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Stories of Non-Becoming:
Non-Issues, Non-Events and Non-Identities in Asexual Lives

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Abstract

In contrast to conventional models of positively 'becoming' an identity through social interaction, this article explores the inverse, negational process of 'non-becoming', whereby actors start but do not continue along an identity career trajectory. Through cumulative attrition, key interactions and encounters at each stage influence non-progression to the next. Using asexuality as an example, we identify three main trajectory stages of non-awareness, communicative negation and non-consolidation, each involving interactional contingencies. With a wider applicability to other repudiated identities, this model shows how even negational symbolic social objects (non-issues, non-events and non-identities) are constituted through social interaction.

Keywords: asexuality, identity, non-becoming, career trajectory

Introduction

Sometimes research takes us in unexpected directions. What had seemed the obvious approach leads to a dead end, while an apparently blind alley opens out into a beautiful new landscape. Serendipitous findings can be the most interesting, so there is value in disobedience to scholarly conventionality (Åkerström 2013). The project on which this article reports was designed to be a study of asexual identities and stories of becoming. However, we also discovered, amongst a subset of participants, accounts of non-identification and non-becoming, whereby they recognised, engaged with, communicated and managed the term 'asexual', but ultimately rejected it as a central basis of identity. This was narrated as a journey, unfolding over the life course and mediated by social interaction. Key events, relationships and memorable encounters served as contingent factors that led actors away from rather than towards an asexual identity. *Stories of non-becoming* reflect a mirror image of the *stories of becoming* conventionally recognised within Symbolic Interactionism. They share similar features but in reverse: distorted, refracted and leading back towards uncertainty. This article examines stories of not becoming asexual, but the same principles could apply to other cases of unrealised, unwanted or unsuccessfully claimed social identities.

Contextual background

Becoming asexual

Asexuality, defined as a low or absent level of sexual desire and/or attraction (Bogaert 2012) is a meta-category encompassing a diverse range of orientations towards sex,

attraction, romance and gender (Carrigan 2011). Recently brought into the sociological domain, it has immediate relevance to questions of identity. Poststructuralist theorists view asexuality as a subversive challenge to the dominant discourses of 'sexu-society' (Przybylo 2011). Micro-politics of intimate citizenship (Plummer 2003) play out in online communities, where members mobilise a complex lexicon of subcategorical labels, such as grey-A, demi-, homo-, hetero- or bi-romantic or aromantic. Recently, there has been a turn towards qualitative studies of asexual people's lived experiences (Scherrer 2008). Carrigan (2011) outlines a sequence of stages of private self-reflection, through which individuals arrive at an asexual identity: feelings of difference, self-questioning, assumed pathology, self-clarification, biographical narration, and communal identity. However, such models still neglect the social interaction context in which these meanings are negotiated. Taking a Symbolic Interactionist approach, our study aimed to explore this missing dimension, through stories of micro-socially 'becoming' asexual.

Becoming ourselves

Symbolic Interactionism understands identity as a social process that unfolds over the life course. The concept of the career trajectory, theorised by Goffman (1961a), Becker (1963) and Strauss (1969), points to successive stages of identity formation, mediated by micro-level interaction, through which we develop social selves. Identity is not a fixed state of being but an ongoing process of *becoming*, whereby actors make progressive commitments to their roles (Becker, ibid.). The meanings attached to these, like all symbolic social objects, are negotiated through interaction (Blumer 1969). Identities are not just private and subjective but social and relational matters (Williams 2000), defined through dialogue with significant others (Mead 1934). Actors use these co-constructed narratives to make sense of themselves and perform identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987) by telling stories of the self (Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

Identity careers were defined by Strauss (1969) as a series of movements through a sequence of social positions, roles or statuses, resulting in self-transformation. Goffman (1961a: 119) referred to "*any social strand of any person's course through life*". This is both subjectively experienced and objectively organised, involving a "*patterned series of adjustments made by the individual*" to their placement and positioning by others (Becker 1952: 470). In organisational settings, such transitions may be normatively regulated by institutionalised status passages (Glaser and Strauss 1971) and marked by ceremonial rites of passage (Van Gennep 1909).

