

Asexuality: a sexual orientation still unknown and pathologised.

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Abstract

Although visibility and social acceptance of homosexuality, pansexuality or even bisexuality seem to evolve positively in the recent years, asexuality still stays an invisible and misunderstood sexual orientation. While it encompasses at least 1% of the population, only few people really know what it is about and the realities it covers. This article tackles in depths the definition of asexuality, then studies the complexity of asexual people's pathologisation. It also pretends to be a plea for the inclusion of asexual people within the LGBTQI+ community, and aims at denouncing society's hypersexualisation as well as the sexual hypernormativity weighting on all of us, asexual or not. Finally, the article examines some of the differences in the experience of asexual people, depending on the gender they identify with, before concluding on supporting a bigger cultural and media representation of asexuality.

Aknowlegements

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SUMMARY

Introduction: What is asexuality?	3
The persistent pathologisation of asexuality.	5
Rejection of asexual persons of the LGBTQI+ community	7
Hypersexualisation of the society and hypersexualisation of the LGBTQI+ community	8
Gender and asexuality	10
Conclusion: the weak cultural representation of asexuality	11

Introduction: What is asexuality?

Asexuality is a sexual orientation characterised by a lack of sexual attraction or desire. Unlike voluntary abstinence (such as that imposed on priests by their vow of chastity) where the person chooses not to have sex, asexuals' lack of desire is not a choice, deprivation or lack. Asexuality is a spectrum, which means that all asexual people and their experience of asexuality are different, and that it affects people of all ages, genders and backgrounds. For example, some asexual people (the “sex-positives”) may have sex, without it necessarily giving them pleasure or constituting a need (to have a child, out of curiosity, to please the partner...), a bit like eating without being hungry. Some asexual people consider themselves to have a libido, but it is not directed towards a particular partner: they are called “sex positive”. Others reject sex, identifying themselves as “sex repulsed”. Finally, some people feel only indifferent to sex (the “sex-neutral” or “sex indifferent”). Most asexuals experience romantic attraction to others and may therefore be in a relationship. Aromantic asexuals, on the other hand, have no desire to have sex and no desire to be in a relationship. Finally, some asexuals have never had sexual desire or relationships, while others have had sexual desire and then identified themselves as asexual later in life. Asexual people are often referred to as ‘ace’ and aromantic people as ‘aro’. The ace of spades has thus become one of the symbols of the asexual community, as has cake, in reference to the phrase “cake is better than sex”.

The common use of the word “asexuality” is recent, and this sexual orientation is still very little known. The earliest traceable use of the term asexuality dates back to 1896, when the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld used it to refer to the existence of human beings who lacked sexual desire¹. In 1922, in *The Female-Impersonators*, transvestite Ralph Werther used the term ‘anaphrodite’ to refer to men who were not romantically and sexually attracted to either sex². In 1948, the American doctor Alfred Kinsey developed a scale measuring sexual orientation from 0 to 6: the Kinsey scale. 0 means exclusively heterosexual, 3 bisexual and 6 exclusively homosexual. Kinsey adds a separate category: the “X”, designating asexual people. While welcoming the inclusion of asexuality on this normative scale, it is regrettable that it is treated as a separate, allegedly unclassifiable group.

Since then, asexuality has been taken into account and recognised in various studies as a sexual orientation in its own right, just like its other side, aromanticism. Indeed, a distinction is now made between romantic orientation and sexual orientation, notably thanks to the split attraction model (SAM). This model, which developed in the Ace and Aro communities, distinguishes sexual attraction from romantic attraction. While most people are parioriented, i.e. their sexual and romantic orientations match (e.g. a straight person is both heterosexual and heteroromantic, a bi person is both bisexual and biromantic), some are varioriented: their sexual orientation does not match their romantic orientation. This is the case of non-aromantic asexual people. Before the DSS model, romantic attraction was included in sexual orientation, since it was assumed that the two were inseparable. Thus, the existence of asexuality complicates the issue of sexual minorities by pushing for the distinction between romantic and sexual orientation, proving that it is possible to be romantically attracted to someone but not sexually, but also that it is possible to have a sexual orientation different from one's romantic orientation (e.g. homoromantic and asexual).

