves safe in situations when they experience unwanted sexual advances, but also how asexuality and abstinence can work to increase a person’s relational appeal to potential partners - at least if you’re a man.

5.2.1. ‘Oh, I need to do something’

When discussing past and current relationships, a number of asexual participants related experiences of what I have termed ‘sexual acquiescence’. Following Conroy et al. (2015), I use the term ‘sexual acquiescence’ to describe participating in *unwanted* sexual activity, but which is not necessarily experienced as, or described as, non-consensual. Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005) argue that there is an important distinction between ‘wanting’ and ‘consenting’ to sex, since one might want but not consent to sex, but equally, one might consent to sex without wanting it (the latter of which the term ‘sexual acquiescence’ is intended to articulate). The term ‘unwanted willing sex’ has also been deployed in the literature to describe this kind of experience, but I feel that ‘sexual acquiescence’ better captures (at least some of) my participants’ experiences, since it highlights the relational and gendered power disparities at work in participants’ accounts. However, I will also suggest that there might be a gradient of ‘acquiescence’, since relational pressures to have sex and the degree of one’s ‘willingness’ also differed.

The finding that asexual people have engaged in unwanted sex has been reported elsewhere in the asexuality literature (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015; Dawson et al., 2016). However, I want to draw attention to the specifically gendered power dynamics of these experiences, which has not been previously addressed. With one exception, the participants who discussed sexual

acquiescence were all asexual women, or asexual non-binary (AFAB) people, who had had male partners.⁴⁴

Gillian reflected explicitly on the societal expectations which motivated her sexual acquiescence in her teenage years:

Ummm with hindsight I do wonder how much of that was....that I was just conforming with what I thought was supposed to happen rather than necessarily what I wanted to happen and I think, now that I'm coming to this kind of understanding of myself, I look back at a lot of things in my life and think 'hmm how much of that was actually me and how much of it was, you know, me trying to follow the pattern that I had been brought up to expect kind of thing'...I mean I vividly remember the first day I noticed that, you know, we were lying on the bed and we were kissing and I noticed that he had an erection it was like 'holy fuck, I'm going to have to do something with that!'

Gillian does not mention gender in so many words here, but it is difficult to envisage a situation where a teenage boy might feel the same pressure to 'do something' in response to his girlfriend's arousal, especially if it is not something he *wanted* to do. Gendered societal expectations were also intertwined with gendered interpersonal dynamics. Broadley recounted a recent experience with her ex-boyfriend:

[He'd say things like] 'If you love me enough, why not?' ...We'd be lying in his bed and kissing and stuff and, at the same time, I felt like I had to do it. Like, not for him making me feel pressure, but, like, just thinking: 'Ahh' just, like, in my own mind I'm thinking: 'Oh I need to do something'...And I just...felt kinda horrible after it, I was like...I really didn't like that, but I didn't tell him that.

Again, while Broadley does not specifically relate her 'need to do something' to her position as a woman in the relationship, the gendered dimensions of this kind of situation are illustrated by one of Gavey's (2005: 10) participants who, in describing 'giving in' to sex with her husband, wryly remarks: 'to leave an erect cock unappeased [is] unthinkable'. It is conceivable that Broadley and Gillian's need to 'do something' can be seen in terms of what Hollway (1989) calls the

⁴⁴ It may be the case that abstinent women did not discuss experiences of sexual acquiescence precisely because sexual acquiescence (by definition) involves engaging in sex, which they were deliberately and consciously abstaining from. For asexual participants, having sex or not having sex did not impact upon their sense of themselves as asexual in the same way it would for abstinent participants. However, the abstinent women in my research did all experience pressure from their male partners to have sex, as I will discuss in later sections.

‘male sexual desire drive’, wherein men’s sexuality is constructed as urgent and primordial, and to which women feel required to respond. Examples of this can be found in research with women across very different contexts - for example, the teenage girls in Holland et al.’s (1994: 29) study made comments such as: ‘as soon as he got an erection...no matter how I was feeling, whether I was aroused or not, you had to do things’ but the middle-aged and older women in Potts et al.’s (2003) research who had been with their male partners for a long time also felt pressure not to ‘waste’ an erection.

Another participant, Julia, also told me that when she rejected her boyfriend’s sexual advances, he would become sulky and question her attraction to him. This created tension in the relationship, and combined with an awareness that having sex was expected of her as a young person, meant that Julia would sometimes have sex with her boyfriend despite not particularly wanting to. However, whilst Broadley ‘felt horrible’ after having sex, Julia was more ambivalent: ‘it wasn’t negative necessarily but it also wasn’t really positive, I wouldn’t say I enjoyed it...it was more like a neutral thing’. This gradient of sexual acquiescence is also illustrated in Frankie’s account. Whilst Gillian, Broadley, and Julia felt the necessity of having to ‘do something’, Frankie instead conceptualised sex as something ‘nice’ they can do for their male partner, despite not really wanting it themselves:

I feel that if I care enough and it means something to them, I’ll do it because I know it means something to them. It’s not something I particularly feel any desire for but if it means something to them, if it’s something important to them, then I should be prepared to...it’s not even, it’s not...it’s not that I don’t like the idea, it’s just that I’m indifferent.

Unlike Julia who consents to sex in order to reduce relationship tension, Frankie’s experience is more positive in that they consent to sex to promote intimacy, again highlighting the need to understand sexual acquiescence as a continuum rather than as categorical. This is similar to some of the experiences reported by asexual participants in Dawson et al. (2016). In their analysis of these experiences, the authors assert that ‘it would be too simplistic, and an underestimation of [participant’s] agency, to see this as something [the participant] was ‘forced’ or ‘driven’ to do’ (p358), and argue that we must take into account specific relational contexts. Whilst I am in full agreement on both

counts, I do want to caution against downplaying the role of social pressures (particularly gendered ones) entirely. Whilst Frankie's account certainly does not convey the same amount of pressure as those of the previous three participants, it is possible that wider gendered norms are still shaping Frankie's experience - particularly evident in the phrase 'I should be prepared to'. In Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras' (2008) analysis of women's narratives of unwanted (but not non-consensual) sex, they identify a discursive thread they call 'Good girlfriends say yes'. This was when girls and women consented to sex with their male partners simply because of their relationship status - a persistence of the traditional 'wifely duty'.⁴⁵ Basile (1999) also found that the reason women most commonly gave for having unwanted sex was the belief that having sex with one's partner was a woman's responsibility. Gavey (1992) offers more context when she discusses how women often appeal to 'nurturant' scripts (i.e. tending to one's partner) to account for participating in unwanted sexual activity in the absence of desire. Duncombe and Marsden (1996) also develop the concept of 'sex work' to describe the emotional efforts by women in some heterosexual relationships to compromise with regards to [their] desires and sexual fulfilment for the sake of the relationship. This can be seen in the wider context of the 'emotion work' that women disproportionately perform (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993). By contrast, when men had unwanted sex with their female partners, the reasons given tended to be less connected to interpersonal relational dynamics, and were more about bolstering their social standing amongst their male peers (Muehlenhard and Cook, 1988) or, even because of

⁴⁵ Frankie identifies as non-binary/genderqueer. I realise that in invoking the idea of 'Good girlfriends say yes' I might be seen to be implying that Frankie is *really* a woman when all is said and done (similar to my discussion of AFAB and AMAB, above). It is not at all my intention to misgender Frankie. Rather, I am considering the wider social context in which Frankie was assigned female at birth and has generally had the social experiences of (and been recognised as) a girl/woman, something Frankie talks about at length in the interviews and notebook. Furthermore, Frankie's relationship is with a cis-gender heterosexual man, to whom they had not fully discussed their identity as non-binary.

feeling an ‘obligation to respond to the appetite of his penis, his other self’ (Potts, 2001: 153).⁴⁶

However, all of this is not to insist on a ‘truer’ reading of Frankie’s account, or to claim that their experience was ‘actually’ coercive or non-consensual, or to dismiss Frankie’s love for their partner as a script. As Gavey (2005: 153) suggests, taking care of one’s partner ‘can arguably be seen as the expression of a woman’s [sic] agency’ but it is also ‘an agency that is constrained by the narrow range of possibilities that are *culturally weighted* towards sex on men’s terms’ (my emphasis).

No men in my sample reported experiences of sexual acquiescence, but Oran - who is a non-binary AMAB person - did discuss how before they realised they were asexual, they had had sexual experiences in which they went ‘through the motions a little bit and you leave yourself out of the picture and you’re not really respecting yourself and the way you should be’. Additionally, in Dawson et al.’s (2016) study, one of the three participants who had had unwanted sex was a man who would ‘give in’ to his ex-wife to avoid hurting her feelings. However, I do want to suggest that using Gavey’s idea of ‘cultural weight’, societal expectations around (hetero)sex tend to coalesce in ways that frequently disempower and place unique social obligations on women, and those assigned female at birth. One participant, Ellie, found it difficult to imagine men having the experiences she had had:

You still somehow find yourself in that situation where you’re doing something you wouldn’t necessarily choose to do, or you’re doing to keep the other person happy rather than because of what you want. Emm, so I don’t know if that really would be the same if you were a guy.

⁴⁶ I have not been able to find any specific research on the prevalence of and motivations for *sexual acquiescence* amongst women in relationships with other women, which may have helped add further nuance to the discussion. However, there is some research which indicates that heterosexual women/women in relationships with men and lesbian women/women in relationships with women, are equally likely to say that they had sex primarily to please one’s partner (Schreurs, 1993). These studies were not asking about *unwanted sex* or *sexual acquiescence*, which may have impacted on the results (since one can still have sex primarily to please one’s partner but can still *want* it themselves). However, it suggests that women taking on the ‘nurturant’ role applies not only in relationships with men - but it could be that this is experienced more reciprocally in relationships with other women.

And indeed, Oran went on to talk about how once they had identified themselves as asexual and was able to talk to their partner about this, they were able to *'have a bit more strength in saying like 'this is a thing I don't want to do, this is a thing we could maybe do', like 'would you be interested in doing this?'*' The label of asexuality thus empowered Oran to be assertive and to better communicate their needs to their partner. Whilst many of the asexual women and non-binary (AFAB) participants had not realised they were asexual or had not told their partners they were asexual when the incidences of sexual acquiescence took place, when women and non-binary (AFAB) persons *did* disclose their asexuality to partners, this was rarely experienced as empowering in the way Oran suggests. As I will demonstrate in the section on Epistemic Injustices, identifying as asexual often did little to deter men from sexually pursuing women and non-binary AFAB persons.

However, as alluded to throughout this section, the experience of sexual acquiescence is not unique to those identifying as asexual. There is a body of literature which documents how unwanted (but not necessarily non-consensual) sex is experienced by a majority of women in sexual relationships with men (Impett and Peplau, 2003; Katz and Tirone, 2009). Therefore while it is tempting to characterise this as part of the asexual women/non-binary (AFAB) experience, it may be that the experience is more related to gender than to asexuality. As we have seen, the gendered discourses that bring about sexual acquiescence - the male sexual desire drive, women as nurturers, women with a responsibility for relationships - apply to asexual and non-asexual people alike. And, as Dawson et al. (2016: 350) remind us, 'there are no distinctly asexual practices of intimacy'. To insist on parsing everything an asexual person says through an asexual lens so it becomes *an example of their asexuality* is to cede to the temptation (evident in much sexualities literature) to accord 'excessive explanatory power...to sexual identities' (Stella, 2015: 58). Instead, it is important to understand asexual people as socially embedded; we need to pay attention to the wider currents of (gendered) power which structure relational experiences, rather than necessarily exceptionalising asexual people on account of their asexuality.

However, there is perhaps also space here to consider that whilst the experience of sexual acquiescence is not unique to asexual women and non-binary (AFAB) persons, it may be the case that asexuality *did* shape their views of sexual acquiescence. Because there was an awareness of one's lack of sexual desire (and to which they had given lots of thought to) participants in my study were perhaps *particularly* attuned to instances where they had sex without feeling desire or attraction. As Gillian mentioned, her identification with asexuality had prompted her to look back at much of her previous sexual and relational experiences from the perspective of this new identity, which had caused her to evaluate her feelings and motivations in ways that may have gone unmarked otherwise. It may also be the case that these norms around sexual acquiescence mean that asexual women and non-binary (AFAB) persons find navigating partner relations with men particularly fraught with difficulties, when they themselves never or rarely feel sexual desire or attraction.

5.2.2. Asexuality and abstinence as gendered capital

5.2.2.1. 'You have an excuse, a really good excuse'

A couple of asexual women talked about how their asexuality could be deployed to help them negotiate certain gendered interactions in the context of hetero-patriarchy. Gillian talks about using her label of grey-asexual as a legitimate 'reason' for turning down men's advances, even if her reason is that she is just not interested:

I think part of the difficulty when you find men being unpleasant to women who reject them is that men don't cope well with rejection, a lot of them, and I'm being very stereotypical and generalizable here but you get my jist. And the natural instinct is to kind of flip that back 'oh you weren't so all that anyway' kind of thing, 'you know this is a problem with you, it's not a problem with me and all that'. But I do think...society as a whole is becoming marginally more accepting of alternative sexualities and there's more awareness...and I think in some ways, being able to say to somebody 'I'm not going to have sex with you because I'm grey-asexual' - even if the real reason is because 'you're an arsehole' or do you know, any of that - it feels like a, to me it feels like I would be less likely to be criticised for that because I'm explaining it in terms of my own sexuality rather than it being so much as a rejection to the other person, if you see what I mean. Cos people know that criticising other people on the -

or they're beginning to know - that criticising other people's sexuality is not on.

In these exchanges, a woman's expressed preferences are not enough. It is not enough for her just to say no - instead what is sought is some identifiable and essential 'reason' why she is turning men down. As Cline (1994: 50) puts it: 'We do not live in a society where women may say 'no' and have their responses automatically regarded as reasonable and legitimate'. This is a theme I return to in more detail in the Epistemic Injustices section. Our dominant cultural understanding of sexual orientation tends to be as biological and hard-wired (Overby, 2014) so to invoke one's a/sexuality is to offer up reassurance that *it's not you, it's me*. And while this may be reassuring to people of all genders, it is of particular salience in interactions with cis-gender heterosexual men, where the stakes can be so high, as Gillian points out:

I mean you hear all this stuff about what goes on when women knock men back which just ranges from that's fine walk away to murder, essentially. And I think being able to say something like 'I'm grey-asexual, I'm probably not going to have sex with you' makes it less likely that my rejecting anybody is going to be taken personally.

Gillian also discussed how she would strategically use the terms grey-asexual and asexual on her online dating profiles in order to 'manage' men's expectations. She talks about how by asserting her grey-asexuality upfront, she is able to feel more confident in meeting up with people offline, since she has 'done her bit' in informing potential partners about her likely lack of interest in having sex, and this would ideally work as a filtering mechanism. Another participant, Julia, who is fourteen years younger than Gillian, expressed similar views:

I guess another advantage is having an excuse - which sounds absurd, as if you even need an excuse - but you have an excuse, a really good excuse, if someone flirts with you and you're just not...you can just be like oh I'm asexual and since they don't know what that means, they just run, and it's cool... I think it's not something that most people react negatively to.

Julia recognises that she shouldn't *need* to have an excuse, and that her 'no' *should* be enough, but since we live in a society where this is not the case, asexuality is something that can be used to keep her safe because 'it's not something...people react negatively to'. Hills (2015: 64) also reports an asexual

woman discussing how having the ‘special classification’ of asexual ‘would be more respected than just saying “I don’t want to have sex with you”’. (However, later in this chapter I will discuss the ways in which ‘asexuality’ often *isn’t* taken to be a legitimate reason for women not wanting to have sex with men). Hills raises the point that the requirement for woman to have a ‘reason’ beyond simply *not wanting to have sex* is related to traditional constructions of women as lacking sexual desire - that is, it is not enough for a woman not to want it, because a woman’s sex drive is ‘naturally’ low, anyway (2015: 152-153). Given that this is not an experience reported by any men in my sample, we can see this as a particularly gendered experience of which many women are subject to, but asexual women and non-binary AFAB people can use the discourse of asexuality as a particular way of navigating this.

5.2.2.2. ‘They actually quite like the idea of it’

While asexuality could be used to avoid relational encounters, both asexuality and abstinence were also seen as a way of increasing one’s relational appeal. This seemed to work through a signification system, where abstinence in particular was read as synonymous with certain qualities and attributes. Dona and Alora, who were both abstinent women, talked about how they (but also women in general) would be particularly attracted to an abstinent man:

Dona: I mean, if you meet a man who says: ‘Well, I’m celibate and... I’m not going to indulge in any sex until marriage or I’m not going to indulge in any sex until the relationship has developed until a certain stage...’ I would love a man like that. And then, to me, I would think more like, I would think: ‘Well, this sounds like a serious person. This person sounds really committed. This person is really serious-minded and has got their head screwed on’. I would definitely love a man like that.

Karen: Do you think other women would feel similar to you?

Dona: Umm, yeah, definitely, I think so, yeah, because I think it comes with this assumption that the person is really committed.

And Alora expressed very similar views:

I think I respect such a man because for him to have chosen to be abstinent, not cos he’s in a relationship, he chooses himself, possibly he has gone through careful thoughts, careful consideration of the

consequences that he could possibly—he's a man, he can't get pregnant but he could contract sexually transmitted infections and he could give it to an innocent lady who probably, because she doesn't want to be labelled a slut, has been keeping to herself all along... I think a man who can abstain, and has given abstaining careful consideration, I think I would respect him because he chose to protect not only himself but the future health of his partner.

For both Alora and Dona, abstinence in a man was encoded with the qualities of responsibility, maturity, and commitment which made him particularly attractive as a potential partner. Connor, who himself was an abstinent man, also talked about how he has experienced his abstinence as a quality that women like:

Connor: The majority of lassies - well, that have found out about it - have said to me they actually quite like the idea of it....

Karen: Emm, what is it - do you think - that makes them like the idea?

Connor: I think it's just the fact you're saving yourself for somebody...And they just didn't expect a guy to do it; they just think we're all pigs. The majority of women dae think that.

Connor also talked about how being abstinent brought about benefits in his relationship with his partner, in that it had made the relationship stronger and more robust:

When you're in a good relationship you've been in ages and still no had sex you get to know each other - mental, physical, spiritual an aw that...Then youse have a stronger bond. If you don't need to dae that [have sex], then you can be in a happy relationship.

The idea that abstinence was something that improved relationships was also echoed by Jason ('It makes you view relationships different as well', referring to how he now conceptualises intimacy in terms of emotional rather than sexual connection) and by Travis, who talks about how abstinence means that he and his partner have learned how to communicate better:

Communication plays an integral part in how we stay abstinent. We're open with one another, we sort of say to one another 'This is not going to go very well for us right now, maybe you should leave the room'. Or we sit and have a conversation about it.

In these examples, abstinence is experienced as not only attractive to women, but something which facilitates better, more mature relationships. Again, abstinence works to signify particular qualities: commitment to and respect for a woman and the relationship. It also seems to mark out abstinent men *as not like other men*, but this is seen in a positive light. It is perhaps significant, however, that the valorisation of abstinence is based upon it being a temporary state; in all of the above cases, the man has not rejected the possibility of all future sexual activity, but is *waiting for the right time*. To use Mullaney's (2006: 84) typology of abstainers, the men imagined in Dona and Alora's accounts⁴⁷, and in Connor's case, are either 'Waiters' (have not previously engaged in a behaviour but plan to do so in future) or 'Time outers' (have previously engaged in a behaviour and plan to do so again in the future). Anticipated behaviour in the future is perhaps key, and it is arguably this intentionality that not only safeguards the men from stigma, but *makes them even more attractive as men*. This may not be the case for men who are 'Nevers' (have never engaged in a behaviour and do not plan to in the future) or 'Quitters' (have engaged in the behaviour in the past, but do not plan to do so again in the future). In these cases, there is arguably a dis-investment from heteronormativity. It is also perhaps notable that no asexual men talked about how their asexuality was a 'draw' for potential partners; it may be that lacking sexual attraction also takes them out of the 'temporary state' zone, or that an intrinsically felt lack of sexual attraction cannot be read as a sign of 'commitment' or 'responsibility' in the same way since it is not seen as a *choice* one is making. Here abstinence is positively affecting one's gendered experience, by providing some gender 'kudos'. But it is also a *gendered experience of abstinence*, since as we will see later, abstinent women did not report similar experiences.

However, one woman on the asexual spectrum, Julia, did talk about how her demisexuality in particular could be seen as something attractive she is bringing to a relationship:

There's one thing I think which would work for the advantage of a potential partner, or say boyfriend - that he would have the advantage that he's the only person that I find attractive at the moment, like basically I find one person attractive at a time, pretty

⁴⁷ Alora and Dona could be considered 'Waiters' in Mullaney's typology.

*much. So that would be an advantage for him and I think that means he might find it easier to trust me theoretically, that might happen. So that's something, that's something that's actually quite valuable I think, the fact that I can tell someone: you're the only person that's attractive to me, I think that's a great advantage.*⁴⁸

Julia's demisexuality essentially acts as a guarantee of her sexual fidelity in that she will not be tempted by other people. Perhaps the fact that Julia is demisexual rather than asexual (i.e. will find someone sexually attractive once she has formed an emotional bond with them) is key; *she will be attracted to you but not to anyone else*. For Julia, her demisexuality might work as a kind of 'stock' in the way it does for abstinent men. However, I think there is also space for a gendered reading here in that Julia is suggesting that her male partner would benefit from the situation - her demisexuality is something she can *bring to him*, for the good of the relationship. Her demisexuality may be appealing as a kind of 'conquest' in that it is he who has succeeded in turning on her sexual attraction. Indeed, the Epistemic Injustices section, I discuss how many asexual and abstinent women had experienced male partners or potential partners expressing desire to 'overcome' or 'conquer' their asexuality or abstinence. It is not inconceivable however to imagine the genders reversed in this scenario: i.e. it is plausible to envisage a woman finding demisexuality a reassuring quality in a potential male partner (especially given traditional notions of men-as-philanderers). The so-called 'confluent' nature of relationships (Giddens, 1992) may also play a part here: demisexuality may be a reassuring quality when relationships are no longer guaranteed to last.

However, the accounts of abstinent women in which they discuss how hard it was for them to find an understanding and accepting male partner (never mind one who was attracted to the fact of their abstinence) serve to highlight the ways in which heterosexual relations *are* so frequently organised around the idea

⁴⁸ It is interesting that upon reading/hearing this, some early readers of my thesis have stated that Julia's experience is just like their own, despite them not identifying as demisexual. It is outside the scope of this thesis to explore how 'common' the experience we call demisexuality might actually be (outside of the discursive space of asexuality), but some of my interlocutors have suggested that given the apparent 'post-feminist' pressure on women to express an active and even voracious sexuality, the idea of 'demisexuality' may have emerged as a way in which to live with a sexual subjectivity that may have, in previous eras, been the norm for many women. However, what is most significant here is that demisexuality was a meaningful identity for Julia, and helped her to better understand (and feel better about) her sexual subjectivity.

of a man getting something from a woman (Nicolson and Burr, 2003). As Yvette, an abstinent woman, said:

I think there are more women who would be understanding of my situation than there are men. Men take it very personally when you won't have sex with them. Even if you tried to explain your feelings they would still feel inadequate. Whereas I think women would have more empathy.

Again there is a sense of the danger in turning men down. Yvette was not sure if she would ever have sex again (i.e. she could either be a Quitter or a Time-Outer, to return to Mullaney's typology), but even participants who did plan on having sex in the future discussed the difficulties of finding a male partner who would accept even a temporary abeyance in sexual activity. Dona talked about how women had to have the 'full package' to offer men, which was conceptualised as a *literal* commodity:

Dona: I don't think they'd be willing to wait, really.

Karen: why do you think that the guys wouldn't be willing to wait?

Dona: Umm, I think for them it's... It's sort of, like, sex comes as a package. I mean, part of being in a relationship. And if you're going to buy just one item, I mean, from the whole package... It's like a big bag of crisps. I mean, if you just buy one bag, and then leave the others, then what's the point?

Dona discusses how women she knows have felt pressured into 'giving' sex simply in order to keep their boyfriends:

Some of them [her friends] were thinking: 'Well, if... If you don't indulge in sex, then the guy will look for it somewhere else... And then you'd be back to looking for another guy!' They just think: 'Well, being a female, you can't say you're not indulging in sex.' That is part of the package of being in a relationship. I feel that as women, there is that pressure to indulge in sex. Because, emm, not indulging in sex in a relationship - before they knew it, the guy left; because the package wasn't complete.

Men's threats to leave women if they do not have sex with them are found elsewhere in empirical research (e.g. Morgan and Zurbriggen, 2007).⁴⁹ Here we can see what Stevi Jackson (1999: 129) means when she describes heterosexuality not just as a 'normative construction of cross-sex desire' but crucially as a 'gendered hierarchy', which is founded on 'the appropriation of women's bodies and labour'. In these instances, abstinence does not work as 'stock' in the dating and relationship arena for women like it may do for men; instead it is seen as a negative because it works as a 'block' to men getting what they want. In accounts such as Dona's, we can see that the pressures on women to acquiesce to sex with their partners - even if they have made a decision not to have sex - are not trivial, and significant stakes are involved. It is a gendered experience of abstinence, since gender seems to be a key determining factor in the kind of abstinent experience one might have⁵⁰, but, as with the section on sexual acquiescence, it is not an *exclusively* abstinent experience, highlighting the role that gender plays in structuring social relationships.

5.3. Peer relations

In this section, I discuss the ways in which asexuality, abstinence and gender arose in participants' discussions of their friendships, and membership of social circles. Three different experiences emerged, which I have termed 'affirmation', 'alienation', and 'increasing connection'. Each of these had different gendered resonances: affirmation occurred primarily amongst asexual women and asexual non-binary (AFAB) persons; alienation was reported by all participants except abstinent men, but also operated in gendered ways; and a sense of increased connection because of one's asexuality or abstinence was

⁴⁹ Again, it is perhaps illustrative to compare the experiences of women in relationships with men to those women in relationships with other women. Due to the relative lack of research on lesbian and woman-woman relationships, direct comparison regarding the imperative for the relationship to be sexual is more difficult. However there is certainly research which documents how some lesbian-identified women are happy in forming romantic but non-sexual intimate relationships (Faderman, 1981; Rothblum and Brehony, 1993). As discussed in Chapter Two, there is also the trope of sexless lesbian relationships, but this is arguably based on misogynistic and patriarchal constructions of women's sexuality outside of a male-defined context.

⁵⁰ Much of the data quoted in this section is hypothetical, in that it is based on participants imagining what would be the case. However, this perhaps makes the argument even stronger since the accounts suggest that participants have absorbed these circulating ideas about masculinity and sex to the extent that this is what they expect to happen to them.

reported by participants across all categories, but again differed in relation to gender.

5.3.1. 'The Judith Butler experience'

Some participants - especially asexual women and asexual non-binary (AFAB) persons - talked about how they had recently found friendship groups in which their asexuality was understood and affirmed. These friendships tended to form when the participant moved to University, and were the result of actively seeking out queer, LGBTQIA+ and feminist communities. Participants talked about their happiness in being surrounded by people who were sensitive to and inclusive of gender and sexual diversity, but were aware that these groups acted as a kind of space apart, insulating them from the 'real world'. Reeta told me 'I'm a bit spoiled in that I move around in a lot of queer circles', and Sam said:

I mean, I think I'm lucky because here I've got, you know, I'm surrounded by people who're...they know about stuff and you know I choose to shut myself off from the wider world a lot of ways and so I don't really have contact with the same sort of cultural pressure that I would if you know, say I was working in an office job...none of the kind of stuff that's normally a huge problem in life is a problem in this environment which is amazing and wonderful and lovely...but it kinda means that going back out into that again is more painful than it was when you didn't expect to be treated with respect at all...All my friends experiences since graduating you know...[laughs] have not been particularly wonderful. I mean, just, they've all found it a real culture shock...coming from like a friends group who are entirely a group of queer activists to [laughs] that.

These participants who talked of finding accepting communities generally had a high degree of cultural and social capital, and in many cases, economic capital. They were all participants who were at University (or had been), and generally had moved away from home to live in large metropolitan cities.⁵¹ Many of them could be understood as having undergone what Rupp et al (2016) wryly refer to as the college 'Judith Butler experience'. This is a gendered experience (i.e.

⁵¹ In total, 26 out of 33 participants had some experience of University (although not all had degrees). As discussed in the Methods chapter, this is partly reflective of the fact that I recruited from University LGBTQ+ societies, as well as through my own networks. Of the 7 who had not been to University, 3 were asexual-identified, and 4 were abstinent. The three asexual persons who did not go to University did not report finding such communities that were affirmative of their asexuality, which perhaps suggests that had I recruited from different sources, my data here might be different. However, the formation of asexual identities might be in part connected to exposure to these kinds of spaces.

mostly of young women and non-binary persons) that involves exposure to the work of feminist and queer scholars, shifts in one's self-understanding (what Rupp et al. refer to as 'learning to be queer') and the formation of friendships and affiliations on this basis. Indeed, several of these participants in my research directly referred to the work of Judith Butler in interviews, or to the notion of 'performing gender'.⁵² Here, gender and class seem to coalesce in ways that allow these participants access to these hermeneutical resources, and thus access to communities where they find affirmation of their asexuality. Abstinence does not seem to be part of this 'emerging sexual story' (Plummer, 1995) in the same way that asexuality is, which is perhaps why abstinent women who had also gone to University in similar contexts did not relate similar experiences of finding affirmation and community.

Indeed, 'feminist' and 'queer' spaces were not universally or automatically experienced as affirming. Some participants talked about how they felt an uncomfortable tension between their asexuality or abstinence on the one hand and the group's celebration of sexual liberation on the other. Reeta and Blair (who were asexual) both brought this up, and while they both stated that they were supportive of the idea of sexual liberation and of women being sexual subjects rather than objects, the possibility of *not* having sex or *not* desiring sex was not on the table. This adds some empirical weight to Cerankowski and Milks' (2010) assertion that sex-positive feminism (characterised as on the ascendancy since the sex wars of the 1980s) might be unintentionally excluding those who do not feel sexual attraction, or do not want to have sex. Fahs (2014) too has recently argued that feminism, as well as fighting for the 'freedom to' (have sex) needs to also incorporate radical feminist ideas about women having 'freedom from' (having sex or being sexual) without being labelled conservative or regressive.

5.3.2. 'Asexual awkward laughter'

However, for many participants, alienation from one's peer group on account of asexuality or abstinence was a more familiar experience (and, indeed, the

⁵² Interestingly, this kind of discourse was not restricted to those who had studied/were studying humanities or social sciences, but also appeared in the accounts of those in STEM fields, which perhaps indicates that entry into these kind of queer and feminist spaces involved learning to speak this kind of language.

participants who had now found affirmation had reported previous experiences of alienation). Women and men (and AFAB and AMAB non-binary persons) tended to report different ways in which this happened.

Many of the asexual women and asexual non-binary (AFAB) participants, particularly when they were younger, had felt alienated from their friends because of the imperative to ‘perform’ having a crush on a boy. Cassandra said:

I have instances where I was younger when like I felt like I had to have a crush on someone to be ‘legit’. I was like...I need to find someone that I find decent enough to have a crush on because I am supposed to have one because if I don’t then I’m not like, I’m not real. Like not really real but you know I’m not...a legit person, you know. What qualifies me as a person and as a girl that is 12 is having a crush with someone, like on someone so it was really, and it was just, urgh terrible.

Reeta also talks about ‘performing’ these feminised forms of desire-talk: ‘Usually, I, you know, you end up in asexual awkward laughter, when people are commenting ‘oh that guy’ and then you’re like ‘oh ho yeah’ [false laughter] and then just change the subject’. And Gillian detects a difference in gendered peer groups (at least amongst teenagers) in that it is enough for girls to have ‘crushes’ without having to act on them:

I think that the fact that I could do that kind of [exaggerated child-like voice] ‘oh I saw him in the corridor’ - that was enough. I think young men are probably under far more pressure...where a young man in that situation would probably be expected to actually go and have conversations with this person, or you know, go up and have physical contact with her in some way.

Frankie also expressed the gendered dimensions of peer pressure they had experienced in their teenage female friendship groups: ‘You’ve got to like someone, you’ve got to think someone’s hot or...I mean it was never as much pressure to have sexual activity, as pressure to be attracted to someone’.

However, the pressure to be sexually active was not entirely absent from some female participants’ accounts. Pippa’s (who was abstinent and possibly asexual but unsure) experience of University was markedly different from the experiences related in the ‘Affirmation’ section (although she also had a high degree of various kinds of capital). She discussed how the social lives of her

friends at University was organised around ‘pulling’, and this was something she had to pretend to participate in:

They were going out with the aim of meeting someone whereas for me it was this annoying thing that you sort of had to go through in order to have a night out [laughs] I mean people enjoyed drinking and dancing as well, but if there was any single people in the group, then it was almost like it was a community event, helping them find someone...you know, we’d go home from the club and they’d be like, ‘oh did you see anyone?’ And I was like [faux disappointed voice] ‘no, no-one!’ [laughs].

Pippa goes on to powerfully express the kind of pressure she experienced:

It was clear to me that it was my choice to sleep with someone but it was also clear that I was expected to make that choice sometimes - I could say no as often as I wanted to individual propositions but I had to say yes to this permissive culture and be constantly looking for someone I didn’t want to say no to.

Pippa’s narrative vividly highlights the idea of ‘compulsory sexuality’ (Gupta, 2015) where saying no to the overall system is unfathomable. Consent is also reduced to finding someone acceptable enough to have sex with, rather than someone whom you actively desire. Isabella (who was abstinent) relates a very similar account to Pippa, again highlighting how social inclusion was contingent upon a willingness to participate in this kind of hyper-sexualised University ‘lad culture’ (Phipps and Young, 2015):

In another sex related conversation at uni I admitted that at that point I hadn’t had sex in 4 years and really didn’t miss it or feel any need for it, and the group said that was weird and decided that they should take me out clubbing to find me a one-night stand as I was obviously in denial. There was such a culture of sex at university, and I was regularly left out of social occasions as I had no interest in throwing myself at men in clubs.

For men and non-binary (AMAB) persons, the experience seemed to vary according to whether or not one was asexual or abstinent. None of the abstinent men reported feeling in any way alienated from their peer groups, although they had all experienced some ‘ribbing’ which they conceptualised as good-humoured. By contrast, asexual men and asexual non-binary (AMAB) persons (although not all) talked about how they felt alien amongst groups of men

because an interest in women and sex worked as a kind of common denominator to facilitate male bonding. As Oran put it:

In like lad culture and sports culture and stuff it's always this thing of like well here's one thing you know you're going to have in common with everybody else in the room is like 'isn't sex great? It's that almost like cartoon frat-boyish sort of thing of like 'here's a way we can guarantee you are going to have things in common, is to talk about this because we're all just like gorillas who just like want to have sex with everyone all the time'.

All of the asexual men and asexual non-binary (AMAB) participants were critical of the idea of masculinity in ways not seen in the abstinent men's accounts. Unlike with Przybylo's (2014) asexual male participants who talked about having to 'perform' certain kinds of masculinity amongst peer groups, these asexual participants (while they might have 'performed' in the past) responded to this by seeking out new friendship groups in 'alternative' cultures - for example, in the case of Oran, the indie comic book community and the queer punk music scene - where these ideas are less prevalent, and there is an understanding of gender and sexual diversity (indeed these sites might also be characterised as part of the 'Judith Butler experience'). Others, such as Jeffrey, withdrew from interactions with other men almost entirely. In this way, there was a 'refusal' to perform. With the abstinent men in my sample, there was no sense of anything *to be performed*; the existence of their desire was perhaps enough to keep them feeling included in their existing friendship groups, and thus had no reason to seek out alternatives.