Typologies and taxonomies show how identity trajectories vary in their content, form and temporal patterning. They may involve a *sudden or dramatic change* that causes a radical reorganisation of the self (Athens 1995) and biographical disruption (Bury 1982), such as spinal injuries ending a sporting career (Smith and Sparkes 2008). Conversely, there may be a more protracted process of *gradual realisation* that a previous role no longer fits, such as the decision to leave religious orders (Ebaugh 1988). *Temporary disruptions* (Strauss, ibid) lead to the suspension of normal duties, for example in Parsons' (1951) sick role, while actors who *play an unexpected role successfully* (Strauss, ibid.), such as surviving a terrorist attack, find that it gives them a fresh perspective. *Coming out* is the interactional sequence triggered by the

proclamation of private information to a public audience (Strauss, ibid.), most obviously with non-normative sexualities. Finally, *turning points* or *moments of epiphany* (Strauss, ibid.) represent critical junctures in the life course. Pivotal events symbolically divide the life into a time 'before' and 'after' self-transformation, evoking revelatory 'awakenings' (DeGloma 2010).

Moral careers involve status evaluation by significant others (Goffman 1961a), such as 'moral entrepreneurs' (Becker 1963): powerful authority figures, such as police officers, who decide which labels are applied to whom, and how much they stick. *Deviant careers* involve a sequence of rule-breaking action being caught and publicly labelled, with consequences for self-identity. This can involve the management of stigma, or spoiled identity (Goffman 1963). Moral and/or deviant careers are familiar concepts in Symbolic Interactionism, widely applied in empirical studies of people becoming marijuana users (Becker 1953), homosexuals (McIntosh 1968), runners (Altheide and Pfuhl 1980), skydivers (Hardie-Bick 2005) and shy (Scott 2007).

Becoming a 'non-' versus non-becoming

However, implicit in these theories is the assumption that actors follow trajectories in pursuit of a positively defined identity. One learns how to play a role, present a self, or manage an attribute, as a symbolic social object (Blumer 1969). This applies even when the object is undesired, such as a stigmatising label: it is still a 'something' with a recognised presence, whose implications are inevitably 'fateful' (Goffman 1967) for social relations. Paradoxically, identities based on difference and otherness share this assumptive basis, being defined relationally, by contrast to something else that they are *not* (Williams 2000). The marginalised, 'abject other' (Kristeva 1982) exerts a powerfully strong presence through its conspicuous absence, bringing into question normatively proscribed identities.

Negatively defined identities can also be proudly claimed, and thereby become positive. Dramaturgical role distance (Goffman 1961b) allows actors to perform detachment from a resented 'negational self' (Chriss 1999), but with the motive of defensively asserting another, preferred identity. Thus Mullaney (2006) discusses voluntary virginity as an example of 'never identities' based on 'not doings', but emphasises that this involves active identity work in repudiating the potential attribute through 'demonstrated resistance' to compulsory sexuality. Meanwhile, Ebaugh (1988) outlined the process of role exit, or 'becoming an ex-', as a career trajectory of progressive disengagement from a previously significant identity. Thus just as one can *become a something*, one can *become a non-something*, an *ex-something*, or a *something-else*, and all of these are positively defined identities.

But what about those who *do not become* a something - who start to move along a career trajectory but never reach the end? The identity is still meaningful and reflectively considered, but does not turn out to be a centrally significant 'master status' (Hughes 1945). A persistent identity potential draws people along, but disengagement with one or more aspects of it leave this ultimately unfulfilled. Brekhus (1998) suggests there has been a lack of research into such 'unmarked' identities, even though they comprise the majority of social life. Most people are *not* things or types, and do not fall into remarkable categories, but we do not study them.

By contrast, 'marked' identities, which are deviant or extraordinary, command a disproportionate amount of sociological attention. This article responds to Brekhus's call for more empirical studies of unmarked identities, to foreground mundane and ordinary experiences.

Stages of non-becoming mirror those of conventional becoming, but appear as inverted mirror images: *not* finding out, *not* coming out, and so on. The process of identity repudiation and dismissal involves 'non-events' and 'non-issues', which are significant in their unremarkableness. Traversing these nebulous objects involves erratic journeys compared to the linear logic of becoming. Crucially, however, these are still socially negotiated processes, mediated by interaction with significant 'career others' (Lindesmith et al 1999).

Career contingencies - the social encounters and relationships influencing the likelihood of pursuing a trajectory (Becker 1963) - still occur, but instead of encouraging progressive commitments, support non-identification. Some social identities are less discernable and harder to imagine as realistically 'possible selves' (Markus and Nurius 1986). They may be less culturally valued, ratified and sanctioned, and so unavailable to claim, or reluctantly attributed by others. Their meanings may be unfamiliar, fuzzier or harder to negotiate in interaction, and the paths towards them less well-trodden. Identities may be picked up, toyed with but ultimately dropped, or put aside to use as mere 'adjuncts' or 'reserves' (Gross and Stone 1964) when other roles become more salient (Stryker 1968). Moral entrepreneurs may intervene to dissuade rather than encourage deviants to engage with labels. There may be no sudden, epiphanous turning point towards the new identity, but conversely, a gradual drift away from it.

