

The Asexual Experience and Community in Denmark

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to contribute more qualitative information about the asexual community to the limited present research. Through interviews with members of the Danish asexual community found through their meeting forum AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network), the research seeks to discover what the purpose of the community is and what exactly the “asexual experience” is in Denmark. Drawing on theories of ethnomethodology and Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition, a framework is set to better understand why the community was formed and what draws people to it and keeps them engaged in it. In accordance with Honneth’s theories, the researcher concludes that it is likely the community formed to foster a sense of internal recognition that was not offered by the larger LGBT community or society as a whole. The community stays together through recurring social meetings, an organizational committee, and the feelings of belonging experienced by the members. The community is still young and working to shape its identity within Denmark, but their experience is undoubtedly unique from the LGBT experience.

Keywords: Asexual, LGBT, Community

1. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Since 1948 when Alfred Kinsey published his Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale that included an additional grade of “X” for those that experienced “no socio-sexual contacts or reactions”⁶ to present-day popular publications such as BuzzFeed’s “The Biggest Misconceptions About Asexuality, According to Asexuals”⁵, asexuality has been dropping in and out of the public and scientific community’s interest for decades. The majority of research so far has been on what asexuality is: what it means to be asexual, how those identifying as such define and experience it, and what personality characteristics are common^{1, 2}. This paper, by contrast, seeks to move beyond the individual’s experience and analyze the Danish asexual community as a whole: how the physical gathering of those identifying as asexual functions. Research on how the physical community develops and is maintained is currently minimally explored in the literature, and this research strives to fill in those gaps.

Theoretical foundation for this research is rooted in basic ethnomethodology and professor of philosophy and director of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research) Axel Honneth’s theories of recognition. Ethnomethodology is based in the belief that one “can discover the normal social order of a society by disrupting it”³. Because little is known about how the asexual community functions, interacting with it and then trying to break one of its social norms and seeing how members react to it should give good insight into whether or not the unit polices its members. If they do, policing could be one means by which the community maintains itself.

Axel Honneth’s theories of recognition hold that one’s recognition is developed in relation to others, and if one does not receive this recognition from a group, then a new sub-community will form to provide internal recognition for its members⁴. Recognition, he maintains, also contributes to one’s self-esteem and self-confidence⁴.

1.1 Self-Esteem

Self-esteem, which is tied to solidarity, is a sense of oneself as a unique and irreplaceable individual⁴. What distinguishes one from others must be something valuable, and, accordingly, to lack self-esteem is to have the sense that one has nothing of value to offer. Those that identify as asexual are constantly bombarded by negative statements about their sexuality: “what a waste, you’re so pretty!”, “oh I totally understand, if I looked like you I wouldn’t have the confidence to have sex either”, “are you *sure*? You probably just haven’t met the right person”, “you should probably go to the doctor and have them fix that”. If someone is consistently told they are broken, that they need to be fixed, that what they naturally have to offer is not useful and needs to be changed, they will not feel valued. From what was gleaned in interviews with the Danish asexual community, sexual attraction carries weight in Danish society, and if one simply does not experience it they are likely to feel worthless and not gain the self-esteem defined by Honneth. This may be one reason the asexual community formed in Denmark: to give its members the reassurance that what they have to offer is indeed valuable and consequently facilitate the formation of self-esteem.

1.2 Self-Confidence

Self-confidence, which Honneth ties to love, is the capacity to express one’s needs and desires without fear of being abandoned as a result⁴. Through our lives we learn that we, as well as others, are individuals in our own right, and are consequently loved. If one does not recognize someone as an individual, as a fellow person, then they cannot love them - and this is what leads to disrespect and the damaging of self-confidence. When someone offhandedly comments to someone identifying as asexual that they are “missing something essential to the human existence” or jokingly questions “so are you an amoeba?”, they are dehumanizing the recipient. They are voicing their opinion that an asexual-identified person is not a human “like them” and is therefore unworthy of respect. In relationships, people identifying as asexual sometimes feel as though they have to keep it a secret from their partner. They may believe that expressing their needs will lead to abandonment purely due to their sexual orientation. This wariness, tied to the dehumanizing comments they must frequently endure, may prevent the unabated development of the self-confidence defined by Honneth. This could be the second reason the asexual community formed in Denmark, to give its members their humanity and the unconditional acceptance to be able to express themselves honestly without fear of abandonment, thus allowing the formation of self-confidence.

This research seeks to substantiate these two hypotheses of the purpose of the asexual community as well as gather qualitative information about the experience of asexuals in Denmark and how the community sees and maintains itself.