5.3.3. 'I don't think we're an anomaly'

However, rather than causing participants to feel alienated from gendered peer groups, asexuality and abstinence sometimes worked to increase connections and strengthen friendships. This can be seen as a step beyond the 'affirmation' discussed above since a participant's asexuality or abstinence was not merely accepted and respected but worked as a kind of *glue* to hold some relations together.

For some women participants (whether asexual or abstinent), their lack of interest in sex and pursuing sexual relationships actually increased the sense of

connection they felt with other women since they understood this to be a fairly common experience. Julia, who was 20, described how half of her female friends could potentially be considered demisexual, a point related to my earlier discussion about the commonality of demisexuality:

Some friends have told me that they often often think about people as really hot, like someone they would want to have sex with and some friends don't, some are like 'no I never thought that' and I ask a lot of questions to experiment, like am I or am I not? I ask things like 'if you see one part of a body, just like an ass or abs or really nice arms or whatever, would you feel attracted to that?' and like half my friends say yes yes I can be attracted to that, other half are like not really no, I need to see the face, I need to know the person a bit, I need to know their background a bit so I'm like...I'm not sure if I'm too abnormal, abnormal sounds pretty bad....if I'm too different from normal...heterosexual people or like other sexual people, I'm not sure I'm too different.

In her notebook, she also went on to write: *'The struggle to find a man that cares more for emotional than physical intimacy is actually something that I feel a lot of women have in common'*. Rami, who was asexual rather than demisexual, and in her 50s, expressed similar a sentiment:

I'm sure that quite a lot of people are just, maybe they're just hiding [their lack of desire] or maybe they don't realise yet who they are. This is what I can, can judge from some of my female friends... I have a lot of female friends, as I mentioned, because they, they just don't realise maybe themselves, but I, I can feel, I can, they're, they're the same, the same as me...Nothing unique.

Reading this back, I was unclear as to whether Rami was suggesting that there are more potential-asexuals than figures suggest, or if asexuality loses salience as a social category since it seems to be a common female experience. This last reading is given more credence when Rami goes on to quote statistics from surveys which suggest that a substantial proportion of women report a lack of interest in sex, which works to back up her anecdotal observations about her friends. In some ways, this would challenge the assertion of asexuality as radically different from allosexuality (the term used within the asexual community for non-asexuality) that is often found in literature proclaiming the queer potentiality of asexuality (e.g. Gressgård, 2013).

Adeline, in her 20s, and abstinent, also talked about how she did not feel different because her female flatmates were also uninterested in sex and did not pursue sexual relationships, even if they didn't think of themselves as abstinent. Furthermore, she felt that they were not unusual in this:

I don't think we're an anomaly. I think there's probably lots of girls our age who aren't very sexually active, umm... Like, there's probably quite a lot of groups of women who've had, like, I dunno, similar views as us... that live a similar lifestyle.

For Julia, Rami and Adeline, asexuality or demisexuality, or disinterest in sexual relationships are reframed not as something *apart from* the gendered experience of heterosexuality, but as part of the heterosexual experience.

However, for the two abstinent men who talked about how their abstinence increased their connections with others, the connections were based not on a sense of commonality with other men, but of *difference*. It was precisely this difference that permitted the closeness. Kartik discussed how his publically-stated abstinence worked to 'degender' him in people's eyes. The consequence of this de-gendering was that he gained an 'in' with both men and women:

Kartik: I don't think I've ever...threatened anybody's masculinity. And so I don't think, you know, there's ever been sort of any astonishment or any sort of commentary on that because people just don't, don't you view you in that way anymore. You kinda, sort of, be de-sexualised - you completely fall out of the paradigm really...I guess, if you say, you know, you're not interested in any of this - then all of a sudden you're not a competitor...You're a confidante. And people tell you extraordinary things, umm, so yeah - I mean, then you kind of, you're not really somebody who's in the same game as them so you're standing outside the game, looking in.

Karen: This idea of being, like, a 'confidante' - is that related to male friends or is it female friends or...?

Kartik: Umm, I think both...Because I guess I get along with both women and men equally well, umm, and so, you know, guys want to know, you know, how to behave around women; and the women want to know what's going on with the guys and so, yeah, it's interesting, yeah, it kind of works both ways. Umm... and, yeah, I think it removes from the equation any, sort of, sexual tension with a woman, you know, that could be a hindrance to friendship. Whereas, with the guys, you're not a competitor.

Although he does not refer to it in this quote, Kartik's experience is probably even better understood in light of him being an abstinent gay man, which further reduces the threat he presents to women, and the competition he presents to men. Abstinence seems to afford Kartik a liminal quality that allows him access to and mobility between different gendered spheres; but rather than diminishing his status, this seems to afford him privilege.

Another participant, Jason, also talks about how his relationships have been strengthened due to his abstinence:

I used to sleep around a lot. Umm, and in my social circle as well, uhh... I wasn't always good. It could lead to problems amongst friends or... changing the boundaries of friendships and making complicated and then you less friends...even just relationships with female friends... emm, they're just strengthened because there's no that: 'Is something going to happen between us at some point?'

Again, there is a sense of abstinence creating difference: difference from his previous self who used to sleep around a lot, and difference from other heterosexual men, who will sexually pursue women friends and risk friendships in the process. Jason goes on to talk about how his women friends now respect him a lot more. These differing gender experiences seem to be related to norms of femininity and masculinity: a lack of sexual interest is often seen as intrinsic to femininity so it increases a feeling of sameness for asexual and abstinent women, whereas lacking sexual interest is not typically 'masculine'. However, rather than being censured, it seems that this 'deviation' allows for stronger bonds of intimacy to develop, perhaps because the usual barriers to intimacy in normative masculinity (sexual aggressiveness and competitiveness) are taken out of the equation.

Thus, as we have seen, gender affects the kind of relations one might have with peers as an asexual or abstinent person (combining with class to offer one access to affirmative resources; creating commonality or difference). But asexuality and abstinence also affects gender in the sense of stymying belonging to gendered peer groups because of an inability or unwillingness to participate in the gendered performance of desire, or alternatively, as strengthening one's identification with one's gender (as in the case of asexual and abstinent women who read their asexuality and abstinence through a gendered lens). In the case

of peer relations then, gender, and asexuality and abstinence, thus interact in multiple and often contradictory ways, increasing belonging in some contexts, and preventing belonging in others.

5.4. Epistemic Injustice



Figure 6 – Excerpt from Frankie's notebook

In this third section, I want to explore a *specific* experience discussed by participants. Of all the experiences discussed in the interviews and notebooks, the experience of having one's own narrative overwritten or overlaid with/by the narratives of others was the most common. I suggest that we view these occurrences as instances of 'epistemic injustice', a concept developed by the feminist philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007). Fricker defines epistemic injustice as a 'wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower' (Fricker,

2007: 1). Fricker argues this has two varieties. *Testimonial* epistemic injustice, to put it simply, is about how some people from particular marginalised social groups are not listened to, or are denied credibility or believability, because of who they are seen to be. Their ‘testimonies’ are dismissed or doubted, or are replaced or reinterpreted by a more ‘authoritative’ voice (by which I mean, the voices of those higher up the gendered, racialised, classed, and able-bodied hierarchies).

Hermeneutical epistemic injustice occurs when a person struggles to render their experiences or subjectivities intelligible to themselves and/or to others, because there is not sufficient discourse or cultural scripts in which to do so (or these are unevenly distributed). Again, hermeneutical epistemic injustice is fundamentally related to power: available discourses are often the discourses of the powerful/the normative. As an example of hermeneutical epistemic injustice, Fricker uses the example of a woman experiencing sexual harassment prior to the development of the concept and language of *sexual harassment*, and being unable to make sense of and communicate her experiences because of this.

Fricker (2017) writes that she developed the concept of epistemic injustice (building on the work of feminist and critical race scholars) to better account for the ‘experiences of those on the less powerful end of various relationships’ (p59). It is a way of ‘making sense of the lived experience of injustice in how a person’s beliefs, reasons and social interpretations were received by others’ (p56). Fricker argues that paying attention to epistemic injustice is essential since: ‘wronging someone as a giver of knowledge...amounts to wronging that person as a knower, as a reasoner, and thus as a human being’ (2007: 44). I find Fricker’s concept useful in being able to make sense of and give name to participants’ experiences. As we will see, certain groups of participants (namely women and non-binary AFAB persons, both asexual and abstinent) discussed how their ability to give testimony with regards their own a/sexual subjectivities and experiences was consistently denied, and over-ridden by hetero-patriarchal

interpretations.⁵³ I have chosen to illustrate this section with a page from Frankie's notebook (Figure 6, p130) which, to my mind, acts as a poignant depiction of the experience of epistemic injustice. In the image, Frankie's subjectivity as an asexual person is being crushed and squeezed by the weight of other people's interpretations and voices.

That asexual persons face negative reactions, including disbelief and denial, upon 'coming out' as asexual is also not a new idea - asexual persons have been communicating these experiences for a number of years (e.g. Decker, 2014), and researchers are beginning to document these (Carrigan, 2012; MacNeela and Murphy, 2014; Robbins et al., 2016). Scott et al. (2016: 276-277) go further in synthesising these experiences as examples of 'communicative negation'⁵⁴, where 'audiences make their own interpretations and may place the actors differently'. However, Scott et al.'s focus is not so much on the negations themselves but on the ways in which these negations (amongst other 'contingencies') work to prevent a person from identifying as asexual. Rather, in this section, I want to focus on these instances themselves, suggesting that we can characterise them as epistemic injustices (both testimonial and hermeneutical), and illustrating how they are connected to wider power structures. In particular, I want to draw out the ways in which these instances are gendered (which previous asexuality literature has failed to do), with reference to feminist scholarship on voice and authority.

I have sub-divided participants' experiences of epistemic injustices according to the specific ways in which subjectivities are being denied. I discuss six of these which apply exclusively to women and non-binary (AFAB persons), and which stem from hetero-patriarchal views of women, and gendered inequalities in relationships. These are: positioning women as 'just' romantic; naturalising low

⁵³ I might have used the concept of 'misrecognition' here too, particularly since in Nancy Fraser's theorisation, it refers to 'institutionalised hierarchies of cultural value that deny [some people] requisite standing' (Fraser, 2007: 20) which leads to the denial of common humanity. However, I feel that the concept of epistemic injustice emphasises to a greater extent that there is a *wrong* being perpetuated, as well as the importance of what is at stake (one's capacity as a knowing subject). The concept of epistemic injustice has also been productively applied to the empirical context of bisexuality (Bostwick and Hequembourg, 2014), and Hall (2017) and McKinnon (2017) have recently shown how the concept might be utilised in researching and theorising queer and trans, respectively.

⁵⁴ 'Communicative negation' as a term vis a vis epistemic injustice also does not capture the *systemic wrongs* that are being perpetuated, as well as the denial of subjectivity that seems to be taking place.

sexual desire in women; the discourse of frigidity; seeing the participant as a sexual challenge to be overcome; fetishizing the participant's asexuality or abstinence; and when asexuality or abstinence is welcomed by participants' fathers. In each of these, I argue that what is going on is that participants' testimonies (such as 'I identify as asexual' or 'I have made the decision to be abstinent') are not taken seriously, and this is for two interconnected reasons. Firstly, it is due to their status as women, or as people perceived to be women. This applies even when it comes to having their testimonies heard by other women. Secondly, they are not taken seriously because their narratives imply a level of agency (the participant is *identifying* as asexual, the participant is *choosing* not to have sex), which as we will see in more detail in Chapter Six, does not fit well with how hetero-patriarchy (still) constructs women and femininity. As such, participants' narratives are reconfigured in ways that downplays this agency. Their identities or decisions are attributed to a passive state of (sometimes pathological) womanhood, or they are re-interpreted in ways in which women's sexualities continue to exist for men. The dynamics behind each of these instances might be different: for example, a woman telling an asexual woman that asexuality is 'just normal' for women is undeniably different to a man who sees a woman's asexuality as a sexual challenge to be overcome. There are different intentions behind each of these instances (for example, in the second instance, there is a clear advantage to be gained by interpreting a woman's asexuality in this way). However, my argument is that both can still be seen as instances of epistemic injustice, because the woman's testimony of herself as asexual is not being respected (it is denied legitimacy as an identity, or is seen as something that will crumble in the face of heterosexual seduction), and this is *because of* the workings of hetero-patriarchy. I argue that both testimonial and hermeneutical epistemic injustices are involved here.

After offering examples of these six instances of epistemic injustices, I then talk about some instances where some men and AMAB non-binary persons had their accounts overwritten by others, but suggest that these differ in some key ways from the above. I end by discussing a more common experience amongst the men in my sample: epistemic *justice* where men have their accounts and identities heard, acknowledged and accepted.

5.4.1. 'She's just romantic'

A number of participants talked about how people 'took' their narratives about not feeling sexual attraction or not wanting to have sex to mean that they were waiting for true love, or the right man. This was often accompanied by positive affect on the part of the other person: what the participant was doing was seen as laudable and romantic. For example, Lucy said the following:

I was like, well I don't want to have sex unless I really really want to and unless I find the right person or something, and they were like [hushed mocking tone] 'oh I think that's beautiful'... they can pigeon-hole me, they can say, oh she's, she's just like a good girl, she's just romantic or she's just sweet.

Pooja discussed how some people reacted to her with a kind of pat on the head, whilst others were more cynical:

Some people are really positive and, you know: 'I wish I done that', 'you wait honey' - I get a lot of that - 'you wait darling, don't you worry'. I get the usual: 'You serious? What you trying to do? Wait for your happily ever after? Your Prince?'

Frankie also raised the idea of 'waiting':

I think there's often this assumption of...emmm...like uhh maybe somebody will be saying that a female asexual is just waiting for the right guy to come along which is [this concept of] waiting...so I'm trying to explain 'no I'm not waiting even if I find the perfect person I'm still not going to be attracted to them sexually'

In these examples, participants' accounts are disregarded in favour of a more legible heteronormative script - that is, the idea that they as women, or people who are read as women, are just 'waiting' for Mr Right. All three participants expressed discomfort about their accounts being taken in this way; Pooja's frustration is clear when she says 'I get the usual', and Frankie's comment 'I'm trying to explain' highlights how they struggle to make their voice heard in the face of dominant narratives. By reframing participants as 'waiting', they are also made intelligible according to a 'Sleeping Beauty' model of female sexuality. Przybylo (2013a) argues that a dominant trend in contemporary sexology is the (re)conceptualisation of women's sexuality as 'receptive', as opposed to the

understanding of male sexuality as ‘proceptive’.⁵⁵ While this move can be seen as an attempt to remove the androcentric bias of much sexology (i.e. the universalising of the male sexual experience) rather than necessarily a return to mid-20th century misogyny, Przybylo (p237) argues that the characterisation of women as receptive (that is, their desire is only ‘awakened’ upon sexual contact, and women are less aware of their bodily responses than are men) merely replaces one regressive model with another. Przybylo argues that these conceptualisations make it more difficult for women to refuse unwanted sex, since *women don’t really know what they want, or they will want sex once they get into it*. And, crucially, Przybylo argues that conceptualising women as such can also lead to denying women the right to self-identify as asexual - i.e. women might *perceive* themselves to be asexual, but 1) women don’t generally feel desire/sexual attraction *anyway* and 2) they just need to wait for their sexuality to be awakened by someone with the requisite techniques. These kinds of assertions have already appeared in some of the psychological and sexological literature on asexuality (e.g. Bogaert, 2004; Brotto and Yule, 2011) and as we go through the following sections, they are themes that emerge in participants’ accounts over and over again, including the accounts of abstinent women. That these themes were entirely absent from the accounts of men and non-binary (AMAB) persons highlights how men and those perceived as such are afforded an agency and the right to self-knowledge in a way that is not the case for women.

5.4.2. ‘Women are not interested in sex anyway’

In some cases, Przybylo’s concerns that asexual women would be denied the ability to identify as asexual because of their gender was reproduced almost verbatim in some participant’s accounts. For example, Julia’s friend questioned if it wasn’t just her ‘nature’. Julia went on to say if she was a man, her declaration of asexuality would be taken much more seriously (even as it was being identified as a problem) *since it could not just be attributed to her gender*. Blair also recounts similar: ‘Then of course with women you get people saying you know well you’re not actually asexual, it’s just that women are not interested in sex anyway’.

⁵⁵ As discussed in Chapter Two, we can also see this in some of the asexuality literature e.g. Bogaert (2004).

And, as a menopausal woman, Tobi's friends attributed her asexuality to her hormones:

[upon telling a group of friends she is asexual] the others in the group immediately said 'oh no you're not you're not, it's just your hormones! Go and see a GP and your GP can give you some hormone treatment' and I said 'no, it's not my hormones' 'it is!' She's a doctor, this person, 'it is, it's just your hormones, go and see your GP and tell her and she'll sort it out' and I said 'no it's not my hormones and please don't tell me what my life is about'

Despite her agentic claiming of the identity asexual, Tobi's account was not heard as such. Instead, it was interpreted in terms of a hormone disturbance or deficiency, which is a particularly gendered frame. As Vines (1993: 7) puts it: 'Hormones are frequently proffered as explanations of women's everyday experience - so much so that a tendency to 'hormonal imbalance' has become a defining characteristic of women today'. And while men of course also have hormones, it is rare that they are seen to determine any aspect of their behaviour, identity or personality. Vines (ibid.) suggests that it is only in exceptional cases - i.e. in 'deviants' and criminals - that male hormones are ever marked as a problem, and 'even then there is a marked reluctance to manipulate a man's hormonal make-up'. This can be seen as an instantiation of a much larger historical trend wherein women have been understood as being ruled by the body (Moore, 2010: 108). By attributing a lack of sexual attraction to the phenomenological experience of being a woman (whether this was seen as a problem or not), this has the effect of denying women (and non-binary (AFAB) persons) subjectivity; in Tobi's account there is a clear sense of a narrative being imposed on her when she repeatedly rejects her friend's diagnosis and asks her 'please don't tell me what my life is about'.

In the case of abstinent women, their agentic decision not to have sex for a variety of reasons is often reduced to a coy feminine reticence about all things sexual. Adeline talks about how in an heterosexual dating encounter her stated decision not to have sex was interpreted in the following way:

Or like me trying to be some sort of, like, chaste girl or like, emm... Not wanting to have sex because, like, it would be improper for me to...it would be like improper for me to have sex and that I was waiting for like the right time...Or something to do with there being,

like, different rules for boys and girls regarding, like, promiscuity like - I didn't want to have sex because it would, emm... Like... I don't know. Like, being undignified or something?

Again, when we understand women as 'receptive', they are positioned as *naturally* resistant and so become targets for the active sexual desire of men. As we will see in the section on being a 'sexual challenge', this occurred in many other participants' accounts.

5.4.3. 'Classic definition of the frigid bitch'

'Frigidity' was another gendered cultural script that was used to over-lay participant accounts. Some participants talked about how they were directly 'accused' of being frigid, such as Broadley (who was asexual): 'They'd just be like: 'Oh you're just, like, you're just being frigid -'. And I'm like: 'Ah, but I don't want to do it''. And Cassandra⁵⁶ (also asexual) talks about how accusations of frigidity also carry connotations of arrogance: 'What I have personally experienced is the classic definition of the frigid bitch. So it's just that I've always had people tell me that I was arrogant because I didn't want to have sex with people'.

Other participants related stories where frigidity was implied through accusations of being uptight and injunctions to 'relax'. Alora (who was abstinent) describes the experience of bumping into a man that she had previously turned down and to whom she had explained that she had made the decision not to have sex: 'He still asks me every time - 'have you met someone yet?' and I'm like 'no' [laughs]. [He says] 'you know you should relax'. I say 'I am relaxed''.

While frigidity is generally seen as 'a concept that is now often dismissed as redundant, old-fashioned and silly' (Cryle and Moore, 2011: 248), it is clear from these participants' accounts that it remains a legible script through which to interpret women's sexuality. It may even carry more weight today as there is an

⁵⁶ Post-interview, Cassandra told me that she chose the pseudonym Cassandra precisely because people 'never believed her'. Cassandra is a Greek mythological figure who was cursed by Apollo to bear the gift of prophecy (that is, to speak the truth) but never be believed. Interestingly (although the participant Cassandra did not mention this), Apollo's curse was the result of Cassandra-of-myth refusing him sexual access to her (Roberts, 2007).

increased imperative for women to be sexual; indeed, as Gill (2009b) argues, the ideal postfeminist woman is a ‘sexual adventurer’ (although only in particularly sanctioned ways), and ‘female empowerment’ is often now taken to be synonymous with sexually free and uninhibited (Levy, 2005).

Far from being a neutral diagnostic category, feminists have long pointed to the ways in which frigidity has been ‘weaponised’ against women who do not respond in the appropriate (male-defined) ways - whether this be women who refused sex with their husbands, or women who experienced no sexual desire for men, or even women who were unable to orgasm through penetration by a penis (Cacchioni, 2015: 446). Frigidity also has a moral dimension: as we have seen, Cassandra was accused of being arrogant, and Frankie also talks about how the invectives ‘frigid’ and ‘cold’ accompanied remarks such as ‘bitch think she’s too good for anyone’. To not want sex as a woman (or as a person perceived to be a woman) is to be conceited, and to have an unacceptably high an opinion of oneself, contravening still-dominant norms of femininity ‘which demand that women be selfless and self-effacing’ (Frederick, 2014: 302). These accounts also highlight the stakes involved in women saying no; as Gavey (2005: 105) puts it: ‘the woman who chooses not to have sex with her male partner when she doesn’t feel like it herself enters into a discursive space spiked with pejoratives and potentially punitive consequences’. The discourses around frigidity perhaps suggest that there is a fine line that women must walk: some reticence is acceptable and expected, but an outright refusal to have sex renders one suspect.

5.4.4. ‘I’m a challenge...’

A large number of participants discussed instances where heterosexual men construed their declaration of asexuality, or abstinence, as a kind of sexual challenge. They were not taken seriously as actors stating their truth, but instead were seen as a challenge to be overcome with enough persistence and the requisite sexual skills. Ussher (1997: 128) describes this as:

The ‘myth’ associated with celibate (and lesbian) women for centuries: any woman who withholds her sexual favours from man is all the more ready to be sexually awakened - “All she needs is a good fuck”.

This was seen in the accounts of women who were both asexual and abstinent, and of varying ages. Pooja, abstinent and in her 20s, said the following:

So, even with that, you know, like, probably the person I've actually been attracted to the most, I told him and he was very supportive - but I could sense there was something pushy, even though he was being supportive. Like, he was saying to me: 'I'll give you time', but then, maybe a week, he'd say: 'So, what? Should it be a week?'

Alora, abstinent and in her 30s, said:

He thought he could change my mind along the line. He had this belief that it was because I didn't love the others that much. He thought if he could love me enough, I would release myself... most guys I've met, no I don't want to say most guys, some guys I've met, they take upon them as a task to be the one to break through, you know.

Sally-Ann, asexual and in her 40s, related similarly:

Then there are the incessant demands that they will change me if they are given the chance... Men, today, automatically say - it was because my ex-husband was no good in bed, which always makes me laugh - they are all obviously 'sex experts'. Most men seem to think they are the 'one' that can convert me. I'm a challenge!... I get all the usual question about what it entails, then the denial from them that it exists and lastly the fact that they will save me from the world of asexuality. I have yet to find a man that will listen, accept and move on without being completely obsessed about it after I've disclosed my orientation.

And Ouka, who was both asexual and abstinent and in her 50s, stated:

The last [man] I've been dating with pretended he was patient and could wait! Wait for what? And he became harassing so I gave up with this relation. ... Men don't accept asexuality ... well, the men I meet anyway, and a "No" doesn't sound like a "No" to them, because they put their need and desire on the top of everything else.

The fact that the ages of these participants span four decades indicate that the idea of women as conquerable is not restricted to women of particular ages, and nor does it matter if women express their lack of interest in sex in terms of an orientation (asexuality) or a decision they have made (abstinent). Gillian's optimism (expressed in the earlier Partner Relations section) that 'asexuality' would be seen as a legitimate reason for turning men down does not seem to be

borne out in the accounts of other women. 'No' never really means 'no', at least when it is said by a woman. In these accounts, men *refuse to accept* asexuality and *deny* its existence, they *demand* incessantly, their goal is *breaking through*, and any ostensible initial support soon gives way to *pushiness*. I argue that these are paradigmatic examples of rape culture, a concept which second wave feminists developed to express how sexual violence towards women was normalized and built into the fabric of our daily lives (Herman, 1984). The concept is intended to convey how rape and sexual violence are not isolated and categorically distinct acts, but are supported by an entire cultural fabric (and indeed structural edifice) which supports and encourages male violence, the objectification of women, and the violation of consent. Furthermore, the concept of rape culture conveys a sense of how this affects women in quotidian and micro ways which are often simply normalised (such as 'instinctively' avoiding certain routes on one's way home at night). Thus, even if the men in the accounts above did not violate the women's consent outright, this can still be seen in terms of rape culture in that the men feel *entitled* to their female partner's bodies or that they see women as a conquest. More recently, feminists have applied the concept of rape culture to different spheres, including online contexts (Sills et al., 2016) and in the resurgence of 'laddism' in the neoliberal university (Lewis et al., 2016). Contextualising participant accounts in such a way allows us to understand that this is not just about asexuality or abstinence in a context of 'compulsory sexuality', but also about the operation and circulation of *gendered* power.

The positioning of asexual and abstinent women as sexual challenges also has very real and material consequences. Some participants (three) shared with me their experience of rape, which arose out of situations in which men disregarded their voices, and instead saw them as challenges to be overcome. For example, Isabella said:

I told him I wasn't interested in sex before marriage (I thought that would at least give me some time to deal with how I was feeling) and he told me he didn't understand my views - on our 4th date he picked me up and took me to an isolated lay-by and raped me - it wasn't violent, I told him I didn't want to do it and he again said he didn't understand. I just gave in so that I would make it home in one piece.

This quote powerfully illustrates how epistemic injustices *matter* and how rendering certain voices unintelligible opens up justificatory space for acts of violence. I am not arguing that the experiences narrated by the four participants above are *the same as* Isabella's experience (nor do I want to downplay Isabella's trauma and distress) but I am arguing that we *can* see them as part of the same system of meaning (rape culture, epistemic injustice) in which women are not heard, not taken seriously, and seen as sexual objects.

5.4.5. 'They find it really attractive'

Heterosexual men also fetishized asexuality and abstinence in women and those perceived to be women, turning them from agentic self-knowers to sexual objects. Ellie talks about how she is reluctant to mention she is asexual on any of her online profiles because it attracts 'freakish types' - that is, men who would be attracted to her on account of her asexuality (possibly the attraction stemming in part from the idea of sexual conquest as discussed above). Sam also relates how she received unwanted attention from a fellow male student:

He said he liked me because I wasn't like other girls, I didn't, you know, dress up slutty or whatever and the reason that I dressed that way was because...I was very very disgusted with the idea of anybody being attracted to me so it was basically like being a nun and wanting nothing to be visible...I feel like seriously angry that no matter what I did other people could sexualise me in their heads.

This man's attraction was not based on Sam's asexuality *per se* since he was unaware that this was how Sam identified. However, it was based upon their way of presenting to the world which Sam sees as inextricably linked to their gender identity, feelings about their body, and asexual orientation. Sam's lack of overt interest in sex becomes fetishized through a simultaneous process of slut-shaming other women. Sam is attractive because they are 'not like other girls' whose sexuality is perhaps insufficiently controlled, and this 'not like other girls' becomes a locus of fantasy. Sam experienced this as profoundly dehumanising because this projection once again took precedence over Sam's own story and way of understanding themselves. Similarly, in perhaps a more familiar narrative, Pooja talks about how men find her abstinence (specifically her virginity) attractive:

Most boys I meet, they find it really attractive at first, like: 'You're a virgin?!'... Like, the older guys - a lot of them seemed to love it which is strange, you know? But the minute it comes to actually, like, understand what that means, it's when they get a bit, you know, taken aback.

Like the positioning of women as sexual challenges, Pooja's virginity similarly positions her as some(thing) to be broken in. Pooja perhaps finds their attraction 'strange' because the reason why she is abstinent is down to a complex mix of reasons and circumstances and is entirely unrelated to sexual titillation; it does not exist for the sake of these men. However, as Pooja's narrative shows, the limits of their approval become clear when they realise that Pooja plans to stay a virgin, and therefore they cannot 'take' her virginity. Pooja's virginity is not respected as a thing in and of itself, but only when it is available as an object of consumption for men.

5.4.6. Fathers 'over the bloody moon'

Another way in which participants' accounts were appropriated by men was literally patriarchal - that is, an appropriation that benefitted their fathers. Some participants talked about how their parents - and specifically their fathers - greeted their asexuality or abstinence with happiness, because it meant they were not dating men. Cassandra discussed the possibility of coming out as asexual to her father:

I kinda came out to my father...my father is weird. He's always like, he's so anxious, and he's so repulsed about the idea of someone touching me so he's really happy [laughs] cos he doesn't want people to hurt me and he knows that when I get hurt, I get really hurt and obviously doesn't like to see me suffer.

Pooja also talked about how both her parents but especially her father were 'over the bloody moon' when she told them that she had made the decision not to have sex. She explains her father's reaction as related to the fact that she is the only girl, as well as the youngest, in the family. Interestingly, no further explanation beyond this was offered by Pooja - possibly because it was not required, given the cultural intelligibility of this script (that is girls, especially when they are 'scarce', necessitate special protection and vigilance). Fathers' motives for this kind of protectionism are undoubtedly well-intentioned: they

are perhaps aware of the dangers for girls and young women of living in a patriarchal society, and genuinely do not want to see their daughters get hurt (this is explicitly stated in Cassandra's account). However, we also cannot ignore the equally-patriarchal implications of this: this protectionism is premised upon the idea of ownership of girls and their bodies, and the gatekeeping of their sexuality, as we have seen in Chapter Three where I discussed abstinence as a form of control over women. This was also evident in Connor's account when, in discussing his girlfriend, he stated: 'Her maw and da' know [that they are abstaining from sex until marriage] and they're extremely happy with it - especially her dad'. This had the effect of improving Connor's relationship with his girlfriend's dad - there is a homosocial bond forged over the understanding of access to this young woman's body, specifically that Connor would not access her until the appropriately sanctioned time.⁵⁷ Interestingly, it does not seem to matter in these accounts if the woman is asexual or abstinent - her desire (or lack thereof) is not at all the issue, but rather, only that she is presumably not going to have sex with men.

There is a dividend (Connell, 1996) involved here - just as Connor is able to strengthen his relationship with his girlfriend's father, there is gendered kudos involved for the young women whose stories are heard in such a way. And as stated previously, the affective elements of these relationships should not be readily dismissed. Indeed, Pooja appeared happy by her father's reaction. Cassandra however was a bit more ambiguous. She describes her father as 'weird' and 'anxious' regarding her having relationships with men, but softens when she describes his concern for her (especially since it seems to be based on knowing her well enough to know her emotional responses). These accounts show how hetero-patriarchy does not just simply enact power on women, but is constituted by relational webs of real and affective human connections and attachments. As Hollway (1996: 97) puts it: 'whilst gender-differentiated positions do overdetermine the meanings and practices and values which construct an individual's identity, they do not account for the complex, multiple

⁵⁷ This interpretive frame emerged again when I gave a conference paper on asexuality. Afterwards, a heterosexual middle-aged male academic approached me to ask questions, before telling me 'as a father, it'd give me peace of mind if my teenage daughters were asexual! Here, his daughters' (potential) subjectivity and identity are subsumed or indeed appropriated under his desire to rest easy in the knowledge that his daughters are sufficiently sexually contained.

and contradictory meanings which affect and are affected by people's practices'. Epistemic injustices are part of these fabric of meanings, and so whilst still ultimately *injustices*, the experience may be lived and interpreted in complex, multiple, and even contradictory ways (e.g. in Cassandra's case of recognising concern, whilst also recognising the concern as a problem).

We might see all of the above in terms of *both* hermeneutical and testimonial injustice. Testimonial injustices are perpetrated because of who the speakers *are*. With regards to hermeneutical injustice, as we will see in the next section on men, it is not necessarily the case that abstinence or asexuality are culturally unintelligible in and of themselves. However, they may become so when a woman speaks agentially of her sexuality (as asexual or abstinent), given the relative lack of discourses concerning women, agency, and sexuality.

5.4.7. Epistemic (in)justice and men

5.4.7.1. 'It's a cover for something else'

Some of the asexual men and asexual non-binary (AMAB) persons in my sample also discussed instances of epistemic injustice. In his notebook, Jeffrey talked about how he does not ever see himself as coming out as asexual, since as a middle-aged man, he feels that people would interpret this as him trying to conceal some kind of perversion or even criminality:

Jimmy Saville: a lifelong unattached bachelor, who in spite of his wealth, lived a frugal life. And Cliff Richard with certain question marks hanging in the air above him...I don't think it's a good idea for a middle-aged single male to declare to all and sundry that he's asexual.

This highlights the role of age in mediating one's experiences of asexuality - although Kai, 25 years younger than Jeffrey, also stated:

If you say that [you're asexual or abstinent] to people, they assume that what you mean is something else, and there must be some other underlying reasons for it or there must be some kind of eh, you know, it's a cover for something else.

For Kai however, the 'something else' that people had in mind was repressed homosexuality, which he discussed through the spectre of another pop culture

figure: Morrissey. The examples of Jeffrey and Kai are undoubtedly examples of epistemic injustice; we might see them as hermeneutical injustices where a discourse of compulsory sexuality means that expressions of non-desire in men must be read through ideas of concealment, repression, and hypersexuality. What I think is interesting about these examples though is how they differ from women's and non-binary (AFAB) persons' accounts. Jeffrey and Kai's narratives are over-written but replaced by scripts which still position them as active sexual agents (even if that sexual agency is 'deviant'). However, they *do* complicate the straightforward assumption that asexual and abstinent men's voices will be 'heard' in the way that they intended.

But, in other cases, what seems to be going on is not epistemic injustice, but rather a negative opinion being expressed with regards to the decision not to have sex. Christopher, an abstinent man, related the following (although he was the only abstinent man to recount such an experience):

I've had people tell me that my decision was just flat out wrong. Or that I'm making, that I'm missing out on a lot of things or that I'm not choosing the right thing. Just the sheer quantity of people that I would have to argue it with is much higher because I'm a man than because I'm a woman ...I think if I was a woman and I had made the decision that I have made now that people might say insulting things about me, like 'oh you prude' or something like that, but they're not going, there wouldn't have been as many people to basically tell me that I was just flat out wrong, as there have been.