Journeys of negatively *non-becoming* are therefore important to study as a phenomenon in their own right, which are qualitatively different from journeys of positively becoming.

Methodology

We recruited participants from asexual online communities such as AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network), Tumblr and Twitter, but also the local press, community centres and LGBTQ groups. We hoped to reach a greater diversity of people, avoiding the usual demographic bias of asexuality research (Carrigan 2011). Despite this, the majority of our sample were white, female, college-educated and aged 18-29. Volunteers described a range of orientations, including hetero-, bi-, pan- and homo-romantic; aromantic; grey-A; demi; polyamorous and sex-averse. 150 people contacted us, of whom we selected 50 by random number generator.

The biographical interviews (on which we focus in the article) asked participants to reflect on their identity over the life course, focusing on how and to what extent asexuality had affected it. Their unstructured form, as 'conversations to a purpose' (Burgess 1984), asked interviewees simply to "*Tell me about the key events and experiences in your life where asexuality has been relevant.*" Author B conducted most of the interviews via Skype, given the international dispersal of the sample, though some were conducted face-to-face within the UK.

The diaries were kept for 14 consecutive days, in all but one case after the interview. Diaries are well-suited to exploring the micro-level of everyday life (Elliott 1997) and intimate relationships (Gabb 2009). We asked participants to consider three questions each day. These were to recall: a social interaction that had made them aware of their asexuality; an occasion when they had felt close to someone or something; and an experience concerning asexuality that had felt difficult or uncomfortable. Participants were encouraged to write free-text responses, and the electronic format of the documents meant they could take as much space as they wished.

Asexuality as non-identity

Contrary to expectations, one striking finding was that asexuality was not always experienced as a social identity. Although all participants had volunteered because they felt the term described them in some way, some regarded asexuality as an attribute of marginal importance, not centrality, to their sense of self. While it was useful as a pragmatic description of behaviour, or a label for their feelings, they did not claim it as a fully fledged identity. This was not a universal rule across the sample, and some participants did express a strong asexual ('Ace') identity. Delphi said, "*I think it's a very big part of how I see myself... if I had to come up with five words, it would definitely be one of them. I don't see any aspect of my life that would really have been the same if I hadn't been asexual.*" We do not wish to underplay the importance of asexual identification for these people, and report on their experiences elsewhere (Dawson, McDonnell and Scott, in press). However, the focus of this paper is on a notable subset of the sample (seven out of 50) who resisted such strong associations.

Often, asexuality was not a foundational basis of self-identity because it was negatively defined, as a lack or absence of sexual desire and/or attraction. Participants spoke about it as an emptiness, a gap in their lives where something was missing, although not missed. In terms of life trajectories, asexuality was a path not chosen, a social action not performed, a way of being not practised. When asked about asexuality, there was literally nothing to talk about:

> *I haven't been very militant about pursuing it. I am very reluctant to define myself with a negative and I feel that's exactly what asexuality does. You're defining yourself by what you're not.* (Immy)

> *I see asexuality as something that defines who you are, but because it's something you don't do... there's millions of things I don't do, and I don't go telling people those things either... You know, I don't go round telling people that I don't like dusting!* (Nate)

With hindsight, this seemed obvious. If social identities are defined by claimed attributes, values and preferences (Jenkins 2004), then how (and why) would people form an identity around something that does not exist and has never been there? Although there are existentialist philosophical arguments for regarding 'nothingness' as a conscious state of being with which one should engage in 'good faith' (Sartre 1943), this was not a meaningful interpretation in this group's lived experiences.

Other participants acknowledged asexuality but saw it as a relatively insignificant aspect of their lives. It was a partial and peripheral, but not central, feature of a multi-dimensional self (Lindesmith et al 1999), and ultimately of limited relevance:

> *It doesn't feel like an identity much. It feels like something that's part of me, but it's not who I am.* (Sophie)

> *It is a part of who I am. But, you know, it's in with all the other parts, so it doesn't rule my life… It just 'is'.* (Ed)

In Stryker's (1968) structural Symbolic Interactionism, identity is imagined as a hierarchical cluster of roles, varying in two dimensions. *Salience* refers to the prominence and likelihood of enacting any particular role rather than others, while *commitment* indicates the depth of meaning attached to it. This group explained that asexuality was less important to them than other, more salient characteristics, and/or less socially visible:

> *I have other things that are more deeply ingrained in me that I know are true and important… I'm a teacher, that's a big thing. And I'm whatever, an empathetic person, a curious person... it means more to me to use those terms to think about what makes me who I am.* (Lizzie)

> *Actually, because nobody else knows that [I'm asexual], it's fairly meaningless. Nobody else would say I have that identity because I don't, to them. If identity is the way you identify yourself to the world - I don't.* (Lisa)

They then felt uncommitted to asexuality as a role-identity, describing it as a 'non-issue', unimportant and comparatively boring:

> *It's not really important because it's - asexuality, it's basically a non-issue from the start so it doesn't really matter. I don't really care, because I think there are so many more important things in life and since sex isn't important to me, I don't think about the lack of it either. I think about what I have to read for next week, or I think about how many pages I have to draft to my supervisor for next month for my thesis, and I think about what types of courses I'm going to take later in the autumn... that's what my life is about right now and so I don't really care about the non-issue that asexuality is.* (Kath)

Non-becoming is still a journey, however, and in the remainder of this paper, we show how these seven non-identified participants had reached this point. Occasional

quotations from others are included for the purpose of comparison, but the main focus is on this subset. We suggest three phases in this process, identifying the relevant career contingency factors (key events and interactions) within each that contributed to an overall pattern of non-progression. Mirroring inversely the sequential stages of becoming, the accounts convey a gathering momentum that led actors *away* from the identity that could have been. Through a process of cumulative attrition, everyone began from the same starting point of potential positive identification, but progressed to differing extents, additional numbers falling off the path at every step.

It should be noted that this is an ideal typical model that, for the purposes of explanatory clarity, presents an artificially neat chronology. In reality, non-becoming trajectories are messy and do not unfold in a smooth, linear fashion. Stages can occur simultaneously rather than consecutively (e.g. dipping one's toe into online communities whilst not coming out to family), although some do imply chronological sequencing ('not finding out' must logically precede 'not communicating'), and people may move erratically between them, trying out different ideas, returning to places and changing their minds. If we imagine a line of stepping-stones over a river, people may take one or two steps before turning back or falling off, hop on and off the same stones, move hesitantly back and forth, or reach the end but not make the final jump to shore. The stones may be arranged non-linearly, like a mosaic, encompassing an infinite array of circuitous routes. Participants' recounted stories were not coherent narratives but complex, entangled plotlines, further complicated by the specific life circumstances of the traveller. Thus in the following discussion, some participants appear at more than one stage, although others illustrate one in particular.

1. Non-issues: false starts

Asexuality must be recognised and engaged with before it can be accepted (or consciously dismissed). The first trajectory stage of *becoming* asexual involves a period of self-questioning, discovery and making sense of the term 'asexual', just as Carrigan (2011) outlined, although we add that this is a socially interactive process. Participants in our study who did positively self-identify realised that the concept was relevant after comparing themselves to significant others in their social milieux, from friends and family to media representations. The sexual imperative (Przybylo 2011) was culturally pervasive: as Liam said, *"It just comes up. It's just everywhere."*

This echoes classic models of social selfhood, whereby actors construct 'looking glass selves' (Cooley 1902) by viewing themselves from the perspective of others. Regarding oneself as a symbolic object (Blumer 1969) allows the actor to discern an image of 'Me' that is publicly perceived and socially consequential, in contrast to the privately subjective 'I' (Mead 1934). Many participants came to think of themselves as different through social comparisons to the generalized (sexual) other who confronted them throughout their everyday lives. As Milkie (1999) argues, 'reflected appraisals' – beliefs about what others believe or consider important – can affect self-image, even if the individual does not believe or value the same things themselves.

Non-difference and normalization

However, different experiences of interaction can lead to a non-awareness of asexuality. Reflected appraisals that do *not* strike the individual as incongruent with their own self-image are unlikely to highlight the attribute as remarkable. Thus for our seven non-identified participants, one contingency was that they might encounter others who prompted comparisons based on similarity rather than difference, as dialectical aspects of identity (Lawler 2008). As Sophie explained, this could have a counteractive, normalizing effect:

> *I think that's part of the reason I didn't have any suspicions that I was asexual, because I was still interested in romantic relationships. And so that was very normalizing for me... when I was in high school, people that were my friends didn't talk about sex very much either, for religious reasons... I don't know if it was just around me, or if that was true in general, or if I just lived in such a small, conservative town that nobody thought it was important to talk about it.* (Sophie)

Unmarked identity

A second contingency concerned whether or not actors were aware of the word 'asexual' and its potential as an identity category. This resonates with Brekhus's (1998) discussion of marked and unmarked identities: whereas those who felt different from significant others and then came across the term might use it to explain this otherness, those for whom the label was absent formed identities around alternative attributes. Asexuality was perceived not as a central figure in their lives, but as an unmarked background.

