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Asexuality and epistemic injustice: a gendered perspective

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on original qualitative research, I argue that the concept of ‘epistemic injustice’ proposed by the feminist philosopher Miranda Fricker, and located within a long genealogy of Black feminist scholarship, can be used sociologically to help understand the lived experiences of asexual people. I show how participants’ accounts of their asexual subjectivities were frequently denied, dismissed and over-written. However, I argue that these experiences were heavily *gendered*, in that asexual women were subject to epistemic injustices to a degree and in ways that their male counterparts were not, and that this must be understood within the power relations of hetero-patriarchy. These epistemic injustices revolved around old yet prevailing constructions of femininity and womanhood as ‘naturally’ asexual, passive, and lacking agency. When asexual men experienced epistemic injustice, this was rooted in familiar understandings of masculinity as necessitating an active and desiring sexuality. Using Fricker’s elucidation of hermeneutical and testimonial forms of epistemic injustice, I show how asexuality remains a culturally unfamiliar hermeneutical frame in a context of ‘compulsory sexuality’ but also how stories of asexuality are ‘heard’ based on the gendered (and unequal) distribution of testimonial credibility.

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Introduction

In 2018, the UK government published the results of a nationwide survey of LGBT+ life in the UK (Government Equalities Office, 2018). An under-reported and generally overlooked aspect of the research was the fact that asexual¹ respondents often had ‘worse’ outcomes than those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual or queer. For example, asexual respondents reported the lowest life satisfaction scores out of all the sexual orientation groups, and were the least likely to say they felt comfortable living in the UK. By a significant margin, asexual respondents were also the group most likely to say that they had avoided being open about their sexuality out of fear of a negative response.

I argue that these findings might be contextualized using the concept of ‘epistemic injustice’ (Fricker, 2007). That is, asexual people face specific harms and violences in terms of their capacity to ‘know’, to ‘speak’ and to be ‘heard’ in relation to their subjectivities and lived experiences². Drawing on original qualitative research, I discuss the ways in which asexual people consistently had their accounts of themselves denied, dismissed, or overwritten by more ‘authoritative’ voices and discourses. Crucially, however, these were also intensely *gendered* experiences. The specific modalities by which testimonies were denied and overwritten were gendered, but asexual women (and agender and gender-neutral participants who talked about their experiences about being read

socially as women) also experienced much more insidious and aggressive epistemic injustices than their male counterparts. I thus argue that while we might consider asexuality to be subject to epistemic injustices, taking gender into account is also paramount.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I clarify my usage of the term epistemic injustice, and how it has been recently applied in other empirical settings. I then discuss some of the empirical asexuality literature where we might find accounts of what could be termed epistemic injustice, but until now have been insufficiently theorized. Next I introduce my own research, before going on to present the findings. I identify four modalities of epistemic injustice that asexual women (and those with agender/gender-neutral identities), in my research, experienced: women as 'just' romantic; naturalizing low sexual desire in women; the discourse of frigidity, and the participant as a sexual challenge to be overcome. I then turn to the experiences of asexual men and those with agender and gender-neutral identities but who talked about their experiences of being read socially as men. I discuss an epistemic injustice faced by these participants: namely that asexuality was a 'cover' for something else. These participants were also subject to lamentations around 'missing out', but I argue that this was not necessarily an epistemic injustice. In the discussion and conclusion, I draw out how the findings relate to hermeneutical and testimonial elements of epistemic injustice.

Epistemic injustice

Far from being the apolitical study of truth, epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why. (Collins, 2000, p. 270)

The epistemic – relating to knowledge and to knowing – is an important dimension of oppression and marginalization. Black feminists have long been writing on how knowledge is profoundly social and relational – that is, how Knowledge comes to be formed, who is heard and afforded credibility, who is ignored and doubted, must be understood as part of the power relations of white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism (Alcoff, 1991; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1982; Spivak, 1988). Many of these ideas were brought together under the concept of 'epistemic injustice' by the white feminist philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007). However, as McKinnon (2016) notes, Fricker's work has been taken up much more widely in philosophy than that of many Black feminist scholars in what is a deeply ironic example of epistemic injustice itself. Thus, whilst drawing on Fricker's naming and elucidation of epistemic injustice in this article, the indebtedness to and location within a genealogy of Black scholarship must be acknowledged foremost.