In the above, Christopher's account is not being challenged for its veracity. There is an implicit acknowledgement that Christopher is telling the truth. The interlocutors are disagreeing with the choice he has made, but this still entails recognition of him as an agentic subject who can make choices. Another thread in Christopher's narrative is the reaction that he is 'missing out' - while this is perhaps indicative of an inability to see things from Christopher's perspective (thus hermeneutical injustice), it might also be interpreted as an expression of male fraternity and camaraderie. He is recognised as 'one of them', and it is assumed that he would want to partake in activities from which they derive such pleasure. Asexual men have also been subjected to this 'missing out' discourse. Ryan, a 24-year-old male asexual participant in a previous research study I conducted (Cuthbert, 2013) stated: 'For a male, a non-asexual might say something like "dude, you don't know what you're missing!"' He contrasted this

with ‘one response I know a lot of women get is “obviously you’re too ugly to get any, so you make up excuses to console your ugly face while you sob into your pillow”’. Ryan’s account perfectly highlights the gendered responses that disclosures of asexuality can provoke: the man’s disclosure in this example is lamented but not doubted, whereas the woman’s similar disclosure is refused legitimacy (this time on the grounds of her purported lack of desirability). This is almost identical to an anecdote offered by a participant of Hills (2015: 142, my emphasis):

*I went to a really small school, and if a guy wasn’t having sex, **people figured it was because he chose not to**. Whereas if a girl wasn’t having sex, the only explanations were that she was religious or because she was undesirable.*

There is a tendency then to take men ‘at their word’, whilst woman must be corrected in her self-knowledge by a more authoritative voice. Therefore, Christopher is perhaps right in that women *are* less likely to be told they’re wrong or making the wrong decision, but instead they seem to be denied the agency and authority to make choices and ‘know’ themselves in the first place. Jordan (2004) encapsulates these themes beautifully when she characterises the dominant narrative as: ‘women do not tell the truth; moreover they are so deceived that it is impossible for them to even know the truth’ (p29) and discusses how ‘women’s voices and women’s words still struggle to be heard; if heard, to be believed; and if believed, to be understood’ (p248).

5.4.7.2. ‘Fair enough’

In stark contrast, men (particularly abstinent men) in my sample discussed the ways in which their voices were heard and respected. Jason was a good example of this. He said: ‘And they eventually get the picture... Initially, they laugh - think I’m kidding. You know? Emm, but when they find out, generally, just like: ‘Fair enough’. ‘That’s your choice, it would’nae be me’ is what I hear a lot’. Indeed, he even says ‘but I don’t go into any explanations as to why’ which emphasises his gendered privilege in this regard. When people ask for clarification, he offers only the following: ‘Well, I just tell people - when they try and flirt with me - am aff it. Umm, and when they say: ‘What d’ya mean?’ I’m like: ‘I’m aff it’’. Being ‘aff’ something is a Scottish (and specifically

working-class) phrase usually applied to temporary abstentions from alcohol due to over-indulgence. By framing his decision not to have sex in terms of being ‘aff it’, he is deliberately invoking humour, which potentially works to mitigate any stigma - but significantly, that is all he needs to say for his narrative to be accepted. Crucially, unlike asexual or abstinent women or non-binary (AFAB) people, he does not feel the need to justify his choices. He also does not relate any incidents where women have seen his decision as a challenge to be overcome; indeed, unlike all the abstinent women in the study, he was confident that potential future partners would respect his decision not to have sex until he was ready, telling me ‘if the person’s there, they’ll understand’. He also affirmed that he would not be pushed into anything, deploying the following metaphor to describe how he sees the situation:

If you decide you don’t want to do something, the only person that can make you do it is you - the person you’re fighting’s yourself. So it’s, like, if you don’t want a drink of water, I cannae force you to take it. D’you know what I mean? It’s your decision. There’s nae pressure for you to take that water - it’s nae different with sex.

For Jason, as a cis-gender white heterosexual man, a lifetime of having one’s choices largely heard, respected, and accepted without question emerges here, and he universalises this privilege so that what is most important is one’s own personal resolve.⁵⁸ This is in stark contrast to the experiences reported by the women and non-binary (AFAB) persons in the study who experienced their agency as much more constrained. Kartik, an abstinent man, also expressed confidence that his position would not come under scrutiny, because he is able to use his voice to ‘shut down’ any detracting viewpoints: ‘I mean, I certainly don’t - I don’t feel the pressure; partly because I simply don’t entertain it. Emm, I just feel like, well: ‘Sorry, none of your business’.

This ‘none of your business’ remark acts as a clear boundary which is never breached. In Connor’s case (also abstinent), his experience with his girlfriend stands in sharp contrast to some of the experience reported by women in the sample. He told me how, three months into the relationship when they had not yet had sex, his girlfriend had approached Connor and asked him if he didn’t find

⁵⁸ Although, to qualify, Jason was also working-class, and so to state that he has always had his voice heard due to his gender, race, and sexuality would ignore the importance of class dynamics.

her attractive, because he had not made any sexual advances on her. This was when Connor explained that he was abstaining from sex until marriage. Connor's girlfriend was unsure if he was telling the truth at first, but readily embraced the situation (even though she was not abstinent herself). Several things stand out in this account. First, that three months had gone past before the situation was broached (compare this to Pooja's account above, where even *after* she had explained her decision, she was being pestered for sex again one week later). Second, there was no attempt at coercion on the part of Connor's girlfriend; indeed, she was certain that the problem lay with *her* in not being sufficiently sexually attractive for Connor. And thirdly, while there was an initial period of disbelief (perhaps related to the seeming incongruity of a man being voluntarily abstinent), Connor's girlfriend accepted his decision at face value, without attributing it to anything else (e.g. his gender or gendered disposition). Of course, this is not to argue that men cannot and never experience coercion from their female partners, or that all female partners would accept this situation without question (I certainly do not wish to suggest that women are less interested in sex, and would be happy in a sexless relationship). But to my mind, comparing Connor's experience with the experiences discussed above effectively draws out the power relations (as well as the emotional labour incumbent on female partners, as we have seen in Connor's case where his girlfriend carefully managed her feelings, 'took on' the worry that the problem lay with her, and came to adapt to the situation) that inhere within heterosexual relations, and more generally, the differing credibility afforded men and women's voices within hetero-patriarchy.

Connor, Kartik, and Jason's accounts can be interpreted as epistemic *justices*, where they are granted the right to know themselves and tell their story (and get to live their choices in ways others may not). It may be that sometimes there is a gap at the hermeneutic level where a man abstaining from sex is hard to understand, but this seems to be resolved by drawing on another script - that is, one where men are imbued with agency, and authoritative voices in a kind of *It may be strange, but if that's what he says, then that's what he says* maxim. Here, testimonial justice is also involved - their believability is based on their status as men, where a hermeneutical incongruity is compensated for by the

social status of the speaker. As Jordan (2004: 2) puts it: ‘throughout the history of patriarchy, men’s ‘truth’ prevailed’.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted some of the ways in which gender manifests itself in the relationships and interactions of asexual and abstinent persons. Focusing on the level of relationships and affective and intimate interactions, as suggested by Jackson (2006), has allowed us to more concretely see some of the ways in which gender and sexuality might relate to each other, in real localised settings.

We saw how the organisation of gender under hetero-patriarchy and ‘rape culture’ resulted in women and AFAB non-binary persons often acquiescing to unwanted sex with their partners, but I argued this should not be seen as a uniquely asexual or abstinent experience. The same social context also meant that asexual women had to deploy their ‘asexuality’ in strategic ways to legitimately refuse some men’s sexual advances, whereas abstinent men were able to use their abstinence to increase their appeal as potential (heterosexual) partners. However, abstinence in *women* was considered more of a ‘block’ than ‘stock’ in the relational arena, given the ways in which heterosexuality is still centred around the transfer of sexuality from women to men.

We also saw different gendered experiences of peer relations. Some asexual women and non-binary (AFAB) persons were able to find affirmation of their ‘difference’ by utilising particular forms of economic, social and cultural capital, but for many participants, alienation from one’s gendered peer groups was a more common experience because of the expectation to live up to certain norms of desire. However, we also saw how asexuality or abstinence could increase one’s feeling of connection to a peer group - for women, this seemed to be based on an understanding of asexuality/abstinence as a common female experience, whereas for men, asexuality/abstinence afforded them a distinction from other men, which facilitated their access to, and esteem within, particular groups.

In the final section of the chapter, we saw the ways in which acts of epistemic injustice were enacted in interactions asexual and abstinent people had with others. I detailed the multiple ways in which asexual and abstinent women and non-binary (AFAB) persons had their narratives overwritten, which I explained by recourse to the ways in which women are constructed as non-credible, unknowing, passive, and over-determined by their bodies and their gender under hetero-patriarchy. Declarations of asexuality and abstinence required a presumption of agency and self-knowledge that women and those perceived to be women are systemically denied, so that more intelligible narratives must be sought, many of which worked directly to the benefit of men. In contrast, I showed that while some men might meet resistance to their narratives, they are not necessarily being denied epistemic authority, and indeed, for many, their experiences are ones of acknowledgement and acceptance. I argued that even when a narrative might be hermeneutically unfamiliar or unknown, one's testimonial status (i.e. the credibility afforded to a person by virtue of their membership to a particular group) can make up for this.

I want to argue here that the organisation of gender under hetero-patriarchy has a hugely significant role in the relational experiences of asexual and abstinent participants. This can be seen in part by the ways in which many of the experiences related by, for example, asexual women, are *not unique to asexual women* (although as I discussed earlier, asexuality might afford participants a particular perspective on, or attunement to these experiences). Even experiences which are ostensibly specific to asexual women (such as using asexuality as a reason to reject men) are in fact examples of a wider social context in which women are positioned as sexual objects whose 'no' is never enough. And most participants, whilst telling me stories about their asexuality or their abstinence often did either implicitly or explicitly situate their 'asexual' experiences in relation to gender, as they reflected upon wider dynamics of power. However, this was not the case for all participants, and this perhaps is an instance where I feel discomfort between offering a critical analysis and respecting how participants themselves understood their stories, as I discussed in Chapter Four). The power of hetero-patriarchy can also be seen in the ways in which asexual and abstinent women's experiences were so similar, and by contrast, how different the experience of abstinence in terms of relationships

was for abstinent women as compared to abstinent men. This chapter has illustrated how male and masculine privilege operated in ways which afforded relational and interactional advantages to men, including being able to leverage a potentially 'problematic' label of abstinence in ways that sometimes even increased their gender status.

The next chapter shifts the analytical focus from relational interactions and practices to the dimension of 'meanings', as I explore the construction of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' with regards to abstinence and asexuality.

6. Masculinity and femininity

6.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which gender, asexuality and abstinence intersected in the sphere of relationships. I argued that because of existing gender inequalities under a hetero-patriarchal social structure, women (and non-binary (AFAB) people) often have similar relational experiences with male partners - regardless of whether they are asexual, abstinent, or sexually active. I discussed how asexual women and non-binary (AFAB) people often had unwanted sex with male partners; how abstinent women struggled to find male partners who would accept their abstinence since heterosexual relations are still centred around the transfer of sex from women to men; how both asexual and abstinent women had to find inventive ways of refusing men's sexual advances because 'no' was never enough; and how both asexual and abstinent women were denied epistemic authority with regards to their narratives about their own sexualities. Whilst these stories emerged through participants' narratives about being *asexual* or being *abstinent*, (and were thus part of their asexual or abstinent 'experience') there was also a sense in their accounts of how these experiences were not just about asexuality or abstinence but were connected to broader gendered power disparities. In contrast to these experiences, abstinent and asexual men (and those perceived to be men) were often the beneficiaries of hetero-patriarchy in their relationships: one asexual non-binary (AMAB) person was able to use the label asexual to assert themselves when faced with unwanted sex; abstinent men found their abstinence to be a kind of boon in their intimate relationships and friendships; and both asexual and abstinent men had their self-accounts largely respected due to the agency afforded them by their gender.

The previous chapter explored the relational experiences of participants, and we saw that these were deeply impacted by ideas about masculinity and femininity. That is, in Jackson's (2006) terms, 'interactions' are closely bound up with 'meanings'. In this chapter, I specifically examine the construction of these *meanings* of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' (i.e. the concepts which structured many participants' relational experiences), with regards to how sexuality (or

non-sexuality) factors into these, and how these played out in the lives of participants.

This chapter is split into two main sections. The first concerns the ways in which asexuality and abstinence relates to masculinity, beginning with the ‘common-sense’ idea that asexuality and abstinence are the antithesis of masculinity, given the assumption that masculinity is fundamentally *sexual*. I will examine the different ways in which participants encountered and negotiated this idea. Asexual men tended to critically deconstruct the idea of masculinity, and masculinity was not particularly important in their lives, whereas abstinent men strove to include their abstinence in their identities as men by deploying particular discourses, including that of agency. In the second section, I turn to focus on femininity, and examine how femininity is thought to be able to accommodate a disinterest in sex in a way that masculinity is not, but also how femininity is ambiguous and contradictory when it comes to sexuality. These ambiguities emerge in the accounts of asexual women who experience ‘ease’ because asexuality is naturalised or normalised as part of femininity, but I show how ease is also contingent and conditional on other norms. In contrast, I discuss how narratives of ‘ease’ were conspicuously missing from the abstinent women’s accounts, which I argue is due to the construction of their abstinence as agentic (which was not the case for asexuality, naturalised as part of femininity) and in turn, the construction of agency *as masculine*. As such, a more general point made by this chapter is that agency (or lack thereof) remains a key component of masculinity and femininity.

6.2. Masculinity, asexuality, and abstinence

In this section, I will outline how notions of active (hetero)sexuality are central to dominant understandings of masculinity and manhood. This is something both asexual and abstinent men have encountered and negotiated to varying degrees, but from my data, there seems to be a difference in how asexual men and abstinent men respond to these ideas. First of all, I will discuss how a common theme in the accounts of *non-male* asexual participants was that asexual men have a particularly ‘difficult’ time as they must struggle with both internal and external expectations of a hyper-sexual masculinity. However, asexual men, whilst reflecting upon and critiquing these constructions of masculinity, reported

more complex and nuanced experiences wherein they recognised both their disadvantages and their privileges.

I then turn to exploring the narratives of the abstinent men in my sample. Unlike the asexual men, the abstinent men did not offer the same kind of reflexivity with regards to masculinity and where they stood in relation to it. Instead, much of their accounts can be seen in terms of the discursive work they undertake to 'lay claim' to a masculine identity. For these men, abstinence did seem to pose a kind of implicit threat to their masculinity that must be accounted for. The discursive work included drawing on forms of alternative masculine 'credit' but also re-interpreting the practice of abstinence so that it becomes a masculine practice in and of itself. I will also explore how other intersecting identities can work to mitigate the potential threat posed by abstinence to participants' masculinities - both in participants' own understandings, and in how they were received by others.

6.2.1. 'It's obviously a lot harder for a guy'

The association of masculinity with an active sexuality has been articulated by sociologists of masculinity such as Raewyn Connell (1995), Michael Kimmel (2005) and CJ Pascoe (2007). Kimmel even argues that masculinity and sexuality are so inextricably knotted together that when men face sexual problems such as erectile dysfunction, they overwhelmingly understand this as a failure of gender i.e. as not being 'man enough' (2005:71). Indeed, the centrality of being able to 'function' in sexually normative ways to some men's sense of masculinity is such that some men are willing to risk their lives by foregoing cancer treatment that might render them impotent or reduce their sexual desire (Cushman et al., 2010).

Asexuality researchers have given a small amount of attention to how this 'knot' of masculinity and sexuality comes to bear upon asexual men. As Przybylo (2014:225) writes:

Asexual men, especially, generate in others astonishment and disbelief, as is for instance demonstrated in the 2006 interview with David Jay, founder of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network

*(AVEN), on the U.S. daytime talk show The View: "I don't get this. A guy. I could see for a woman. But you? You have to do something."*⁵⁹

The assumption that men will be interested in sex means that the presenter on The View finds Jay incomprehensible. Jay, for his part, has reflected on the difficulties of being an asexual man: 'A lot of the images of empowerment for men are tied up with sexuality. Learning how to have an empowered gender identity without sexuality is really tricky' (Jay as quoted in White, 2010). This indicates that for some asexual men, reconciling their asexuality and their masculinity is a difficult and fraught process, as so much of what they have been taught to be and to value as men is bound up with ideas of an active sexuality. The three men in Przybylo's (2014: 235) study echoed this struggle: for example one participant talked of moments of tension between 'being a man' and 'being asexual' (Przybylo, 2014:235); and an asexual man in MacNeela and Murphy (2014: 807) talked about how he felt his asexuality was a 'weakness or a failure' and he felt like 'less of a man' because of it. These themes emerged in my own research - but, crucially, were primarily expressed by asexual women and asexual non-binary (AFAB) persons rather than asexual men themselves. Almost universally, women and non-binary (AFAB) participants talked about how the experience of asexuality must be more difficult for men. This was generally prompted by my asking them if they thought their experiences as a person on the asexual spectrum would be different if they were a gender other than the one they currently identified with. The reason as to why life was imagined to be more difficult for an asexual man was tied to the idea (as discussed above) that there was more pressure on men to be actively sexual, as Frankie put it:

There's this assumption of what guys want, that guys are meant to be wanting sex a lot more than women who are wanting more affection just in terms of pure stereotype...I think it's obviously a lot harder for a guy.

Reeta also suggested 'it's harder for men in general to be asexual', since 'being a man involves having sex', linking this to 'conquests and rites of passage' that men are expected to undertake. Sam also discussed the 'pressure from the

⁵⁹ This might be seen as an instance of epistemic injustice in that the interviewer is doubting the veracity of Jay's claims ('you have to do something'). However, as discussed in Chapter Five, he, like the asexual men in my research, was still being positioned as an active sexual subject in a way that asexual women and non-binary (AFAB) people were not.

environment to be sexual and heterosexual’ that asexual men were subjected to, and how they imagined this would be ‘really alienating’ if they were an asexual man and felt that having sex was ‘something that I needed to do, to be, to fit in’. Both Reeta and Sam allude to how an asexual man’s very personhood might be under threat due to his asexuality, when being a man is so inextricably tied up with being sexual.

Some participants, as well as hypothesising asexual men’s internal struggles and alienation from peers, also spoke about how asexuality in men is much more pathologised than it is in women, and that people would generally have a stronger and more negative reaction to an asexual man. Frankie discussed how an asexual woman is assumed to be ‘just one who is waiting’; but with asexual men it is assumed that ‘there’s something wrong with him because he’s not interested’. Gillian echoed this in a wonderful turn of phrase: ‘With a young man...people would be ‘oh my god it’s the end of the world, what is wrong with you, get thee to a prostitute’ you know, that sort of thing’. As will be discussed in the section on femininity later in the chapter, it is imagined that there is space available within the construction of femininity for asexuality, but no such equivalent space within masculinity. Indeed, we can see this idea in *The View* interview quoted above (‘I could see this for a woman. But you?’). This leads to participants hypothesising that asexual men, upon disclosing their asexuality, would be met with accusations of ‘wrongness’, pathology, and a sense of urgency in putting things ‘right’.

However hypotheses about asexual men having a particularly difficult time were not fully borne out in the narratives of asexual men and non-binary (AMAB) people in my study. There was indeed an acknowledgement that masculinity was tied up with sexuality, as Nathaniel put it:

If you haven’t lost your virginity by the time you’re, I don’t know, what, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, there’s something wrong with you...What’s wrong with you man? Come on. And it’s both genders in a sense, but I think there’s this extra pressure on a man to perform in, in that sense. So much of masculinity is tied up with sex.

Jeffrey too discussed how sex was part of the definition of being a man:

On what makes a man: he takes great pride in his sexual prowess and his ability to 'please' a woman; he'll wince if you mention castration to him; and God forbid that he should be thought of as effeminate!

And Nathaniel went on to talk about how these cultural associations mean 'you learn to lie your way through it' because if you 'admit' to never having had sex, 'you'll be seen as something wrong with you'. Whilst there was pressure with regards to 'the whole bloke thing about being able to be a man, be a sexualised man', Nathaniel also said 'I can imagine it's very similar, well similar in some senses, for a woman'.

There was no sense of a great internal struggle in the narratives of Nathaniel and Jeffrey, although they do reflect upon these uncomfortable social situations. Jeffrey talked about how being male was different from being a man - the first he saw as a biological category, the second as a set of cultural and social understandings, effectively expressing the idea of the sex/gender distinction (Oakley, 1972). He saw himself as an asexual male rather than an asexual man - in this way he was able to reconcile his asexuality with his male bodied-ness by articulating masculinity as something separate from having a male body. Nathaniel too also articulated his identity in terms of a sex/gender split, in that he saw the construction of masculinity as something separate to 'biological' sex. However, whilst Jeffrey disengaged entirely with masculinity and manhood, and was content to just occupy the space of 'biological' maleness, Nathaniel did claim the identity of 'man'. He did so by arguing for the necessity of expanding what is included under the aegis of 'man' and 'masculinity':

Any concept or construct of gender to me is separate to the sexual organs that you possess, to the sex that you have. We have chosen to construct these gender norms in society and I am comfortable now saying 'well that's your norm, it's not my norm in society', and I will challenge it.

He said 'I am shaped like a man, I act like a man, I think like a man'. These statements do not refer to Nathaniel according with the stereotype of what a man is or is like, but about Nathaniel claiming the space of 'man' so that how he looks, acts, and thinks become what a man is, simply by virtue of him being a man and doing these things. In this way, asexuality can fit perfectly with Nathaniel's sense of manhood (if not society's), because manhood is expanded

to encompass whatever he - as a man - does or is. Manhood is established a priori, and thus nothing can negate this manhood (aside from he himself, by no longer identifying as a man). Nathaniel's understanding of gender perhaps stems in part from his community work with transgender organisations (although he himself is not transgender), where the separateness of sex and gender may be emphasised, and one's self-identity is accorded priority (i.e. if you identify as a man, then you are a man, regardless of what society says men must be like). These might be seen in some way as assertions of agency: whilst the non-male asexual participants spoke almost of the intractable nature of the norm that real men must be sexual, the emphasis in the asexual men's accounts was more on how they *negotiate* the idea of masculinity.

Not only then did the asexual men in my study relate no profound conflict between their asexuality and gender identities (even if they did have uncomfortable experiences), but they were also keen to stress the difficulties that asexual women faced. For example, Nathaniel suggested some difficulties that asexual women might encounter that he would not: for example, he feels that people tend to ask him less prying questions about his asexuality because men are not perceived as available as women are in this way. Oran, who was an asexual non-binary (agender, AMAB) person, also talked at length about how asexual women are particularly disadvantaged by still having to live under patriarchy. The idea of 'asexual male disadvantage' was therefore much less emphatic than that hypothesised and expressed by non-male participants. And whilst non-male participants tended to focus on how asexuality would be a barrier in the lives of asexual men (i.e. in preventing asexual men from fitting in), asexual men (and non-binary persons) themselves were more keen to problematise masculinity, and discuss how it was masculinity that got in the way of them living fully authentic asexual lives. The concern was less about being denied access to masculinity (since none of them wanted access to masculinity, commonly understood) and more about how constructions of masculinity presented barriers in their everyday lives. For example, Jeffrey alluded to how the trope of the sexually predatory male meant that he, as an asexual man, was prevented from even talking to women in a platonic sense:

I might be seen to be typically male, to be acting like a bloke, you know, chatting up and stuff like that when actually I'm not...it's that

old phrase, men are only after one thing when in fact it's the last thing I want - it's not what I want at all.

Oran echoes this, but is also keen not to blame women for making assumptions about the motivations of men, given the long historical precedent of male sexual aggression:

I also get really paranoid about like being a creep and like, I feel like as somebody who's like male-bodied as well like you really have to recognise that like you have a certain amount of privilege in pretty much every situation and that, like, you know, there's a whole culture surrounding like that macho sort of male dominant thing...even if, you know, I just want to get to know a person sometimes it's like well I'm not going to go over and start talking to them because they're going to think I'm hitting on them and I would feel like a sleazebag.

Thus, whilst recognising the personal barriers faced, Oran is able to situate this disadvantage within structures of hetero-patriarchy, whilst still recognising their privilege in being male-bodied and being 'read' as a man.

It is difficult to account for exactly why non-male asexual participants felt that asexual men were at a disadvantage when asexual men (and non-binary AMAB people) did not necessarily experience it in the same way. It may be due to people's tendency to downplay their own struggles, and instead compare themselves to those who have it 'worse' (we saw both groups of participants do this, referring to each other). This may have been a way of asexual men and asexual non-binary (AMAB) participants to retain a sense of agency in the face of pervasive and powerful constructions of masculinity and sexuality (although there was no real sense that these participants were 'doing masculinity' by drawing on a masculinist discourse of agency, as did the abstinent men in my sample, as we will see below). Concurrently, the asexual women and asexual non-binary (AFAB) participants may have put greater emphasis on 'male asexual disadvantage' because the ways in which women are systematically disadvantaged under patriarchy are so commonplace and quotidian that participants are perhaps less able to distinctly 'see' the ways in which asexual women (especially in relation to themselves) are affected by these structures and instead are drawn to the ostensibly 'dissonant' image of the asexual man. Or (and) it may be that the asexual men and non-binary AMAB people in my

study were equipped with the hermeneutical resources to deconstruct the idea of masculinity, and because of this, found themselves less caught up with the idea of how they as men *should* be. This is perhaps not the ‘asexual man’ that Gillian, Reeta, Frankie et al. had in mind when discussing the plight of asexual men (nor Przybylo or MacNeela and Murphy in their research). However, as I will discuss in the next chapter on subjectivities and embodiment, there was often a sense in which coming to identify as asexual meant becoming more aware of gender as a social construct (the ‘Judith Butler Experience’ as described in Chapter Five), due to the nature of the asexual online community, and its proximity to LGBTQ+ cultures.

6.2.2. Discursive work to affirm masculinity

Having discussed how asexual men and non-binary (AMAB) persons negotiated this knot of masculinity and active (hetero)sexuality, I now turn to the accounts of abstinent men. However, before delving into the empirical data, I will map out the conceptual framework I am using to understand these narratives.

Compared with asexual men and non-binary (AMAB) persons, in the interviews with abstinent men there was less direct talk of masculinity, despite my efforts to encourage participants to reflect on the concept and its relation to abstinence. Rather, I felt that masculinity was something that was being actively ‘done’ and accomplished in the interview space through the ways in which participants spoke about themselves, their abstinence, and their relationships. Here I found it useful to draw on the work of Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) in conceptualising the interview not only as an exchange of information but as an ‘opportunity for signifying masculinity’ (p91) on the part of participants.

In all interviews with abstinent men, I experienced a sense in which masculinity was being affirmed or laid claim to, as if to ‘compensate’ for the potentially emasculating stigma of abstinence.⁶⁰ This was something that I also subsequently

⁶⁰ My own positioning must also be taken into account here. If we think about the interview as an opportunity for signifying masculinity, the ‘audience’ to whom this is directed is also key. Whilst I can never be sure of how participants ‘read’ me, the interview dynamics may have been affected by their perception of me as a woman, and their ‘compensatory manhood acts’ at least partially carried out in that context.

discerned in my analysis of the transcripts. I suggest that we understand this as examples of 'compensatory manhood acts' which Sumerau (2012: 462) defines as the ways in which 'subordinated men signify masculine selves by emphasising elements of hegemonic masculinity'. Whilst the status of my abstinent male participants as 'subordinated' is debatable (given their many other privileges), abstinence nevertheless presents a level of threat to masculinity (if we understand an active sexuality to be a core element of masculinity) and therefore has to be 'compensated' for. This compensation usually takes the form of emphasising some other aspect of masculinity, which researchers have referred to as drawing upon 'masculine credit', 'masculine insurance' or 'masculine capital' (Anderson, 2002; de Visser and Smith, 2006; de Visser et al., 2009). Empirical evidence of such acts in varying contexts abound: e.g. Hennen (2008) discusses gay men's cultivation of larger bodies and adoption of symbols of masculinity; Barnes (2014) documents how infertile men talk about the masculinising effect that (in)fertility treatment was having on them (for example, increased testosterone promoting hair growth); Ward (2015) discusses how straight men who have sex with other men emphasise their heterosexuality through drawing on aesthetic and discursive tropes of fraternity 'bros' and 'chill'; and Gough et al (2014) discuss how men who wore make-up would account for this in terms of the admiration and attention they received from women. Some of these might also be seen as examples of 'hybrid masculinities' (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014), where men are exhibiting, enacting and embodying elements of both 'hegemonic' and 'subordinate' masculinities (although the empirical focus of work explicitly utilising the concept of hybrid masculinities has largely been on how privileged men are able to assimilate elements of subordinate masculinities for which they gain recognition as 'progressive' and 'cool', such as straight men adopting 'gay aesthetics'). A key point to emerge from all of the above research is that while there may be a *diversification* of masculinity (which can *appear* to be about equality and inclusivity as Bridges (2014) argues), this does not mean that the power structures associated with masculinity are challenged or dismantled - for example, when 'subordinate' men (gay men, infertile men, men who have sex with men etc.) appeal to markers of hegemonic masculinity to elevate themselves within the gender order, or when men in more hegemonic positions use their very privilege to incorporate elements of more subordinate forms of masculinity to bolster their own social

standing. Indeed, Bridges and Pascoe (2014: 256) suggest that these kind of examples are best understood in terms of the ‘flexibility of patriarchy’.

In what follows, I will read my data through these lenses, suggesting that the abstinent men I interviewed can be understood as engaging in compensatory manhood acts through drawing attention to other forms of masculine credit. These include credit relating to sexual desire, mastery of the body, agency, and rationality. I devote a fairly large proportion of this chapter to this theme, because it was in the accounts of abstinent men that this work of ‘doing gender’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987) came through the most strongly (much more so than in any other group of participants). In addition, my analysis here has ramifications for the wider sample, in that it develops the idea that agency is a masculinised concept, which is a theme I return to in my discussion of both asexual and abstinent women.

6.2.2.1. ‘I still have urges’

A commonality in interviews with abstinent men was how they all told me that they still experienced sexual desire, despite having made the decision not to have sex. For example, Jason said: ‘I still look at people and find them attractive. Yeah, it’s still there. I still have urges’. And Christopher was keen to clarify that ‘I would not describe myself as asexual, just not sexually *active*’ (emphasis in original). This accords with the findings of Terry (2012) who found that his celibate male participants were keen to emphasise the presence of their sexual desire, which Terry suggests may be borne from a perceived need to ‘establish, maintain and protect their sense of masculine identity’ (p879). Sandberg (2016) also discusses how older men in her study would narrate a past version of the self with strong sexual desires (although this desire was expressed less strongly in relation to their present day selves to avoid being seen as a ‘dirty old man’). Using both Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed, Sandberg succinctly encapsulates the relation of sexual desire to masculinity when she states: ‘men’s expressions of desire for women are part of becoming intelligible as (real) men. Sexual desire for women could then be understood as a compass that directs to and retains men within a heterosexual matrix’ (p200).

Sandberg also points out the importance of narrative practice in establishing identity when she describes her participants as ‘*doing* heterosexuality by telling how one has *done* heterosexuality’ (p203, my emphasis). Therefore, in the case of abstinence, an expression of sexual desire may be a way to keep abstinent men within the paradigm of heteronormativity (and by extension, the normatively masculine) regardless of sexual activity.⁶¹ This might accord with recent shifts in how we understand sexuality, particular with regards to the relative weight of desire vis a vis actions or behaviours. Anderson (2008) refers to a model he calls the ‘one drop rule of homosexuality’ in which even the slightest sexual contact with another man is enough to mark a man as gay, but suggests younger men are resisting this in having sex with other men whilst retaining a heterosexual identity. Amongst some of the men he interviewed he found that it was ‘subjectivity of desire for another man’ that marked one as gay, rather than the acts themselves (p109), and the importance of subjectivity (rather than behaviour) was also something that their peers recognised and respected. This was a finding echoed in Ward (2015) in her study of sex between straight white men, and who suggests that it is the understanding of sexuality as ‘hard-wired’ that allows straight men the leeway to have sex with other men, as they can be assured of their innate *real* heterosexuality. In the case of abstinent men, they could thus be seen to be drawing on an articulation of sexuality wherein what matters is subjective desire (and adequate expression thereof), rather than being sexually active. One participant (Jason) even drew me into this narration of desire when he attempts to describe his mind-set before he became abstinent. He tells me:

There would have been a point where I'd have thought erm if it were me and you and I were interested...I'd maybe flirt, ask you out, but at the back of my mind, I'd have one thing on my mind.

This exchange helped to set the gendered and sexual parameters of the rest of the interview - he is positioned as the active heterosexual male (even if he now distances himself from this) and I am the passive female object (note the emphasis on *him* being interested, *him* flirting, *him* doing the asking out).

⁶¹ This does not, of course, preclude the fact that the abstinent men in my study actually *did* feel sexual desire. Expressing desire can still be a truthful reflection of one's feelings, whilst also accomplishing particular identity positions (especially since there was a particular eagerness to inform me of the presence of their desire).

Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) argue that interviews can pose a threat to men, as it puts them in the unfamiliar situation of being-looked-at or under inspection in some way: 'To open one's self to interrogation is to relinquish control and thus put the masculine self at risk. It is not uncommon, in our experience, for men to try to exert compensatory control over interviews' (p93). By positioning himself and I in this way, Jason might be understood to be reclaiming some control over the interview (especially since his narrative would have functioned equally as well without drawing me into it in this way).

Additionally, as in Terry's (2012) study, participants such as Jason also emphasised that they were still sexually *desirable* to women:

Karen: But you're not actively going out and looking for someone at the moment or...

Jason: No, am... If anything, I'm going out my way to hide from it [laughs]

Karen: Okay.

Jason: D'you know what I mean? I've had a few people that are friends that have tried to, like, get me to come out and get me drunk and they've been quite suggestive towards me and... I maybe avoid certain environments. Emm, like a one-on-one with someone where I know they want that.

Here Jason presents an image of himself as (humorously) beleaguered in having to actively avoid the advances of his women friends. This permits him to demonstrate that his abstinence has no bearing on whether or not women find him attractive; he is still, for all intents and purposes, heterosexually successful. An adjunct to this appeal to sexual desire (both possessing desire and being desirable to others) is the claim to possession of sexual 'skills' or knowledge. Christopher is a particularly telling example of this. Although he stated 'I'm a virgin in the technical sense', he goes on to tell me:

I've never had any trouble being in a relationship and when you go through awkward phases in relationships in your teens that didn't apply to me...in fact when I was younger I saw how many of my friends were having difficulties meeting girls. So I actually wrote a guide for how to meet women and get to know women better.

Christopher presents himself as particularly sexually accomplished - so much so that he literally wrote a book on it.⁶² He tells me that he doesn't need to prove himself with regards to sexual prowess amongst his male friends because by writing that guide, 'I've already sort of proved myself when I was 14, 15, 16, 17, 18'. Thus, by telling me that his sexual prowess and knowledge is being recognised by other men, he is able to affirm his masculinity. Christopher also redefines what is meant by sexual 'success' or 'experience', so that he can claim these without contradicting his status as abstinent, and as a virgin. Christopher rejects the usual understanding of sexual success when he states:

I think I'm sexually accomplished, is how I would describe myself. In that I know what I want in a relationship, and I've got that. And ummm therefore there's no reason for me to go in another direction... if I had to define myself, I would say that I was sexually competent in that I understood what I wanted. And I understood that my values were, uh I had values in my head.

For Christopher, being sexually accomplished is not about having experienced particular sexual scenarios, but is about confidence and assertiveness in knowing (and getting) what you want, even if what you want is *not* to have sex. It is through this extensive knowledge about sex and relationships, and how he has been able to get what he wants, that Christopher is able to occupy a 'masculine' subject position.

6.2.2.2. 'The whole abstinence thing is a walk in the park really'

Whilst participants were keen to affirm the presence of sexual desire (their own, and of others towards them), and their knowledge of sex, they simultaneously talked about how *easy* abstinence was. That is, while they felt desire, it was not something they struggled with, but rather, it was something they had attained a kind of mastery over. Participants described their embodiment of their abstinence as a kind of ease: for example, Jason went so far as to describe it as 'easy as breathing':

Karen: Is it a challenge or...?

⁶² Christopher reluctantly tells me that this guide was now being shared on an internet Pick-Up Artist forum (PUA); see Chapter Three for a discussion of this.

Jason: Not at all. So, no it's no a challenge. It's not something I think about on a daily basis, I don't need to think about it. It's as easy as breathing - d'you know what I mean?...It's under control, it's never out of control.