Lisa, in her late thirties, was older than most of our participants who positively self-identified, and reflected on this generational difference. Lisa described herself as 'asocial' and introverted, and said her young adulthood had preceded the Internet age. Until recently, she had not encountered the term 'asexual' in public discourses, much less used it in her social circles. Instead she had built up a strong occupational identity, with asexuality remaining dormant as an unexplored blind spot:

> *In my day-to-day life at the moment, nobody knows that I am asexual... It's never been discussed and I would never bring it up so it's not an explicit feature of my life at all. I don't really think about it and that has been the case for quite a while... I didn't have a word to describe my lack of attraction. Before reading the stuff on AVEN and online, I wouldn't even have had the concept of identity - there is a whole language and way of thinking about things which is just completely not part of my thinking.* (Lisa)

2. Non-events: communicative negation

For those who passed through the stage of (not) 'feeling different' and (not) 'finding out' about asexuality, the next step on the trajectory was *not communicating* or *miscommunicating* the identity in ways that negated its existence. Whether or not asexuality emerged as a symbolic social object (Blumer 1969) depended on its negotiated meaning in situated interaction contexts: it was only when the term was

invoked and used that it became pragmatically effective, or 'real in its consequences' (Thomas and Thomas 1928). To the extent that it held shared meanings, the object was communicated successfully, but often this conversation of gestures (Mead 1934) was interrupted. Thus a second set of contingencies concerned the extent to which asexuality 'called out' the same set of interpretive meanings in actor and audience (ibid.), and was procedurally (in-)consequential (Schegloff 1992).

Non-announcements and misplacements

Identity claims are negotiated between actors and audiences in social encounters, as occasions of joint social action (Blumer 1969). In Stone's (1962) model, actors make 'announcements' about their current roles and characteristics, but these claims may not be accepted. Audiences make their own interpretations, and their attributions or 'placements' of the actor may locate them in different social categories. An incongruity between announcements and placements renders an identity claim unsuccessful, echoing Goffman's distinctions between virtual and actual identities (1963), or impressions given versus given off (1959).

Some participants explained that they had attempted to engage with the asexual identity category, but that others had been unreceptive to it, or defined them differently. Hostile reactions to coming out were occasionally reported, although these tended to backfire by making actors more defiant. More often, asexual peers offered certain prescriptions of the identity that did not resonate with the actor's personal experience. Kath explained how she had struggled to locate herself within the array of sub-lexical categories presented by the online communities. She felt obliged to 'label myself' and give the 'correct response' in order to be accepted into this group, but remained privately sceptical:

> *Well, I have been thinking about this because what I've found out with this AVEN website is that people label themselves to a great degree – you know, they have sub-categories of everything. And so I really tried thinking about that and so I would sort of say that I'm probably hetero-romantic... [But) I mean sometimes they're just really confusing. I had to Google, basically and got to some kind of Wikipedia article… before learning all the, what do you call it - what they all sort of mean and not mixing them up. I know what I am, but if other people need me to label myself I also need to know what they mean in order to give the, I don't know, correct response....* (Kath)

Thus even if the asexual identity is personally meaningful, actors may not be able to develop it as a recognised social identity, and vice versa. Lack of audience validation is an important contingency factor mediating non-progression. Failing to be placed in a desired category, and/or being placed in the wrong one, means that attempted identity announcements remain limited in their procedural consequentiality.

Non-legitimation: guardians and gatekeepers

Related to this issue of (in)validation is the role of people in positions of authority, such as doctors, teachers and religious mentors. Becker's (1963) model of the deviant career pointed to 'moral entrepreneurs', whose status allowed them to make

influential judgements about the actor's fate. Police officers, for example, could determine whether or not a deviant activity was classified as a crime and the individual treated as a criminal. However, in careers of non-becoming, moral entrepreneurs wield power differently, as guardians and gatekeepers: they can block access to social categories, denying actors the right to self-define in their preferred ways:

> *I thought it was a good idea just in case... Because people do have hormonal imbalances...Maybe it was because of that, so I went for the blood test. And I was absolutely convinced they would find something wrong... A couple of weeks later, rang up the surgery. 'Yeah, the tests are back: perfectly normal.'... I was a bit disappointed, yeah, 'cos I thought there'd be a fix.* (Nate)

Thus trajectories of non-becoming, just like those of becoming, can involve key events and fateful encounters, which are recalled as memorable turning points (Strauss 1969). However, the effect of this is reversed: instead of reinforcing a burgeoning identity, they quash it, turning the actor off towards a different path.