¹ La vie en queer. (2018). Histoire des communautés asexuelle et aromantique [online] Available at: <https://lavieenqueer.wordpress.com/2018/04/25/histoire-des-communautes-asexuelle-et-aromantique/> [Accessed 11 Sept. 2021].

² Today, we would speak of aromantic asexuals.

Asexuality has become increasingly visible since the early 2000s, notably with the creation of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)³ in 2001 by American asexual rights activist David Jay. The creation of this site allowed the formation of a real community of asexuals on the Internet, and thus of an active asexual activism. It was the first media to talk about asexuality and open a space for discussion for those concerned. AVEN has been translated into several languages, giving birth to the Association for Asexual Visibility (AVA) in 2005.

If there have always been people without sexual desire, the relative visibility of asexuality today has given it a strong identity dimension. Asexuality has become a sexual identity, with its own website, flag and subculture. Unlike homosexuality or trans-identity, which have been legally punished and thus made visible and part of the public debate, asexuality has never been banned or condemned. The history of the asexual community is therefore not part of the relative linearity of obtaining rights for homosexual or transgender people.

Asexual people are not necessarily celibate: it is possible to be ace and in a relationship, whether in a “platonic” relationship or not. Married life, children, intimacy, affection or tenderness are therefore quite possible for an asexual person. Some asexuals in a couple with a queer (i.e. non-asexual) person can have sexual relations with their partner. It is also possible, if both people are open to polyamory, for the same-sex partner to have relations with someone else. However, it is not always easy for a queer/asexual couple to function, especially if sex is very important to the queer person. As sex is considered a norm in a couple, finding someone who is willing to give it up is difficult, and asexual people are sometimes forced to choose between continuing their relationship and forcing themselves to have sex, or coming to terms with their asexuality, but fearing losing their partner. Communication, openness and honesty are therefore particularly necessary for an asexual/allosexual couple to function.

Although asexual people claim that sex is not necessary for a happy relationship and that it is possible to be in love without feeling the need to have sex, this does not mean that the asexual person's feelings of love are not genuine. For example, the asexual person may be attracted to his or her partner aesthetically, emotionally or intellectually rather than sexually. There are many ways to love someone, and sexuality should not be considered essential in a couple or in life in general. Some non-sexual couples replace sex with other equally fulfilling activities as alternative ways of connecting with their partner.

It is questionable how many asexual people there are in the population. The figure of 1% of the world population is often given. However, this figure comes from a 1994 British survey of 18,876 people. Most recent surveys with a larger sample size have since obtained a higher figure. In a 2017 US study⁴, For example, 4% of respondents aged 18-34 and 1% of respondents aged 35 and over identified themselves as asexual. It is possible that the figures are underestimated due to the low visibility of asexuality, from which it could be inferred that a large number of asexuals are unaware of being asexual.

Finally, it should be remembered that asexuality is not a puritanical or religious movement seeking to advocate abstinence. It has nothing to do with morals and ethics, since it is neither a choice nor an opinion. Asexual people are not against sex, nor do they want to prevent anyone from having sex. They

³ <https://www.asexuality.org/>

⁴ GLAAD. (2017). Accelerating Acceptance 2017: A Harris Poll survey of Americans' acceptance of LGBTQ people [online] Available at: https://www.glaad.org/files/aa/2017_GLAAD_Accelerating_Acceptance.pdf [Accessed 14 Sept. 2021].

only want asexuality to be recognised as a normal and valid sexual orientation, just like heterosexuality, bisexuality or homosexuality.

The persistent pathologisation of asexuality.

Asexuality was pathologised in the 1980 DSM 3 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) as a sexual dysfunction under the term “Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder” (HSDD), defined as a “deficiency or absence of imaginative sexual fantasies or desire for sexual activity” and which would frequently conceal a psychosis or depressive state⁵. Since then, doctors and sexologists frequently try to “treat” asexuality with drugs or therapies, which could be likened to conversion therapies for homosexual or transgender people. Asexuality is seen as a disease or a problem that needs to be solved. Many asexual people are thus led into psychotherapy without needing it.