Epistemic injustice refers to harms perpetuated against marginalized groups specifically in relation to knowledge, and in their capacity as knowers. Fricker (2007) argues that epistemic injustice comes in two forms. Firstly, *testimonial* injustice relates to how some people from particular marginalized social groups are not listened to, or are denied credibility or believability, because of *who they are*, or are *seen to be*. Their testimonies are dismissed, or are replaced or overwritten by more 'authoritative' voices (that is, the voices of those higher up gendered, classed, racialized and able-bodied hierarchies) and discourses. Secondly, *hermeneutical* injustice occurs when a person struggles to render their experiences or subjectivities intelligible to themselves or to others, because there are insufficient discourses or interpretive frames with which to do so (or these discourses are unevenly distributed). As a paradigmatic example of hermeneutical epistemic injustice, Fricker uses the example of a woman experiencing sexual harassment prior to the emergence of 'Sexual Harassment' as a discursive concept, and thus being unable to make sense of and communicate her experiences because of this.

There has been extensive subsequent philosophical engagement with the concept of epistemic injustice (for example, see Kidd, Medina, & Pohlhaus, 2017 for an edited collection). Beyond Fricker's outlining of the concept, above, I do not delve into these intricacies and nuances here as my deployment is intended as a *sociological application* rather than a philosophical debate – that is, as an applied concept to help us interpret patterns in the social world.

Empirical applications of the concept of epistemic injustice to date have largely been in the realms of health-care and medicine, where epistemic injustices in clinical interactions are often perpetuated against particular kinds of bodies and patients such as pregnant women (Freeman, 2015), those experiencing chronic pain (Buchman, Ho, & Goldberg, 2017) and those experiencing mental distress (Newbigging & Ridley, 2018). Within the fields of gender and sexualities studies, epistemic injustice as a concept has been taken up in some limited ways: for example, in accounting for the micro-aggressions faced by bisexual people (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014) and for trans people's experiences of 'gaslighting' wherein they are made to second-guess their realities (McKinnon, 2017), as well as a lens through which to consider the ways in which autistic people are denied capacity in sex education (MacKenzie, 2018). Of course, as the longer genealogy of epistemic injustice would suggest, there is a huge corpus of empirical work detailing experiences of denial, dismissal and discrediting of marginalized groups but here I have focused on scholarship that explicitly uses and applies the concept of epistemic injustice. In this article, I take this in a new empirical direction in considering its application to (gendered) experiences of asexuality.

Asexuality and epistemic injustices

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing body of interdisciplinary asexuality scholarship (for example, Bogaert, 2004; Carrigan, 2011; Cerankowski & Milks, 2014; Dawson, Scott, & McDonnell, 2018; Cuthbert, 2019). This is beginning to document the negative reactions faced by asexual people – although of course, asexual people have been communicating these experiences outside academic forums for years now (see for example, Decker, 2014). Many of these experiences have what could be considered an epistemic dimension. MacNeela and Murphy (2015) discuss various 'denial narratives' from others, whilst Robbins, Low, and Query (2016) present examples of 'disbelief' and 'dismissal', Scott, McDonnell, and Dawson (2016) speak of 'communicative negation' and Gupta (2017) uses the term 'denial of epistemic authority'. The accounts are strikingly similar across these studies: participants report being told by others they were confused, that they had not yet met the right person, that it was just a phase, that they were 'late bloomers', that it was a disorder, or that asexuality simply did not exist. These experiences could be so powerful that they sometimes worked to prevent a person from claiming an asexual identity at all (Scott et al., 2016).