Coming out: non-events and non-responses

A final contingency at this stage is whether the actor decides to 'come out' to their significant others, and the reactions that ensue. Strauss (1969) saw coming out as a means of self-transformation, involving the public proclamation of a private identity: one may *self*-identify with a group or category, but it is only when audiences bear witness to the testimony of this that one's *social* identity is transformed. Stories of the self must be 'tellable' (Smith and Sparkes 2008) in the audience's eyes, with conventional features that provide shared horizons of expectation (Tonkin 1995). Thus Plummer (1995) identified coming out stories as a distinct genre of biographical self-narratives, characterised by themes of 'suffering, surviving and surpassing' social stigma and triumphing over adversity. Meanwhile the situations in which coming out dramatically unfolds may be recalled as epiphanous turning points (Strauss, ibid.) in the process of becoming.

Not coming out

Stories of non-becoming, by contrast, feature the absence of a 'coming out' event, or its meaning being defined as insignificant. While for those holding normative sexualities 'coming out' is impossible (i.e. you don't have to 'come out' as heterosexual to be recognised as heterosexual), for our participants 'coming out' could be one part of a positively held asexual identity. However, many of our participants compared their experiences to those of other groups within the LGBTQ array, whose positively-defined sexual orientations made coming out important, politically and personally. By contrast, their own negatively defined status did not lend itself inevitably to this social action. Viewing asexuality as a non-issue led them to disregard proclamation as an irrelevance:

> *I wouldn't even say asexuality was that kind of thing... 'Cos homosexuality - sex is still a big issue. Heterosexuality - having sex is a big issue... But asexuality -*

sex isn't a big issue. So why do you need to go round telling people about it? I don't see it as a big deal at all. (Nate)

Others agreed that coming out was socially unnecessary, serving no pragmatic purpose:

> *I feel like I wouldn't get anything necessarily helpful out of it... I had toyed with the idea in the past of sitting all my friends down and telling them all at the same time and it being this whole thing, which - it just doesn't feel like useful to me because the idea of coming out is weird to me.* (Lizzie)

The absence of a transformative event meant that nothing subsequently changed in the participants' everyday lives. The term remained unused in communicative social action, and the identity category it invoked lay dormant. Related to this was a lack of political activism, with a reluctance to reduce oneself to a misrepresentative label:

> *I don't think I would ever go to like, an AVEN event. I don't want it to be that huge, of like my identity... It's just, it's something incidental, I guess, which plays into me not necessarily wanting to come out to people, because it makes it feel like it's bigger than it is to me. It's incidental, so it's not really something to tell people.* (Lizzie)

Non-response as anti-climax

Some participants attempted to come out, but the reactions of significant others dampened the effect. Whereas the social ratification of a proclaimed identity can create a liberating sense of legitimation (Rubin et al 1993), a *non-response*, or disappointing one, can close off this interpretative pathway. The 'dramatic self-change' that Athens (1995) described cannot occur if its staging is not supported by a receptive audience.

However, this also depended on the actor's interpretation of the encounter: the same (non-)reaction could be experienced differently, with contrasting implications for identity. Individual life circumstances and current priorities affected these interpretations. For example, asexually-identifed Leah, in her early twenties, "*had all this worry built up inside me*" and welcomed the bathos of acceptance as a delightful relief ("*To have it be a complete non-event was wonderful... we just went on with what we were doing*"). By contrast, non-identified Ed, in his forties and less concerned with peer approval, interpreted it as confirmation that his asexuality was a non-issue. Nonchalance, bland indifference and dull inconsequentiality punctured and deflated what, for Leah, would have been a critical moment:

> *Errr, well, it actually didn't go that bad. [Mum] didn't see seem shocked or anything by it, wasn't upset; she just accepted it. And as for my ex... I don't think it's something we talk about too much.* (Ed)

3. Non-consolidation: managing deviance and stigma

The third stage of the non-becoming trajectory concerns how actors experienced their asexuality as a socially significant attribute over the longer term. Those who had passed through the previous stages - engaging with the identity category,

communicating it and having it socially ratified - could nevertheless end their journeys here, before the final stop, and not consolidate an asexual identity. Further contingency factors arose as actors learned to manage the impact of asexuality on social relations, for the strategies they devised could reduce the attribute's fatefulness. Rather than progressively committing to asexuality as a deviant career (Becker 1963), they drifted away (cf. Matza 1964) and pursued other pathways to identity. Asexuality remained peripheral to their sense of self, and was not consolidated into a centrally defining 'master status' (Hughes 1945).