Already a hundred years earlier, in 1886, the psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing proposed theories about the lack of sexual desire in his book *Psychopathia Sexualis*. According to him, asexual people are degenerate, physically overworked or neurotic. The psychologist Henry Havelock Ellis sees abstinence as a consequence of Christian morality⁶. Finally, Freud affirmed the necessity of having a satisfying sexual life to be fulfilled and healthy⁷. For Freud and his successors, not having sexual desire was a neurosis.

This vision of sexuality as necessary for well-being dates back to the 20th century in Western countries, fed by Freudian theories on sexuality, the beginning of the medicalisation of the sexual field, the sexual liberation movements of the 1970s and scientific research on sexuality and particularly orgasm. It is no longer only reproductive sex that is valued (religious morality) but also sex for sex's sake (to procure pleasure), which becomes central to the modern vision of the couple. The absence of sexual relations thus gradually became out of the norm, whereas previously, on the contrary, abstinence (apart from procreative relations) was valued by society and the Catholic Church, and separating sex and reproduction was considered negative.

Asexual activists won a victory in 2013 when the American Psychiatric Association recognised asexuality as a sexual orientation and no longer as a mental illness, provided that the person not experiencing desire does not suffer from it and explicitly identifies as asexual. The invisibility of this orientation, however, sometimes makes it difficult to identify with a term that is still so little known. Asexuality is still considered abnormal, and the universality of sex as a natural need is hardly questioned. Even today, in France, one of the spouses can ask for a divorce for fault in case of “non-consummated marriage”. Moreover, the notion of distress does not totally depathologise asexuality. Indeed, as writer and journalist Angela Chen points out in her book *Ace: What asexuality reveals about desire, society, and the*

⁵ DE ORY, Z. (2019). Revendiquer l’asexualité : une résistance aux injonctions sexuelles ?. *Mouvements*, 99, p. 136-144. [online]. Available at: <https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.3917/mouv.099.0136> [Accessed 09 Sept. 2021].

⁶ CHICHE, S. (2011). Peut-on avoir envie de ne pas faire l'amour ? *Scienceshumaines.com*. [online]. Available at: https://www.scienceshumaines.com/peut-on-avoir-envie-de-ne-pas-faire-l-amour_fr_27878.html [Accessed 10 Sept. 2021].

⁷ *Ibid.*

meaning of sex: *“It is possible to be distressed about something - many ace people are distressed about being ace - without the cause of that distress being a problem or an illness per se”*⁸.

Asexuality is all the more pathologised because the absence of sexual desire is in fact a symptom of many illnesses or disabilities such as depression, autism or sexual trauma. Some people, for example, have no libido because of a depressive state or after a sexual assault, but this is a temporary state, unlike asexuality which lasts a lifetime. Medical and especially psychiatric help could be useful for these people, since their lack of desire is not a matter of sexual orientation. In the particular case of autism, a correlation has been raised by several studies with asexuality, but neither are diseases nor problems to be solved. Asexuality is not a disease, as one does not normally feel bad about being asexual, although one may suffer from rejection and stigma. However, some people feel that their lack of desire is a problem, suffer from it and want to be 'cured' of it. It is therefore sometimes difficult to determine whether it is a sexual orientation for them or something pathological and temporary. In any case, the prejudice according to which asexuality is the consequence of a sexual trauma is incorrect and damaging, just like the one according to which asexuals have no heart, would be robots devoid of feelings, which contributes to their dehumanisation and joins the stereotypes on autism.

As Angela Chen states in her book: *“Asexual people with disabilities may find it difficult to fit into either community, wondering where their disability ends and their asexuality begins, and whether finding that boundary should matter”*⁹. People with disabilities have long fought to ensure that disability is not associated with asexuality, against the stereotype that people with disabilities are undesirable or unable to have sex. People with a disability are already perceived by default as asexual, as eternal children. People with disabilities may fear to fit the stereotypes, to conform to what is expected of them.

According to psychiatrist Richard Montoro, a specialist in sexual identity issues, there is no medical cause for the lack of desire in asexual people, and asexuality is simply a variant of human sexuality¹⁰. Just as some animals exhibit homosexual behaviour, asexual behaviour is also found among them. Studies in the 1990s on young rams, for example, showed that 10% of them remained indifferent to females, and 2-3% remained indifferent to both males and females¹¹. A similar study conducted on rodents in the 1980s showed that 12% of males had no desire¹².