In this article, I build on this previous work but also expand on it in some key ways. Specifically I argue that there is value in characterizing such dismissal and denials as 'epistemic injustice'. Naming it as such emphasizes that there is a systemic *wrong* being perpetuated related to wider power structures, rather than a transaction between individuals, where one may simply be 'prejudiced' or lack understanding. Key to this is highlighting the ways in which these experiences might be gendered. This has been under-explored in previous literature and as I argue in the empirical sections of this article, this is an essential dimension of the injustices being perpetuated. This connects to and seeks to address a general need to 'gender' the asexuality literature (Cuthbert, 2019; Gupta, 2019), as well as consider intersectional experiences of asexuality beyond the figure of 'the asexual' (Cuthbert, 2017; 2021a).

Methods

The data on which this article is based comes from research on gendered experiences of asexuality and sexual abstinence. However, in this article I focus only on the experiences of asexual participants³ (n = 21 out of a total of n = 33)⁴. Participants took part in semi-structured interviews⁵, chosen to allow participants to talk in-depth about their experiences. The interviews explored a range of themes pertaining to the how gender might be 'done' (or not) in the context of asexuality, as well as how asexual experiences might be shaped or impacted by gender. Twelve participants also went on to complete a multi-media notebook, and a follow-up interview (see Cuthbert (2021b) for details of these), but the data in this article comes from the first interviews.

Participants were based in the central belt of Scotland (n = 13) and in England⁶ (North East (n = 1); West Midlands (n = 1); South East (n = 3); South West (n = 2); London (n = 1)), and were recruited via recruitment advertisements placed in a variety of offline and online sites (such as, libraries, community centres, LGBT societies, platonic dating websites, and social media). The advertisements called for those over 18 who identified as asexual or did not feel much or any sexual attraction.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 53, with most participants in their mid-late 20s and early 30s. The participants were fairly diverse in terms of socio-economic status, although a limitation of the research is its overwhelming whiteness – only two participants out of 21 self-identified as an ethnicity other than white. The whiteness of both asexual communities and asexuality research, as well as the concept of asexuality itself, is an endemic problem (Foster, Eklund, Brewster, Walker, & Candon, 2019; Hawkins Owen, 2014; Vaid-Menon, 2014) and responsibility for this needs to be borne in part by white asexual researchers, myself included. The analysis in this article undoubtedly suffers from its lack of attenuation towards race, especially since racism is a key vector of epistemic injustice (Medina, 2013).

The asexual participants had a variety of gender identities and expressions. Around half identified in binary terms as man/male or woman/female, whilst half identified with terms like agender, gender-neutral and genderless (see Cuthbert, 2019). Some of these latter participants saw themselves as trans, but most did not, and many of these participants still retained a connection to binary gender in the sense that they were read by others as a man or a woman, and contextualized their experiences as such. So for example, in my analysis I include participants who had an agender identity but talked about being treated as a woman in relational encounters and social situations, alongside participants who were women. To be clear, this is in no way to suggest that agender or gender-neutral participants were 'really' men or women, but my presentation of the analysis is, I feel, responsive to and respectful of participants' own framings, and also speaks to the ways in which binary and patriarchal understandings of gender still structure the social world. I use pseudonyms chosen by participants, and refer to all participants by their stated pronouns.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. A coding framework was constructed based on my research questions as well as some early transcripts; this was iteratively revised as I coded all of the transcripts. From this, the theme of what I conceptualized as 'voice overridden' emerged as particularly significant. This theme was then subject to more sustained and in-depth thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as I began to identify different modalities in which this happened (which form the different sections of the analysis), but also how this was gendered, in terms of the nature of the modalities, as well as *who* it was happening to. In thinking through this data and then through exploring the literature, I began to conceptualize and understand these accounts more broadly in terms of gendered epistemic injustices. Overall, I took an abductive analytical approach. CS Peirce suggested abductive reasoning proceeded as follows: 1) Some event, X, is observed. 2) But if some explanation, Y, were in place, then X would be a matter of course. 3) Therefore it is plausible that X is actually a case of Y (Shank, 2008). Timmermans and Tavory (2012, p. 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 a researcher can bring to bear on the data. In particular, this was shaped by my positioning as a feminist post-structuralist sociologist.