Non-permanent identification

The first contingency here was the impact of finding out about asexuality, especially learning the word, upon actors' sense of self. Medical sociologists have documented the subjective importance to patients of receiving a diagnosis for contested conditions (Glenton 2003). Professional validation, backed by the authority of a 'scientific' institution, provides legitimation of both the illness's reality and the patient's credibility, allowing access to the Parsonian sick role. Social identities built around health statuses are consolidated by the impact of the diagnostic moment (Jutel 2009), as a biographical turning point in the social process of becoming sick.

However, finding out about an unwanted or repudiated label can have a much less powerful effect upon identity and social relations, failing to ignite and fuel a deviant career. As with the anti-climactic experience of coming out, discursive verification is less of a majestic firework than a damp squib:

> *My perception of myself has not necessary changed. I feel like I understand myself but I have been the same this whole time and so, in that sense it is also sort of, I don't want to say insignificant because it's important, but it's not like my day-to-day life will change.* (Lizzie)

Many participants, within and outwith our non-identifying sub-sample, recounted a 'Eureka!' moment when they first stumbled across the word 'asexual', and the official validation of their experiences came as a relief. Yet, for many, this was a short-lived euphoria, which did not lead to making progressive commitments to an asexual identity. Rather than experiencing a dramatic moment of epiphany (Strauss 1969), participants described a more mundane, pragmatic process of gathering and digesting information, then moving on. It was as if they simply needed to confirm their hunch, 'tick the box' and stow the name away in their vocabulary of motives (Mills 1940) for when it might be needed. Finding out was just a pragmatically useful means to an end rather than a rewarding end in itself. It represented a transitory stage within a broader journey of identity exploration: a springboard on to other things:

> *[I thought] "Yeah. That's useful to know, yeah". You know, like finding the diagnosis for some ailment you've had for a long, long time. It's just nice to know. And you just get on managing it for the rest of your life.* (Nate)

Tied in with this was an idea of provisionality and impermanence. Asexuality was not regarded as a definitive pathway or one-way street, but rather a situationally variable

state. Actors could drift (Matza 1964) in and out of this, making pragmatic choices about when (not) to be asexual:

> *I think, because I've switched back and forth, it's become more of a tool... a hat that I can take on and off when it seems appropriate... I don't like the idea of restraining myself to one thing. I prefer to think of it as like, this is how I experience things now and there is possibility that I might experience things differently in the future.* (Lizzie)

Invisibility and unknownaboutness

A second contingency factor at this stage was the extent to which actors believed their asexuality was apparent to the generalized other (Mead 1934) and must be acknowledged in their interactions. In his account of stigma, Goffman (1963) makes a distinction between attributes that are discredit*ing* - already visible on the person and undeniable, such as physical disabilities, and those that are discredit*able* - hidden and concealable, such as having a criminal record or mental health condition. The 'knownaboutness' of the former means that they must inevitably be dealt with in social encounters, whereas the latter allow the possibility of 'passing' as 'normal' (someone not possessing the characteristic). Managing a discreditable stigma involves techniques of 'information control', as actors make strategic decisions about what (not) to reveal about themselves. However, for our seven non-identifiers, this circumspection was not motivated by fear or shame, but rather a view that their asexuality was not anyone else's business:

> *I feel like all kinds of sexuality, or lack of sexuality, belong in the private sphere... I'm always talking to people - individually, one on one conversations, emails that sort of thing, but I don't feel the need to make it a public declaration or statement. I do believe that asexuality should have an invisible component.... I am very happy with the hard-won perspective on life I have acquired over the past couple years, but that does not make me confident that I should be anyone's spokesperson!* (Immy)

Extinguishing interpretations

The final contingency here is the interpretations offered by the significant others (Mead 1934), especially friends, with whom the actor chooses to socialise. Such figures are important in the formation of any social identity, as reference groups against whom actors develop a sense of relational selfhood (Williams 2000). Furthermore, in any identity trajectory, career others (Lindesmith et al 1999) mediate the individual's progression along sequential stages. However, in cases of deviant or stigmatised identities, significant others are particularly important to those who find themselves positioned as outsiders to social norms. Goffman (1963: 32) said that fellow victims provide a backstage haven of comfort and moral support, "*a circle of lament into which he [sic] can withdraw*".