And Kartik offered: 'Yeah, I wouldn't say it's very difficult. Emm... I mean, you know, again, it really does depend on your confidence level, umm... the whole abstinence thing is a walk in the park really'. Indeed, by stressing *just how easy* they found abstinence to be, there is even a danger that they will undermine the strength of their desire in the first place. However, whilst we might see this as a kind of challenge to hegemonic masculinity (in that the all-encompassing and primal 'male sexual drive discourse' (Hollway, 1989) is potentially undermined), these assertions of ease can also be seen as a particular formation of hegemonic masculinity: that is, the ability to exert control over one's 'base' bodily desires, and the triumph of the mind over the body (Sydie, 1987). The role of rationality was particularly prominent in Christopher's account of his embodied ease: 'from the logical perspective I can just block myself up and just say, like, so...the desire is there but I can rationalise it away. Easily'. The power of the mind over body is evident here - Christopher is able to reason with himself and successfully *think* the desire away. Participants also emphasised their control and mastery when I asked them about outside/external pressures working against their decision to be abstinent. Whilst acknowledging these pressures, the abstinent men felt strongly that they were unaffected by these. Jason told me 'I've never been one to buckle to any kind of peer pressure' and Travis talked about how 'peer pressure is the most inane and stupid thing' and asserted that: 'My life's my own and I'm going to live it the way I want to and act the way I want to...If I take part in social norms, I do them because I want to'. Jason and Travis might be seen here as affirming their masculinity through presenting themselves as standing firm in their resolve, unaffected by the opinions and actions of others. They have a strong sense of self, and a mastery and control over their actions - they are their own men. Terry and Braun (2009: 173) found that amongst their participants, part of the construction of a 'mature masculinity' involved the assertion of a 'genuine self' that stood apart from societal influences, linking in to a long historical association of masculinity with autonomy. Similarly, de Visser and Smith (2007) found that the young men in their study who did not drink alcohol could make up for this 'non-masculine disinclination towards drinking' (p603) by stressing their 'masculine competence' in other regards - notably in

the way they could resist peer pressure, and the framing of young men who capitulated to such pressures as foolish. Indeed, Pascoe (2007) noted that in her high school ethnography (which focused on masculinity rather than abstinence), the Christian men who were waiting until marriage to have sex explicitly used this as evidence that they were *more* masculine. Pascoe (2007: 85) asked one young man: 'Do you ever feel less masculine because of it?' to which he responded: 'No. If anything, more. Because you can resist. You don't have to give into it'. Thus, there is a sense here that abstinence - because of what it requires to be successful, and because of what successful abstinence symbolises - might actually be generative of masculinity in and of itself.

A couple of participants even explicitly distanced themselves from 'masculinity' because of what masculinity implied about capitulating to certain social norms. Jason tells me that his friends sometimes tease him for being effeminate but he doesn't care because being this way is more fun, and he's not going to give that up to fit in with someone's idea of masculinity. Travis also said: 'I do sit in an isolated position from the traditional view of what it would be to be masculine. I don't much care'. Whilst it feels somewhat perverse and paradoxical to account for someone's disavowal of masculinity as *evidence of their masculinity*, this has been a theme in other masculinities research. For example, Whitmer (2017) found that the men in their study discursively distanced themselves from 'typical' men, but this became 'a way of demonstrating the inherent stability of one's masculinity' (p128). Rejecting or distancing oneself from masculinity can be another way of doing masculinity, since it again signifies individuality and resistance to social pressures. 'Trying' to be masculine is perhaps to indicate that one is already failing at masculinity, since masculinity is constructed as 'natural', effortless, self-assured, and resistant to outside influence. By not trying to be masculine (and telling me about it), Jason and Travis are perhaps already enacting masculinity. Hills (2015: 133) also points to an example of this in the college fraternity game of 'gay chicken' where having sex with another man is seen to actually *increase* your heterosexuality, because this proves that you are not worried about people thinking you are gay (and it is this lack of concern which is characterised as defining 'real' masculine heterosexuality).

6.2.2.3. 'It's my choice'

Abstinent male participants varied in their specific reasons they had for becoming abstinent. However, a central feature underlying these accounts was the way in which they presented their abstinence as their choice. This can be seen, for example, in Christopher's assertions that 'I made a conscious decision to not be sexually active' and 'It's 100% my choice'. For Christopher, this distinguishes him from other men who are abstinent: 'People unlike me are trying to convince themselves that this is a choice that they've made when it's not really a choice they've made; it's just a way of rationalising their own rejection'. By framing his abstinence as something of his own volition, he is distancing himself from what Donnelly et al. (2001) would call 'single involuntary celibates' who are unable to find a sexual partner. In this way, Christopher is able to frame his decision as an agentic one, rather than as one imposed upon him. Whilst the desire to present oneself as agentic is in no way limited to men, the qualities of agency and autonomy have had a long historical association with masculinity, and so Christopher's insistence that it was his choice might be seen as a way to emphasise his masculinity. As Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001:96) put it: 'The desire to signify a masculine self may lead men to exaggerate rationality, autonomy and control when giving accounts of their experience'. Similarly, Jason tells me 'I've not been having sex via choice', 'I've refused to pursue another sexual relationship', 'I made the decision that I wouldn't have sex again', and Connor said 'it's my choice'. The abstinent women I interviewed also referred to their 'choice' and their 'decision', but this was usually in passing, as a short-hand or euphemistic way to describe their abstinence, rather than it being something they put any weight on.

Christopher goes on to explain the specific reasons he had for becoming abstinent:

It was....a decision based on uncomfortability about social norms. In particular, particular gender expectations. Specifically things to do with consent, so the fear of finding myself in a situation where umm where there would be a dispute about consent. That could cause trouble in the future.... basically I didn't want to risk being called a rapist. I mean, basically it's that [laughs] If you come down to it, it's just the fact that, that, getting into that sort of situation was something that was very easy, and especially when I saw stories in the media that lead me to think about if this was something that I

wanted to...open myself up to. Whether the balance, the balance was, the balance was risk or reward [unclear] it was only going one way, to risk.

Christopher feels that heterosex is too great a risk to take, given the possibility that he might be falsely accused of rape. He points to a prevalence of these cases in the media, and having witnessed the 'severe consequences' that befall the falsely accused, he does not want to 'expose himself to being in that situation' given that 'that sort of accusation could basically destroy my life'. Having conducted a 'risk analysis' (Christopher's words), he decided to abstain from sex until marriage since he felt marriage was less ambiguous when it came to consent - it involves 'giving yourself over to somebody else'. He makes clear he thinks that any reasonable actor might arrive at the same decision if they properly evaluated the situation: 'it's easy to see how somebody could come to the same sort of conclusion that I have at this point'. Again, this shows how knowledge, intelligence and logical thought are central to Christopher's sense of himself as masculine.

Kartik differed from the other abstinent men in the study in that he identified as gay, but he too used the language of rationality in explaining his decision. He invoked the idea of 'business investment' by quoting statistics about divorce rates, and levels of happiness within relationships:

I'm like: 'Well, you know, given these odds, would you ever make an investment of this sort of thing?'... And I'm like: 'Well you wouldn't put your money there, but you want me to sacrifice my life on these odds?' [laughs]

Like Christopher, he too sees sexual and romantic relationships as a risk (this time a risk to his own happiness):

I think, okay, well, you know, in terms of happiness, I'm at a certain level. However, if I should enter into a relationship, I stand a very high risk of jeopardising that happiness...and a significant risk of losing other things as well. Therefore, it doesn't appear, to me, to be a risk worth taking.

It is not unusual to find people conceptualising their personal lives in terms of risk: for example, theorists such as Beck see 'risk as central to modern culture and as having become a key element in the calculations of the self' (Peterson,

1996: 46). These appeals to risk and rationality are therefore not the exclusive domain of men, but it was striking in the interviews how none of the women used similar language. Siegel and Scrimshaw (2003) found similar: in their interviews with HIV-positive men and women who had become celibate, the male participants conceptualised their decision much more often in terms of a rational decision-making process, rather than led by emotion or embodied feeling, which were more common in the women's accounts.

Abstinence, as well as a way of managing risk, was also envisaged by participants as making them *more* rational. For Jason, abstinence made him more focused, allowed him to channel his energy towards his health and fitness, and allowed him to reappraise what was important in his life:

I realised my life was a lot less complicated, umm, when I was thinking with the right head...I think more logically. I think about what is important...I refocus the effort into other things, like, ehh, maybe going to [martial arts] or working out or what have ye than... I find it's a more acceptable use of my time and emm, like how I'm thinking as well. You know what I mean, instead of going out and chasing a bit of skirt, I can focus my time...on other things that matter.

Connor also talked about how being abstinent had helped him to find the discipline to train towards his desired occupation, and join the reserve armed forces whereas 'if I had sex I might have been distracted'. He went on to say 'it's had a good impact on my full entire life' and that it was 'just a better life choice'. Both Connor and Jason could be seen to be appealing to the idea of being a good (neoliberal) citizen. The granting of citizenship is increasingly contingent on both employment status and a demonstrable willingness to take responsibility for one's own health (Liebenberg et al., 2015). By showing how abstinence has allowed them to reach these goals, Connor and Jason are demonstrating attainment of these citizenship requirements of 'responsibilization' (ibid.). Furthermore, as Terry and Braun (2009: 172) argue, 'traditional discourses of masculinity' elide with 'neoliberal ideals of the individual as a self-determining, rational social actor'. Indeed, Robertson (2006) argues that neoliberal understandings of health, premised as they are on managing risk, responsibility, rationality, and control, provide an opportunity for men to 'do' gender, departing from the traditional notion wherein concern for

one's health is feminising. Related, Connor and Jason also spoke about themselves as more 'mature' as compared to their peers and in Jason's case, his hedonistic hypersexual younger self ('I was a bit of a slut'). In this way, sexual conquest was framed as something foolish immature boys did who were overly concerned with their peers' esteem, whereas Connor and Jason did not feel the need to prove themselves in this way, and had come to value things other than 'mere' sexual gratification (again referring to their self-presentation as resistant to peer pressure). As discussed in the previous chapter, abstinent men also envisaged their abstinence as facilitating more fulfilling, emotionally intelligent, multi-dimensional, and mature relationships with their partners.⁶³ Thus, 'maturity', linked with rationality, control, and 'responsibilization', invoked a kind of superior masculinity (Korobov and Bamberg, 2004) that did not necessitate involvement in sexual activity since it was 'above' this in many ways.

The accounts of abstinent men in invoking ideas of choice reflect sociological theories of individualisation (Giddens, 1991), where life-courses are experienced as less pre-determined and people are more free to craft their own biographies. Through their abstinence (which they have freely chosen), men like Connor and Jason are able to hone and focus their lives in the direction they wish to go in. As already quoted in the relationships chapter, Jason expressed this feeling of choice and a concomitant lack of external influence: 'If you decide you don't want to do something, the only person that can make you do it is you - the person you're fighting's yourself...It's your decision'. Again this links in with the 'ideal neoliberal subject' - since individualization is considered to be 'neoliberalism in action' (Dawson, 2012: 311). We have already seen how this ideal reflexive neoliberal subject is implicitly masculine, or embodying qualities traditionally associated with masculinity (McNay, 1999), but feminist writers have also pointed out that on an empirical basis, many women do not experience the same level of freedom to craft their biographies in such an agentic way due to material inequalities in both the reproductive and productive spheres (Jamieson, 1998; Adkins, 2004). Referring to these gender (and class) critiques of individualization, Dawson (2012: 310) suggests that 'individualization is

⁶³ Wilkins (2009) also found that the sexually non-normative men in her study (polyamorous goths, and abstinent Christians) used the discourse of 'intimacy' – facilitated by their polyamory or their abstinence – as a way of portraying themselves as 'better' or 'evolved' men.

stratified’ and ‘some are accorded either more reflexivity or the ability to act out their reflexivity more fully’. As discussed in the relationships chapter, I have also shown how women are less likely to have their agency recognised, and their individual narratives respected. The abstinent women in my research very rarely - if at all - discussed their abstinence in terms of autonomous choices. And, as I will discuss in the next data chapter, women’s decisions to be abstinent - whilst still agentic - were explicitly accounted for as responses to gendered and sexual violence, abuse and power disparities. Thus, while being abstinent could help a woman reclaim some feeling of independence and control, the reasons for becoming abstinent were inextricable from wider webs of social and interactional relations in a way that was not articulated in the accounts of abstinent men.

Thus, I argue that the abstinent men in my research were indeed the beneficiaries of a stratified ‘individualisation’. But I also argue that in asserting this narrative of choice (and related narratives of rationality, responsabilization, and maturity), participants were also laying claim to masculinity in the interview space (since individualisation is, after all, gendered). Combined with assertions of desire, of desirability, of sexual knowledge, of mastery of temptation, and of resistance to pressure, the abstinent men in my study were able to ‘offset’ any threats to their masculinity as represented by abstinence, given the centrality of active (hetero)sexuality to constructions of manhood.⁶⁴

6.2.2.4. ‘I think it probably made it easier because I was Indian’

However, despite the discursive work participants were undertaking, there was also a sense that other factors intersected with abstinence and masculinity to reduce the necessity of such work. Particularly, religion, ‘race’, and class provided explanatory frameworks through which abstinence and masculinity could be more easily reconciled, both internally, and in the eyes of others.

⁶⁴ It is important to note here however that the interview setting might have influenced the narratives that participants constructed around their abstinence. How participants talk about and account for their abstinence in their everyday lives may well be different (but as a constructionist, I still contend that this creation of meaning in the interview setting still tells us something valuable about the social world).

For some participants, religion could provide a lens through which others could understand their abstinence without bringing their masculinity into question. For example, Connor often drew upon the discourse of the ‘Good Catholic boy’ in explaining his abstinence to me and to other people. He tells me how ‘I just promised my maw’. In most other circumstances, recourse to maternal authority might be seen to severely threaten one’s presentation as autonomously and independently masculine (e.g. ‘emasculating’ discourse of ‘mummy’s boys’) but here religion (or rather, familial Catholic culture and Connor’s expectation that I would understand this) plays a role. The trope of the ‘Good Catholic boy’ appears in pop culture and is often associated with extreme masculinity: e.g. it appears in gangster films such as *Goodfellas* where Italian-American New York mobsters capable of extreme violence show a devotion and respect for their mothers, and for their Catholic cultural traditions.

Other religious traditions could also offer an ‘explanatory framework’. Travis, who was Mormon (as was his girlfriend), felt that his religion meant he came under less scrutiny for being in an abstinent relationship: ‘It would be looked at differently... if this was a secular, non-religious relationship and we were celibate. I guess the question would be: ‘Why?’’ He discusses how people often know about the Mormon requirement not to have sex before marriage, or are aware there are specific religious injunctions against particular activities. This means that his abstinent ‘makes sense’ - people generally needed no further justification for a behaviour they might otherwise perceive as non-normative. Although religious affiliation might still be ‘emasculating’ in some regards (e.g. Thomson and Remmes (2002) discuss how constructions of masculinity often stand in the way of men’s religiosity), it does allow Travis to thwart the intense scrutiny and pathologisation that might follow otherwise.

Kartik, who had been raised Hindu, also discussed how religion was a sufficient enough explanation for most people:

I think there's a lot of things that can be explained away if you just put it in a religious context. So, people don't, don't really question much if you just say: 'Oh no, it's part of my religion' or, you know, I think that this happens. You know, eh, it takes a very, sort of, strong atheist or sceptical mind to, to really criticise and question something like that. Umm, and so yeah I don't think other people looked beyond the distinct religious explanation that was given.

Religion was a sufficiently strong cultural script through which other people could understand his decision to be abstinent, and it was something that Kartik strategically played upon. Racialisation also played an important role in Kartik's experience. He explained how during his time at university, his Indian ethnicity (and attendant assumptions of religiosity) afforded him legible space to exist as an abstinent man (in that his masculinity was still recognised):

I think it probably made it easier because I was Indian. Umm, because, you know, there's this whole idea of Indian mysticism and all the rest of it, you know. It's all very strong in the Western imagination. Umm, and I think, you know, so definitely I think my ethnicity made a difference.

The 'orientalism' (Said, 2003) that Kartik refers to here meant that Kartik's abstinence could be 'understood' as part of an exotic, mystical culture with traditions of asceticism. He also reflected on how his ethnicity meant that he did not come under suspicion with regards to his abstinence (as he might have done if he had been a white abstinent man):

I think it's also not as, I think, not tainted, for example, by let's say, a Christian person, eh, a white person...you know, with the whole sex scandal stuff going on. Or child abuse stuff. So, you know, I think that definitely makes it much more palatable - in being from a different ethnicity.

Kartik is able to escape that potentially damaging association because his racialised religiosity does not mark him as suspect. He also goes on to remark that the classed environment in which he found himself was an additional 'help' in fostering his acceptance: 'I went to [university] which was, sort of, very upper-middle class and where people, anything that was foreign, was just, like, prized'. As Reay et al. (2008: 243) suggest, amongst the middle-classes, and particularly in educational settings, 'diversity, and ethnic diversity in particular, is viewed as a valuable asset'. But, while critical of this fetishization of the 'exotic' and 'foreign' by the middle-class, Kartik also recognises that these

factors, as well as his own class privilege in being able to access these spaces, made for a smoother experience as an abstinent man.⁶⁵

Christopher and Travis' narratives also reflect the importance of class, but this time in terms of the kinds of masculinities that they themselves are able to draw upon. Both Christopher and Travis align themselves with a kind of chivalrous, noble masculinity - Christopher explicitly, Travis implicitly. Christopher tells me:

So this sounds really cheesy but if you ask me what a man is, this is what I'd say...the knight in shining armour...the idea of being chivalrous, protect partner from abuse, in fact protect all other people from abuse. So this might come more from my background - chivalry, acting in the right etiquette way, strength, protecting important things to you....those are the key things that would sort of define what it means to be masculine.

This is a form of masculinity that still holds significant cultural currency, particularly on a global level. Recent military interventions in the Middle East have been framed around 'liberating' and 'protecting' Muslim women from the assumed brutality of their husbands and fathers, which Iris Marion Young (2003) refers to as a 'logic of masculinist protection', which draws on tropes of chivalry and knightly gallantry. By aligning himself with this form of masculinity based on protection, honour, and chivalry, Christopher does not need to be actively sexual to retain his identity as a man. Indeed, as Kate Millett (1970) argued: 'the chivalrous stance is a game the master group plays in elevating its subject to pedestal level'.

In a more indirect way, Travis also claims a kind of 'noble' masculinity. Part of the reason why he is abstinent is because his girlfriend is religious and does not want to have sex before marriage. Travis spoke a lot about honouring her and her wishes, for example when he said 'those were her standards and I respect them' and:

⁶⁵ Arguably, Kartik's experience can also be read in terms of 'epistemic injustice' in that his decision to be abstinent is explained with recourse to his 'race' and religion. However, Kartik did not particularly express a negative view about this, unlike the epistemic injustices narrated by asexual and abstinent women in the Relationships chapter. We also saw in this chapter how Kartik also related several instances where his abstinence was taken seriously by family and friends – i.e. instances of epistemic justice.

When someone that you love and care about holds an opinion like that, that's you know, fundamental to their deepest integrity...it would be remiss of me to cross that line or attempt to forward any kind of activity that I know where she would really start to feel emotionally bankrupt.

Travis also talked about how he felt it was important to intervene when socialising in a group of men and they wolf-whistle women, or reveal sexually explicit information about their partners ('I tell them to politely shut up', and 'sometimes it gets into rather, you know, vulgar things in which case I more often than not step in'). This is not to suggest that Travis does not genuinely hold these views, but it could be that in returning to this theme at several points during the interview, he is eager to present a version of himself as honourable in his conduct and values. I want to suggest that class perhaps facilitated access to this kind of chivalrous masculinity. Christopher himself alludes to how 'his background' (upper middle-class, privately educated, parents part of the diplomatic corps) might have influenced his views and the importance he places on particular values. Travis too was from a middle-class family both economically (his parents owned multiple properties) and socially/culturally (he too had been privately educated). Lake (2016: 1217) in a recent study of mixed-doubles tennis, has recently pointed to how 'etiquette norms including chivalry have remained a key feature of certain white-dominated middle-class contexts'. In Travis and Christopher's narratives, their chivalrous masculinity works through juxtaposition to hypersexual masculinities, which they see as boorish and crass ('Just the worst thing' - Travis; 'I've always found this pretty disgusting' - Christopher). Arguably, this has class resonances: the rational intellect of the upper classes vs the crude embodiment of the lower classes (Morgan, 2005: 170). Notably, the working class abstinent male participants - Jason and Connor - did not draw on this same discourse of chivalrous masculinity. Nor did Kartik, who was from a privileged background, but perhaps crucially was also gay and non-white. The idea of chivalry is encoded with both whiteness and heterosexuality - it is most commonly expressed by (white) men in relation to (white) women, and is racialised through historical associations with Knights and the Crusades, and through its take-up by White Supremacists in the US (including the Ku Klux Klan's designation of members as 'Loyal White Knights') (McLean, 1994). The discourse of chivalry is thus one that is less available to Kartik, Connor, and Jason, whereas Christopher and Travis were able to mobilise it due to their positioning

at the intersections of whiteness, heterosexuality, and middle-class-ness. Chivalrous masculinity was used by Christopher and Travis as a way of diminishing the centrality of sex to masculinity, which had the effect of creating a space for them to exist as abstinent men (and thus claim masculinity); but it was a space that was only made available through their classed, racialised, and sexual privileges. As we have seen earlier in the discussion, religion and non-whiteness (albeit in different ways, and with different relations to power⁶⁶) also gave participants ‘space’ to be abstinent in that their abstinence was made intelligible in the eyes of others, and of participants themselves.

6.2.2.5. Abstinance as masculine?

To conclude this section then, I want to return to the central relation of abstinence and masculinity. Whilst the asexual men in my study were very critical of, and reflexively engaged with, the idea of masculinity (ultimately seeing it as a problematic construct), the abstinent men seemed to deploy a number of discourses in order to cement their belonging in the ‘masculine’ category. Abstinance, in many ways, seemed to implicitly constitute a threat to masculinity, and so participants undertook ‘compensatory manhood acts’ in which they drew on other sources of masculine capital. These included: presenting themselves as sexually *desiring* as well as *desirable* subjects; laying claim to sexual knowledge and past sexual ‘accomplishments’; asserting their mastery and control of both body and mind; rejecting the suggestion that they were influenced by any external forces; insisting on the agency of their choices; emphasising the rationality of their decisions, and appealing to notions of responsible neo-liberal citizenship. Thus, whilst ‘abstinence’ potentially represents a challenge to hypersexual masculinity, it became part of a hegemonic construction of masculinity in participants’ accounts, involving a valorisation of the masculinised rational disembodied intellect (and a concomitant subordination of the ‘feminine’). Some of these discourses drawn upon by abstinent participants echo those found in the small number of

⁶⁶ I refer here to how Kartik’s Indian ethnicity and Christopher’s upper-middle class status both afforded discursive space in which to be abstinent, yet they reflect different kinds of power relations. Kartik’s ethnicity is exoticised and Othered, whereas Christopher’s class background carries all of the weight of the establishment behind it. Furthermore, Christopher uses class as a way of constructing his own narrative, whereas for Kartik, the frame of ‘race’ and religion is something that is, to an extent, externally imposed upon him.

contemporary Western studies of celibacy/abstinence and masculinity, as outlined in Chapter Three (Haenfler, 2004; Wilkins, 2009; Terry, 2012; Diefendorf, 2015); and as I have been arguing, these also accord with the idea that ostensibly ‘diverse’ masculinities in actuality continue to reinforce gendered inequalities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). However I also noted that ‘race’, religion and class impacted on these discourses - either in terms of which discourses were available to draw upon (being located on the privileged side of the class spectrum), or in terms of whether other people already had an explanatory framework through which to ‘understand’ (and thus legitimate) their abstinence (in these cases, occupying a more marginalised position with regards to ‘race’ and religion). Furthermore, I also suggested that in some ways, there is a sense of abstinence itself being *generative* of a kind of masculine capital. Due to what abstinence is thought to *require* (e.g. mastering desire; resisting external pressures; forging one’s own path; rational thinking), abstinence also seemed to be used as ‘proof’ of one’s masculinity in and of itself. As we have seen in Chapter Three, celibacy has been - and is - often closely linked to masculinity in both historical and non-Western contexts. Similarly, amongst these UK based participants, the relationship between abstinence and masculinity is perhaps less oppositional than might first be assumed.

6.3. Femininity, asexuality, and abstinence

In the previous section, I examined how asexuality and abstinence were related to masculinity. I explored how many of the asexual women and asexual non-binary (AFAB) participants envisaged asexual men as having a particularly difficult time due to dominant discourses of hypersexual masculinity; but that asexual men themselves did not necessarily see it in this way, partly because they were critically engaged in deconstructing the idea of masculinity. However, for the abstinent male participants, masculinity *was* something that was important to them, and I examined how their narratives could be seen to implicitly ‘account for’ the threat that abstinence potentially posed (as well as how abstinence itself can, in some cases, move from being a ‘threat to masculinity’ to ‘evidence of masculinity’).

In the latter half of this chapter, I want to shift my focus onto femininity. Here we begin not with the idea that femininity is oppositional to asexuality and abstinence, but rather with the idea that femininity is more accommodating to both abstinence and asexuality, since women are understood not to have particularly high sex drives or be (very) interested in sex. We can find evidence of this in various places. Meston and Buss (2009) wrote a book entitled ‘Why Women Have Sex’ - the very existence of which (and the lack of a parallel text relating to men) suggests that for women, sex is still something that needs to be accounted for. Women often still feel compelled to minimise their sexual experiences - for example, Alexander and Fisher (2003) distributed sexual history questionnaires and found that in conditions of anonymity, men and women reported similar levels of sexual experience, but when women felt there was a risk of a researcher being able to see their responses, they reported much lower figures than men (i.e. under-reported). This suggests that women still feel a social pressure to minimise their sexual experiences, since the ‘sexual double standard’ persists (Bordini and Sperb, 2013) wherein women are expected to adhere to a standard of sexual behaviour more restrictive than that applied to men. And these sociological patterns also appear in the development of pharmaceutical drugs. *Filbanserin*, the new drug touted as the ‘Viagra for women’, works not in increasing blood flow or sensitivity to certain parts of the body as Viagra does for men, but is specifically formulated to work in the brain to increase levels of sexual desire. The implication then is that men’s desire is pre-existing and so it is only mechanical assistance that is required, whereas for women, the problem *is* one of desire. Theorists of gender and sexuality have also mused on this connection:

‘Masculinity’ stands for a bundle of characteristics to do with the presence of erotic capacity, whilst ‘femininity’ signifies a putatively ‘opposite’ bundle of characteristics to do with the absence of that capacity. Sex, in short, is the property of men and any women laying claim to any kind of sexual capacity is thereby masculinised (Wilton, 2004: 101-102).

However, with regards to sexuality, femininity is also profoundly ambiguous. Whilst women might not possess the same level of ‘intrinsic’ sexuality as is presupposed in men, women are still expected to be sexually *responsive* (Gavey, 2005). Yet there is also a danger of being *too responsive*: Schur (1984) refers to

this as the bind in which women were ‘deviant either way’, and Dunn (1998) refers to ‘conflicting rules’ in which women should be both sexually active and chaste. Empirical research documenting how women and girls are both ‘damned if they do, and damned if they don’t’ with regards to sexual behaviour (e.g. Lippman and Campbell, 2014; Farvid et al., 2016) continues to proliferate. If women feel desire (and there may be increasing expectation that they *should*, given the very existence of drugs such as Filbanserin), this is conditional on them being desirable in the eyes of others. Radner (2008: 98) writes that ‘appearing desirable according to the codes of consumer culture is a sign of her ‘desire’’ and Hills (2015: 89) argues ‘women especially are told that their right to feel desire depends on how much they are desired by others’. In this way, feminine sexuality is not the active, internally-propulsive sexuality of masculinity, but remains reactive, receptive, and still structured around the ‘male gaze’ (Mulvey, 1975). Class and ‘race’ of course play a role in the construction of women’s sexuality: as discussed when reviewing the ‘ascriptive’ asexuality literature, a supposed lack of sexual interest may only apply to particular kinds of racialised and classed bodies. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) and Bev Skeggs (1997) have written on how black women and working-class women’s sexuality tends to be problematized through discourses of excess, lack of control, and ‘vulgarity’.

In the following sections, I will show how this ambiguity was evident in the accounts of asexual women and asexual non-binary (AFAB) people. For the asexual participants, many felt that the idea that it was somewhat normal or natural for women not to experience sexual desire or attraction afforded them some level of ‘ease’ in their own lives, with regards to their asexuality seeming unremarkable. However, participants simultaneously problematised this, based as it was on what they saw as misogynistic assumptions about women, and how the ‘ease’ was often a double-edged sword in that these assumptions were responsible for delaying their identification as asexual as well as for the epistemic injustices related by participants in the previous chapter, in which their identities as ‘asexual’ went unrecognised. Participants also talked about how this ‘ease’ was complicated by other elements, such as life-course, age, hetero-normativity, and romantic orientation.

In contrast, abstinent women did not narrate the same level of ‘ease’. I venture that this is potentially related to the role of choice and agency. Whilst asexual women’s lack of desire could be understood in terms of femininity, abstinent women were making a decision *not to have sex*. Arguably, this represented a transgression of the imperative that women be ‘sexually responsive’ to some degree, and so I conclude by suggesting that ‘agency’ represents somewhat of a problem for dominant understandings of femininity. I consider recent arguments that there is now a ‘agency imperative’ for women with regards to sexuality and problematise this in light of the data presented in this chapter.

6.3.1. ‘I think I’ve had it easier’

Many of the asexual women and asexual non-binary (AFAB) participants discussed how they felt they had an easier time being asexual *because* they were women (or socially perceived as such). These assertions usually arose in tandem with claims (discussed earlier in the chapter) that asexual men must have a particularly difficult time because of the presumed opposition between masculinity and asexuality. It was precisely because there was imagined space within femininity for asexuality (or at least, for a lack of sexual desire or attraction) that these participants felt they ‘had it easier’, as Gillian put it: ‘I think I’ve probably had it easier [than asexual men]. I think people...tend to assume...that women not being that interested in sex is a normal thing’. Frankie, a non-binary (AFAB) person, also spoke of the ‘leeway’ afforded them due to their perceived gender: ‘Because of the way that society states about gender roles, it’s probably a lot harder for guys to come out so I possibly had some leeway in that people perceive me as female’. Blair, also non-binary (AFAB), spoke about how being perceived as a woman allowed them to fly under the radar, in that their lack of interest in sex was considered ‘normal’⁶⁷:

Women are not expected to be as obviously interested in sex than guys, that’s maybe kind of made it easier to, you know, it’s not as

⁶⁷ In my earlier research with asexual disabled people, some of the women participants expressed very similar sentiments – for example, one participant said ‘the reaction to women coming out as asexual is sometimes ‘that’s normal for women’. This meant that on the one hand, people were less taken aback when she came out as asexual, but it also meant that ‘asexual women are misunderstood’ since her *identity* as asexual was not being recognised (Cuthbert, 2017: 253).

weird that I'm not joining in with everyone talking about horny they are or whatever.

Reeta went further in suggesting that there were particular feminine roles/archetypes in which asexuality was assumed or expected, and the existence of these meant that her asexuality (as a woman) would be more readily understood:

It might also actually be a bit easier for female asexuals because we have the whole [sigh] frigid, shy virgin...like archetype to go into if we want to and um...I dunno, a professional woman is supposed to be quite, is not supposed to be sexual at the same time and a mother is not supposed to be sexual. There are a lot of females that are not supposed to be very sexual. So I really have a bit...a few more places to go where...that are—still quite like restrictive, but I do think it's harder for men in general to be asexual.

Oran, who was not a woman but a non-binary (AMAB) person, also suggested something similar when they said that we already have the language to reflect women's lack of sexual desire and disinterest in sex:

So I don't know whether it's as believable for a man to be asexual as it might be for a female to be asexual, if you know what I mean. Like, you have like words like frigid for example like to describe like typically a female person for like not having any like sexual desires, but there isn't really an equivalent. I mean I guess you could use that to describe a guy, but you'd rarely hear it being used.

Like Reeta, Oran points out that the figure of the 'frigid woman' might help to foster the 'believability' of asexual women. However, both Reeta and Oran also implicitly suggest that this 'believability' is based on a misapprehension of asexuality (e.g. asexuality as frigidity or 'natural' female disinterest, rather than an identity or subjectivity). This can also be seen in Heather's account:

One thing I've noticed is that when I tell guys they're, like by and large, this isn't true in every case, but by and large, when I tell guys that I'm asexual they, they, they kind of believe it, and like they don't necessarily believe that it's a legitimate sexuality, but they believe that my feelings are real. They're like 'oh you're not interested in sex? Well, you know, that's not a big deal, lots of women aren't interested in sex', and when I tell girls they often have more of a trouble believing it, because I feel like there is a kind of perception that girls are not interested in sex, but people who are actually girls kind of know that that's not true, assuming they're sexual themselves, and they're like 'what? Really? No, there must be

something, there must be something awry here'. But like guys are just kind of like 'oh well I never really thought girls were that into sex anyway', so like yeah.

Heather discusses how it was in interactions with men in which these assumptions of women as 'naturally' asexual were more likely to emerge. Because of what men 'know' about women's sexual disinterest, Heather's asexuality is unremarkable ('they believe it' 'not a big deal'). Again, however, this believability is not based on affording Heather 'a legitimate sexuality', but upon a particular set of culturally-constructed ideas about women, femininity, and sexual desire (i.e. epistemic injustice). Thus, the cost of 'ease' (in being unremarked-upon, in being accepted as unexceptional), was that it was based on something that participants also found deeply problematic. Indeed, 'believability' was not the same thing as 'being taken seriously'. Heather went on to say:

Asexual guys, it must be harder for them to come out, but I also feel like they might be taken more seriously, because like if a guy says he's not interested in sex that is seen as a serious problem, whereas if a girl says she's not interested in sex it's like [shrugging]. And like I don't know if that's better or worse because like there's, because neither's really the right answer. Like you want to be taken seriously, but you also don't want to be like treated as if you've got a disorder or something like.

Here Heather points to how different constructions of masculinity and femininity affect reactions to asexual men and women: because masculinity is so closely linked with sexuality, any ostensible deviations are taken seriously (indeed, taken *too* seriously to the point of pathologisation), yet because there is space to accommodate asexuality within femininity, women's self-identities as asexual risk being subsumed within that. As we have seen in the Relationships chapter, these ideas about women and sexuality provided the grounds in which epistemic injustices could be perpetrated: when asexuality is 'normal for women' (combined with a more general marginalisation of women's voices) then assertions of agentic subjecthood on the part of asexual women are effectively erased. We also saw how these assumptions were used by some men to legitimise sexual aggressiveness up to, and including, violating consent.

These assumptions about women, femininity and sexual desire affected participants themselves, in that some asexual women felt that their journey to recognising themselves as (and identifying as) asexual was hindered. Lucy said:

Part of me just thought like ‘well that’s a female thing’ or you know ‘girls don’t masturbate’ and stuff like that...I think it’s harder to identify if that’s what you’re experiencing because a lot of women don’t really explore sexuality.

Similarly, Julia said:

They [men] might realise [that they were asexual] earlier...I think if I wasn’t female I probably might have noticed a lot sooner because I’ve attributed it to my personality as a woman because there are quite a few girls who don’t talk much about any sexual topics at all, who don’t really have much of an interest in them.