Findings and analysis

'She's just romantic'

A number of asexual women and agender/gender-neutral 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 (21) said the following:

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

Frankie (18, agender) also raised this presumption of 'waiting':

Somebody will be saying that a female asexual is just waiting for the right guy to come along ... 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 socially (mis)read as women, are just 'waiting' for Mr Right. When others reframe participants' accounts in terms of 'waiting', they are made intelligible according to a 'Sleeping Beauty' model of female sexuality (Przybylo, 2013). Przybylo argues that a dominant trend in contemporary sexology is the (re)conceptualization of women's sexuality as 'receptive': that is, their desire is only 'awakened' upon sexual contact, and women are less aware of their bodily responses than are men. Przybylo argues that these conceptualizations make it more difficult for women to refuse unwanted sex, since women do not really know what they want, or they will want sex once they get into it. And, crucially, Przybylo argues that conceptualizing women as such can also lead to denying women the right to self-identify as asexual – that is, women might *perceive* themselves to be asexual, but 1) women do not generally feel desire/sexual attraction *anyway* and 2) they just need to wait for their sexuality to be awakened by someone with requisite skill. These kinds of assertions have already appeared in some of the psychological and sexological literature on asexuality (see for example, Bogaert, 2004; Brotto & Yule, 2011) and as we go through the following sections, they are themes that emerge in participants' accounts over and over again. These themes were entirely absent from the accounts of male participants and those who were agender/gender-neutral but were read socially as men, suggesting that men are afforded an agency and the right to self-knowledge in a way that is not the case for women. In some ways, the accounts in this article would seem to contradict the contemporary postfeminist imperative for women to be agentic and empowered sexual subjects (Gill, 2009). But the discursive space of 'female sexuality' is riddled with ambiguities and contradictions – for example, whilst women are implored to be fearless sexual adventurers, they are still held to unequal standards and routinely censured when they are *too* adventurous (Farvid, Braun, & Rowney, 2017). And indeed, as Gill (2009) writes, the ends to which women's sexual agency can be permissibly directed remains circumscribed – for example, ultimately towards pleasing and appeasing men. The accounts presented in this article can thus sit alongside postfeminist constructions of female sexuality; as we will see, the ways in which accounts are overwritten are generally amenable to or in the service of male sexual desire and 'access'.

'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, Blair (20, asexual, agender) said: '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'. Heather (21, asexual, agender) narrated a very similar story:

When I tell guys that I'm asexual they kind of believe it, well 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 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'.

Heather was subject to epistemic injustice in their interactions with women when their asexuality was over-written as pathological ('something awry here') – a common epistemic injustice experienced by asexuals across the gender spectrum (Decker, 2014). However, it was in Heather's interactions with men in which assumptions of women as 'naturally' asexual were more likely to emerge. Because of what men 'know' about women's sexual disinterest, Heather's asexuality was unremarkable ('they believe it'; 'not a big deal'). It was, also, presumably not something that these men had found a barrier to in pursuing sexual relationships with women. This unremarkableness was not insignificant; Heather and other participants spoke about how this offered some degree of 'ease' in terms of people not making a big deal about it (for example, 'it's a bit easier for female asexuals because we have ... like archetypes to go into ... there are a lot of females who are not supposed to be very sexual' (Reeta, 18)). However, this 'believability' was based not on affording these participants 'a legitimate sexuality', but upon a particular set of misogynistic ideas about women and sexual desire. Thus, the cost of 'ease' (in being unremarked-upon, in being accepted as unexceptional), was reifying deeply problematic constructions of gender.