2. Definitions

The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), which hosts the world’s largest online asexual community as well as a large archive of resources on asexuality, defines an asexual as “someone who does not experience sexual attraction”⁷. Unlike celibacy, asexuality is not a choice, but rather a sexual orientation akin to heterosexual or bisexual. Many asexual people experience attraction in some form (aesthetic, romantic, etc.) but do not necessarily feel a need to act out this attraction sexually. Asexuality is not an inability to experience sexual arousal – some experience it often while others experience it rather seldom, and others may even choose to alleviate it through partnered sexual acts. AVEN offers many qualifiers about what exactly it means to be asexual, but emphasizes that it is an identity for many people and can serve as a useful label to help someone “figure themselves out” for as long as it applies to them⁷. For the purpose of this research, we have defined an asexual person simply as “someone that identifies as asexual and in some way participates in the asexual community”. We have also defined the “asexual community in Denmark” as those that self-identify as asexual and participate in online forums and chat with other asexuals from Denmark or the surrounding area and/or physically meet with those participating in the Danish online thread “Hej danskere” on AVEN.

3. Methodology

Because this research seeks to gather qualitative data to gain a better picture of the asexual community in Denmark, various qualitative methods were used so that answers could be revealed naturally and allow for further lines of questioning. In this way the research was informed and led by the community, revealing the topics and themes the

community found most important, rather than the researcher seeking only specific information. The researcher used a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and field studies. These methods were best for this situation because there is very little past research on the subject, creating a need for basic “bottom-up” information. The methods used allowed for organic answers and revealed information that could be used as a foundation for later research.

The sample (8 interviewed and 12 participated) was gathered from AVEN after contacting the administrator about the researcher’s intent to study the community in Denmark. The researcher was given their own thread and allowed to advertise the study on the “Hej danskere” thread. Participants signed up for a time slot to be interviewed or gave consent to be observed during one of their social meetings. Interviews were recorded for later transcription and field studies had their notes written up after their conclusion. Transcriptions and notes were coded with a combination of Nvivo 10 and hand coding with Word 2013, labeling certain responses and observations as related to various overall themes such as “purpose of group” and “maintenance of community”.

This research had limitations due to the fact the community itself was so small and the researcher had limited time to conduct interviews before coding had to begin. Though only 12 were observed, there was a good variety in the sample: for example, those that were “regulars”, those that had not been to a physical meeting, those that were not Danish, and those that had been in the community for a long or short time.

A possible bias in the research is that the researcher also identifies as asexual, though this fact may have been what put the participants at ease and allowed for honest, unguarded answers. Some participants voiced that knowing this allowed them to answer fully without having to worry about explaining themselves or being misunderstood.

4. Results

Through the 8 interviews and 2 participant-observation field studies, the researcher found rather consistent answers to how and why the community functions. According to the participants, the overall purpose of the community is to make sure its members do not feel alone or think they are the only one having these experiences. It is place for friends to meet and do an activity together without having to worry about being alienated for your sexual orientation. The community, which is estimated to be about 50 people and has been meeting on and off again since 2012, has two different types of meetings: social and organizational. Meetings generally happen in Copenhagen, though rarely they have been in Odense or elsewhere.

The social meetings are attended by between 6-20 people, depending on the activity and people’s availability. These usually happen once a month, though the timing is not strict and is wholly dependent on when someone proposes a new meeting. There is no leader or hierarchy that directs who should suggest a meetup – people take the initiative to post about what they wish to see or attend and invite the rest of the group to tag along. As such, people’s participation is dependent on their location (proximity to Copenhagen), how much free time they have (whether they have work or university), finances, current interest (wanting to meet with other asexuals or being satisfied not meeting them), and what they hope to gain from the meetings (friends, something to do, knowledge from the activity). The location of these meetings change every time, but usually pertain to something cultural such as a museum or concert. Discussions usually revolve around the event; asexuality is rarely discussed. For some, the social meetings are a good way to meet people that participants can talk to on the side about things that are too personal for a group setting. For others, the social meetings are simply a way to have a group of people to be with on a Friday night. New members to these meetings are met with friendly questions, though nothing too personal is ever discussed at a social meeting.

The organizational meetings are attended by a core group of 6-8 people in the offices of LGBT Denmark. They discuss issues related to asexuality (such as increasing visibility of the orientation in Denmark), write to sexologists to correct their impression of it, and engage in large-scale activism such as attending Copenhagen Pride. The group is still very new, though, and members are quick to point out that they are still discussing who they are as a group and where they wish to go as an organization. The meetings are coordinated fully on the forums of AVEN, where a meeting is proposed in the “Hej danskere” thread and then carried off to a separate thread to hammer out details and see who can attend.

The asexual community’s experience as an asexual in Denmark was rather varied. Some voiced that they were wary of researchers that claimed to be investigating asexuality, since researchers’ agendas could be corrective or they may ask insensitive and insulting questions. Most members of the community maintained that though the narrative of Denmark claims it to be a liberated place, when it comes to sexuality the country is decidedly liberal (people need sex to be happy and everyone should want it and have a lot of it). Many participants reported that this led to pressure from friends to “just try it” and from the media that simply having sex will solve all their problems. Members felt that this

idea about sex in Denmark made it especially difficult to be asexual, as they constantly have to be defending their label from those that doubt its existence or believe there to be something mentally or medically wrong with them. Though some experienced understanding and acceptance from those they told, coming out as asexual in Denmark is daunting for many. Some believe it will make it impossible for them to find a relationship because of people's inaccurate ideas about their sexuality or people will feel entitled to ask intrusive and patronizing questions.