None of the asexual men or asexual non-binary (AMAB) participants reported similar experiences. I have previously discussed (Cuthbert, 2017: 251) how cultural assumptions regarding disability (i.e. that disabled people are asexual) might prevent or delay disabled persons from coming to *self-identify* as asexual. Disabled women talked about how their lack of sexual desire was attributed (both by themselves and by others) to their disabilities or impairments, but we can see from the above how this might have also been compounded by their gender. The ‘sexual assumption’ which Scherrer (2008) and Carrigan (2011) describe their asexual participants battling against is perhaps less relevant the further one moves away from the able-bodied male norm.

6.3.2. ‘It’s kind of cute now but it won’t be forever’

The idea of ‘ease’ in asexual women and asexual non-binary (AFAB) people’s accounts was also tempered by a number of other factors. It seemed that where one was in the lifecourse (and normative understandings of what lifecourse stages involve) affected how easy it was to slip under the radar. Gillian said:

Although I rarely get asked whether I have a boyfriend or am married, new people I meet often ask whether I have kids. I wonder whether people are coming to accept ‘34-female-unmarried’ but have not quite got their heads round ‘34-female-childless’.

Earlier Gillian had spoken about how she felt had an easier time because people assumed her lack of interest in sexual relationships was normal for women, but when it became clear that her asexuality meant that she did not have nor want any children, Gillian felt that people would have a harder time squaring this. As evidenced by the questions new acquaintances ask Gillian, at a certain point (usually in one's thirties) it is one's motherhood status that comes to be the most important facet of identity. This was in stark contrast to Tobi, who was in her 50s, and was no longer able to have children: 'Far from being pressurised, it was the opposite: 'oh Tobi, it's so wonderful that you're not one of those women who are kind of getting older and just desperate for a man''. Tobi finds her lack of interest in sex and relationships met with societal approval because as an older woman, to be overly interested ('desperate for a man') is to be acting inappropriately for her gender and age (and reproductive) status. And Lucy, who was in her very early twenties, also commented on the importance of age and lifecourse:

If people find out I'm in my late 20s or my early 30s and I've never had sex, like anything else I would accomplish would just be wiped aside because they'd just see me as a freak, a weirdo. You know it's kind of cute now but it won't be forever.

As a young women at the start of her twenties, Lucy feels that the fact she has never had sex and is not interested in having sex is still acceptable, but in a few years' time this will not be the case. Again this suggests that particular pressure is applied to women in their late twenties and thirties with regards to normative expectations, including those relating to reproduction. The average age at which women in the UK have their first child is now 28.6 years, and the average age of all mothers giving birth is 30.3 (ONS, 2016a). In 2015, for the first time since 1947, the fertility rate for women over 40 was higher than that of women under 20 (ONS, 2016b). These statistics suggest the construction of a normative reproductive window for women: Gillian, at 34, is located within this, and so her asexuality (expressed as a disinterest in sex and sexual relationships) becomes more visible (and perhaps more problematised), but both Lucy and Tobi, arguably outside of this window, had an 'easier' time.

Norms regarding life stages or phases can also be seen in Megan's account. Megan was a trans woman who felt that there was an expectation on her to be asexual during her transition:

There are scripted ideas of like what trans people's lives should be like. And there's this expectation that trans people, you know, should be like asexual or whatever prior to like surgery and things like that... Because like with regards to trans, and particularly trans women, like it's either the idea of, you know, an assumption of asexuality or like hyper sexuality, and it's kind of like there's not really a middle ground given in that regard.

Megan references the normative and (often clinical) assumption that trans women should be asexual, at least until 'after surgery' (despite the fact that many trans people opt not to undergo surgery) when they are more normatively gendered (Davy and Steinbock, 2010: 271). This is a cis-sexist and hetero-normative assumption, as it implies that sexuality is only permissible when there is 'congruence' (or what is taken to be congruence) between one's sex organs, gender expression, and gender identity. Megan refers to the guilt she feels because she is a trans woman who does not identify as asexual, and worries that she might be perpetuating harmful notions about trans people's sexuality. However, because she is occupying this normative position deemed appropriate for this phase of her life (i.e. gender transition), she feels she is met with some degree of approval as her asexuality is not seen as particularly strange or unexpected (despite how problematic she finds this).

Other participants also suggested that the experience of 'ease' was also conditional on particular hetero-normative assumptions. The archetypes mentioned earlier (such as the 'frigid woman') were not just about femininity but were examples of hetero-femininity. Heather raised an important point about how the 'naturalisation' of asexuality only works in the context of heterosexual relationships: 'when you're not sexually attracted to men as a woman that's seen as fine because women are, you know, frigid...'. That is, if you are a heterosexual woman who does not experience sexual attraction, your heterosexuality nor your femininity is diminished by this because of hetero-femininity's long historical connotations of sexual passivity, reserve, respectability etc. However, Heather goes on to say that lesbian and bisexual women are not understood in the same way since homosexuality, as a historical

construction, has been so sexualised. Heather says: ‘But if you don’t want to have sex with women you can’t be attracted to women obviously, because you have to do that [have sex]. I don’t know, like it’s very heteronormative’. Homosexuality is understood as fundamentally sexual attraction, whereas heterosexuality, in contrast, can be understood as encompassing many different forms of romantic and affective ties. As Bev Skeggs writes: ‘the homosexual subject has become the very sign of sex’ (as cited in Stella, 2015: 90), but as Stella (*ibid.*) puts it: ‘sexual signifiers are not perceived to be as central to heterosexual identities, since they are associated with ‘natural’ reproduction and therefore concealed’. Whilst a woman who is asexual and hetero-romantic has familiar archetypes of asexual or non-sexual hetero-femininity to render their lack of interest in sex less suspect, by contrast asexual women who are homo-romantic or bi-romantic have to contend with the hypersexual assumptions related to their homosexuality or bisexuality. Heather suggests this sexualisation is so powerful as to negate the possibility of asexual homo- or bi-romanticism (‘you can’t be attracted to women obviously’).⁶⁸ Heather relates this to their own experience in discussing how, when they were attracted to a woman and disclosed this to a friend (who was aware of Heather’s asexuality), the friend questioned why Heather would even want to be in a relationship with this woman, if sex was off the table.

Additionally, just like how the normalisation or naturalisation of women’s asexuality was heteronormative (and those outside of that heteronormative frame did not experience the same kind of ease), Blair also pointed out that this normalisation/naturalisation was also predicated on assumptions about romance. That is, being able to fly under the radar due to the asexuality-as-natural in women trope was contingent on expressing some level of romantic attraction (to men) and a desire to be in a relationship (with a man). When asexuality was combined with an aromantic orientation in women, there was much more of a sense of transgression and of ‘failing’ one’s gender. As Blair, who was a non-binary (AFAB) person but ‘read’ largely as a woman, put it:

⁶⁸ Although, again perhaps illustrating the ambiguity of femininity and sexuality, there are also contradictory discourses regarding the sexlessness of lesbian relationships, as in the previously-mentioned trope of ‘lesbian bed death’.

As a woman I'm expected to be gooey and romantic so I'm going against that stereotype by uh not being interested in all that sort of thing so yeah like if you, you know the women's magazines and the films that are targeted at women and all that sort of thing, generally women's role in the films that they are in is to have a romance with some of the other characters and magazines are full of how to attract men and all that sort of thing so yeah, obviously a big part of being a woman is meant to be, you know, your romantic relationships... I guess I'm not, not playing the role I'm sort of expected to play by refusing to [laughs] do all that sort of thing.

Reflecting on this later in their notebook, Blair went on to say: 'A woman who doesn't find a (male) romantic partner has failed'. Blair felt that they did not have the 'refuge' of romanticism to be able to shield them from people's judgements. They suggest that it is not so much the difference between sexual and asexual women that is most pronounced, but rather the difference between those who are romantic and those who are not, given the ways in which femininity is still so closely sutured to an interest in romance and relationships rather than sexual desire (Vickery, 2009). For Blair, the assumption that asexuality was natural or normal for women was only something that benefitted those who were still romantically interested (and as we have seen from Heather, romantically interested in men). Therefore, the 'ease' that asexual women were thought to experience because of norms around femininity and sexuality is, on inspection, complicated and riven with ideas about the life-course, age, heteronormativity, and romance.

6.3.3. 'You a man or something?'

In contrast, narratives of 'ease' (even when they were being simultaneously complicated) were conspicuously absent from the accounts of abstinent women. These participants did however at times discuss how sometimes they felt 'rewarded' for their abstinence, when it was misread in terms of them being virtuous. Alora described how: 'some are like - because after all they still see female abstinence as virtue - yeah, they see it as a virtue for women so I do have some that respect me for that'. Thus, there was some sense in which abstaining from sex created a kind of gendered kudos since the control and containment of women's sexuality is still something that is rewarded. However, more common in the narratives of the abstinent women in my study was a sense

in which they felt their decision not to have sex created problems in their relationships with others.⁶⁹ I argue that precisely because it was their decision, the same norms around femininity and sexuality which afforded some asexual women space (or ease) did not apply to abstinent women. As commonly understood, abstinence was more than not feeling any sexual desire or attraction (which could be explained with recourse to femininity), but it represented an unwillingness to fulfil the imperative that women should be sexually responsive.⁷⁰ Abstinent women were refusing to participate in this expectation by standing by their decision even when under pressure. In the Relationships chapter, I discussed how abstinent women themselves conceptualised their abstinence as a kind of ‘block’ in intimate relationships, since they were not upholding their end of the bargain as women to grant men sexual access to their bodies. As we have already seen Dona’s friends say: ‘Well, being a female, you can’t say you’re not indulging in sex’. Thus, to assert that you are not going to have sex, is to potentially endanger one’s belonging in the category of ‘female’. Indeed, some participants have even had their gender questioned because of their abstinence: for example, upon disclosing her abstinence, Pooja has been asked: ‘what, you a man or something?’ This has also affected Yvette’s own self-understanding: she talks about how she sometimes feels she is not a ‘real woman’ due to her abstinence. When I ask what it would be mean to be a real woman, Yvette tells me: ‘very sexually capable and that I do everything that is expected of me’. ‘Sexually capable’ may imply a level of agency, but from subsequent discussion, it was clear that Yvette meant this in terms of her ability to give sexual pleasure, and to please her partner.

The importance of sexual responsiveness is also illustrated in Rami’s narrative. Rami was asexual, but also refused to have a sexual relationship with her ex-husband. She related the following story:

He used to say, he used to say me that ‘you’re cold woman’... I’m sure he found that I’m not responding - in comparison with, he always

⁶⁹ Pooja’s narrative perfectly juxtaposes ideas of ‘virtue’ with the necessity of being sexually responsive. As discussed in the Relationships chapter, Pooja talked about how her virginity was positively evaluated by men, until she made it clear that she was not going to have sex with them, at which point their view changed.

⁷⁰ The same might be said of the asexual participants, but as we saw in the Relationships chapter, many asexual women and asexual non-binary (AFAB) persons did have sex with their partners; they were, to some degree, ‘sexually responsive’.

used to talk about his brother and his wife. 'Oh she's this and that, oh she's so' and blah, 'she's so affectionate' dadadadadada, and [laughs]. That's what I had in mind by 'the proper woman'. They're like, like affectionate and sexual.

Unlike the asexual participants in the previous section for whom asexuality often affirmed their femininity in the eyes of others, Rami's gender as a woman came under scrutiny because of her asexuality - or rather, because her asexuality meant that she was not willing to have sex with her ex-husband. Her ex-husband called Rami 'cold', and Rami herself felt that she was not a 'proper woman' because she was not fulfilling the duties she was expected to fulfil as a wife (highlighting too how subjectivities come to be formed relationally - i.e. Rami's sense - or lack thereof - of herself as a woman). Thus, this demonstrates how sexual disinterest was less problematic with regards to femininity and womanhood than taking a stand and refusing to have sex. Agency in this sense could be seen as going against what was considered feminine.

However, in a recent article, Bay-Cheng (2015) suggests that we need to expand our conceptual tools for understanding (young) women's sexuality. The moralistic dimension of virgins and whores is no longer sufficient in accounting for the contexts in which young women negotiate their sexuality, as sexual activity in women is no longer as stigmatised as it once was. Bay-Cheng proposes that we bring in a second dimension, which she calls the 'agency line'. A particular product of neoliberalism, Bay-Cheng argues (based on a literature review of research on young women's sexualities) that young women are now more likely to be evaluated on how agentic their sexual behaviours and decisions are (and the more agentic, the higher the evaluation). Thus, Bay-Cheng suggests that women who have sex for their own pleasure and of their own volition ('high activity, high agency') are appraised more highly than women who have sex to please others ('high activity, low agency'), but also that women who choose 'conscious celibacy' ('low activity, high agency') are seen more positively than young women who are naïve about sex, are abstaining because they are following rules, or are abstinent but don't want to be ('low activity, low agency'). As Bay-Cheng put it:

When cast in terms of agentic self-interest and fortitude, abstinence might garner respect. But without such neoliberal trappings, abstinent girls may be pitied for missing out...or for being

undesirable. Those whose sexual inexperience is believed to be involuntary rather than volitional may then fall below the Agency Line, at the abstinent end of the sexual activity spectrum (2015: 285)

Indeed, Bay-Cheng suggests that women who are ‘consciously celibate’ can be seen as ‘self-assured neoliberal strivers asserting their agency’ (2015: 284). Bay-Cheng, however, whilst arguing for the necessity of a conceptual tool that takes into account women’s agency in the construction of sexuality, is also deeply critical of this ‘agentic imperative’, highlighting how it could result in women under-reporting assault or abuse in order to maintain their status as agents, as well as shutting down the possibility of critiquing structural inequalities (since we are agents, not victims). I agree with Bay-Cheng’s appraisal, but I am dubious about her claim that women are required to be agentic, at least to the extent that is being suggested. The accounts of the abstinent women in my study (those who are ‘consciously celibate’) do not reflect a state of affairs where women are validated due to their decision not to have sex. As we have seen, their agency (or more precisely the negative evaluation thereof) often results in struggles and tensions in interpersonal relationships, and this agency can also be enough to call women’s gender into question. I suggest that this is because agency continues to be masculinised, to be seen as a masculine quality. This may be more acceptable when the agency results in sexual activity (i.e. ‘high activity, high agency’) because men can often be the beneficiaries of this. But when the agency is high and the activity is low (as in the case of abstinent women), and there is no dividend for men, this is not celebrated in the same way. ‘Activity’ then still matters - albeit not in the traditional configuration of the virgin-whore scale. It is perhaps the case that women’s agency is more likely to be affirmed when it does not stand in the way of the operations of hetero-patriarchy.⁷¹ We have also seen in the Relationships chapter that women’s assertions of agency (e.g. that their abstinence is a considered, conscious choice; or that they self-identity as asexual) are frequently dismissed and over-written with more familiar gendered narratives. When we ground abstinence in relational and interactional contexts, as in the accounts of my participants, we can see that the agency imperative still has limits. Indeed, the ‘masculinised’ nature of agency was also illustrated earlier in the chapter. We saw how abstinent men, in

⁷¹ Rosalind Gill (2009b) offers some support to this when she argues that sexual agency is now seen as compulsory for young women, but the ends to which this agency can be directed remain very limited (i.e. having ‘fun fearless’ sex with men).

order to claim a masculine subject position, spoke about their abstinence precisely in terms of agency - as in, it was their choice to be abstinent. O'Sullivan and Vannier (2016: 51) argue that 'agency is [still] a privilege of male desire', and this would seem to be true with regards to my participants. Agency thus bolstered masculinity in the case of abstinent men, but represented a potential threat to femininity in the case of abstinent women.

6.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the relationship between masculinity and femininity, and asexuality and abstinence. This was accomplished through the analysis of participants' accounts - in terms of their reflections on masculinity and femininity, how these related to their lives, and how they emerged in the narratives themselves. This is the 'meanings' dimension of Jackson's typology, where participants engage with culturally-shared understandings of gender (namely as a binary system of the masculine vs the feminine).

I began by discussing the common-sense construction of masculinity as sexual. This was an idea that emerged in asexual participants' accounts - but generally by non-male asexual participants in talking about how being asexual must be particularly difficult for men. These participants envisaged asexual men as struggling to reconcile these seemingly oppositional elements of their identities (and indeed, this did seem to be the case for the small number of asexual men in other studies). However, the asexual men in my study had a relationship with masculinity that was critical and ambivalent. There was no desire to marry their asexuality with masculinity, because they saw masculinity as a problematic concept, and one they did not particularly want to be a part of. They were able to do so because of their knowledge of gender as a social and political construct allowed them to 'see' the artifice of masculinity, and either disengage entirely with it, or stretch the idea so broadly as to encompass anything that a self-identified man does.

In contrast, the construction of masculinity as sexual seemed to pose more of a threat to abstinent men, and rather than disengage from or redefine masculinity, they undertook discursive work in which they invoked other elements of masculinity so that they could still lay claim to a masculine identity.

They did so by emphasising the presence of their sexual desire, as well as the fact that others still found them sexually desirable, and how they possessed abundant sexual knowledge. They also talked of the mastery they had over their bodies and desires, and how they were resistant to and unaffected by social pressures. The abstinent men also stressed that abstinence was their choice, and furthermore, that it was a rational and logical choice, highlighting the centrality of discourses of agency and reason. I also discussed how the availability of these masculine discourses, as well as how other people viewed abstinent men, was shaped by class, 'race', and religion. In many ways, abstinence even seemed to be generative of 'masculinity' (and not just something to be compensated for), because of what it both signified and required.

In the second half of the chapter, I focused on femininity, and its somewhat ambiguous relationship to sexuality, in which expectations of sexual disinterest co-exist with expectations to be sexual (at least in particular ways). These ambiguities arose in the accounts of asexual participants, who, on the one hand, spoke of how the naturalisation of 'asexuality' (or a lack of sexual interest) for women meant that their own asexuality seemed unexceptional. Yet, on the other hand, this 'ease' was based on a failure to recognise asexual women and asexual non-binary (AFAB) persons' agency to assert an asexual identity; it was based on a fundamentally misogynistic conceptualisation of femininity. This had consequences in participants' lives: as well as causing the epistemic injustices documented in the previous chapter, these ideas about women and sexuality were sometimes internalised and prevented participants from being able to see themselves as asexual, at least in a conscious and agentic sense. But I also discussed how this 'ease' becomes less easy when one is within the window of normative reproduction; as well as how the construction of femininity that allows for such ease is actually a heterosexual, romantic, and cis-gender femininity.

Abstinent women seemed to have a different relation to femininity, in the sense that their abstinence did not affirm their status as women in the way that asexuality did for (some) asexual women. In contrast, the negative evaluation of their abstinence caused relational problems, and their abstinence could even bring their gender into question. I argued that this was due to the agency

abstinent women were seen to be asserting, and their refusal to be sexually responsive, both of which transgress dominant understandings of femininity. Despite arguments in the literature that sexual activity is less central to the evaluation of women's sexuality nowadays, and that women are evaluated in terms of their ability to express and exert agency, I suggested that the positive evaluation of women's agency is contingent upon adherence to hetero-patriarchal norms regarding women's sexual availability. To be seen as agentic and yet not be sexually active (as the abstinent women in my study were) is to risk one's belonging to the category of 'woman'. Thus, in this regard, agency is in many ways still a masculinised concept (or is at least more associated with masculinity). We also saw this in the other sections of the chapter: abstinent men drew on agency to assert their masculinity, and the presumed absence of agency (in that their asexuality was seen as a consequence of their gender) amongst asexual women allowed them to fit into femininity. This indicates the dogged persistence of the sexual double standard wherein men and women are still judged by different (and unequal) criteria.

Again, this chapter has shown how experiences of asexuality and abstinence are profoundly affected by gender, as constructions of masculinity and femininity will create different sexual expectations, norms and contexts that men and women must navigate. But unlike in the previous chapter where experiences of abstinence and asexuality were more similar than different (the most significant split was along gendered lines), here we also saw the differences between experiences of asexuality and experiences of abstinence when it came to masculinity and femininity. This was due to the differing relation to 'agency' that asexuality and abstinence have, and how agency (remains) a particularly gendered concept.

In the next chapter I once again look at the ways in which sexuality is connected to gender, but move beyond the frame of masculinity and femininity to think about gender in a broader sense, and in how this relation manifested itself in participants' sense of subjectivities and embodiments. Thus I move from focusing on societal meanings of gender (particularly masculinity and femininity) to foregrounding the subject.

7. Subjectivity and embodiment

7.1. Introduction

In the Relationships chapter (Chapter Five), I focused on gender, along with asexuality and abstinence, as discrete categories that came together in the relational experiences of participants (in that gender profoundly impacted upon the experiences participants had). My focus there was on ‘interactions’. In the Masculinity and Femininity chapter (Chapter Six), my focus shifted to ‘meanings’. Again I discussed how asexuality and abstinence ‘met’ the gendered categories of masculinity and femininity, but also how asexuality and abstinence could be seen as partially *constitutive* of certain constructions of masculinity or femininity: for example, that abstinence was encoded as a masculine practice, or that asexuality was naturalised or normalised as part of femininity.

In this chapter, I want to move beyond constructs of masculinity and femininity and think more broadly about how gender, and asexuality and abstinence, are interconnected and co-constitutive. Masculinity and femininity are, of course, part of gender, but they are not the *entirety* of gender. In this chapter, I hone in on participants’ own gendered subjectivities and embodiments - that is, their sense of themselves as gendered (or non-gendered) beings - that may go beyond the binary of masculine or feminine, and explore how these are connected (or not) to asexuality and/or abstinence. This relates to the level of the ‘self’ or ‘subjectivity’ in Jackson’s (2006) schema. I argue that the subjectivities and embodied experiences of asexual and abstinent participants allow us to see how gender, asexuality, and abstinence often come to form one another, and cannot be easily separated.

My use of the term ‘subjectivity’ requires a word here. I follow Jackson and Scott (2010) here in their use of ‘subjectivity’ rather than ‘identity’. Like Jackson and Scott, this is because I feel that subjectivity ‘encompasses far more than identity: there are many aspects of the self that are not reducible to identity’ (p122). Whilst identity is an important part of subjectivity, there is also a sense in which subjectivity refers to our ‘interior’ lives, relating to how we feel and think. Of course, as Jackson and Scott point out, ‘subjectivity’ is always

socially located (rendering the easy distinction between ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’ problematic) and so, as with the other findings chapters, discussions of structure, interactions, and meanings are also threaded through this chapter. I also discuss embodiment in this chapter because embodiment is inseparable from subjectivity; as Crossley (1995: 48) puts it, drawing on Merleau Ponty: ‘embodiment is...the very basis of experience. We experience by way of sentient embodiment. Our body is our way of being-in-the-world, of experiencing and belonging to the world’. In many participants’ accounts, talk about their embodiment *was* talk about their subjectivity.

This chapter comprises four parts which explores issues of subjectivity and embodiment in various ways. The first part, Questioning Gender, focuses on how asexual participants talked about their asexuality as bringing about particular gendered subjectivities (such as in identifying as non-binary, or becoming exposed to new ways of thinking about gender). The second section, Appearance Work, discusses how many participants, both abstinent and asexual, talked about how not being interested in attracting a sexual partner effected the decisions made about appearance, or the appearance related work they undertook. The third section, Fleshy Bodies, focuses on how asexuality impacted on how participants felt about their bodies (or how feelings about bodies could impact on sexual desire or sexual interest). In the final section, Motivations, I talk about how abstinent women conceptualised their abstinence as a response to the (bodily and emotional) vulnerabilities they felt from hetero-patriarchy, and so for them, abstinence represented a kind of gendered independence - but not one that was necessarily *political*.

7.2. Questioning Gender

In this section, I examine asexuality’s impact on participants’ sense of gendered subjectivity. Whilst in the previous chapter I discuss how asexuality and abstinence fitted in with broader societal constructs of masculinity and femininity and how these were experienced in the lives of participants, here I want to specifically hone in on how asexuality altered or affected participants’ sense of themselves as gendered subjects beyond the dichotomy of masculine and feminine (and beyond other people’s perceptions). I focus exclusively on

asexuality in this section because it was the asexual participants who had the most to say in this regard.

I begin by discussing how participants felt that their asexuality meant that they were less attached to gender as a whole, because gender was conceived as a fundamentally sexual thing. This often led to identification as non-binary or agender. Similarly, I then discuss how coming to identify as asexual often meant entry into a discursive space where gender (and sexuality) were being critically interrogated, and how this could bring about a plethora of new gendered possibilities for some participants.⁷²

7.2.1. 'Weird, weird...gender is weird'

For most asexual participants, the idea of gender was something they found alien or confusing or simply irrelevant. Blair devoted a full page spread of their notebook to the following proclamation:

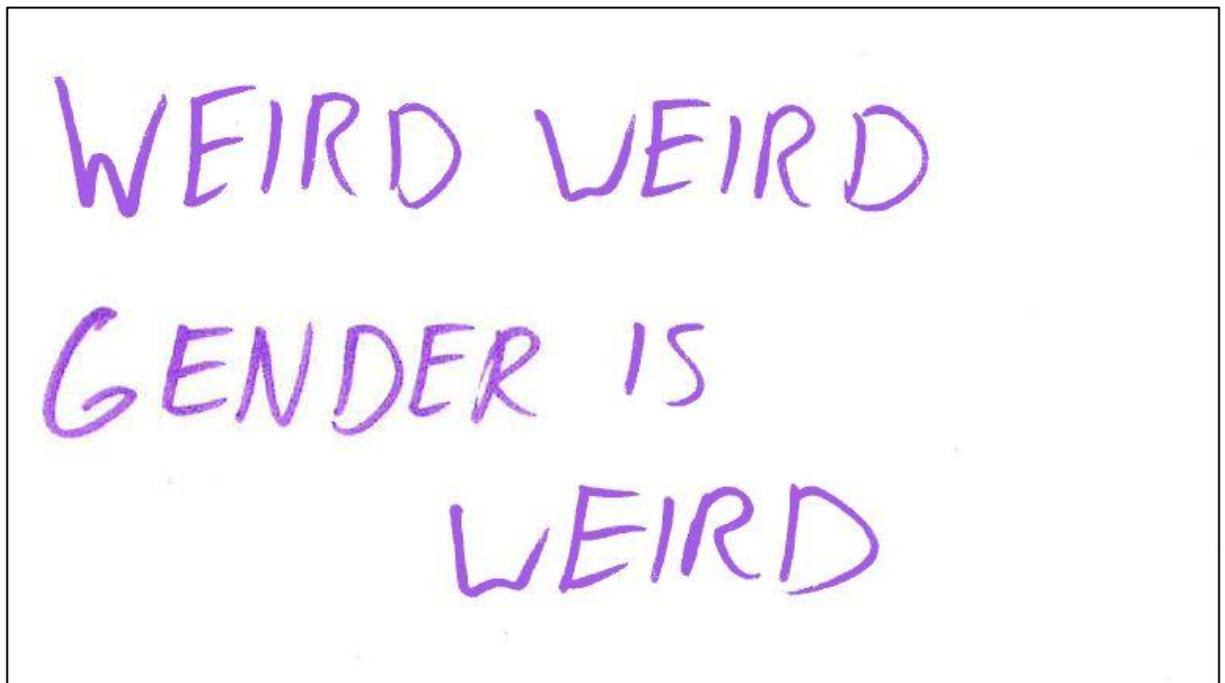


Figure 7 – Excerpt from Blair's notebook

⁷² It is worth briefly discussing here what these participants meant when they talked about 'gender'. At times it referred to an oppressive binary framework that worked to 'organise' society in particular ways, and included norms of masculinity and femininity. But it was also seen as something personal and individual – so that people could have a 'gender identity' and a 'gender expression' which referred to one's subjective sense of self. Gender identity and expression were generally conceptualised as more expansive and more complex than 'gender' as a social structure.

A number of asexual participants talked about how gender was less relevant (or even wholly irrelevant) to them *in light of* their asexuality. They talked about how gender is generally ‘organised’ around sexuality, and because they had a lack of interest in sex or did not feel sexually attracted to others, gender (their own and others) became much less important to them. Heather talks about this with eloquence and is worth quoting at length:

I kind of find gender an unnecessary question, like if I was to be brutally honest. Like I mean I see it in society, I understand why it's important to people, but I don't understand why it happened in the first place or like, I feel like I could be perfectly happy if that had never been a thing, because it just doesn't matter to me, and like in some roundabout way I feel like that's probably connected to my asexuality....When you have no interest in one [gender or sexuality] there's not very much reason to find interest in the other I guess, like. I mean that's not the full thing, but like, gosh. I mean we define, conventionally, sexual attraction as being like heterosexual or homosexual, if you take it in like the most basic forms, and like that's always related to your own gender, and there's this understanding that you and someone else, who is another gender, will work out...But they're [homosexuality and heterosexuality] almost defined by the existence of gender, and like I mean you could say the same thing about gender and sex because like, you know, male and female, if I'm really bad and loosely kind of link sex and gender together, like male and female are different because of their sexual organs, so like, or at least conventionally are different because of their sexual organs. So like if sex wasn't a thing there would be no need to have that separation at all. For me my lack of interest in either is exemplified by the other, and if I felt very strongly that I was female, for example, I would probably be more inclined to find out more about my sexuality, and if I was convinced that I was heterosexual, or even bisexual or whatever, I might be more interested to find out about my gender and how I slotted into other people's sexualities. But as it is I have no particular interest in either, and neither really inclines me to find out about the other, because I don't really see the point. I don't really see, I don't really see why it matters what gender I am if like, if gender doesn't matter to my sexuality and I don't really see why it matters if I'm sexually attracted to anyone.

For Heather, gender has its genesis in sex. One's designation as male or female is defined in relation to the sexual organs one is perceived to have, with the expectation that once you are an adult, you will have a particular role to play in sexual and reproductive acts. Heather discusses how this can be subverted (i.e. through homosexuality which involves sex with someone of the ‘same’ sex/gender) but ultimately, the *raison d'être* of gender is to organise and

regulate our sexual relations. This is similar to Ingraham's (1996) contention that the only reason for the separation of humans into two genders/sexes is because of the existence of (hetero)sex(uality). For Heather, who does not feel sexual attraction, gender is not a meaningful way for them to organise their relationships, or orient themselves to the world. Oran also felt that gender became less meaningful in the context of asexuality:

If heterosexuality, or sexuality in general, isn't something that you really value then like also you should take a look at your like gender identity and say like, well is that something that's really important to you? Because yeah I do think they're like intrinsically linked because when we talk about gender we talk about sex. Like if you look in a textbook about animals for example, like that's what you're talking about. It's like reproduction and sexual activity, or like how, you know [laughs], asexual in plant life or like animal life is just about, you know, not needing a partner and stuff like that. So yeah I do think it's all interlinked and I do think like if you start to identify as asexual then there's probably part of you that thinks about gender as well.

Although the biologicistic understanding of asexuality as self-reproduction is usually dismissed in asexuality discourse (hence Oran's self-conscious laughter), Oran strategically uses it here to make the point that sex and sexuality are fundamentally defined in relation to gender (both yours and your sexual partner's) whereas asexual organisms (who do not have sexual partners) are not typically gendered. Tobi also felt her lack of affinity with gender was related to her asexuality:

If I'm not identifying as strongly as female, feminine, whatever you want to call it...then that would seem to go along—because somehow strong gender identification seems to me to—I'm thinking aloud now - it seems to me that strongly identifying with a certain gender also seems to me to strongly identify with sexuality...so most of the people I know seem to perform their gender in the context of their sexuality.

Tobi went on to discuss how different sexualities often had different gendered aesthetics attached to them (e.g. ideas of looking/dressing straight or lesbian or gay) and it was in this referential context that Tobi felt most people understood their gender. Without experiencing any kind of sexual attraction, Tobi said she felt unattached and indifferent to being a woman. However, Tobi wanted to avoid postulating any kind of causal relationship between her asexuality and her

lack of gender identity. For Tobi, it was enough to know that her gender and her asexuality made sense in light of one another: ‘the two co-exist but whether one causes the other I don’t know’. Kai felt similar to Tobi, in that he felt his lack of affinity in one realm went along with his lack of affinity in another: he talked about how not participating in the ‘gender game’ (i.e. not being decisively masculine or feminine) was probably linked to him ‘not having a defined thing’ with regards to sexuality (by which he meant he was not really attracted to anyone).

The theme of how gender was really ‘about’ sexuality emerged in other ways in participants’ narratives. Reeta discussed this through her analysis of the ways in which the word ‘asexual’ was deployed in popular culture. In her notebook, she talks about how ‘asexuality is a gender transgression’ and in particular, how ‘asexual’ is often invoked as a pejorative when women do not dress in the appropriately gendered ways:

Of course women are taught to always at least keep a minimum amount of concern over how attractive we look in the back of our heads. It’s all about pleasing others...there is a hidden expectation of being ‘desirable’, to have a hint of sexuality underneath. It’s not explicit, and it seems impossible to discern how exactly you manage to successfully do that, but then there seems to be a line you can cross where you’re no longer even giving a hint that you would like to be seen as sexually attractive (to men) - you are ‘asexual’. I don’t see people calling out men for wearing ‘asexual clothes’. I do not even know what ‘sexual clothes’ would be for men.

For Reeta, not only is ‘asexual’ deployed to refer to *looking* unsexy or unattractive, but this is also an inherently gendered phenomena. For women, to be asexual is also to be not properly feminine. Reeta states: ‘I read a quote by a journalist who said that her lack of curves and flattering clothes meant that she should ‘walk with the asexuals in the Pride parade’’. ‘Curves’ and ‘flattering clothes’ imply a normative understanding of femininity, and so to lack these things is enough for the journalist to ‘relegate’ herself to the asexual contingent at Pride. Reeta goes on in her notebook to suggest that this link between asexuality and a lack of femininity could be related to how female sexuality is not about subjectively and agentically feeling desire, but about *looking* desirable for others:

People think of sexuality as mostly being about how people relate and feel about you rather than how you feel about others - being sexual means being an object, not a subject. I do think this has a lot to do with gender...people seem to use the word [sexuality] in a way that seems to connote you being a sexual object, and being attractive, and you see it's kind of odd and weird to me but it also kind of makes sense in regards to women's role, in a sad way.

Therefore, when one 'fails' to be desirable in the eyes of others (which usually means women failing to embody a certain image), then one is no longer seen to inhabit the category 'sexual':

If people can be (wrongly) distinguished as 'asexual' just by not conveying sexuality or attractiveness well enough by how they look and carry themselves, is sexuality really such a fragile concept that it can be 'taken' from you regardless of how you actually feel about it, if people around you do not think you look sexual' enough?

What Reeta writes in her notebook chimes with my earlier discussion in the Masculinity and Femininity chapter about how feminine sexuality is still often understood as invoking desire in others rather than be a desiring subject oneself, and more broadly, how agency is generally not considered part of femininity.