'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, even when they had disclosed their asexuality, such as Broadley (21) when she talked about being in relationships with men: 'They'd just be like: "Oh you're just being frigid"'. And Cass (21) talks about how accusations of frigidity also carry connotations of arrogance: 'What I have personally experienced is the classic definition of the frigid bitch. I've always had people tell me that I was arrogant because I didn't want to have sex with people'. Other participants relayed stories where frigidity was implied through accusations of being uptight and through injunctions to 'relax'. While frigidity is generally seen as 'a concept that is now often dismissed as redundant, old-fashioned and silly' (Cryle & Moore, 2011, p. 248), it is clear from these participants' accounts that it remains a legible script through which to interpret women's sexuality. Indeed, it may even carry more weight today in the context of the postfeminist imperative to cultivate a (particular kind of) sexual self (Gill, 2009). Far from being a neutral diagnostic category, feminists have long pointed to the ways in which frigidity has been 'weaponized' 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 (Caccioni, 2015). Frigidity also has a moral dimension: as we have seen, Cass 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 opinion of oneself, contravening still-dominant norms of femininity 'which demand that women be selfless and self-effacing' (Frederick, 2014, p. 302). These accounts also highlight the stakes involved in women saying no; as Gavey (2005, p. 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.

'I'm a challenge'

A large number of participants discussed instances where heterosexual men construed their declaration of asexuality as a kind of sexual challenge to be overcome with enough persistence and requisite sexual skills. Ussher (1997, p. 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 described almost verbatim in the accounts of participants. As an illustrative example, Sally-Ann (46) said:

There are the incessant demands that they will change me if they are given the chance . . . Men automatically say it was because my ex-husband was no good in bed, which always makes me laugh ‘cos they’re 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 questions about what it [asexuality] entails, then the denial from them that it exists and the fact that they will save me from the world of asexuality.

Stories of being seen as a sexual challenge were also closely linked to the ‘naturalization’ of asexuality in women, discussed above. If women are *just like that anyway*, then sexual pursuit becomes normal, natural, necessary. Stories like 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 structural edifice) which supports and encourages male violence, the objectification of women and the violation of consent. 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 see women as a conquest. Indeed, while it has of course never gone away, there has been a recent popularization of heterosexual male sexual conquest seen in extreme formulations such as ‘pick up artistry’ and in the ‘seduction industry’ (O’Neill, 2018) but also more broadly through anti-feminist masculinities, and the re-emphasizing of biological sex differences (Van Valkenburgh, 2018). Contextualizing participant accounts in such a way allows us to understand that this is not just about asexuality in a context of ‘compulsory sexuality’ (Gupta, 2015), but also about the operation and circulation of *gendered* power. In three participants’ cases, these stories did indeed culminate in rape, where their asexual subjectivities were denied and a forcible ‘correction’ was attempted. Isabella (31) spoke about how, on a fourth date with a man, and whom she had told she was asexual, he raped her in his car telling her if only she would try it, she ‘might like it’, and how he ‘just didn’t understand asexuality’. Epistemic injustice thus has extremely real material consequences, as we see how rendering certain voices unintelligible (Isabella’s subjectivity as an asexual woman) opens up justificatory space for acts of violence in a context of hetero-patriarchy and rape culture.

‘It’s a cover for something else’

I now move on to discussing the experiences of asexual men and asexual participants who were agender or gender-neutral but talked about their experiences being read socially as men. Some scholars have written about the seeming incompatibility of asexuality and masculinity – for example, Przybylo (2014, p. 225) writes ‘asexual men, especially, generate in others astonishment and disbelief’. Masculinity remains closely linked to an active desiring sexuality (see for example, Fleming, DiClemente, & Barrington, 2016; Hammond & van Hooff, 2020). As such, some participants talked about experiences that can be conceptualized as forms of epistemic injustice. For example, Jeffrey (53, gender-neutral) talked about how he does not ever see himself as coming out as asexual to anybody, since as a middle-aged ‘man’, he feels that people would interpret this as him trying to conceal some kind of perversion, sexual deviance or even criminality:

Jimmy Saville, a lifelong unattached bachelor . . . and you know what happened there. 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.

Here Jeffrey uses the example of two men in the public eye who were/are 'lifelong bachelors' to point to how this is a risky position to occupy. Asexuality is, of course, not the same as being a bachelor, but here Jeffrey is suggesting that it will be interpreted in the same way. Jeffrey's account highlights too the role of age in mediating one's experiences of asexuality – specifically here the intersections of middle-age, maleness and singleness as a pathologized status that generates suspicion (Eck, 2014). However, Kai (26, agender/man), 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 you know, it's a cover for something else. Like with Morrissey, people think there's something else going on there.