⁸ CHEN, A. (2020). *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex*, Beacon Press. Page 92 : « *It is possible to be distressed by something - plenty of aces are distressed about being ace - without the cause of that distress being a problem or an illness in itself* » (traduction libre).

⁹ *Ibid.* Page 6 : « *Disabled aces can have trouble fitting into either community, wondering where their disability ends and their asexuality begins, and whether finding that border should matter* » (traduction libre)

¹⁰ BOUCHARD, C. (2018). L'asexualité, une orientation sexuelle méconnue. *Radio-Canada*. [online] 28 Sept. Available at: <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1124807/asexualite-dernier-tabou-orientation-sexuelle> [Accessed 09 Sept. 2021]

¹¹ HIRIGOYEN, M-F. (2007). 11. La vie sans sexe. Dans: *Les nouvelles solitudes*, pp. 172-184, Paris: La Découverte. Available at: <https://www.cairn-info.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/les-nouvelles-solitudes--9782707153289-page-172.htm> [Accessed 10 Sept. 2021]

¹² CHICHE, S. (2011). Peut-on avoir envie de ne pas faire l'amour ? *Scienceshumaines.com*. [online]. Available at: https://www.scienceshumaines.com/peut-on-avoir-envie-de-ne-pas-faire-l-amour_fr_27878.html [Accessed 10 Sept. 2021]

Rejection of asexual persons of the LGBTQI+ community

The asexual persons sometimes suffer to find their place in the LGBTQI+ community and have to frequently face rejections and mockeries. Certain individuals of the community affirm that the asexuals would not be as oppressed, that they would not be the “true LGBT”, or that it is absurd that a so-called heterosexual man self-identifies as LGBTQI+. Let us respond to these allegations.

First of all, the asexual persons are sometimes included in an extended acronym: like the one of the LGBTQIA+ community. This A signifies asexual, and not allied, which would indeed make no sense. Then, asexuality is a sexual orientation that is different from heterosexuality. The heteros are both heterosexual and heteroromantic. The asexuals can be cisgender, heteroromantic and asexual as well as transgender, homoromantic and asexual. The inclusion of the asexual persons in the LGBTQI+ community therefore does not mean the inclusion of cisgender and heterosexual persons. There is also a myth of the cisgender and hetero asexuals claiming to be asexual in order to integrate, to infiltrate the LGBTQI+ community, this reminds us of the TERF’ discourse asserting that transgender women are men disguised as women to integrate feminist movements.

Nevertheless, the asexual persons have claims similar to those made by homosexual movements in the 1970s: that asexuality be recognised as a legitimate sexual orientation, and not seen as a choice, a problem or a pathology. Today, there are still a lot of common points between the struggles of asexuals and those of other queer persons: fighting psychiatrisation, lack of representation, sexual assault, etc.

Certain people justify the rejection of the asexual persons of the LGBTQI+ community by the fact that they would not be quite discriminated against. While emphasising the absurdity of this quest for oppression, we have to remind ourselves that these asexual persons are substantially stigmatised, but often differently. If they do not risk, for example, being aggressed on the road because of their sexual orientation, the discrimination that they suffer is more akin to symbolic violence or microaggression. This happens more within the framework of intimacy (of the couple in particular) than in that of public space. When they come out, the asexual persons are frequently told that they have to try before they know, that they have not yet found the right person, that their orientation is fleeting, that they have been abused in their childhood or suffer from psychological trauma, that they are too young to know, too disagreeable to find someone, or even that their orientation is linked to a hormonal problem. This is after all the same thing people told and have been telling to the homosexual persons. The relations in couple, the sexual life, the way of life and the identity of the asexual persons like lesbian, gay, bis or transgender people have been and continue to be constantly questioned and ridiculed.