7.2.1.1. 'It's almost easy to accept yourself as agender'

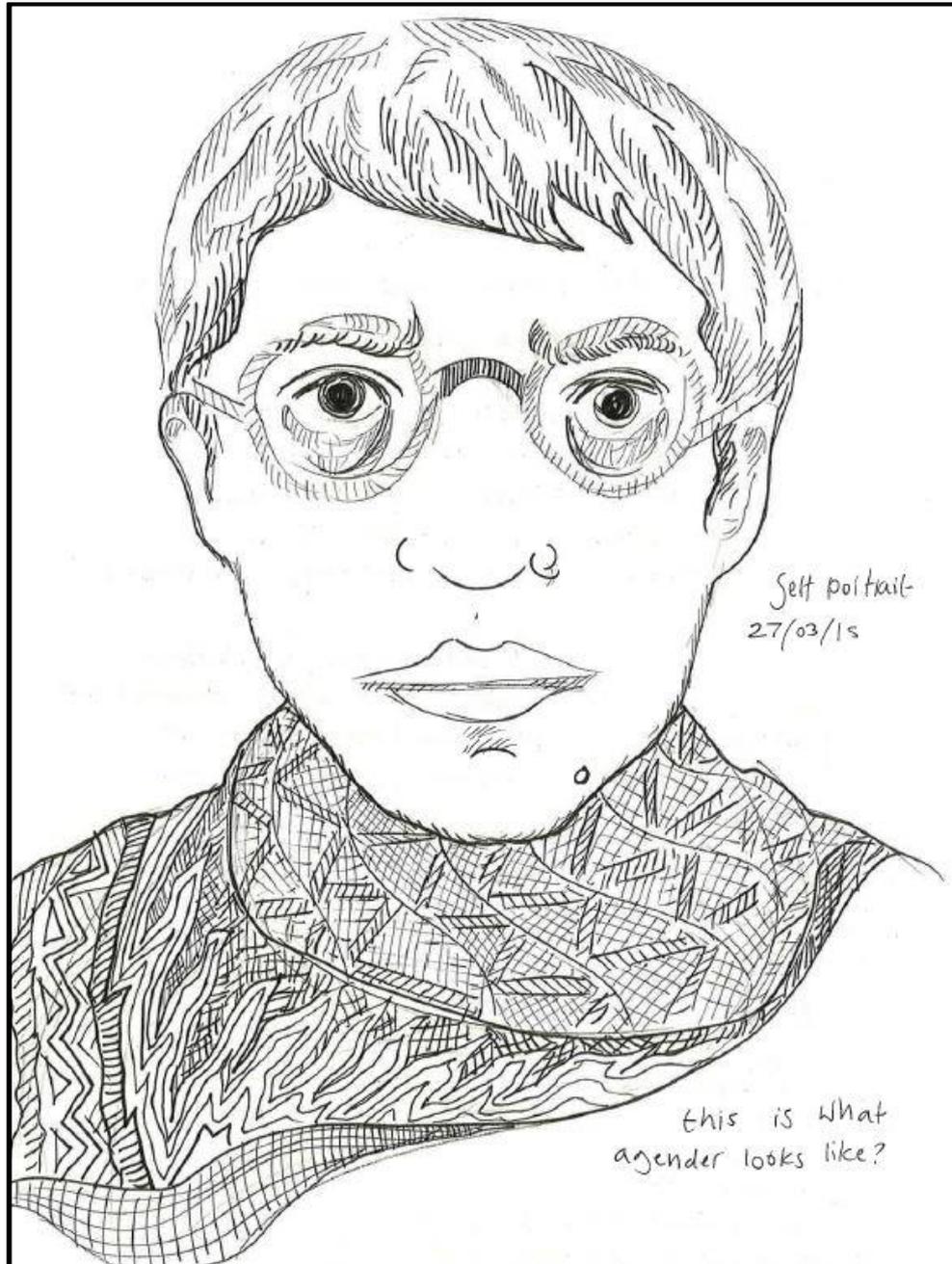


Figure 8 – Excerpt from Dylan's notebook

I begin this section with a self-portrait drawn by Dylan (figure 8), with the caption 'this is what agender looks like?' For a significant amount of participants, this lack of identification with gender (at least in a binary sense) meant that they had also begun to identify as non-binary, gender neutral or agender (see footnote 35 in Chapter Four for definitions of these terms) or were in the process of exploring these terms. This accords with the findings of annual censuses which have been carried out on the online asexual population, where in

2014, 26.1% of survey respondents identified as non-binary, genderqueer, agender, neutrois, or a gender 'other' than man or woman (Asexual Census, 2014). Asexuality (in rendering gender somewhat irrelevant to participants) was not necessarily the only factor involved in adopting these new labels but it was often a contributory factor, as Oran explains: 'It's almost easy to accept yourself as agender when you start to realise that those binary ideas are only there to serve kind of heterosexuality in a way'.

Jeffrey went further in describing how he saw his identification with gender neutrality as the same thing as his asexuality:

Karen: how kind of connected do you think your asexuality and your gender neutrality are?

Jeffrey: They are more or less the same thing erm uhm [long pause] I suppose there's not much more that I can say about that. [pause] They're the same thing basically. I dunno.

While Jeffrey went on to acknowledge that it was possible for someone to be gender neutral and sexual, for him, they were conceived of as so similar that he struggled to articulate the difference between them ('there's not much more I can say about that'). Whilst MacNeela and Murphy (2015) suggest that some asexual people might strategically identify as non-binary in order to side-step the conflicts posed by asexuality and masculinity or femininity (leaving aside the fact that identifying as non-binary is in no way 'easy', given how our society is so fundamentally structured around the gender binary), this did not appear to be the case amongst my participants. Non-binary was less a cognitive cerebral identity (although it was this too) and more something that was felt, and made sense - not as a way to manage asexuality, but (in large part) because of their asexuality.

Frankie however was more circumspect. In the first interview, they considered that their asexuality had some kind of link to being agender/non-binary:

Karen: Can you see any links between identifying as asexual and - you said you're not quite sure if you're agender but you certainly...

Frankie: Emm...there possibly is a link in that...so I think possibly there's that in that I don't have a defined attraction so for me

there's sort of...and because of the way that I experience romantic and platonic attraction emm I think for me gender is a lot less important than it might be for others.

However, they went on to say that it may also be related to how their parents never pushed gender norms on them as they were growing up. In the second interview, roughly two months later, we returned to this question:

Frankie: The thing I said the last time, about how I don't really care about gender; I don't really feel one way or the other... I think I sort of pushed that as being part of my asexuality. And when I actually started doing a bit more research, it came to me that - maybe it's not part of my sexuality, maybe it's something else. Umm... I think, definitely, that might have slowed me down on that bit and I thought it was just part of me being ace, and not really being interested that much. I think not seeing the lines that much, if that makes sense?

Karen: Yeah, and so what made you start to think that it may not be...

Frankie: I mean, it was just sort of talking about it to other people who are lot better informed. Umm.. And they said... Umm... 'Have you looked up this or that?' and I ended up looking and, sort off, finding all of these non-binary resources, reading through it, finding out all of this stuff - and it made a lot of sense when you start getting through that.

At this point, Frankie now felt that their being agender/non-binary was something separate from their asexuality, and felt that they might be agender/non-binary regardless of whether or not they were asexual. This new understanding of self emerged from Frankie's engagement with asexual-inclusive LGBTQ+ spaces, both online and off. The role that entry into new discursive spheres could play in forming gendered subjectivities was something other participants brought up, and I explore this in the next section.

7.2.2. 'I met a wide variety of people who identified in different ways'

In the previous section, participants connected the phenomenological experience of asexuality (not feeling sexual attraction and/or not being interested in sex) to their lack of identification or affinity with gender (at least in binary terms). This was because gender was understood to be about sex and

sexuality. But another way in which asexuality could impact on one's sense of gendered subjectivity (as prefigured in Frankie's account, above) was when participants sought out (online) spaces where asexuality was being discussed, and they found new ideas relating to gender being discussed simultaneously. This might be seen in terms of what Rupp et al. (2016) refer to as the 'Judith Butler experience', as discussed in the Relationships chapter. As discussed in Chapter Two, asexuality as a form of self-identity has been closely linked to the internet and to online spaces. The online spaces that participants referred to included asexual-specific sites, but also to broader spaces (such as Tumblr ⁷³) that contained critical discussion of the construction of gender and sexuality, and of 'alternative' gender and sexual identities.

Previously, MacNeela and Murphy (2015) discussed how for some of their survey participants, questioning their asexuality prompted a concurrent questioning of their gender. This was a finding echoed in my research, but importantly, there was also a marked relational element to this - participants did not undergo these processes of questioning as isolated individuals, but in dialogue with other people and 'community' (Scott and Dawson, 2015). This was also similar to some of Hines' (2010) participants, who experienced shifts in their sexual subjectivity once they started engaging with the trans community. Sam (who was agender/trans) describes how identifying as asexual and seeking out other asexual people worked as a gateway leading to new gendered possibilities:

I started thinking about my gender because I'd come out as asexual and coming out as asexual meant that I met a wide variety of people who identified in different ways and that made me think if there aren't only like two options.

The people Sam was able to meet (facilitated by their identification as asexual) opened their mind to the possibility of being something other than just man or woman. Heather (who was unsure of their gender identity but was possibly agender) had a similar experience:

⁷³ Tumblr.com is a site comprised of individual 'short-form' blogs, where users post photos, animated gifs, and videos alongside more traditional text entries. The content is often created by users themselves, but many also use Tumblr as a kind of scrapbook where they (re)post content they find online. Users follow each other, so that the entries from the users one follows appear in a continuously updating feed.

I mean it was part of the same kind of investigations I was doing into gender and sexuality...But like basically I was, I was on Tumblr and stuff and I was just looking into this and I found this whole wealth of like different options for people to be. I feel like asexual communities probably have a much greater understanding of gender than most other circles, even like, even very traditional LGBT groups, because a lot of them are still kind of rooted in the activism from like twenty, thirty years ago, which was like kind of trans-exclusive in itself, and like not even considering going near any of the kind of subtler aspects of gender. So like whereas asexuality kind of comes from the same kind of recent online communities as a lot of like more general gender discussions come from. So I think like a lot, there's a lot of overlap between the people in the communities.

Several other participants specifically mentioned Tumblr as an example of a space where these kinds of conversations about gender and a/sexuality were taking place, which accords with other research that explores Tumblr as a particularly queer space (Fink and Miller, 2014; Oakley, 2016). For Heather, the association of asexuality with these kind of ideas about gender was related to the fact that asexuality as an identity has grown up alongside the internet, as have many of the young people who identify as asexual. Thus, there has been more of a 'cross-fertilisation' of ideas given the relative ease of communication, which has been aided by platforms such as Tumblr wherein users can express different facets of their identity or interests in the same continuous online space (which Fink and Miller (2014: 612) describe as 'polyvocal'). Similarly, when I asked Oran how long they had been identifying as agender, they told me:

More or less the same amount of time as I've been identifying as asexual really. I like, I think I found out about a lot of this stuff because, you know, it tends to all get discussed by the same people at the same time. Like it's all part of the same discussion as like if you're not like cisgendered and heterosexual then there's things that you need to talk about with each other because nobody's going to give you that information readily, like you have to seek that stuff out.

Oran sees asexuality as queer and non-normative, and it is this understanding that has allowed them to make these wider connections with other queer people, and therein discover new possibilities for understanding one's gendered subjectivity. The overlap that asexuality shares with other online communities that are non-cisgendered and non-heterosexual (to use Oran's terms), is also illustrated by the Asexual Census (2014) in which there were a considerable number of non-asexual respondents (which the survey creators anticipated in

their inclusion of ‘non-asexual’ options in the survey). They had come across the survey via its circulation in the online networks of which they were a part. Of the non-asexual respondents, only 26% identified as straight, but 20% had a gender identity other than man or woman (compared to the 26% of asexual respondents). This supports the point that there is significant ‘cross-fertilisation’ occurring, and asexuality as an identity formation, might be seen as part of the larger ‘Judith Butler experience’ (exposure to feminism and queer theory, as discussed in Chapter Five). This is not to say that participants’ identities as non-binary can be accounted for in terms of exposure to these kind of critical gender and sexuality discourses rather than asexuality. As we have seen in the previous section, many participants did make sense of their non-binary identity with specific reference to the phenomenological experience of not feeling sexually attracted to others. However, in addition to this (or alongside this), the wider discursive networks of which asexuality was seen to be a part of, and access to new terminology and language, may have facilitated or instigated these new kinds of gender identification.

However, this exposure to new ideas was not always experienced positively. Heather said: ‘It’s made me think more about gender, just because gender is mentioned a lot in the same circles, but I haven’t really come to any great realisations of anything. I just feel more uncertain about it, I think’. Learning about new terms and subject positions was not necessarily liberating for Heather, but instead increased the confusion they were feeling about their gender. Yeadon-Lee (2016: 26), in her research with non-binary people, also found there to be ‘potentially undesirable features of gender expansion and pluralism’, which could hinder rather than aid people’s sense of gendered subjectivity. Heather also cautioned against viewing asexual people as having the same views on gender:

There was someone on AVEN talking about how they didn’t want asexuality to be in the LGBT, to be associated with that movement, because they didn’t agree with LGBT rights, and they were going on about this... that kind of thing was particularly common, especially, they had a gender forum, and a lot of the language was really kind of hostile to anyone who wasn’t cisgendered... I just found it really disheartening to read, especially when that’s one of the biggest forums I think on that site... So like I definitely wouldn’t say that like gender is comprehensively understood and everything in the asexual

community. There's definitely issues there... they're like 'you can't be asexual if you've ever had sex and I hate sexual people because they're always thinking about disgusting stuff and they never get any work done because they're all off being decadent and frolicking and that kind of stuff'. So like a lot of them are really up themselves, so like they would be quite dismissive of, I think, anything that doesn't conform to their views which quite often includes quite a rigid kind of male/female dichotomy.

Therefore, it was not inevitable that coming to identify as asexual would mean one would begin to question gender - either one's own, or the abstract idea of gender. Indeed, some asexual participants did not feel that their gender subjectivity was in any way shaped or reconsidered in light of their asexual identification, or their discovery of the asexual community. This is an important point to make, and is a caveat against proclamations of asexuality as necessarily queer, or in viewing all asexual people as actively deconstructing gender (Fahs, 2010a; Gressgård, 2013). Whilst many participants did make this link, there were also participants like Broadley who responded in the following way:

Karen: I mean, when you discovered asexuality, did that prompt any feelings about your gender?

Broadley: No, not really. Didn't make me think at all.

Similarly, Ellie was quick to dismiss my line of questioning on this matter: 'Yeah, I guess I was just thinking...your question: 'Does asexuality affect the way you view gender?' and my answer was: 'No. Not really. End of.' [laughs]'. For these participants, coming to identify as asexual did not instigate a parallel process wherein they reconsidered their gender, or gender in general. Notably, these participants also had contact with the online asexual community. Going back to Heather's point, then, it is important that we do not conceptualise 'asexuality' as homogenous and monolithic, or as a transformative process which 'radicalises' peoples world-views.

In this section, I have discussed the ways in which participants talked about their asexuality as having an impact on their gendered subjectivities. The phenomenological experience of lacking sexual attraction made gender feel less relevant to participants, and thus many came to identify as non-binary or outside of gender in some way. This process was also facilitated by the fact that

coming to identify as asexual is for many participants also a kind of ‘Judith Butler experience’, given the connections between asexual spaces and discourses, and other gender and sexuality ‘questioning’ communities. However, this did not apply to all participants, and some felt that coming to identify as asexual had no effect on how they thought about gender, or if it did, this was not necessarily experienced positively. In the next section, I shift to looking specifically at appearances and outward gendered expressions, and how both asexuality and abstinence could affect participants’ ‘investment’ in these.

7.3. Appearance work

There was a significant commonality in both abstinent and asexual participants’ narratives in that *not being interested in attracting a sexual partner* was seen to have an impact on choices and practices relating to appearance, and gendered appearance in particular. I begin by discussing how participants across the board talked about how this lack of desire to attract a sexual partner meant they felt relieved of much appearance-related work. In turn, some participants felt that this lack of need to impress others meant that they could be more authentically themselves, without having to fit into particular gendered moulds. However I also go on to discuss how, whilst women felt relieved of the pressures of having to ‘dress up’, their decisions to ‘dress down’ was not always their own either - indeed, for many women and AFAB participants, they felt it necessary to dress down in order to avoid male sexual attention. However, I end this section again by discussing how some participants did *not* envisage their appearance changing or being in any way connected to their asexuality, or their abstinence.

7.3.1. ‘It sort of takes pressure off me’

Participants, both asexual and abstinent, and of all genders, talked about how, because they were not interested in attracting sexual partners, they often made less of an ‘effort’ with their appearance. For example, Jason, an abstinent man, said the following:

I suppose sometimes I don’t make as much effort now, because I’m not chasing an active relationship. Or letting myself go sometimes. Because I’m not trying to look pretty for anybody... I would maybe go

out in the street noo wearing, like, ma comfies...You know, as opposed to putting on a pair of denims and that, and trying to look good because I'm going out to see people. Maybe I dress down more.

This makes sense in light of Davis' (2015: 962) contention that:

Choices about fashioning the body can also function as currency in 'sexual fields'...[that is] spaces in which patterned assemblages of bodies congregate and compete for sexual status. Within such settings, erotic actors, regardless of sexual orientation, use clothing (as well as other means of bodily adornment and interactional compartment) to manipulate their appearance in ways that rank highly on a particular field's hierarchy of desirability.

Davis recognises that not all appearance choices are so calculated as suggested by the above quote (indeed, they often occur without much thought), but his point that appearance works as an 'important means through which social actors navigate the complex intersections of their erotic desires, their sexual identities, and the demands of social institutions in their everyday lives' (p963) is a key one. However, in the case of asexual and abstinent participants, who can be seen as less interested in participating in such 'sexual fields', there is less significance accorded one's choices about appearance and clothing (although I complicate this in relation to gender, below). For his part, Jason did not necessarily see this as a good thing, as he conceptualises this in terms of 'not making an effort' and 'letting himself go' (this last phrase indicating he is failing to achieve particular appearance standards). He goes on to link this to patterns of behaviour he observes in himself that he finds self-destructive, such as staying inside for too long, and not taking proper care of his health. However, other participants (notably women and non-binary AFAB persons) talked about this in terms of being relieved of the pressure to embody a particular gendered appearance standard. Blair, an asexual non-binary (AFAB) person said:

I certainly don't feel the need to...um make myself look all feminine and pretty to...you know attract a partner or anything cos obviously I'm not interested in doing that...I dunno it sort of takes pressure off me...I don't have to act in a way that men are gonna find attractive.

Reeta, an asexual woman, also used the language of 'pressure':

Karen: Identifying as asexual, do you think that has had any impact on your feelings towards gender or your feelings towards being feminine?

Reeta: I think it's...in some ways it might relieve some of the pressure because a lot of my friends or like people in general often feel when they do want to find sexual partners uh if they also want to rebel against their norms, their gender norms, they find that hard...wanting to seem attractive also means usually—it depends on the circles you move around in—but it means that you have to meet the whole standard of attractiveness and that is usually very conforming to gender.

In the same way that asexuality was sometimes understood to de-anchor one from a strong gender identification, Blair and Reeta discuss how identifying as asexual (or more precisely, their disinterest in attracting a sexual partner) meant they felt they did not have to conform to particular gendered standards of appearance (because gender was understood in terms of sexual attraction). However, this was understood to be a particular relief for women (and those perceived as such), because gendered standards of appearances tend to be so much more numerous and stringent for women than for men, and the burden of gendered attractiveness weighs particularly heavily on women (Black and Sharma, 2001; Kwan and Trautner, 2009 - although increasingly, masculinity is also entwined with appearance norms [Ricciardelli, 2011]). This can perhaps be contrasted with Jason's narrative, who did not necessarily see appearance work - the work in making himself look 'pretty', which was said somewhat tongue-in-cheek - as particularly coercive or cumbersome.

Reeta described what she essentially saw as the psychic weight of being a woman:

The whole...expectation that you should always have in the back of your mind to make people interested in you...you're supposed to prioritise being attractive and presenting yourself; that you're supposed to care about how men you're interested in think about you.

Iris Marion Young (2005: 63) encapsulated this gendered state of being when she wrote 'I cannot see myself without seeing myself being seen'. Asexuality, or disinterest in finding a sexual partner, was not seen as magically transforming one's consciousness - for instance, Julia said: 'Occasionally I find myself wondering is this going to be sexy or is this going to be good looking for

guys...society tells me you should take this into consideration, always think how would guys like you in that', which suggests the pervasiveness of the internalisation of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). However, asexuality was seen as affording at least pockets of respite from this - a kind of psychic space in which women did not need to be constantly thinking about how they looked.⁷⁴ Reeta felt that when she realised she didn't care about people being sexually attracted to her, she began to challenge norms of femininity, embodied through everyday acts such as not shaving her body hair and not wearing a bra. Reeta drew a picture in her notebook (figure 9) which indicated this subjectivity:

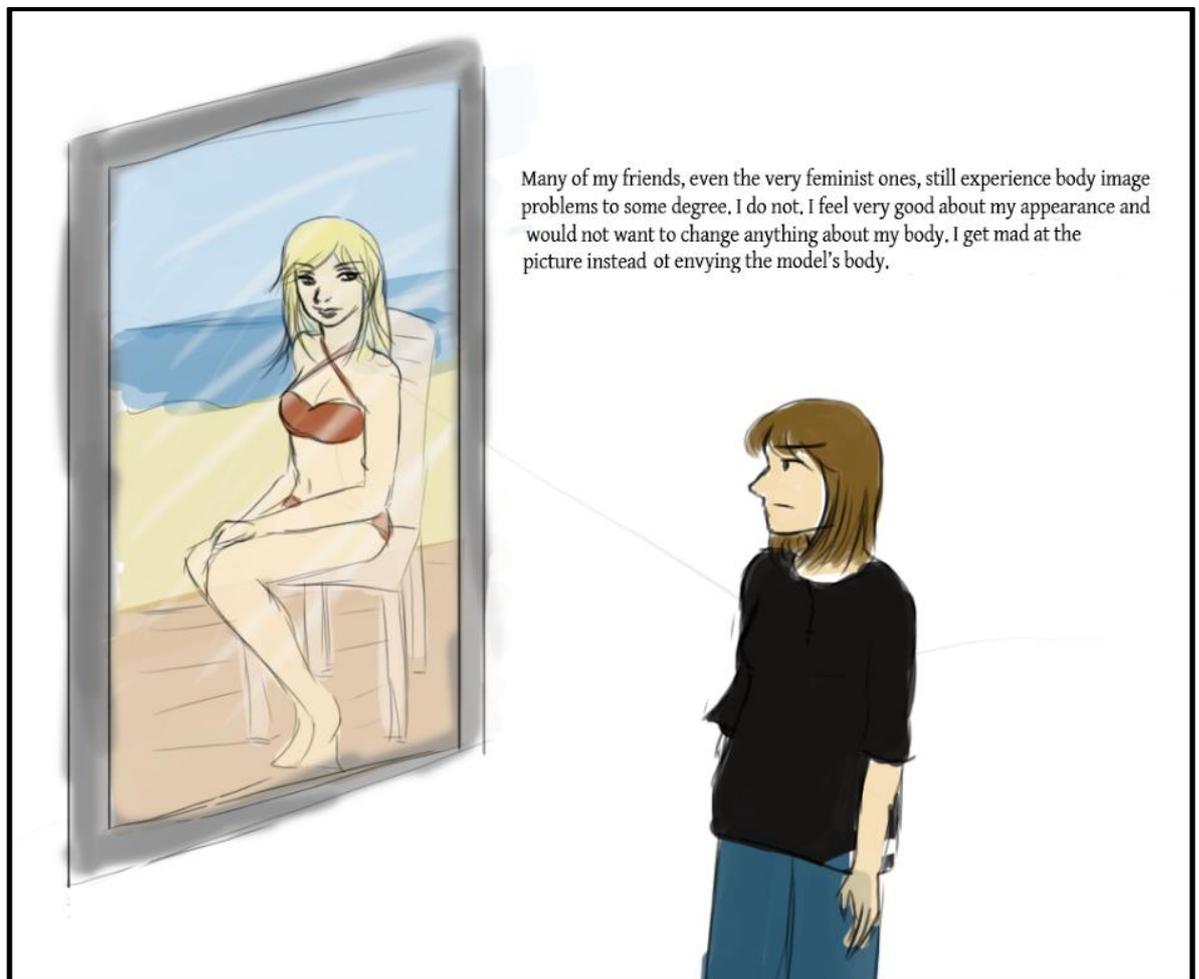


Figure 9 – Excerpt from Reeta's notebook

⁷⁴ In their study, Stuart and Donaghue (2012) found that one of the main motivating factors women had for engaging in beauty practices was related to the sense of being under scrutiny from other women. However, this narrative was largely absent from my participants' accounts (perhaps due to the fact that this was not a line of questioning I pursued).

This picture and accompanying text indicate Reeta's sense of freedom from gendered appearance norms, which she contrasts with how even her (sexual) feminist friends still struggle with these issues. The picture also subverts the idea of the gaze: rather than wanting to have the idealised feminine body depicted in the picture, Reeta is instead looking at it critically. Indeed, she is the one doing the looking. Research indicates that identifying as lesbian can have a similar effect in that women often feel enabled to reject normative and restrictive standards of femininity because they are not interested in attracting men, but also that these are replaced by new gendered appearance norms (such as not being butch enough, being too butch etc.) (Hutson, 2010; Huxley et al., 2014). This perhaps suggests that whilst not being interested in attracting men was undoubtedly part of the reason why participants such as Blair and Reeta felt this kind of relief with regards to gendered appearance⁷⁵, it was not only due to this. Rather, it does seem to be a broader issue of not being interested in attracting a partner full stop. This is compounded by the fact that Reeta and Blair were both aromantic. Not only did they not want a sexual partner, neither did they want a romantic partner. Other participants, of varying romantic orientations, also spoke about how they felt less pressure with regards to their appearance (even if they were seeking a romantic partner), but these themes were most pronounced in Blair and Reeta's accounts. This provides some empirical weight to Chasin's (2011:716) speculation that 'attractiveness standards govern gender presentations and behaviours, and that without the desire to attract a sexual partner, asexual people may have more freedom to explore their own genders' - although we might also now nuance this by suggesting that those who were not seeking romantic partners perhaps felt this freedom particularly acutely.

Not feeling compelled to fit oneself into gendered appearance 'moulds' not only helped some participants feel relieved of pressure, but some participants talked about how they could now be more authentically themselves. As Ellie (who was asexual and aromantic) put it:

I'm not driven to search out a guy or a girl who I want to settle down with, I don't have - I don't agree with make-up, I don't believe in

⁷⁵ Indeed one participant, Sam, explicitly spoke about how it was their lack of interest in men that shaped their lack of 'femininity', rather than their asexuality.

wearing make-up. I don't like what make-up represents - this concept of: 'You need to hide who you really are to make yourself appealing to someone else'... Em, I can do what I want; I can say what I want. I don't have to make these compromises.

Like with the participants discussed above, Ellie views gendered appearance practices as fundamentally about attracting a sexual or romantic partner. Because of this instrumentality (i.e. setting out to achieve a goal), Ellie views these practices (particularly those related to femininity) as artificial, and about masking who you truly are. By contrast, Ellie felt that because she wasn't involved in this dating game, she could fully be herself. This applied to her appearance in that she didn't feel she needed to or wanted to partake of feminine beauty practices, but was also broader than this, in that she felt she could act and speak according to her own will, since she was not risking losing the approval or favour of a potential partner. Like Reeta above, Blair also spoke about how even their feminist friends who were (hetero)sexual were not immune to these pressures:

I know quite a few people like, are quite feminist and complain about men a lot and don't want to have to pander to them but at the same time are attracted to men and therefore want men to like them and sort of have this tension going on.

Blair's feminist friends find themselves having to work out how much of themselves they can compromise in order to be attractive enough for men to like them. In contrast, Blair, who not only felt freedom with regards to their appearance, also spoke about how not wanting to find a partner meant that they did not have to censor themselves in any way: '...whereas I can just slag off men as much as I want to [laughs]'.

However, this sentiment of freedom and authenticity was not only limited to asexual and aromantic women and non-binary (AFAB) persons. Kartik, who was an abstinent gay man (and did not envisage himself ever seeking a partner) talked about how embracing abstinence: 'creates a whole new space where you don't have to please anyone'. He initially spoke about this in terms of appearance, but went on to say that he had found a new sense of self-worth 'which is independent of other people and their opinions'. This was because: 'You kind of remove yourself from the game of this whole sex and sexuality. So

you're standing outside of the game of sex and sexuality and, as a result of this removal, you're not chained'. He thus experienced his abstinence as a kind of unshackling from norms and expectations of how he should look and act, which he sees as driven by 'the game' of sex. Thus, whilst the freedom granted by not having to attract a sexual partner was felt particularly keenly for women, it was not limited to women.

7.3.2. 'They thought that I was sexually available just because I was wearing a dress'

However, for women and non-binary (AFAB) persons, there was a sense in which one kind of appearance work was replaced by another. Whilst participants talked about being freed from the need to look particularly feminine and attractive, they were also talked about how they felt compelled not to look particularly feminine and attractive in order to more safely navigate relationships with men. Pooja (an abstinent woman) talks about how her clothing choices are influenced by the fact that she's not concerned about looking good for others, it is also the case that 'dressing down' (by which she means appearing less 'feminine') is also often necessary for her in order to avoid unwanted sexual attention from men:

I get the creepiest and the dirtiest looks, honestly, just walking down Sauchiehall Street. And that has a big effect, like, I could have worn a skirt today, before I came here, but I thought: D'you know what? Just some of the guys, and some of the things they say, when I walk by - you know, when I'm all dressed up - I find it quite, quite taken aback. And it definitely puts me off wanting to dress up. Cause I'd rather they call me 'dyke' than say, you know: 'Come here honey, come give me a kiss'. Then I can just brush off, but you can't brush off somebody physically following you up Sauchiehall Street, you know... So I definitely prefer it, you know? You gotta remember that if I go out in my trackies - I can just walk invisible, you know, nobody will see me.

Pooja felt pressure to dress in more gender neutral ways simply in order to walk down the street without experiencing sexual harassment. Wearing a tracksuit allowed her some invisibility, and to some extent fly under the radar of men. If she was noticed, it was when men commented on her sexual undesirability because of her 'un-feminine' dress, but this was something that was much less threatening for Pooja. Many asexual women and non-binary (AFAB) persons related extremely similar stories. For example Cassandra:

Just going around the city with something that showed a centimetre of cleavage...you'd get unwanted attention. And that really also made me like reject all kinds of feminine clothing especially...and make-up. Actually still today I don't really wear any because I don't want people to look at me, I don't want men to see me, because I'm really uncomfortable. I've had problems with sexual harassment...Some people are just like, so you're wearing a skirt so basically you want me to put my hands on your legs and I'm like, no... they thought that I was sexually available just because I was wearing a dress.

Indeed, Cassandra talked about how she actively and purposely adopted male mannerisms in an attempt to stop people (men) from perceiving her as sexually available:

I had people thinking I was male and I ran with it, cos I was more comfortable, because if they perceived me as male then I wouldn't have the problems associated with being female and they wouldn't be interested in me, they wouldn't make moves on me.

Pippa also talked about how being abstinent and asexual meant she wore 'quite neutral clothes partly as a signal that I'm not interested', since:

When I do get someone chatting me up, it tends to be when I'm wearing feminine clothes...I found I got unwanted attention while in them. There was an attitude of 'if you didn't want to meet someone why are you dressed like that' so I stopped wearing them...If I wasn't abstinent and asexual I probably would have more days when I wore 'girly' clothes.

It wasn't necessarily the case that Pippa disliked wearing 'feminine' or 'girly' clothes, but that not wearing them became a strategy for her to navigate the gendered social world, and in particular, the assumption of women's sexual availability. Indeed other participants did talk about how they enjoyed wearing high-heels or dresses or make-up, but the cost of wearing them was too great ('men think its an invitation to you know...you're advertising yourself in a way' - Gillian). These narratives show how not looking 'attractive' was thus not always experienced as a freedom, but as an unfortunate necessity in a world structured by gender inequality.

Of course, having to be mindful of what one's appearance communicates is by no means an experience unique to asexual or abstinent women (Huey and Bernt, 2008; Montemurro and Gillen, 2013). In a society where rape culture

proliferates, all too often it is seen as a woman's responsibility to modulate the way she looks in order to avoid unwanted sexual attention, up to and including rape. Thus, in a lot of ways, the experiences communicated by the above participants are perhaps more to do with their gender rather than their asexuality or abstinence. However, whilst acknowledging this themselves, some participants felt that being asexual meant they were much more averse to being seen as sexual, and possibly being approached in 'that way'. For example, Reeta wrote in her notebook: 'especially as being asexual, I'm VERY uncomfortable with any sort of objectification because that is so far removed from what I want to be'. Cassandra also talked about how she was perhaps even more uncomfortable than many women about being seen as sexually available because of the kind of relationships she wanted to forge: 'I wanted people to feel connection with me not on a physical level but on different levels... I don't you know want people to find me cute and attractive, so I never wore one [a dress]'. And Sam also talks about how they dressed in a particular way so that people would not sexualise them, because as a sex-averse person, this was experienced as particularly distressing:

I was very very disgusted with the idea of anybody being attracted to me so it was basically like being a nun and wanting nothing to be visible so I was - I felt like seriously angry that no matter what I did other people could sexualise me in their heads.

The gendered nature of the above accounts is illustrated by contrasting them with that of Jeffrey, an asexual man. Jeffrey did feel that his asexuality did affect his clothing choices in that he wanted to hide parts of his body that he saw as particularly sexualised. He wrote the following in his notebook:

In connection with being asexual, there are a couple of things I make a point of doing/not doing:

*-I only wear coats or jackets that are long enough to cover up that slight male 'bulge' of mine in the trouser area. It may not be much, but I'm aware of it and I don't want women to see it: I AM NOT A SEX OBJECT**

-Similarly, if I'm not wearing a coat, I always wear my shirt over my trousers - not tucked in.

*[footnote]*As if!*

The inclusion of the asterixed ‘as if!’ works to communicate how ridiculous Jeffrey finds the idea of him being perceived as a sex object by women. As with all male participants, and those who were non-binary (AMAB), Jeffrey did not talk about experiencing sexual objectification in the way that Cassandra, Pooja, Sam, Gillian, Reeta, Pippa etc. did. As someone afforded the social privileges of maleness, Jeffrey can make a joke about being sexually objectified by women precisely because he is not sexually objectified by women (and because the male body is not sexualised in the way that female bodies are). This goes some way towards showing the different stakes involved in negotiating one’s gendered appearance. However, it also shows that for asexual men, there is still a concern with, and a discomfort involved in, coming across as ‘sexual’ - although perhaps less because of what it communicates to others, and more because it does not align with Jeffrey’s subjectivity as asexual.

However, as with the discussion of above where Ellie and Broadley did not feel that identifying as asexual caused them to rethink or reconsider gender in any way, it is important to note that not all participants felt that their asexuality or abstinence had any kind of bearing on how they dressed or on decisions made about their appearance. When I asked Rami, an asexual woman, if she felt her asexuality had any impact on how she dressed, she said: ‘I don’t think so...I just like to dress smart. No it doesn’t affect this, no’. Similarly, Travis and Christopher, both abstinent men, said they would dress the same way regardless of whether or not they were abstinent or not, and did not envisage any kind of connection between their appearance and their abstinence (‘just what I like to wear...I mean, whether or not it would make me more or less sexually appealing has rarely ever passed my mind’ - Travis). However, the lack of thought Travis puts into what his appearance communicates perhaps reaffirms much of what I argued above, in that his gender affords him the privilege of not having to worry about such things - that is, worry about being either too sexually appealing, or not being sexually appealing enough.

In this section, I have discussed the ways in which participants felt their asexuality or abstinence was connected (or not) to the choices and efforts they made regarding their appearance. For most of the asexual and abstinent women and non-binary (AFAB) persons, they conceptualised their appearance in terms of

‘attracting’ a sexual partner, and because they were not interested in doing so, they felt relieved of the pressure of cultivating how they looked (in terms of ‘dressing up’ or ‘looking good’). This was often linked to a feeling of being able to be more authentically oneself, including a freedom to be less constrained by gender norms. However, I also discussed that for many of the asexual and abstinent women and non-binary (AFAB) participants, they were never *fully* relieved from the pressure of cultivating their appearance, because as women/people read as women, appearance work was still necessary to ‘repulse’ unwanted sexual advances. ‘Dressing down’ or ‘de-feminising’ thus became another form of required labour.