For Kai 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; however, Jeffrey and Kai's accounts differ in some ways from the accounts of women discussed above. Jeffrey and Kai's narratives are overwritten by others but replaced by scripts which still position them as *active* sexual agents (even if that sexual agency is 'deviant'). This is in stark contrast to the assumptions of passivity we saw in the previous sections.

'Dude, you don't know what you're missing!'

Some asexual men reported experiences where they were met with an inability to see things from their perspective. For example, Nathaniel (33), talked about how his disclosure of asexuality had been met with lamentations from his male friends that he was 'missing out' on the joys of (hetero)sex. This was in despite of the fact that Nathaniel had had sex before with partners of various genders, but came away feeling indifferent, and still did not feel sexually attracted to others. He therefore contested the fact that he was missing anything at all. Ryan (28) reported a very similar experience: 'I've been told "dude, you don't know what you're missing!"'. However, while Nathaniel and Ryan's subjectivities as asexual are not being properly taken into account, I argue there is still some recognition of them as agentic subjects – albeit ones who are making strange 'choices'. Their identity as asexual is not necessarily in question. Indeed, these responses might be interpreted as expressions of male fraternity and camaraderie, and a recognition of 'sameness'. It is therefore not apparent that these can be seen as experiences of epistemic injustice. This is illuminated further by the fact that Ryan went on to contrast his experiences of disclosure with that of asexual women: 'one response I know a lot of ace 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"'. From this, we can see that while Ryan's disclosure may be lamented, it is not necessarily doubted, but a woman's similar disclosure is refused legitimacy entirely (this time on the grounds of her purported lack of desirability). As Radner (2008) argues, women's sexual agency is often contingent on appearing sufficiently (hetero)sexually attractive. Overall, stories of epistemic injustice occupied a much smaller space across the accounts of asexual men.

Discussion and conclusion

From the above, it is undoubtable that asexual people face epistemic injustice. Firstly, there is a hermeneutical element to this. While asexuality clearly exists as a kind of discursive constellation, or interpretive frame, through which people can understand their experiences and lay claim to an asexual identity, in many ways it still remains 'unintelligible' in a mainstream sense. Despite the fact that asexuality is growing in public recognition or visibility, the idea that people might not experience (very little) sexual attraction all too often seems incomprehensible in a culture where sexuality is compulsory (Gupta, 2015). Hermeneutical resources around asexuality exist, but the stories and subjectivities fashioned through them are still systematically refused hearing.

However, the gendered nature of the data presented in this article shows that hermeneutical injustice is not the full story. Whether or not a participant was a woman or a man, or understood to be a woman or man, mattered greatly. This can be understood as testimonial injustice, whereby a person's account is afforded or denied credibility depending on particular configurations of power. The women in my study, and agender/gender-neutral participants who were perceived to be women, systematically had their subjectivities and self-knowledge dismissed not just because asexuality was unintelligible, but also because of inequalities under hetero-patriarchy. I demonstrated four different modalities through which this might happen: framing women as romantic or 'waiting'; naturalizing low sexual desire in women; discourses of frigidity and seeing women as a sexual challenge to be surmounted by male heterosexuality. Although the specific dynamics of these might be different, we can see a commonality in that under hetero-patriarchy, women remain marked as non-credible, unknowing, passive and over-determined by their bodies. Identifying as asexual is an agentic act – it requires self-knowledge and an assertion of subjecthood – yet agency still seems to contradict dominant understandings of what it means to be a woman (O'Sullivan & Vannier, 2016), despite ostensible contemporary emphases on women's agency and sexual subjecthood (Gill, 2009). Therefore, as we have seen, such agentic accounts had to be rendered intelligible that is, attributed to a state of womanhood, or reinterpreted in ways which continue to exist for and revolve around male sexual desire.