Other types of discriminations are experienced by the asexuals, who are, for instance, especially the subjects of sexual abuses within the couple, do not find positive representation on television or in the media, and have to deal with a hypersexualised society that denies their existence. We might say that the asexual persons often suffer discriminations in a manner that is less exacerbated than homosexual, bisexual or transgender people, but asexuality is so little known that it is more difficult to find support from other asexual people, or even cultural representation to identify with asexual characters. Asexuality has a great invisibility compared to others identified as queer, and the sexual norm is still stronger than the heterosexual norm, thus making the very possibility of asexuality unimaginable. The identity and existence of asexuals is therefore constantly denied. Like other LGBTQI + people, asexual persons are also more likely to suffer from depression and mental health problems: 50% of asexual people have

already seriously thought about suicide and 14% have already made an attempt, according to a 2016 study. Many asexual people feel abnormal, ashamed and out of step with society's expectations, and most "grow up in the closet". When everyone is obsessed with something but not them, it is understandable that asexual people wonder if they are not "broken", if they do not have a problem.

Asexual and/or aromantic persons are subjected to the injunction of heterosexual sexuality, and to contest this, in the same way as homosexual persons. Being ace or aro indeed makes it possible to question patriarchy and heteronormativity, since the absence of sex calls into question the traditional view of what a couple should be and of what love should be: cisgender, heterosexual, exclusive couple, having or planning to have children, living under the same roof and in the same bed, etc. Moreover, "*the claim of non-desire of women expresses in hollow a questioning of the normal heterosexual relationship according to the entourage, the hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD) and the sexologists*": the existence of asexuality and particularly of asexual women calls into question the (hetero)sexual norms and the very definition of what the "right" sexuality should be.

It is exhausting not to be recognised in your own community, especially when you know that asexual and aromantic people have been historically present in LGBTQI+ struggles, even if they did not yet self-identify with this term. Queer persons have been insulted for not fitting gender norms but also for not having heterosexual relationships, which includes ace and aro persons. As they were not sexually attracted to the opposite sex, they were also often mistaken for homosexual people and could thus suffer from homophobia and heteronormativity in society. Like lesbians, asexual women could be threatened with corrective rape to "make them heterosexual". Ultimately, all people whose lives are not hetero-centered suffer from the heterosexism of society.

We should also not forget that most asexual people are not heteroromantic. Many are transgender and/or romantically attracted to the same sex and therefore naturally belong to LGBTQI+ groups. Studies show that only a third of asexual people self-identify as heteroromantic, and that they are more often transgender or non-hetero than the rest of the population. Being hetero or having hetero romantic relationships is not a dealbreaker for being part of the community, with many transgender people being heterosexual and many bisexual people mostly engaging in heterosexual relationships.

Hypersexualisation of the society and hypersexualisation of the LGBTQI+ community

It is difficult to be an asexual, to live in a society as sexualised as ours. Sex is everywhere: movies, advertisements, internet, fashion, pharmaceutical industry, pornography, magazines (recommending having sex 2 or 3 times a week to be fulfilled)... The profusion of sexual images and the unveiling of the body is accompanied by a pervasive use of sexual images to sell. Sexual potential is commodified, notably with the promotion of drugs aimed at improving sexual performance or alleviating "pathologies of sexual insufficiency". Society puts sexuality at the centre of everything, and it is seen as an important part of individual identity. Frigidity, impotence as well as the absence of sexual desire are considered shameful, and the pressure to always be efficient and overactive sexually is such that we even come to speak of "sexual misery".

Since sex is a more than recurrent subject between friends, asexual persons often feel a pressure which pushes them to lie, to invent a sex life for fear of being rejected. During adolescence, asexual persons

often have difficulty with their friends' surge of interest in sex, feeling excluded and abnormal. Furthermore, the loss of virginity is made sacred as an "essential step in becoming an adult", fuelling the infantilising idea that asexuals are children "refusing to grow up" or "fearful of sex". Even at school, in sex education classes, sexuality is considered an obligatory step, and the notion of consent is hardly ever discussed. It discusses human reproduction but never or very little sexual diversity. In addition to the presumption of heterosexuality, there is also the presumption that everyone will have and want sex.

The hypersexualisation of society puts pressure on the frequency and quality of sex, which is also harmful for asexual persons as well. It gives the impression that the happiness of a couple but also of individuals is measured in sexual frequency, and thus asexual persons are "unhappy" or "neurotic". For Zoé de Ory, asexuality thus makes it possible "*to question the social model whereby the individual thrives through sexuality*"¹³.