Whilst some of the men in my sample may have felt free from the pressure of having to make themselves look appealing to others, none of the men felt similar pressure to make themselves *unappealing* in order to simply go about their day. When Jeffrey, an asexual man, spoke of covering himself, this seemed to be more about his own bodily discomfort, and less about the consequences of *not* doing so. I further explore this ‘bodily’ dimension in the proceeding section.

7.4. Fleshy Bodies

We have seen how asexual could have an impact on participants’ gendered subjectivities, and how being asexual or abstinent could have an impact on one’s appearance. In this section, I move beyond appearance to discuss how participants talked about existing in their own fleshy, visceral bodies, and the gendered and sexual dimensions of these experiences. I begin by examining how some participants felt that their asexuality could impact how it *felt* to be in a particular body, and how it was envisaged as causing gendered bodily discomfort. I then discuss the ‘inverse’ of this, where some participants talked about how the phenomenological experience of existing in a particular body (particularly a body one was unhappy with) could lead to feeling asexual, or deciding upon abstinence.

7.4.1. 'The Beast Within'

Some participants talked vividly about the kinds of embodied gendered discomfort that being asexual could invoke. In Oran's case, they expressed it in the following drawing:



Figure 10 – Excerpt from Oran's notebook

In this, Oran is describing what it felt like to be an asexual teenage boy having physiological sexual feelings.⁷⁶ They liken it to the fairground game of 'whack-a-mole' where sexual impulses keep arising in their body, and it is an increasingly frenzied race to keep them down. As an asexual person, Oran did not experience a sense of new horizons being opened through these feelings, but rather it was something profoundly distressing, and at odds with their sense of themselves as a person. Oran did not feel sexually attracted to others, nor did they want to be sexually active, so these physiological reactions happening in their body was something to be 'dealt with' and carefully managed.

Jeffrey also described how his asexuality had a significant impact on how his gendered body is experienced. He was profoundly uncomfortable with and often disgusted by some of his body's responses, such as nocturnal emissions, sexual dreams, and spontaneous erections. This prompted him to disassociate his 'real' self (his intellect) with these baser bodily functions, which he anthropomorphised into something he called 'The Beast Within'. He wrote about this extensively in his notebook:

⁷⁶ Asexuality does not mean one is not capable of sexual responses to particular stimuli. Asexual people can and do become sexually aroused (Brotto and Yule, 2011). However, sexual arousal is not the same thing as feeling sexual attraction towards other people, or desiring sexual relationships with others.

I am made aware of the 'beast' that, whether I like it or not, is there, deep down inside of me...Just because I - and I am my intellect and my higher, finer emotions - find the very idea of sex repellent, that doesn't mean that my body is incapable of functioning as a male body should do, and it doesn't mean that...well 'it' - the beast: my id? 'It' has a mind of its own. This is how I'm made aware of and feel sexuality in my body, and I don't like it one bit. I dissociate myself from - deny - the beast within.

His embodied everyday experience was one where he struggled to retain control over 'The Beast Within', and he has had to adapt his bodily practice to this end:

This disconnect within me: it's kind of like when Dr Morbius in the film Forbidden Planet (sci-fi again) plugs himself into an alien 'brain boost' machine and, inadvertently, causes his id to become detached from his mind and it - containing all his subconscious anger and jealousy - turns into a murderous invisible monster, lashing out at those who it perceives to be its enemies...My monster from the id - my primal beast within - goes rampaging about in its own idiosyncratic way, in the world of my dreams, causing havoc in the 'pyjama area'. ...Or at least it used to. I've pretty much got it under control nowadays by no longer sleeping in a bed. If I sleep in a bed, if I get all comfortable and snug...that's when The Beast strikes. So I sleep propped up in a chair. My sleep is fitful, and that probably contributes to my general irritability, but it's a price worth paying, I think.

As an asexual person, Jeffrey experienced his gendered body as often betraying him, if he did not take the requisite steps (such as changing how he slept) to keep it under control. But this was not something that was restricted to asexual men or asexual non-binary (AMAB) people. In their notebook, Blair also talked about how asexuality affected how they felt about their gendered body:

And most of the time I don't really think about my breasts but sometimes I'm like, these are weird? What's the point of them? I'm glad I have small breasts, and I like wearing a sports bra partly because it's comfy and partly because it makes them even flatter. I don't know if this is because breasts are soooo sexualised and I'm not interested in looking sexy so they're...not really doing anything for me.

Blair's asexuality means they are not interested in being or looking sexual, and because breasts are heavily sexualised in our culture, Blair experiences alienation from their own body ('sometimes I'm like, these are weird?'). Blair's narrative in particular shows how cultural meanings of bodies interpellate onto

actual bodies to affect our embodiment - there is nothing inherently sexual about breasts, but because our primary association of breasts is with sexuality, Blair experiences their breasts as not fully part of themselves. Blair also muses as to whether their non-binary identity was formed in response to this experience of embodiment. After writing about their thoughts about claiming non-binary as an identity, Blair goes on to ask if this is 'Related to the sexualisation of women at all? Who knows. Like, escaping that by not being a woman, I mean'.

Blair finds it difficult to be in a woman's body because of how women's bodies are sexualised, and this is not what they want as an asexual person. Therefore, Blair wonders if their motivation for coming to think of themselves as non-binary might be related to this sexualisation of women's bodies. This adds an explicitly embodied element to the discussion of how asexuality might lead some participants to a non-binary gendered subjectivity: not only is it a cognitive, reflexive process, but for some participants, it is also a process that is intimately tied in to the gendered and sexual(ised) body.

Interestingly, none of the abstinent participants discussed the same levels of discomfort with regards to their bodies, or sexual responses. Sexual responses did occur, and these were often inconvenient given participants' desire to maintain their abstinence, but they were generally seen as something that could be managed (recall, for example, in Chapter Six where abstinent men discussed the ease with which they could manage their desires).⁷⁷ Alora, an abstinent woman, also spoke with humour about how 'you don't start what you can't finish', which was her strategy for dealing with her sexual desires in a previous relationship (i.e. avoiding any kind of temptation that may lead to what Alora considered to be sex). This difference between asexual and abstinent participants may have been related to how sexual bodily responses and desires fitted (or didn't fit) into participants' subjective sense of self: for asexual participants, sexual responses were incongruent not only with their identity as asexual, but with parallel embodied feelings in which they were not interested in sex, and did not want to have sex with anyone. Abstinent participants, in

⁷⁷ It is interesting to compare these with Jeffrey's account, who spoke much more of the difficulties of 'controlling' his body and its responses.

contrast, perhaps understood their sexual responses as part of their sexuality, but that they were just choosing not to act on these responses.

7.4.2. 'I don't wanna have sex because I'd be having sex in this body'

Other participants felt that it was their feelings of discomfort with their gendered embodiment that lead to their asexuality, or their disinterest in having sex. Megan and Sam, both asexual, talked about how they experienced gender dysphoria which caused profound bodily distress. Gender dysphoria refers to feeling acute discomfort or distress in one's body because of the absence or presence of particular gendered bodily markers (such as breasts, facial hair etc.); wearing particular gendered clothes; having to adopt particular gendered roles; or being 'read' as a particular gender, which does not fit one's gendered subjectivity. Many transgender people experience gender dysphoria (although many do not), but gender dysphoria can also be experienced by those who are not transgender. For Megan and Sam, feeling sexual and having sex were fundamentally *bodily* experiences, and so, as Sam put it: 'I don't wanna have sex because I would be having sex in this body'. Similarly, Megan said:

But like also because I am trans that's kind of something that plays into it. It's like how much of this is just that I don't feel comfortable with myself or my body... and so it's kind of, like that's a pretty important factor in, I guess, engaging in sex, and it's like I wouldn't really want to engage in sex with, I guess, parts that aren't very comfortable...Like to what extent my dysphoria is just, you know, blocking any interest in it.

In Doorduyn and van Berlo's (2014) research on trans people's experience of sexuality, they also found that their participants, whilst not identifying as asexual, nevertheless talked about how the bodily 'incongruence' they felt sometimes caused 'irritation, aversion, or disgust' with regards to sex. Megan and Sam's accounts show us how sexual feelings and subjectivity are not something separate from the body, formed elsewhere, but are closely linked to one's embodied (and gendered) experience. We can see this too in Isabella's narrative:

I sometimes wonder if I felt attractive (or was one of those annoyingly naturally gorgeous people) whether I would feel feminine, sexy and feel sexual desire. ..I think my lack of sexual desire is directly linked to me being so disappointed in and ashamed of who I am. I can't remember ever not hating myself, and how can I expect other people to like me if I don't like myself... Body dysmorphic disorder has been mentioned as a cause of my feelings - I see a hideous monster in the mirror.

Although Isabella is not struggling with her gender *identity* in the way that Megan and Sam are, her bodily discomfort still has gendered aspects since she experiences *not feeling attractive* as *not feeling feminine*. Isabella directly connects her feelings about her body to her not feeling any sexual desire. Implicit in Isabella's account is that women's sexuality is dependent on being sufficiently attractive to others (as discussed in the Masculinity and Femininity chapter), rather than as a subjective feeling in its own right; and so because Isabella feels she is not attractive, this impacts on how she experiences her sexuality.

Adeline also felt her gendered embodiment was the reason why she experienced no sexual interest, although in ways different to Megan, Sam, and Isabella. At the time of the interview, Adeline was recovering from anorexia. She felt that her 'sex drive was reduced massively by becoming anorexic'. In turn, she sees her anorexia as an inherently gendered bodily response to hetero-patriarchy. Adeline wanted to de-feminise her body by becoming extremely thin in order to protect herself from sexual predation, but concurrently, there was also a desire to be more attractive to men through having the ideal thin body, as encapsulated in this page from her notebook:

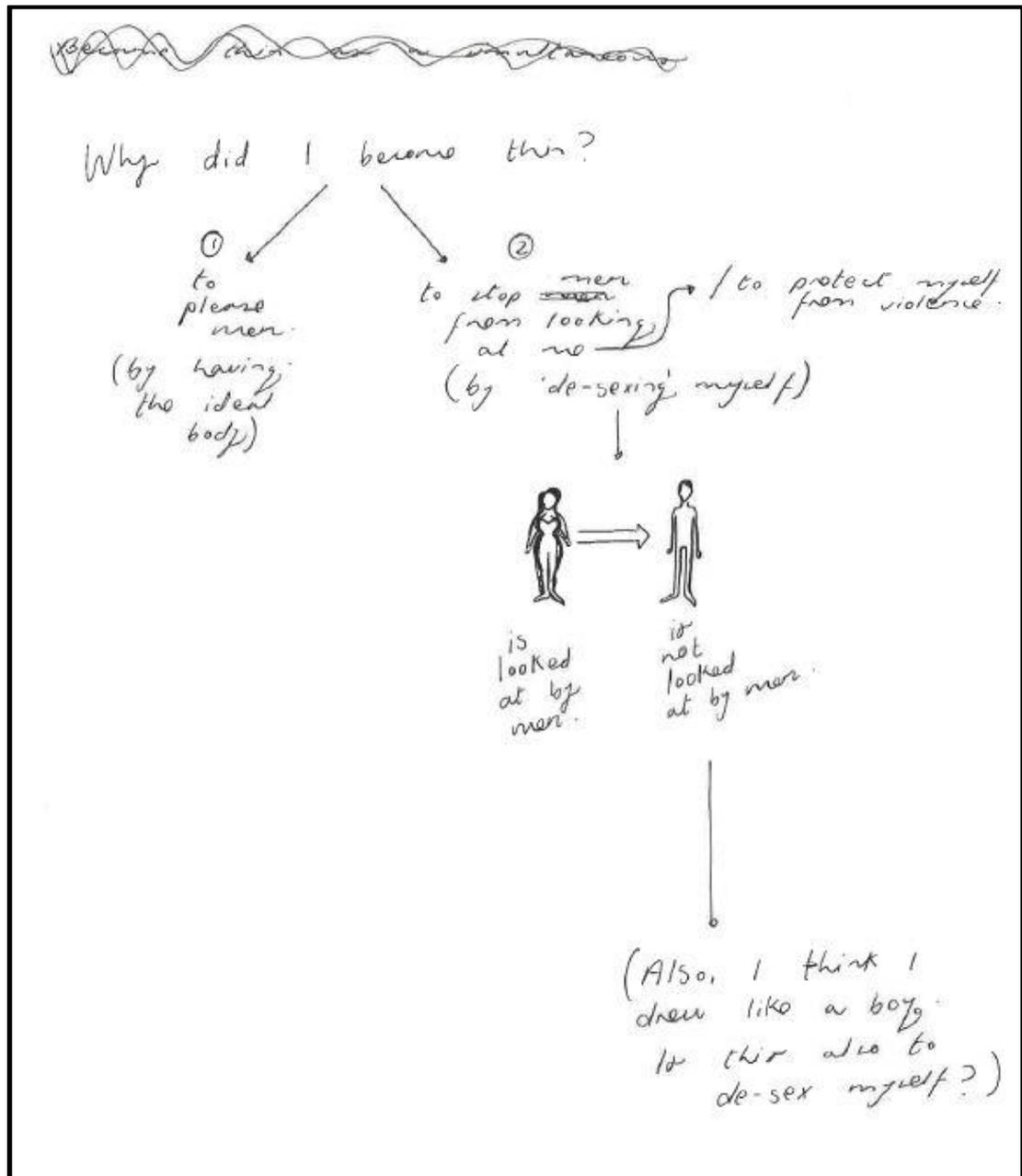


Figure 11 – Excerpt from Adeline's notebook

The text reads: Why did I become thin? 1. To please men (by having the ideal body). 2. To stop men from looking at me / to protect myself from violence (by de-sexing myself). [Beneath first figure] is looked at by men. [Beneath second figure] is not looked at by men. (Also I think I dress like a boy. Is this also to de-sex myself?)

This page illustrates the challenges women face under patriarchy: under constant pressure to submit to the male gaze (since this is often the only way women can gain validation), but this same gender system is also one of violence that women must constantly navigate. What initially seems like a contradiction in terms (becoming thin to attract men *and* to repel men) becomes understandable when we think about these structural relations of hetero-

patriarchy. Adeline sees these relations (where she desires to be both seen and not seen) as precipitating her anorexia which was a psychological and physiological experience that brought about her sexual disinterest. Thus, whilst Adeline's embodied experience caused her sexual disinterest (as in Megan, Sam and Isabella, above), this embodiment (and sexual disinterest) was also inextricable from the broader social structure - in this case, from gendered relations under hetero-patriarchy.

7.4. Motivations

The above sections explored how asexuality and abstinence could have an effect on gendered subjectivity, on appearance, and on feelings about the body (although at parts I also discussed how gender was seen to precipitate certain asexual and abstinent subjectivities). In this section, I discuss abstinent women's motivations for becoming abstinent. I pay special attention to this because of the fact that for abstinent women, their reasons for becoming abstinent, and how they conceptualised abstinence, was in many ways inextricable from gender (in a way that was not the case for abstinent men). As with Adeline, above, their abstinence could only be understood with reference to gendered relations under hetero-patriarchy. I discuss how abstinent women experienced and conceptualised sex with men under current societal conditions to be dangerous and fraught with unequal power relations. Abstinence was seen as a response to this, but also, for some participants, abstinence was also viewed in terms of gendered independence (but this was not the same as saying that it was a *political* position).

7.4.1. 'Women are just a vessel for men'

All of the abstinent women in my study talked about how the main driver of their abstinence was the fact that having sex with men felt like it would be too much of a risk. However, rather than the careful cost-benefits analysis undertaken by Christopher (see Masculinity and Femininity chapter), the

abstinent women tended to base their decision on an embodied feeling that having sex would be tantamount to a loss of self. Specifically, it was not that sex was inherently unsafe for women, but under current gendered arrangements with such marked power disparities, the women felt they would be losing something of themselves. Dona said the following:

Because, for me, it feels like this, like, you're 'giving in'...I feel like I'd be giving away a big part of me...For some females, sexually, it's a bigger thing than it is for males. So you are, sort of, like giving in, I don't know, your body and your personal freedom, your personal space and sharing that with someone; whereas with men, I don't think they see it that way. I don't think they think of it that way.

In this context, Dona saw her decision not to have sex as 'about protecting myself more than anything else'. Alora also felt that having sex with a man, at least outside of marriage, would have a deleterious effect on her as a woman. She had come to this judgement after witnessing the experiences of her mother's female friends when she was a child:

I noticed even the very strong ones, when it comes to relationships, they lose it totally! One minute someone is all strong and mighty and the next minute she's like a weakling you know, crying and stuff, and somehow, I started thinking 'OK the problem is guys' [laughs] so from then I just made up my mind, OK, no guy is going to get me all washed up.

But also now as an adult woman herself:

There are two things I've noticed about friends who are sexually active. It's...they get very attached to the man, and if, for any reason, anything happens, I noticed those who are sexually active, who have been sleeping with him, they usually feel more broken than those who have never slept with a man. And those who do not, walk out unscathed... you know the guys do feel that the sex thing gives them control over you.

Alora specifically spoke of sexual relations as a site where power was enacted between men and women. In Alora's experience, men used sex as a way of controlling women, and many of the women she knew were often left hurt and vulnerable after sexual encounters with men - they become 'weaklings' and 'broken'. Alora has witnessed strong women lose themselves through sexual relationships with men, and she does not want to have the same experience.

Alora would only consider sex in the context of marriage, because she felt that would give her some level of protection since her and her hypothetical future husband would be committed to each other through the vows they had made.⁷⁸ Alora's views on marriage was informed by her Christian faith, but she told me she didn't necessarily see sex outside of marriage as a problem - it was more the damaging effect it could have on women that motivated her abstinence, rather than her religious views. Alora and Dona's accounts also link in with what asexual participants said about how their asexuality allowed them to retain their authentic selves, without having to fit in to a gendered mould. For Alora and Dona, sex involves some kind of loss of self, some kind of sacrifice.

Ouka said something similar to Alora:

Most men use sexuality to possess and dominate their partner. This is a very crucial point and as long as I can remember I've always noticed that they behave differently before the first time they have sex with you and after. This had always disappointed me. They are not the same after they were finally able to reach their goal: have sex with you.

Ouka, like Alora, sees heterosexual relationships as sites of possession and domination on the part of men. Ouka had experienced this herself in the past - her male partners had acted in disingenuous ways in order to have sex with Ouka, but once Ouka was no longer something to be 'conquered', their manner changed, and they became less interested in having a relationship with her. As such, Ouka decided that she no longer wanted to participate in sex under these circumstances. Ouka felt sex should be something sacred and meditative, but she was aware that few people shared her view on this, and so had 'opted out' in order to protect herself from these kind of situations. Yvette also felt very strongly about the current state of sexual relations:

I hate how a man can have sex with a woman without feeling anything for them and being able to walk away after sharing something like that. It makes me feel sick inside just to think about it. I feel like I have to protect myself from that. I feel very guarded. I

⁷⁸ Whilst Alora envisaged herself as probably having sex in the future, the other abstinent women were uncertain if they ever would have sex (again) or, in the case of Yvette, were certain that they would *not*. Those that were uncertain talked hypothetically about how they might have sex if they ever found a partner they felt comfortable with, but they were also largely pessimistic about the possibility of this ever occurring.

just cannot imagine a situation where a man would love me enough to stay with me without there being any sex involved.... I feel like women are completely disposable to men. I feel like I don't want to ever give any the opportunity to hurt me. I just feel like sex and love are treated as such separate things by our generation. I sometimes feel like women are just a vessel for men. Like it doesn't even matter what is below the surface. It makes me feel empty...Men know that if they say [I love you] to a woman they can win her trust - I still believe it is only ever truly about the physical aspect for men...they are willing to lie and manipulate to pursue women who they know feel differently and then abandon them whenever they feel like it.

Like the other abstinent women in the study, Yvette's response to this situation was to no longer be sexually active with men. Pooja also spoke about how men were not interested in who she was as a person, or if they were interested, this was an interest they feigned in order to have sex with her ('Guys only want sex. They don't really care about my jokes'). Pooja spoke powerfully to the phenomenological gendered experience of always being 'on guard': 'you've grown up always having to watch out for men, you always think of the worst case scenario so it's best to be prepared'. Being prepared, for Pooja, meant an inclination towards distrust and cynicism whenever a man seemed interested in her. These accounts of heterosexual relationships are far from Giddens' (1992) vision of the 'pure relationship', characterised by democratisation and gender equality. Indeed, it was the persistence of deep gender inequalities amongst men and women with regards to relationships that led these women to become abstinent. Additionally, we have also already seen how living under hetero-patriarchy had shaped Adeline's embodied gender and sexual subjectivity - in an effort to feel safe, she had changed her body in particular ways, which caused her to feel less sexual desire, but which was also brought about by not wanting to have sex because she felt vulnerable and unsafe. As MacKinnon (1989) argued, it was indeed the case that (hetero)sexuality was experienced as a site of oppression for these women, and so abstinence was seen as the solution. In previous decades, political lesbianism might have been an alternative space to which these women gravitated (in that it represents a refusal of male sexual power rather than an innate attraction towards other women), but it is a discourse that has largely dropped out of sight, partially because it has been superseded by an understanding of lesbianism as a sexual orientation rather than as a form of political identification. The abstinent women in my study saw themselves as heterosexual (and in addition, did not see their refusal as

necessarily political, as I will discuss below) and so abstinence was the space that was available for them.

It is important to pause here and note that the abstinent women who expressed these views often had little in common demographically. Pooja and Adeline were in their early 20s; Dona, Alora and Yvette were all in their early 30s; whilst Ouka was in her early 50s. Their occupations ranged from student to professional to service worker to blue-collar worker to artist. They constituted both immigrants and those who had lived in the UK their whole lives, and were of various ethnicities. Some had privileged upbringings, others had difficult and sometimes traumatic experiences growing up. Some had been sexually active in the past, others had not. They also lived in various parts of the UK. But the similarity of their accounts struck me in a profound way. This is not to dispute that intersections of race, class, and age affect the experience of womanhood under hetero-patriarchy, or that gender (or more specifically, being a woman) should be taken to be the ‘master category’, but in these accounts, there seemed to be a shared experience of danger and potential loss, and of male domination when it came to heterosexual relations, and these experiences had been so significant as to bring about their abstinence. Their abstinence could in no way be understood without also understanding the conditions under which they were expected to be involved in sexual relations. Considering Vance’s (1984) conceptualisation of sexuality as a site of both pleasure and danger for women, in the cases of these participants, sexuality was, at the time of the interview, predominantly characterised as danger. It seemed to be the case that ‘the dangers of sexuality...make the pleasures pale in comparison’ (Vance, 1984: 1).

7.4.2. ‘Now I have my power back’

The above section highlighted how the abstinent women in my research felt that heterosexuality under current gendered relations was a site of domination, and a place where harm could come to women.⁷⁹ It was for this reason that they decided against having sex (some for the time being, some more permanently).

⁷⁹ None of these participants discussed homosexuality/bisexuality/relationships with women, and how these might compare to relationships with men, but this is possibly because all of the abstinent women identified as heterosexual, or as attracted to men.

However, some of them went further than this and articulated their abstinence as a way of retaining their gendered independence, or of retaining their power. For Alora, abstinence was practised as a kind of defiance: ‘it was just me wanting to be in control of myself, and not wanting any man to dictate how I feel’. The same sentiment was discernible in Ouka’s account:

Now I have my power back, even if men still try to force me. I have my power back because I refuse to have sex... I am proud of my choice because I don't want to feel like a bitch or a female dog anymore. This is how I felt before. And very powerless.

And Yvette too specifically invoked the language of resisting power and control: ‘[I’m abstinent because] I don’t want to give anyone any power or control over me’. It is illustrative to compare how ‘control’ arises in the narratives of abstinent men and women. There is a sense that for both groups, abstinence involves control. However the contexts for each are very different. As we saw in Chapter Six, abstinent men spoke of how being abstinent was easy for them because they had sufficient control over themselves; abstinence was seen as an exercise in self-control. In contrast, abstinent women talked about abstinence as allowing them to resist the control *others* had over them, and instead regain control ‘for themselves’. The control was not about managing bodily desires or urges, but about asserting autonomy with regards to who has *access* to their body, and to their emotions. The narratives of abstinent women was not about how *easy* or how *hard* it was to be abstinent (in some ways this was irrelevant), but rather about the social context in which their abstinence felt *necessary*. Granted, one abstinent man (Christopher) felt abstinence was necessary for him due to the possibility of false rape allegations (and what he saw as a criminal justice system skewed towards women), and so this was also about making himself less vulnerable, but overall, this was not a theme that arose in the accounts of abstinent men.

These accounts of abstinent women have direct parallels with many historical celibacy movements discussed in Chapter Three, in which abstinence was practised by some women as a way of carving out a space of independence and autonomy in a male-dominated society. Rather than abstinence as a form of control over women, these participants saw abstinence as a way of fighting against extraneous control. Indeed, Abbott’s (2001: 251) discussion of 19th

century middle-class spinsters for whom ‘sexual intercourse and marriage was seen as a surrender of rights and personal independence’ still applies to the narratives of the abstinent women in my research, in the 21st century. However, unlike with many of the celibacy movements discussed in Chapter Three wherein celibacy/abstinence/spinsterhood/virginity was envisaged as a conscious political decision, this was not necessarily the case for my participants. Their abstinence was brought about because of their experiences that they have had under hetero-patriarchy - an experience of loss, danger and humiliation. And while they were critical of gendered relations between men and women, and could see these relations as a result of an inequitable social system, in many senses their abstinence was still individualised. It was in many ways an ad-hoc and reactive decision, chosen to afford them a feeling of safety rather than to make a political statement. Indeed, except from Adeline, there were no explicit references to feminism in any of the other abstinent women’s narratives. While we could argue - like Cline in Chapter Three - that women’s abstinence, regardless of motivations, is always (however inadvertently) a political act, for the participants in this study, abstinence was more an issue of forging a livable life for themselves, rather than a radical feminist act per se. Cohen and Taylor (1992: 33) discuss how as sociologists they were keen to interpret the criminal activities of the prisoners they spoke to as rebellions against capitalism, yet ‘they [the prisoners] regarded [these activities] more as ways of making out in the world rather than radical techniques for confronting it’. The same might be said for the abstinent women in my research - while it is true that their abstinence cannot be understood out with the gendered scaffolding of hetero-patriarchy, their abstinence was for them primarily ‘a way of making out in the world’ as women.

7.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored abstinence, asexuality, and gender at the levels of subjectivity and embodiment. Following Jackson (2006), I explored how the three other dimensions of the social (structures, meanings, and interactions) are woven together in participants’ sense of themselves as gendered (or not, as the case may be) beings.

I examined four different aspects that arose in participants' accounts. First, I discussed how asexuality was understood to bring about particular gendered subjectivities. For some participants, gender was understood to be about sexual attraction, and so in not experiencing sexual attraction, or being interested in sexually attracting others, gender felt irrelevant. This led many to a non-binary identity. But non-binary identification was also facilitated by the fact that coming to identify as asexual often meant exposure to a discursive space in which gender and sexuality in all aspects were being questioned. However, whilst the majority of participants did feel that their asexuality affected their gendered subjectivity, this was not the case for all participants.

Second, I went on to explore how participants talked about both asexuality and abstinence affecting their appearance, and in particular, the 'appearance work' they undertook. Most participants felt that not looking for a sexual partner meant that they could put less 'effort' into their appearance - but this was something that was also significantly gendered. Women and non-binary (AFAB) participants talked about they felt relieved of the pressure of feminine bodily and aesthetic labour, both practically, and psychologically as they felt liberated from the burden of 'seeing myself being seen'. Due to not having to 'attract' other people, participants also felt they could be more authentically themselves, without artifice or pretence (which was how some participants viewed gendered practices). However, I also went on to discuss how not making an effort also felt like a necessity for some women and non-binary (AFAB) people, in order to avoid male sexual attention. This was something asexual people saw as particularly important because their asexuality meant they were not at all interested in engaging with people sexually.

Third, I moved beyond appearance to talk more explicitly about embodiment, and how sexual and gender subjectivity existed in real fleshy bodies. I discussed how a phenomenological sense of oneself as asexual could clash with 'sexual' aspects or responses of the body, causing a kind of gendered discomfort. I noted that this was not something present in the accounts of abstinent participants, who may have seen their bodily responses annoying in that they could challenge their commitment to abstinence, but did not experience them as distressing or alien. I then went on to discuss how discomfort with the gendered body (which

in some cases was linked to broader structures of hetero-patriarchy) was imagined by some participants as precipitating or even causing their lack of sexual interest, leading sometimes to an asexual identity.

Fourth, I discussed abstinent women's motivations for becoming abstinent. I discussed how for them, abstinence was in many ways fundamentally about gender - or rather, the particular configurations of gender under hetero-patriarchy. All of the abstinent women related stories of loss, of humiliation, of degradation, in their sexual relations and encounters with men, and so it was for this reason that they had become abstinent. For some, abstinence felt like a reclamation of personal power and independence. However, I ended by cautioning against interpreting this as necessarily political, since for participants, it was more a strategy for helping them 'get by'.

This chapter has shown the ways in which gender and sexuality (or in this case, gender, asexuality and abstinence) intersected on the subjective level. Meanings of sex, sexuality, and gender, their institutional organisation, and sexual and gendered relations with others all came together to affect how participants understood themselves, how they presented themselves to the world, how they felt about their bodies, and the decisions they took. It is at this level of the subjective that we can see (perhaps more so than at other levels), the ways in which gender and sexuality come to form each other. Had we insisted on the ontological separation of gender and sexuality (I discuss in Chapter One how this has in many ways become orthodox) then this entanglement present in participants' accounts may not have been so visible. We mightn't have been able to see how asexuality could be related to a non-binary gender identity, or how asexuality was bound up with feelings about the gendered body, or how not being interested in sex affected how one dressed, or how abstinence was a way of surviving a milieu riven by gender inequalities. Unsettling the fixity of the border between gender and sexuality thus allows us to include a wider range of subjectivities in our research, including the subjectivities of those who are asexual and abstinent. However, with regards to the literature on how gender and sexuality are related, this chapter has shown how, at the empirical level, and at this particular site, there is no clear causality or directionality, as sexuality affected gender and gender affected sexuality, and in some cases, they

were more entangled. In the next chapter, the conclusion, I go on to discuss these points in relation to the thesis as a whole.

8. Discussion and conclusions

In this final chapter, I discuss the themes of my research and what they mean more broadly. I begin by recapping the research context, before going on to discuss my research aims and how I have addressed these in this thesis, including what my research has added to the question of gender and sexuality's interrelationship. Following on from this, I highlight the contributions that this thesis has made to the asexuality and abstinence literature specifically, before ending on a discussion of the wider import of this research for gender and sexualities studies.

8.1. Revisiting the research context

This thesis was an empirical exploration of the relationship between gender and sexuality. More concretely, this was achieved by researching the gendered experiences and subjectivities of participants who were asexual or abstinent. Whilst the relationship between gender and sexuality has been well-theorised, there is a need to understand how this relationship works 'in practice', in the lives and relationships of diverse groups of people. Recent research has explored this relationship in the lives of transgender people, and those with 'non-conforming' genders (and this body of research has troubled the easy separation of gender and sexuality that has become orthodox in many activist and academic spaces). I have built on and diversified this empirical work by focusing on the 'site' of asexuality and abstinence - broadly conceived as having a relationship of lack, absence, or inactivity with regards to sex and sexuality. Therefore, it was my goal to explore the operation of gender when sexuality is, at least ostensibly, no longer present, and from this think more broadly about what this means for how we understand the relationship between gender and sexuality. The research was also warranted because of significant gaps in the research on asexuality and on abstinence, respectively. I argued that both fields required 'gendering': that is, studies which analyse asexuality or abstinence with regards to gender, (and from a sociological perspective) are either missing or partial. It was my personal, political and academic positionality as a feminist and my

insistence of the centrality of gender in any sociological endeavour that led me to this research, and provided me with an interpretative framework.

8.2. Revisiting the research aims

The above context and rationale was translated into three research aims, which guided the collection and analysis of data. These were:

1. To explore the gendered experiences of asexuality and abstinence
2. To explore the ways in which gender is experienced and made sense of by those who are asexual and abstinent
3. From this, develop a more nuanced and empirically informed understanding of the interconnections between gender and sexuality

I will now discuss my findings in relation to these aims, and address how each aim was met.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that asexuality and abstinence are fundamentally *gendered* concepts because understandings and norms relating to sexual desire and sexual activity are inextricably linked with how we understand gender. Traditional understandings are remarkably persistent: femininity and womanhood still carry assumptions of sexual disinterest and sexual passivity, although this does not preclude the necessity of being sexually *responsive*. Masculinity and manhood are still structured around the (hetero)sexual desiring actor. As a result, and in relation to my first aim, I have shown that experiences of asexuality and abstinence *are* indeed gendered, but furthermore, I have shown the considerable *significance* of gender in these experiences. The gender which one is perceived to be shapes what it is like to make the decision not to have sex, and what it is like to not feel any sexual attraction (and to claim an identity as asexual).

Gender, understood in its hetero-patriarchal configuration, was so significant that it often bridged the gap between asexuality and abstinence. For example, abstinent women often had more in common with asexual women than with

abstinent men with regards to pressures and tensions in navigating sex in intimate relationships, with regards to how seriously their subjectivities were taken, and with regards to the appearance work they felt compelled to do, as well as what was at stake here. By contrast, whilst there were some differences between asexual and abstinent men, there was also commonality in their stories of being able to assert themselves in relationships; their ability to mobilise their abstinence as a kind of gendered capital; and in the credence that was afforded their testimonies (at least relative to women).

Even when experiences of asexuality and abstinence diverge - for example, when asexual and abstinent women were not equally afforded recognition as 'women' by others - this divergence still seems to be structured around gender in that it is based on the different ways in which asexuality and abstinence fit into femininity. 'Fitting into femininity' was itself based on particular gendered assumptions about agency: when women are seen to possess it, *and* use it to not have sex with men, then they are at risk of having their femininity challenged. By contrast, asexual women often had their asexuality 'explained' by their *natural* disposition as women, and so this did not necessarily disrupt their positioning as feminine. Agency (and its gendered contours) was also central to the experience of abstinent men, in that agency was the lens through which they viewed their own abstinence, and this, I argued, represented a particular way of claiming masculinity.

Gender was also so significant that for abstinent women, gender was not just a variable that modulated their experience of abstinence, but abstinence, in their experience, did not make sense without gender. It was their gendered positioning within hetero-patriarchy that had made their abstinence feel necessary. Abstinence, for these participants, was not just a gendered experience but was an *experience of gender*.

But gendered experiences were also not homogenous. For example, 'race' and religion could mean that some abstinent men did not have to account for their abstinence quite so much since their racialised appearance and/or assumptions made about their religious practice could provide a ready-made framework of comprehension for others. We also saw how the construction of asexuality as feminine was disrupted when other norms of femininity were 'lacking': such as

when asexual women were not heterosexual, not interested in romance, or when women were within the window of 'normative reproduction' but had not had children.