In Becker's (1963) model of the deviant career, peer group members play a key role in negotiating the interpretative meaning of deviant activities (such as smoking

marijuana) and altering the actor's perception of the associated identity. When significant others positively endorse an otherwise stigmatised way of life, this makes it easier for individuals to become progressively committed to it. Logically, then, the same must happen in reverse: negative, neutral or normalising interpretations can decrease the appeal and potency of a deviant identity.

Goffman (1963) identified two social groups from whom the stigmatised find support. The 'own' are people who share the attribute and understand the social predicaments commonly faced. The 'wise' are those who do not share the attribute but are nonetheless knowledgeable and sympathetic to its implications. Both of these groups featured in our participants' accounts as significant others whose attitudes had *discouraged* them from developing an asexual identity.

Online communities, such as AVEN, functioned as the main 'own' group. Many participants said that when discovering asexuality, they felt relief, comfort and reassurance from like-minded others who understood them. However, amongst our non-identifying sub-sample, these feelings were short-lived, and online encounters only fleeting. As with the prior stage of engaging with asexual discourses, participants described more instrumental motives: they pragmatically took what they needed from the group before moving on. Furthermore, the 'own' group's politicised interpretation of asexuality could be unappealing. Few seemed willing to commit to long-term membership, and this was connected with a generally apathetic attitude towards online activism:

> *I remember when I was in the first, fledgling stages of this, I went on AVEN a lot and I would read it and I would think about joining it, but there was something just, I didn't necessarily like. Not about AVEN, but about the idea of sort of subscribing myself to the asexual community, and having a stamp, and being like, "I'm asexual, I am part of the community, I am part of this movement." (Lizzie)*

> *There are YouTubers who are passionate about asexuality and explaining what asexuality is, [but] I didn't want to become one of those people, so I've been very hesitant to use the term, even now. I think that I'm not necessarily engaging my relationships with asexuality very much. Kind of on purpose, 'cause I'm trying to keep it all in my head, kind of keep it a little under control, 'cause it doesn't really need to be out... I guess I don't see a whole lot of ties with asexuality outside of myself, and so I don't have to work with my asexuality as I navigate friendships or my family or anything like that. (Sophie)*

The 'wise' group comprised friends, family and particularly relationship partners, who were not asexual themselves but nonetheless sympathetic and accepting. Many participants had been or were currently involved in practices of intimacy (Jamieson 1998), ranging from romantic flirtations to casual sexual encounters, polyamorous arrangements, and long-term monogamous relationships. For those who identified as asexual, this required explicit discussion and negotiation over whether, to what extent and how sex would (not) figure in the relationships (Dawson, McDonnell and Scott, in press). For the non-identified, however, accommodating partners were those who shared their disinterest in sex and disinclination to talk about it. Together, they tacitly agreed to co-define this absence as a non-issue:

I don't know if it's just pure luck, but I've never gone out with people who were highly sexed anyway... You know, you'd start of being all enthusiastic and after a while it would just peter out and neither or you would be particularly bothered about it; you'd rather stay at home and have a cup of tea, watch telly…. So it was easy. (Nate)

Conclusion

Stories of non-becoming reflect an inverted mirror image of the stories of becoming recognised by Symbolic Interactionism. While we know that social identities develop as interactionally-mediated careers, leading to positively becoming a something, non-something, or ex-something, little is known about the 'unmarked' process of *non-becoming*, whereby actors start but do not continue along a path towards an identity. We can discern a non-linear trajectory of stages, each involving career contingencies that influence *non-progression*. Interactions with significant career others co-define the identity's emergent meaning as non-relevant, lacking procedural consequentiality. While most embark on the initial stages, a process of cumulative attrition means that many do not reach their journey's end. Instead of making progressive commitments to a burgeoning identity, actors become disengaged and uncommitted.

The case of asexuality presents an illustrative example. Participants pragmatically considered, communicated and managed the term 'asexual', but ultimately rejected it as a core identity. This involved three socially interactive stages of (1) non-awareness through low role hierarchy salience, (2) communicative negation through non-announcements and misplacements, non-legitimation, and anti-climactic non-responses; and (3) non-consolidation of a deviant career, through non-permanent identification and potency-extinguishing interpretations.

The principles outlined here hold a wider applicability to other under-researched social identities that are unmarked, unwanted, unsuccessfully claimed, rejected or repudiated. For example, while atheism (as positive disbelief) is much debated, agnosticism (the mere absence of faith) is not. We need to learn more about why most people *do not* become social types rather than why some do. This model of a non-becoming trajectory shows how even negational symbolic social objects (non-issues, non-events and non-identities) are constituted through social interaction and mediated by a myriad of career contingencies, emerging from encounters and relationships throughout the life course.

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