With sexual desire seen as a norm and even a necessity, asexual persons can feel strange, ashamed or even feel guilty for being who they are. The hypersexualisation of society obscures any possibility of not feeling sexual desire. Sex is thus considered a universal natural need. It is, for example, part of the essential physiological needs in Maslow's pyramid of needs, just like eating, drinking, sleeping or breathing.

Asexual persons have developed the idea of "compulsory sexuality", which is inspired by the notion of "compulsory heterosexuality" theorised in 1980 by Adrienne Rich in her essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. She designates, for simplicity, the presumption that for women, heterosexuality is the only possible option and the only natural and viable sexual orientation. The notion of compulsory sexuality designates, on the same idea, the presumption that every human being is sexual, and therefore that not wanting sex is unnatural and strange and that people who are not interested in sex lack an essential experience.

If it is difficult to integrate into society without being devoid of sexual desire, it is also difficult to integrate into a community as sexualised as the LGBTQI+ community, in which it is sometimes considered impossible to be both queer and not interested in sex. For example, the pressure is very strong on gay men to be sexual. Asexual and homoromantic men thus often feel doubly rejected, as it is considered "shameful" in their community not to have sexual relations. It can even lead ace gay men to doubt their identity, since they do not identify with the experience and often highly sexualised portrayal of gay men. The LGBTQI+ movement is pro-sex in that it promotes respect for different identities and sexual orientations and campaigns for a fulfilling sexuality and free from shame and societal injunctions. It must be reminded that just because asexual persons do not have sexual desire does not mean that they are against sex. As we have seen, the majority of them do not dislike sex. Asexual persons, therefore, claim everyone's sexual freedom, including the freedom not to be sexual. However, pro-sex feminism at times becomes so pro-sex that it falls under the stigma of those who refuse to have sex, categorised as "frigid" or "stuck". It is a very good thing to defend sexuality and pleasure, but it is necessary to be careful not to fall into the sexual injunction. Some asexual feminists have thus been criticised for their non-sexuality, supposedly proof that they would not have liberated themselves sexually and therefore

¹³ DE ORY, Z. (2019). Revendiquer l'asexualité : une résistance aux injonctions sexuelles ? *Mouvements*, 99, p. 136-144. [online]. Available at: <https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.3917/mouv.099.0136> [Visitée le 09 Sept. 2021].

would not be “good” feminists. Feminist pro-sex discourses must take into account asexuality, and in particular the experience of asexual women.

Gender and asexuality

Gender is a factor affecting the sexual injunctions and thus the experience of asexuality. Several studies point out that the number of women identifying as asexual is higher than that of men and non-binary people. According to a 2016 study, for example¹⁴, women represent 63% of people in the asexual community. Women are also more likely to force themselves to have sex, 42.3% of women questioned sometimes forcing themselves to please their partner, against 22.2% of men¹⁵.

Why this disparity in numbers? Maybe because asexuality questions the traditional idea of what a man should be. The masculinity of men is challenged if they do not have sex. Men are under a lot of pressure to sleep with as many women as possible, which allows them to be popular, to be “cool”, to be respected. The ideal of masculinity therefore requires (hetero)sexuality, and gay, asexual, or never-before-sex men are socially excluded. Note that asexual men should not be confused with unintentional incels or single men, that group of misogynistic heterosexual men who are angry with women and think they deserve sex. Asexual men are willingly single and experience no frustration.

If the worth and virility of men are evaluated according to their sexual performance, that of women, on the contrary, is according to their conformity to the role of sexual object. Women are also more subject to the norm of reproductive sexuality and are stigmatised if they do not comply with it. It is surely easier for women to identify as asexual, being seen as less inclined to enjoy sex¹⁶. In addition, for many women, “*recognising themselves as asexual allows them to free themselves from the agony of seduction in a society that places great importance on sexuality.*”¹⁷ When an asexual woman discloses her asexuality, common reactions are often to tell her that she is a repressed lesbian, that she should go see a shrink, or that she has been abused by a man. They are also often referred to as stuck or frigid.