The asexual community believes themselves to be distinct from the LGBT community in Denmark because it is far less known and their experiences are inherently different. According to members of the community, young children in Denmark are exposed to LGBT terms and persons in media and school long before they start identifying with them – but not asexual. Adults and children are rather unlikely to come across the term, making it common for youth to go through high school believing themselves to be broken or trying to force themselves into some other sexual orientation category. Because there are no famous Danish asexuals, it is impossible for young people with this sexual orientation to see themselves reflected in the media and have someone to identify with. There are more places for LGBT folk to go, such as bars, clubs, support groups, and organizations that specifically cater to them. The asexual community believes it is this lack of visibility and effortful inclusion that makes their experience in Denmark inherently separate from the LGBT experience.

5. Discussion

From the interviews with the community members, we can conclude that indeed the community was formed in congruence with Honneth's theories of recognition – a sub-community was created to facilitate a sense of internal recognition that was not offered by the LGBT community or society as a whole. The LGBT community is focused on their right to love and have sex with who they wish, while the asexual community is focused on their right to be free from sex: to not be judged for not wanting or not having it. Danish society as a whole encourages liberal sexuality, and is much more likely to accept LGBT individuals because (according to one participant) “at least they're having sex”. The asexual community offers needed validation through reassurance that what each member has to offer is valuable and they do not need to be fixed. Though this is not done through explicit statements, the community's mere existence as a safe place to be and not hide one's sexuality is sufficient. It proves that there are others like them and since those in the community are not trying to alter themselves, they do not need to either. The community gives an unconditional acceptance: they will not abandon you for your asexuality so you are free to simply be yourself without carefully picking your statements or how to express yourself. Members are allowed to be at ease because they do not need to be constantly analyzing the intentions of those present (“Is she hitting on me? Could my statement have come off as innuendo? Should I laugh at that sexual joke? Should I offer an explicit hook-up anecdote to get them to like me?”). This recognition from the sub-community is likely why it was initially formed.

We can also conclude from the interviews that what currently maintains the community is the recurring social meetings, organization committee with a common goal, and the feelings of belonging experienced by its members once joined. Meeting to do an activity eases the flow of conversation, since everyone can chat about what is happening or what they think of the event instead of trying to discuss personal things. These social meetings are often large enough that people can talk in small groups if they wish to get to know others better or they can simply enjoy the event if they would rather not strike up a more than surface-level conversation. The likely reason the community engages in these activity meetings is because it is the least intimidating for all involved – they can physically do something instead of having to sit and awkwardly try to converse at a café. The frequency of the meetings means members have about a month to plan around it if they wish and applies a little pressure to attend, since the next one will not be for another month. If they were weekly, there would not be much pressure to attend because one might think “oh I'll go next week”. This is likely why the numbers are what they are: going up to twenty or so people at a meeting. If they were weekly there would probably be a more balanced dispersal, with 4 or 5 rotating, different people at each meeting.

The organizational committee also maintains the community, through planning future meetups and creating long-term goals for the group. It seems to be the informal job of those that attend the organizational meeting to make sure that there is a meetup every month and for a few major holidays, such as Christmas. This is likely a fail-safe to be sure the community does not fizzle out after a few months of no one taking the initiative to post. The committee also inspires the community to have the long-term goal of forming an organization for asexuals in Denmark, which all members can support regardless of their level of activism. This gives a sense of binding to the community, since they have a future together and can affect later new members that enter the community.

The community is also maintained through the feelings of belonging fostered by it. Every person interviewed made sure to tell the researcher about everyone's friendliness and genuine interest in each member. There are also no

conflicts within the group, which the researcher feels is due to the fact members would not want to fall out of favor with the only large asexual group in all of Denmark. The community is full of different ages, nationalities, and interests, so it is likely quite easy for a new member to feel a sense of belonging and comradery.

5.1 Significance

The findings of this research are significant because they show that the LGBT community, though it supposedly encompasses all non-heteronormative sexualities, does not adequately cater to asexuality. The asexual community is distinct from the communities of other sexualities and formed due to a lack of recognition from that “umbrella” community. The findings also give new perspectives on what asexuals gain from their community and why it is needed. Past research has covered what asexuality is, but this research reveals why the community itself has formed, is maintained, and is unique in the context of Denmark.

5.2 Future Directions

Future directions of research on asexuality could involve checking in with the Danish asexual community in a few years to see what changes the organizational committee has made and how it has affected the community. Are there more people actively involved? Are there new people suggesting meetups? Is having an officially recognized organization different than the loose meetup group in purpose or membership? Further, research could be done on the Danish asexual group on Facebook and see how it contrasts with the AVEN group. Is there a different purpose? How do the themes of the posts compare? Future research could also attempt to recruit more individuals, to see if different levels of activity in the online chat or physical meetings affects members’ impression of the community.

6. References

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