Turning to my second research aim: in some ways, how participants experienced and made sense of gender was also linked to these gendered experiences. Although I have shown how abstinent men could be seen to be 'doing masculinity' in their narratives, there was also a sense in which gender was not a 'problem' for them, and not something that was consciously reflected on. This is perhaps partly because of the 'ease' of some of their experiences. Unlike abstinent women for example, no-one had attempted to 'overcome' the men's abstinence, no-one had questioned the veracity of their stories, no-one had made them feel guilty about not having sex, and no-one had seen their abstinence as a reason for rejecting them. Because of this lack of friction in encountering the social world due to their (relative) positioning on the hetero-patriarchal hierarchy, 'gender' was not necessarily something abstinent men needed to engage with.

Conversely, abstinent women, and asexual participants of all genders were much more likely to reflexively discuss gender in their interviews and notebooks. Asexual men and asexual non-binary AMAB people, whilst often also being the beneficiaries of hetero-patriarchy in their interpersonal interactions, talked at length about constructions of masculinity and their explicit negotiations with it. It may have been that the asexual men and asexual non-binary AMAB people in my sample were more reflexively and critically aware of 'gender' than most, but there was a sense in which coming to identify as asexual, and learning the language of asexuality with its cross-overs with other gender and sexual minority communities, was also often a simultaneous process of questioning gender (the 'Judith Butler Experience'). But asexuality is also perhaps more ambiguously situated with regards to masculinity than abstinence. As we have seen, asexuality is often misunderstood as a natural feminine quality/disposition, whereas abstinence, with its associations of agency, is often itself harnessed as proof of masculinity. For asexual men (and those perceived to be men), gender was thus perhaps less taken-for-granted and less given when compared to abstinent men.

One of the key findings of this thesis is how many participants made sense of their gender through their sexuality. Many participants, both asexual and abstinent, understood gender to be *fundamentally about* sexual attraction, sexual attractiveness, and organising sexual relationships. This impacted on participants to varying degrees, and in various ways. For some asexual people, their lack of interest or identification with sex and sexuality meant that they felt gender was irrelevant, and did not identify with gender in any particular way. Indeed, for some participants this led to identifying with a term such as agender, gender-neutral, or non-binary. For some of these participants, this understanding of gender *as* sexual not only caused them to dis-identify with the idea of gender, but it also affected their embodied experience in that they felt deep discomfort with their gendered body. For other participants, feelings of gendered bodily discomfort were understood to affect their (lack of) interest in, and willingness to have sex.

Gendered appearance (particularly the ‘work’ that was put into this) was also experienced and made sense of through the lens of sexual attraction and sexual relationships. As such, many asexual and abstinent participants felt freed from the pressure to cultivate particular gendered appearances (to ‘look good’) but for women and non-binary AFAB participants, this was replaced by the pressure to *not* look good, so as to avoid unwanted male attention (again pointing to the gendered experiences of asexual and abstinence).

Thus whilst participants had diverse gender identities and subjectivities, and differed with regards to whether or how much they questioned the concept of gender, for the majority of participants, gender was experienced as an aspect of sexuality, and was made sense of through this lens of sexuality.

All of the above points to the multiple ways in which gender and sexuality are entangled in participants’ accounts (relating to my third research aim). As with the empirical research on transgender discussed in Chapter One (e.g. Hines, 2007; Valentine, 2007; Doorduyn and von Berlo, 2014), my research has challenged the easy separation of gender from sexuality. Some of my findings chime with some of the findings of the above: for example, my participants also talked about shifts in sexual identities leading to shifts in gender identities/understandings of gender, or vice versa, such as when coming to an

asexual identity meant exposure to new discursive communities of gender. This shows how gender and sexuality are relational concepts, both in terms of being relative to one another, but also formed through interactions and relationships with other people and groups. The above research also highlights the embodied nature of both gender and sexuality, and as we have seen, this was also a key theme to emerge from my research.

However, querying the interrelationship of gender and sexuality at the 'new' sites of asexuality and abstinence has also meant new insights. We have seen how due to hetero-patriarchy, gender still 'works' in the absence or lack of sexuality, as much as in its presence (and in much the same ways). Asexuality and abstinence as sexual subject positions are themselves gendered, with different attendant associations of masculinity and femininity. Therefore, the experiences of asexual and abstinent participants were often split down (binary) gender lines. Key to this was the structuring framework of hetero-patriarchy, and the importance of this structural element was something I highlighted throughout the thesis. It is because hetero-patriarchy constructs sexual agency, desire and activity in particularly gendered (and unequal) ways that experiences of asexuality and abstinence *are* so riven by gender. My research has also emphasised how sexuality was central to people's understandings of gender, and how this affected participants' gender identities, gendered appearances, and gendered embodiment. Furthermore, in employing Jackson's fourfold typology of structure, interactions, meanings, and subjectivities, this thesis has also empirically demonstrated how the relationship between gender and sexuality might differ at different 'levels', as well as how these levels can interact.

Thus, this thesis has highlighted the need not only for gender and sexuality's interrelationship to be explored empirically (as Jackson (2006) has argued), but it has also highlighted the value of conducting this research at different 'sites' in order to draw out similarities, differences, and nuances, but also at different levels or dimensions of the social world.

Having discussed my research aims, I now turn to discussing my contributions to specific literatures.

8.3. Contributions to asexuality and abstinence literature

Aside from contributing to debates on the relationship between gender and sexuality, my thesis also adds to the literature and research on asexuality and abstinence. In Chapter Two, I noted that the two existing studies on asexuality and gender (while making welcome inroads) suffered from a limited sample size, restrictive methods (e.g. open-ended survey), a narrow focus (e.g. just on men), and a tendency to centre 'transgressive' interpretations over the narratives of participants themselves. My research has aimed to address these shortcomings by including a greater number of participants of a variety of genders, using notebooks alongside interviews (including follow-up interviews in some cases) and offering more complex narratives by considering different dimensions of the social world, in which we move beyond the dichotomy of 'transgression' and 'accommodation' to more fully engage with how asexuality is 'lived'.

My research also has implications for asexuality research more broadly. Throughout this thesis, I have emphasised the necessity of considering gender when considering asexuality, both in terms of how it is constructed and understood, but also with regards to experiences of asexuality. Since gender is so central to issues of desire, sexual activity, and agency, then to talk about asexuality without talking about gender would seem to be a significant oversight, which has implications for the rigour of any analysis. Furthermore, I have shown in this thesis that even when we include gender, we must be careful not to limit our analysis to one level or one aspect (i.e. the individual, or the discursive). Rather, we must try and capture a sense of the different ways in which gender 'works' - i.e. the structural, but also the relational and the interactional, and through embodied experience that might go beyond discourse.

My thesis has also pointed to the usefulness of considering asexuality in tandem with abstinence, and has been the first study to do. This is not to deny the specificity of asexuality, or to imply they are the same thing, but in broadening the window of enquiry to take in other forms of non/negative sexuality, there is potential to go beyond seeing asexuality as a unique isolated phenomenon (as the sexological and psychological literature is wont to do) and instead locate it in wider structures of meaning and experience. This is an important way in which sociology can make a distinct contribution to the field of asexuality

studies. However, it is essential that researchers do not ‘collapse’ asexuality and abstinence into one another - to do so would be to undermine the efforts of asexual activists, and would override how people themselves use these terms, thus constituting another form of epistemic injustice.

With regards to the research on abstinence, my thesis also makes an important contribution. It is the first sociological study since Cline’s work in the early 1990s to include abstinent women. Recent sociological interest has been confined exclusively to abstinence and masculinity, perhaps because of the ostensible intrigue promised by juxtaposing abstinence and masculinity. Abstinent women are perhaps considered less of a ‘cool’ topic, but as I have shown in this thesis, their accounts very starkly remind us of the operations of hetero-patriarchy which must remain of urgent sociological interest. Through comparing their accounts to that of abstinent men, and in finding much in common with the experiences of asexual women, we have been able to see the continuance and persistence of rape culture, and of misogynistic ideas about femininity, agency, and desire.

Related to this is a broader point about redressing the balance between sociological interest in masculinity vis a vis femininity. Shelley Budgeon (2014: 321) notes that the study of masculinity has ‘not been matched by a similar interest [in femininity]’, and Gill and Scharff (2011: 2) discuss how within gender and cultural studies, it is ‘girls and women’ who have been studied as opposed to ‘femininity’, whilst the opposite is true with regards masculinity, and men and boys.⁸⁰ Although a discussion of masculinity forms a significant part of my thesis, I also explore some of the contours of femininity, in terms of how it is constituted and experienced in the lives of participants. Furthermore, by considering both femininity and masculinity, we have been able to see some of the ways in which they are *relational* concepts (Budgeon, 2014: 323). In the next and final section, I expand on this by discussing how this thesis speaks to gender and sexualities studies more broadly.

⁸⁰ This is potentially because of a traditional feminist distrust of all things ‘feminine’, or because femininity is so often naturalised through the association of women with the body and with nature (although Serano (2007:43) points out that it is often *masculinity* that is naturalised in that it is conceptualised as coming directly from *who men are*, whereas femininity is seen as something that requires effort and labour).

8.4. Broader contributions and looking forward

I have already shown how this thesis has contributed to debates on the relationship between gender and sexuality, highlighting the need for empirical exploration of this relationship at different sites, as well as bringing to light ways in which gender and sexuality can be related in people's experiences and subjectivities. Beyond this, my research also has implications for the direction of future research on gender and sexualities.

This thesis has also pointed to the need for feminists and researchers of women's sexuality to remain engaged with the 'dangers' of sex, to use Carol Vance's (1984) term. For many of the abstinent and asexual women and non-binary AFAB persons in my research, sex and sexuality in the context of hetero-patriarchy remained a site of fear, violence, humiliation and powerlessness. Whilst feminist researchers have of course never stopped paying attention to these aspects of sex, Alison Phipps (2014) writes of 'problematic developments within feminism' in which there is a 'focus on women's agency and identity at the expense of examining framing structures' (p3) and 'approaches to sexual violence in particular have tended to emphasise women's resistance and agency' (p36). That is not to say we must ignore the 'pleasures' of sex - the resistance and the agency - but that we have to ensure any theorisation or discussion of sexuality under hetero-patriarchy is also sufficiently attentive to the dangers therein.

This thesis has also insisted on the importance of bringing gender into any sexualities research. I discussed this above in relation to asexuality research specifically, but it is a point that can be applied to sexualities scholarship more broadly - particularly work that is rooted within (certain parts of) queer theory. As briefly noted in Chapter One, gender is often seen to shackle sexuality's liberatory potential. Hammers (2015a) argues that this is because many queer theorists who are influenced by the psychoanalytical tradition see gender as 'part and parcel of ego and identity formation' (p839) whereas sexuality is understood as unconscious and anti-social (and thus where the 'promise' lies). Thus 'in this psychoanalytically informed strain of queer, while not altogether inconsequential, [gender is] deemed unnecessary/inadequate to the task of

understanding sexuality' (Hammers, 2015b: 154). However, as Hammers points out, this leads *not* to a better conceptualisation of sexuality, but one which becomes 'masculinist' in its refusal of gender. My research also attests to the limitations of such an approach. I have argued not only that gender and sexuality *cannot be understood* without reference to each other (at least if we go beyond the realms of theory to how gender is constructed, lived, and made sense of in the everyday world), but also that attempting to think about sexuality without gender means that we privilege the accounts of those who can take gender as a 'given' - those who are privileged enough that gender becomes invisible (Kimmel, 1990).

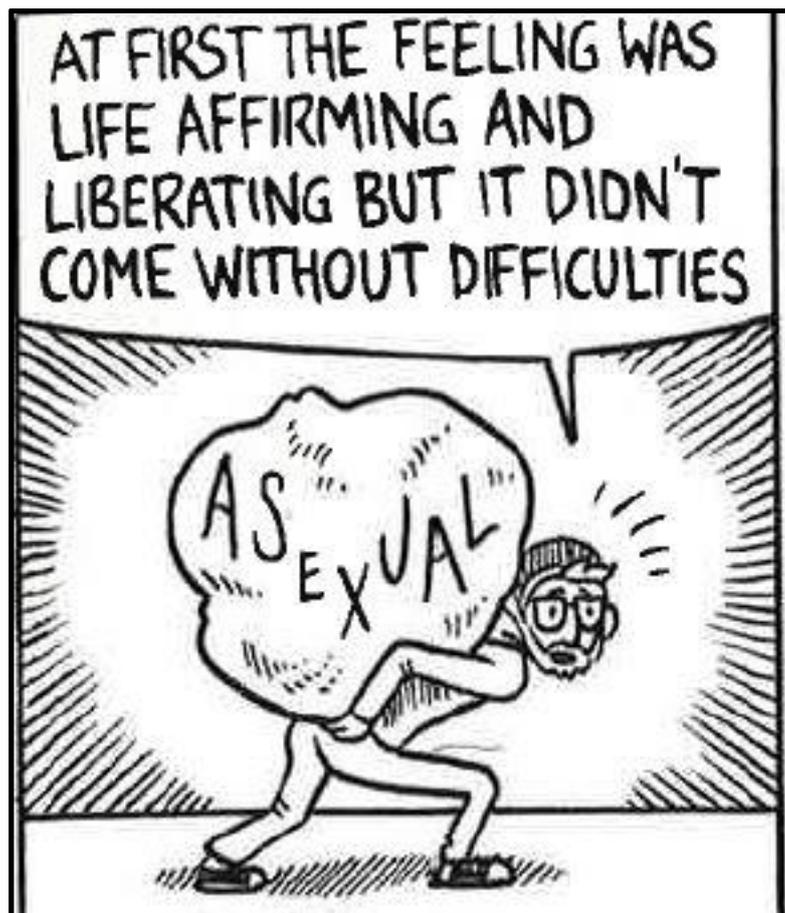
To return to the very beginning of the thesis, Jackson suggested that 'the empirical connections between [gender and sexuality] require exploration and should neither be presupposed nor neglected'. This thesis has not only been an empirical exploration of this relationship, but has also highlighted the dangers and limitations of viewing sexualities without gender. This is not to necessarily argue for the precedence of gender over sexualities, but to recognise the ways in which gender does structure so many aspects of the social world.

Any sexualities research thus needs to be 'gendered'. Gender may indeed be a constraining factor, but not in the way suggested by queer theorists. Indeed, my research has shown that gender constrains some, but for men and those with male privilege, gender also enables, smoothes, and facilitates. Rather than gender in itself as the problem (and the solution being the dismissal of any gendered analysis) my thesis suggests that we take gender as a central (although not necessarily exclusive) analytical frame in thinking about sexualities. Doing so allows us to see the ubiquitous, pervasive but often subtle workings of hetero-patriarchy in which gender can constrain *some* yet *enable* others (and this, rather than 'gender', is what I suggest is the problem).

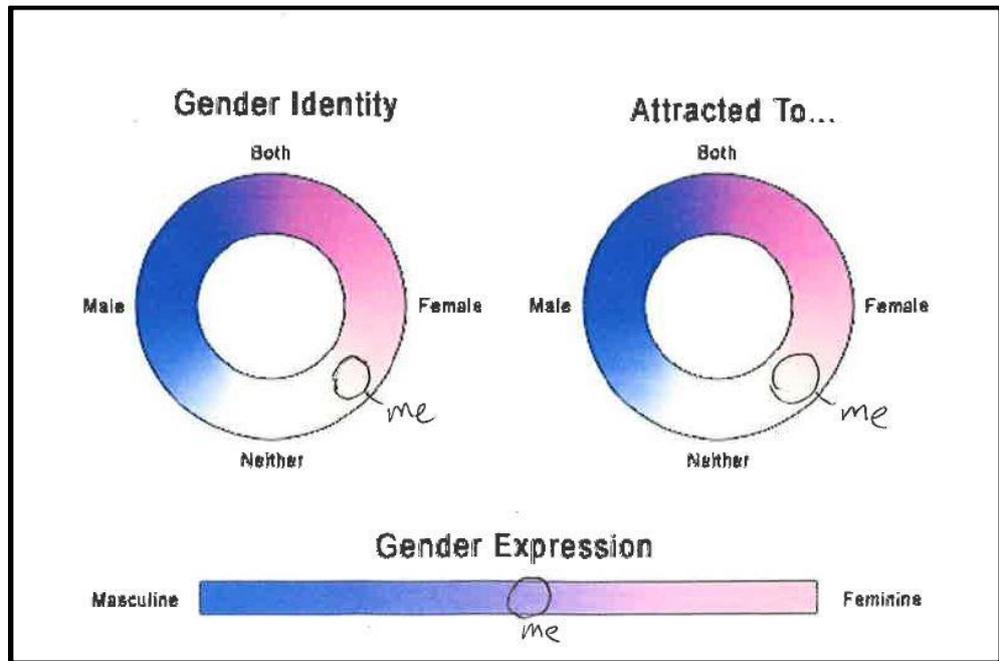
Appendix A: Examples of notebook data



A1 (Oran)



A2 (Oran)



A3 (Pippa)



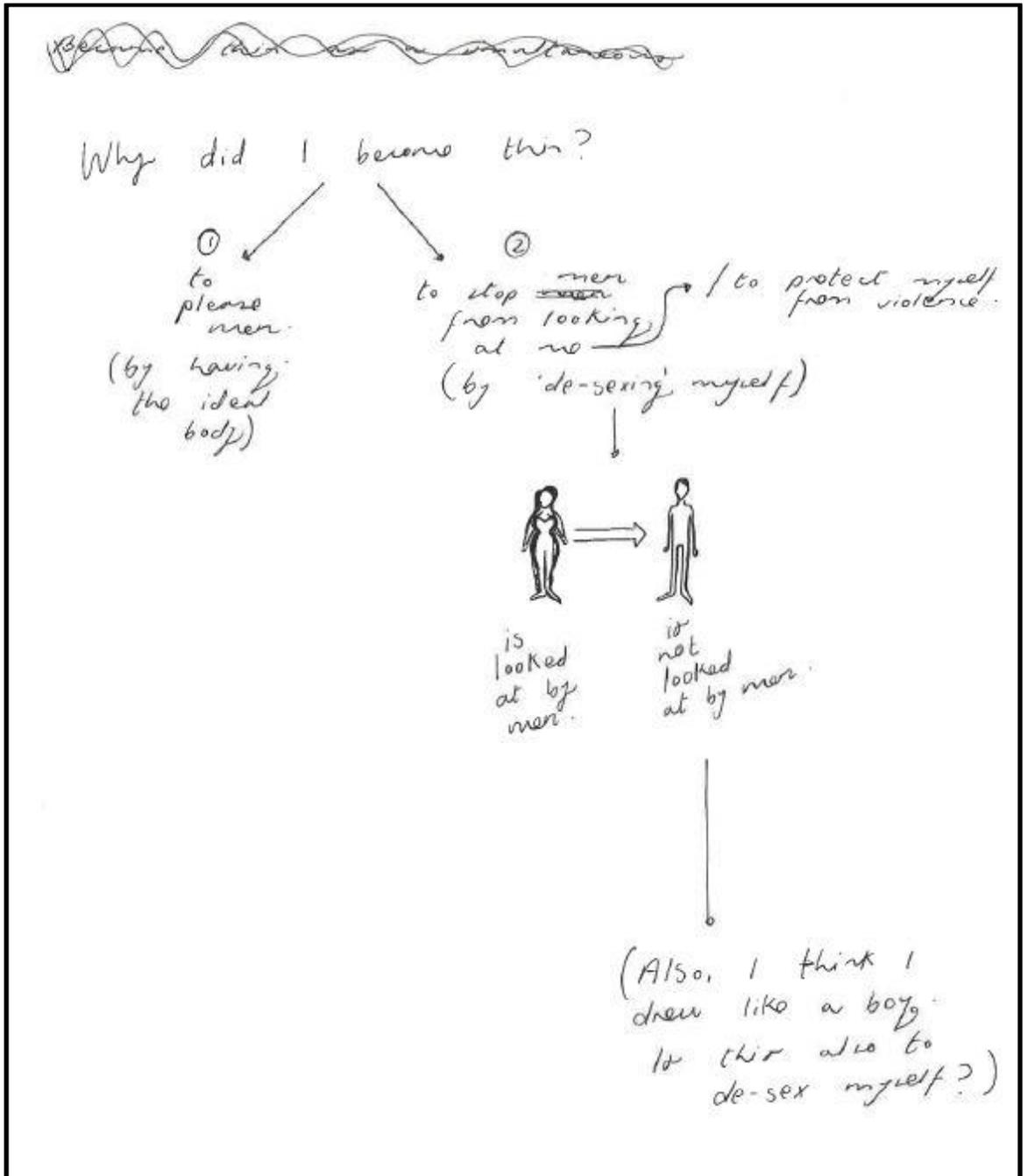
A4 (Pippa)



A5 (Kai)



A6 (Blair)



A8 (Adeline)

Appendix B: First and second stage recruitment poster⁸¹

DONT FEEL MUCH
(OR ANY) SEXUAL
ATTRACTION OR
DESIRE?

CHOOSING NOT TO BE
SEXUALLY
ACTIVE?

IDENTIFY AS
ASEXUAL OR
CELIBATE?

If you feel that any of these describe you, I would like to invite you to take part in a social research project!

My name is Karen and I'm a PhD researcher in sociology at the University of Glasgow.

If you're over the age of 18, I'd love to interview you about your experiences!

For more detailed information feel free to get in touch (please take a contact strip!)

This research has been approved by the University of Glasgow and the Economic and Social Research Council

 University of Glasgow | College of Social Sciences
 

k.cuthbert.1@research.gla.ac.uk Office: 0141 330 4543								
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⁸¹ This poster is the hard copy version with contact strips but I also produced an online version of this poster without these.

Appendix C: Third stage recruitment poster



CHOOSING NOT
TO BE SEXUALLY
ACTIVE?

CONSIDER YOURSELF
ABSTINENT OR
CELIBATE?

If you feel that both or either of these describe you, I would like to invite you to take part in a social research project!

My name is Karen and I'm a PhD researcher in sociology at the University of Glasgow. If you're over the age of 18, I'd love to interview you (in person or via Skype/phone) about your experiences!

For more detailed information feel free to get in touch:

k.cuthbert.1@research.gla.ac.uk

This research has been approved by the University of Glasgow and the Economic and Social Research Council

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Appendix D: Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Pronoun	(A)Sexual identity	Ethnicity	Occupation	Disability	Interview format	Notebook participation
Adeline	22	She/her	Abstinent, heterosexual	White	Unemployed	N	F2F	Y
Alora	31	She/her	Abstinent, heterosexual	Black African	Postgraduate student	N	F2F	N
Blair	20	They/them/their	Asexual, aromantic	White	Undergraduate student	N	F2F	Y
Broadley	21	She/her	Asexual, bi-romantic	White	Charity fundraiser	Y	F2F	N
Cassandra	21	She/her	Demisexual, grey-sexual, pan-romantic	White	Undergraduate student	N	F2F	N
Christopher	27	He/him/his	Abstinent, heterosexual	Mixed (White/Chinese)	Postgraduate student	N	Skype	N
Connor	20	He/him/his	Abstinent, heterosexual	White	Apprentice tradesperson	N	F2F	N
Dona	32	She/her	Abstinent, heterosexual	Black	Project manager	N	Skype	N
Dylan	26	They/them/their	Grey-A, queer	White	Carer	N	F2F	Y
Ellie	28	She/her	Asexual, aromantic	White	Engineer	N	F2F	N
Frankie	18	They/them/their	Asexual, demi-romantic (mostly men)	White	Undergraduate student	N	F2F	Y
Gillian	34	She/her	Grey-A, hetero-romantic	Mixed (White/Indian)	Postgraduate student	N	F2F	Y
Heather	21	They/them/their	Asexual, pan-romantic	White	Undergraduate student	N	F2F	N
Isabella	31	They/them/their	Asexual, pan-romantic	White	Paralegal	Y	Email	N
Jason	32	He/him/his	Abstinent, heterosexual	White	Unemployed	N	F2F	N
Jeffrey	53	He/him/his	Asexual, hetero-romantic	White	Disability preventing work	Y	Phone	Y
Julia	20	She/her	Demisexual, hetero-romantic	White	Undergraduate student	N	F2F	Y

Pseudonym	Age	Pronoun	(A)Sexual identity	Ethnicity	Occupation	Disability	Interview format	Notebook participation
Kai	26	He/him/his	Asexual, romantically indifferent	White	Disability preventing work	Y	F2F	Y
Kartik	27	He/him/his	Abstinent, gay	Indian	Journalist	N	Skype	N
Lucy	21	She/her	Asexual, bi-romantic	White	Undergraduate student	N	F2F	N
Megan	23	She/her	Asexual, pan-romantic	White/Jewish	Undergraduate student	N	F2F	N
Nathaniel	33	He/him/his	Asexual, bi-romantic	White	Project manager	N	F2F	Y
Oran	26	They/them/their	Asexual/demisexual, pan-romantic	White	Teacher	N	F2F	Y
Ouka	50	She/her	Abstinent, hetero-sexual	White	Artist	N	Email	N
Pippa	28	She/her	Abstinent and asexual, homo-romantic	White	Teaching assistant	N	F2F	Y
Pooja	20	She/her	Abstinent, heterosexual	White/Indian	Undergraduate student	N	F2F	N
Rami	53	She/her	Asexual, hetero-romantic	White	Accountant	N	F2F	N
Reeta	19	She/her	Asexual, aromantic	White	Undergraduate student	N	F2F	Y
Sally-Ann	46	She/her	Asexual, aromantic	White	Undergraduate student	N	Email	N
Sam	23	They/them/their	Asexual, queer	White	Undergraduate student	Y	F2F	N
Tobi	53	She/her	Asexual, possibly hetero-romantic	White	Therapist	N	F2F	N
Travis	21	He/him/his	Abstinent, heterosexual	White	Undergraduate student	N	Skype	N
Yvette	31	She/her	Abstinent, heterosexual	White	Emergency services operator	N	Email	N

Appendix E : Information sheet



Information sheet

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what taking part in the research will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. If you have any questions or would like more details, please ask! Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Project title: Exploring the gendered experiences of those who do not feel sexual attraction, and those who choose not to be sexually active

Researcher: Karen Cuthbert, PhD student, Sociology, University of Glasgow

Email: k.cuthbert.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Supervisors : Dr Matt Dawson (Matt.Dawson@glasgow.ac.uk) and Dr Francesca Stella (Francesca.Stella@glasgow.ac.uk)

What is this study about?

My name is Karen Cuthbert and I am doing a PhD in Sociology at the University of Glasgow. I am conducting research which looks at how people who do not feel (much or any) sexual attraction towards others, and/or who choose not to be sexually active, think and feel about their sexuality and gender, and the kind of experiences that they might have.

I am doing this research because previous work that has been carried out with these groups has tended to ignore the issue of gender. I think this is an important 'gap' to address. My research takes a **social** (rather than psychological or medical) approach and it is my goal to 'ground' my research in the lived experiences and perspectives of participants.

Who is invited to take part?

I am interested in talking to individuals who feel they can be described by at least one of the following:

- You don't feel much or any sexual attraction towards other people
- You choose not to be sexually active

You might also identify with terms like '**asexual**' and/or '**celibate**' but this is not a requirement of the study.

You should also be **over 18**.

Do I have to take part?

No - it is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part in the study. If you decide to take part, you are also free to withdraw again at any stage without having to give a reason why. If you withdraw from the study, you also have the choice to withdraw any data that you have previously given.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you will be invited to participate in two face-to-face interviews with myself (these can also be conducted via Skype or phone). In the **first interview** I will ask you some questions about your experiences, although the conversation will be open so you will be able to talk about whatever you think is relevant and important.

After this interview, I will then invite you to make a 'notebook' or 'scrapbook' (which can be an actual book, or can be electronic) in which you can include writings, diary entries, drawings, photographs, collages, playlists etc. on the topic of gender. If you like, I can give you some suggestions or prompts for things to include. I would like you to return this to me shortly before the **second interview** (which will be about **4 weeks later**), where we can then go through it together and talk about some of the things you have included. With your permission, I'd like to keep hold of the notebook for my research (stored securely!), but the notebook will be returned to you once the project is finished.

Both of the interviews will be very informal and relaxed, and you do not have to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable with. If you prefer, you can take part in the interview without having to make a notebook.

Each interview will last for about an hour and a half. They can take place at a date, time and location of your choosing. With your permission, I would like to make an audio recording of the interviews. From the audio recordings I will make a transcript of what we have both said which I will then analyse as part of my research.

What will happen to the results of the research?

The results of the research will be used in my PhD, which I will submit in September 2016 at the earliest. If you like, I can provide you with a written summary of the research, or even a copy of my PhD itself, once it has been submitted. I may also use the results from this study in conference presentations, academic journal articles or in a book. I may quote some things you have said, and/or include some extracts from your notebook (see the section below for how I will ensure your privacy in this regard).

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All paperwork and documentation relating to the research will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my secure office at the University of Glasgow. Any electronic files will also be stored in a password protected folder, of which only I have access to. All information will be held in line with the UK Data Protection Act (you can read more about this here: <https://www.gov.uk/data-protection/the-data-protection-act>). With your permission, I would like to retain copies of the research data for a maximum period of **ten years** after submission of my PhD for future research purposes.

When I come to write up my PhD and any other pieces of work arising from the research, you and any information that you give me will be anonymized. This means that people who read it won't be able to identify you or anyone you might mention. This can be done through changing names, removing details of where you live and work, and taking care not to use extracts from the notebook which have identifying features.

All information that you give me will be treated confidentially. However, it is important that you know that research data is not 'legally privileged' – this means that the police/courts can request the research data if such a situation ever arises.

Who has reviewed the study?

The College of Social Science Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow has reviewed and approved this study. If you have any concerns about the way the research is being conducted, you can contact Muir Houston, the College of Social Science Ethics Officer. His email address is: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

Who is funding the study?

The study is being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (www.esrc.ac.uk).

What next?

If after reading this you would like to take part, please send me an email at: k.cuthbert.1@research.gla.ac.uk and I will get back to you. I'm also happy to talk about any concerns or questions you may have!

Appendix F: Notebook information sheet and prompts

Information about the notebook-diary project

Alongside the interviews, I am also asking people to take part in a 'notebook-diary' project. This will involve **recording and reflecting upon your everyday experiences, thoughts and feelings relating to gender** in a notebook/scrapbook/diary over a period of about 4 weeks.

You can either use a paper notebook (I can supply you with one, or you can use one of your own) or you can do it electronically, using free software such as Evernote (www.evernote.com) or GoogleDrive (www.google.co.uk/drive/) or a program such as Microsoft OneNote which comes with some Microsoft Office packages. Alternatively, you might want to make a blog using a site like Tumblr (www.tumblr.com) or Wordpress (www.wordpress.com). You could also use a combination of paper and electronic!

In your notebook, you can use lots of different ways of expressing yourself. These might be:

- Keeping a daily diary
- Writing (fiction, memories, thoughts)
- Drawing (or just doodling!)
- Photography (old photos; photos you take as part of the project)
- Making collages of images/words
- Video-making
- Links to blogs or websites
- Or anything else you might think of!

You can include anything you like (and leave out anything you don't want to share). If you need some inspiration, have a look at the 'Prompts' sheet for some ideas of themes you might want to explore.

Don't worry about how 'artistic' (or not!) you feel you are –this isn't about how well you can draw or write or take photographs, but is about exploring your experiences of gender and how you feel about this in some new ways. There is no 'right' way to do this!

The notebook project will start after the first interview, and you will have about 4 weeks to complete it. Just shortly before the second interview takes place, I will ask you to return the notebook to me, either through the post in a stamped and addressed envelope I will provide for you, or by email. In the second interview, we can go through the notebook together, and discuss some of the 'entries' you have made, and what those mean to you. With your permission, I'd like to keep hold of the notebook for my research (stored securely!), but the notebook will be returned to you once the project is finished. If I use any of your notebook entries in my PhD thesis or in any future publications, I will be careful not to include anything that might identify you, or the people around you.

Prompts!

*'Make' or 'take'
a self-portrait (or
a series of self-
portraits!)*

*How do others make
you feel?*

Do you feel
'masculine' or
'feminine' right
now? Ask yourself
this question
everyday for a few
days and record
your responses

• • •
**Show how
being in
different
spaces makes
you feel**
• • •

*Has there been
times in your life
that you haven't felt
like a 'real' man or
a 'real' woman?*

*Were there times today when you
felt 'aware' of your gender?*

*How do you think you
present yourself to the
world?*

How do you think others see you?

*What kind of clothes
do you wear? Why?*

Show or write about the
kinds of things that make
you feel masculine or
feminine (or neither, or
both!)

*What does it feel like
to move through the
world?*

*What is it like to be in
your body?*

Are there ways in
which you feel your
sexuality in your
body?

Appendix G: Consent form



Consent Form

Title of Project: *Exploring the gendered experiences of those who do not feel sexual attraction, and those who choose not to be sexually active*

Name of Researcher: Karen Cuthbert

(Put an 'X' in the boxes if you agree/consent)

1. I confirm that I have read and that I understand the Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without having to give a reason. I also understand that any identifying details I give will be anonymized in all submissions and publications arising from this research
3. I consent to take part in an interview with the researcher
4. I consent for the interview to be audio recorded
5. I consent to take part in the notebook project

Name of participant (PRINT)	Signature	Date

Name of researcher (PRINT)	Signature	Date

Appendix H: Interview schedule

1. **Ask participant to tell me a bit about themselves:** age, what do you do for a living, what is important to know about you?

[cover demographic questions]

2. **Ask why they decided to take part in the study**

3. **Explore personal history of sex and sexuality:**

(Content warning - will be asking questions about sexuality, and I've got some questions about having sex. Reiterate to participant that if there are things they don't want to answer that's fine, and we can also stop at any time)

- Who are the people who are most important in your life?
- Have you ever experienced sexual desire, or sexual attraction?
- Have you ever experienced having sex? What does 'having sex' mean to you?
- Would you consider yourself to be sexually active? What does sexually active mean to you? Have you been so in the past?
- How do you feel about the idea of sex?
- Have you ever felt any pressures to have sex? Do you currently feel pressure?
- Where has this pressure come from? Are there any environments where this pressure is particularly strong?
- Would you like to have romantic or sexual relations in the future?

4. **Explore issues of identity and labels:**

- Are there any terms you use to describe yourself in relation to your sexuality?
- How did you come to use that term?
- What specifically in your experience caused you to identify as such? Were there some particular experiences that caused you to start questioning?
- Do you seek out others who also use this term?
- Is 'outness' important to you?
- Engagement with communities? Experiences?

5. **How would you describe your gender? How do you feel about your gender?**

6. **What do you understand by terms such as masculinity and femininity, and how do you feel you relate to these?**

7. **Do you think your experience of asexuality/celebrity/low sexual attraction/not having sex has been affected by your gender?** (Prompts – has it been easier to claim certain identities? How has it affected relations with others? Do you feel particular pressures have been put on you, or assumptions or expectations made of you?)

8. **Do you think your experiences might have been different if your gender was different?** (Particular challenges as a man/woman?)

9. **Do you feel there is any connection between a lack of sexual attraction/not having sex, and gender?** (Prompts: Do you feel that your lack of sexual attraction/lack of sexual activity has had any impact on your gender identity? Ask them to reflect on how (or whether) they feel that ideas about masculinity and femininity are linked to ideas about being sexually active etc. Has identifying as X prompted you to think about gender in new/different ways?)

10. **How do you think gender is understood in the asexual community? (if relevant)**

11. **Do you think romantic attraction (having it or not having it) makes a difference in the experience of being asexual? (if relevant)**

12. **Are there positives to being <orientation/identity term>?**

13. **Religious/spiritual outlook– does this have any impact?**

14. **Age – does age affect experiences?** (Does age affect the way in which other people respond to your X? Do you think your experiences will change as you get older?)

15. **Political – do you ever think about X in political terms?**

16. **Are there other situations that you encounter where you're made aware of your asexuality/abstinence?**

17. **Anything to add?**

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