There are strong links between the claims of asexual persons and the rest of the LGBTQI+ community, but also with those of feminist movements, especially on the issue of consent, which must be respected so that the “no” of asexuals should not be questioned and should not be justified. In addition, some queer feminists are not interested in heterosexual sexuality because they see it as a place of subjugation of women and a tool of patriarchal domination. As we have seen, in the 1920s and 1930s, men who did not have sex were targeted by slurs directed at queer people because denial of sex broke gender norms, and their refusal to have sexual relations with women equated them with gay men. A convergence between feminist, asexual, gay and lesbian struggles is therefore more than necessary.

¹⁴ BAUER, C., MILLET, T. & al. (2018). The 2016 Asexual Community Survey Summary Report. [online] 15 Nov. Available at: http://asexualcensus.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/2016_ace_community_survey_report.pdf [Accessed 18 Sept. 2021].

¹⁵ DE ORY, Z. (2019). Revendiquer l’asexualité : une résistance aux injonctions sexuelles ?. *Mouvements*, 99, p. 136-144. [online]. Available at: <https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.3917/mouv.099.0136> [Accessed 09 Sept. 2021].

¹⁶ MARTIN, V. (2019). Les asexuels sortent de l’ombre. *Université du Québec à Montréal*. [online] 26 Apr. Available at: <https://www.actualites.uqam.ca/2019/communaute-asexuelle> [Accessed 09 Sept. 2021].

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Even between allosexual men and women, the lack of sex is not experienced in the same way. According to Gérard Mermet¹⁸, 50% of men, against 34% of women, consider it difficult to endure not having sex for several months. In addition, 26% of women and 18% of men could do without sexuality completely without difficulty. These figures are obviously not intended to demonstrate the existence of naturally stronger sexual needs in men than in women. Rather, they show how gender-differentiated socialisation and expectations create distinct sexual behaviours between men and women. Mermet also points out that many women agree to have unwanted sex, for example to calm an abusive partner.

Conclusion: the weak cultural representation of asexuality

While homosexuality, bisexuality, transidentity and other sexual orientations or gender identities are increasingly represented on screen, the cultural portrayal of asexuality remains very low, with only a handful of asexual characters. The very first asexual character dates back to 2003 in *The Late Show*, on CBS. This very stereotypical character, Sebastian, was staged in a humorous spot titled “*Sebastian: The Asexual Icon*”. We can also cite the character of Gerald Tippett in 2007 in a New Zealand soap opera called *ShortLand*, or the character of Poppy in the American series *Judge* in 2010¹⁹. These programs were however, very little seen or known.

In the more recent and famous ace characters, we find Varys from *Game of Thrones*, a castrated eunuch, or Brad in *Faking It*. A turning point came with *Bojack Horseman* and the character of Todd Chavez: asexuality was finally portrayed realistically, without mockery or the character constituting a joke. Todd first comes out in Season 4, “*I’m not gay. I mean, I don’t think I am, but I don’t think I’m straight, either. I don’t know what I am. I think I might be nothing*”. In the following episodes in his reflections, we see him come to terms with his asexuality, be in a relationship and flourish. Many asexual people consider him to be the first true portrayal of asexuality on screen, especially as he is one of the main characters in the series. Before *Tedd*, the rare portrayals of asexual characters were presented as sick or abnormal, like Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*. This one being also autistic, it represents in a stereotypical and supposedly comical way the two communities at the same time.

Bojack Horseman's team learned about asexuality and sought advice from Sharis B. Ellis, the co-chair of Ace Los Angeles, on how to achieve a non-stereotypical and realistic asexual character. The same goes for the making of the teenage series *Shadowhunters*, which also called on Ace Los Angeles to help them write the coming out of vampire Raphaël Santiago²⁰. According to Shari B. Ellis, screenwriters do not represent asexuality because they lack knowledge on the subject, but also because sex sells. Moreover, to write a good ace character, it is necessary to ask the opinion of those concerned, which many screenwriters don't bother to do.

Most recently, there was the supporting character Florence in season two of *Sex Education*, a teenage girl who says she never experiences sexual attraction and thus believes she is “broken”. She thus affirms: “It’s

¹⁸ MERMET, G. (2006). *Franco-scopie 2007*. Paris: Larousse.