Asexual men, and agender/gender-neutral participants who were perceived to be men, were also subject to epistemic injustices (although they reported far less instances of these), and these epistemic injustices were also linked to constructions of gender. For example, these participants spoke of how their asexuality was misinterpreted as concealing some kind of 'deviant' sexuality, an epistemic injustice which is based on how masculinity remains heavily entangled with expectations of sexuality. However, (assumed) masculinity may also offer a form of protection since some asexual men spoke about while they might be subject to lamentations about how they were 'missing out', their ability to 'know' themselves as asexual remains ultimately intact. We can see this as a case where a hermeneutical injustice (the unintelligibility of asexuality) is to an extent modulated or compensated by the social recognition of masculinity, and the agency and authority assumed thereof (that is, testimonial *justice*).

Overall, I have argued that epistemic injustice – in both its hermeneutical and testimonial forms – is an important concept to help understand the lived experience of asexuality, including contextualizing some of the quantitative indicators that suggest higher levels of dissatisfaction, discomfort and fear experienced by some asexual people (see, Government Equalities Office, 2018). While some of the asexuality literature has hinted at the epistemic marginalisations experienced by asexual people, I argue there is a benefit in using such an explicit concept as 'epistemic injustice' – it highlights the systematic dimension of these experiences, and links them to persistent structures of hetero-patriarchal power. Epistemic injustices *matter* – they have profound personal, social and relational consequences. However, this article has also shown that a critical attenuation to gender is essential – all asexual people are not affected equally, but women and those that are read socially as women, are much more so, given the operation of power relations beneath hetero-patriarchy. Future and further analyses might go beyond the admittedly somewhat binary terms in which this article has been set out – for example in explicitly and specifically exploring non-cis and/or non-binary experiences in relation to epistemic injustices and asexuality. And while this article differentiated participants' accounts by gender, it did not address the racialization of asexuality (and how this is also gendered) which may powerfully affect how accounts are 'heard', and could potentially – yet usefully and fruitfully – disrupt and extend the analysis presented here.

Notes

- 1 In the most basic sense, asexuality is commonly understood as a sexual subjectivity where one feels little or no sexual attraction towards others. However, it is also an umbrella term encompassing a wide variety of subjectivities with different and nuanced relationships to sexual and romantic attraction (Decker, 2014).

- 2 I use the terms 'lived experience' and 'subjectivity' somewhat synonymously to refer to people's self-aware sense of being and living in the world from the particular position or standpoint they occupy within it.
- 3 Some of these participants identified as grey-ace (experiencing sexual attraction rarely) or as demisexual (experiencing sexual attraction only when they feel an emotional connection), but they also described themselves as asexual, hence their inclusion under the broader rubric of asexuality. Participants also differed in terms of whether or not they felt romantic attraction, and towards whom. However, since similar experiences of epistemic injustice were reported by participants with a diversity of romantic orientations (such as, aromantic, heteroromantic, panromantic), my analysis does not differentiate in this regard. But it is also important to note that aro aces (aromantic asexuals) also face particular forms of exclusion, erasure and hostility due not only to 'compulsory sexuality' (Gupta, 2015) but also 'amatonormativity' (Brake, 2012), and more research centring the voices of aro aces is required.
- 4 Most of the abstinent and celibate women in my research reported very similar experiences to those discussed by the asexual women and agender/gender-neutral participants in this article. There was also a clear gender divide amongst abstinent participants, as abstinent men generally had their abstinence accepted at face value. However, I do not include these accounts in this article in order to give a clear focus on asexuality, but also due to the political contentiousness in discussing asexuality and abstinence together which would require some lengthy discussion.
- 5 Ethical approval was granted by the Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow, and all participants gave written informed consent.
- 6 The UK, like other Anglophone countries in the Global North, have a small but not insignificant asexual population. Figures on prevalence range from 0.4% to 1% of the population (Aicken et al., 2013). Awareness and visibility of asexuality is growing steadily in UK popular culture—for example, newspapers periodically feature special interest pieces on asexuality, and there has been an asexual character in the UK soap opera *Emmerdale*.

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