¹⁹ GOMBERT, P. (n.d). L'omerta autour de la place de l'asexualité sur nos écrans. [online]. Available at: <https://www.psychologue-garnero-paris.fr/templates/images/omerta-autour.pdf> [Accessed 12 Sept. 2021].

²⁰ MAYARD, A. (2019). Il serait grand temps de changer de regard sur l'asexualité. *Slate*. [online] 21 Aug. Available at: <http://www.slate.fr/story/180897/asexualite-desir-orientation-sexe-aven-ace> [Accessed 10 Sept. 2021].

like I'm surrounded by a huge feast with everything I could want to eat, but I'm not hungry"²¹, to which the character of Jean Milburne, sexologist, retorts that it could be a question of asexuality.

In France, the representation of LGBTQI+ characters lags far behind the one of American or British. The first homosexual kiss on the screen was for example only in 2005 in *Plus belle la vie*, 14 years after the United States and their kiss between two women in *Los Angeles Law* in 1991. Likewise, it was not until 2018 that an openly transgender actor, Jonas Ben Ahmed, appeared in a French series, also *Plus belle la vie*. This series is also the first to have spoken of asexuality, with the character of Léa in 2012 then of Rémy and Antoine respectively in 2015 and 2018. Even if this representation was far from perfect, since the character used this alleged asexuality as an excuse to leave your boyfriend and thus hide his attraction to women, the fact of pronouncing the word asexuality will have allowed a peak search of the term on Google the evening of the broadcast of the episode, with 21 000 views recorded on the Wikipedia page devoted to asexuality²².

The social, media and cultural under-representation of asexuality is harmful, because representation does not only reflect reality: it can change the reality. Many ace people claim that if there had been more representation, they would have realized their asexuality much sooner. Under-representation or misrepresentation thus results in a significant number of people being asexual without knowing it. Representation is important in that it makes it possible to make asexuality visible, to show that it is possible. It contributes to the social acceptability of asexuality and allows people who are wondering to put a word on their feelings. A lot of people have discovered themselves asexual thanks to *Bojack Horseman*, but many others never hear about asexuality because it is so invisible, and thus do not discover themselves asexual until the age of 30 or 40. They spend all this time feeling strange, and often forcing themselves to have sex to fit into the norm.

The overwhelming majority of asexual people find out about their sexual orientation, get to ask a word about it, by searching the internet, browsing forums, reading articles or through social media. In the 2016 Asexuality Community Survey²³, a third of respondents said they discovered the existence of asexuality on Tumblr. The Internet therefore plays a major role in the visibility of asexuality, but we also need media and cultural representations to be able to make asexuality a mainstream subject, known to the general public.

Asexual people often grow up feeling lonely and thinking that only they are feeling what they are feeling. They may feel a great shame, a great disconnect between their desires and the expectations of a hypersexualised society. Discovering the existence of asexuality, of the asexual community and thus putting a word on its difference is therefore almost always an immense relief, even a revelation, which makes it possible to put an end to the feeling of abnormality. It allows you to feel less alone, to realize that other people are going through the same thing as us, that our sexual orientation is valid. When we know that people who have not yet discovered themselves as such often think they are sick, or that

²¹ Netflix, *Sex Education*, season 2, episode 4.

²² GOMBERT, P. (n.d). L'omerta autour de la place de l'asexualité sur nos écrans. [online]. Available at: <https://www.psychologue-garnero-paris.fr/templates/images/omerta-autour.pdf> [Accessed 12 Sept. 2021].

²³ BAUER, C., MILLET, T. & al. (2018). The 2016 Asexual Community Survey Summary Report. [online] 15 Nov. Available at: http://asexualcensus.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/2016_ace_community_survey_report.pdf [Accessed 18 Sept. 2021].

something is wrong with them, we understand the importance of identification with the term asexual and the need for representation.

It is still considered shameful to talk about asexuality. There is a strong stigma around the issue of lack of desire, and declaring yourself asexual is a difficult coming out to do, especially since you almost always have to explain what it is. Many homoromantic and asexual people find it easy to report that they like the same gender but are uncomfortable showing their lack of sexual desire. Thus, it is crucial to talk more about asexuality and give it more representation, but also to include diversity in this representation, so that everyone can identify with it. To date, for example, there has still not been a black, trans or Asian asexual character.

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