

# CONTEMPORARY SEXUALITY

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## Asexuality gets more attention, but is it a sexual orientation?

Some sexuality experts are skeptical

For years, Julie Decker had suspected she didn't have the same desires as other girls. As a young teen, she didn't fixate on boys (or girls, for that matter). In high school, she didn't want to date anyone. But a boy asked her out repeatedly, so she relented.

Soon the pair were kissing and fondling, but Decker wasn't into it.

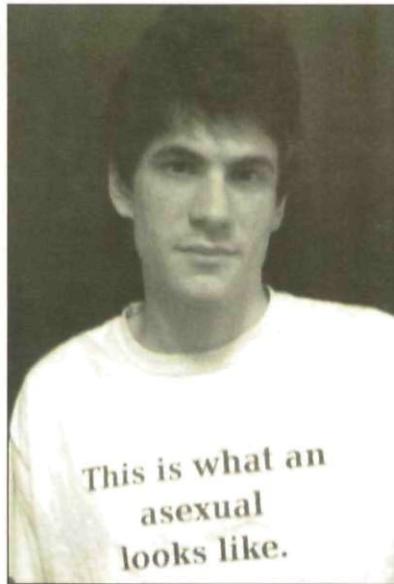
"It wasn't unpleasant so much as it was uninteresting and a little bit gross," Decker remembers. "I spent the whole time trying to memorize a song from a cartoon."

The encounter solidified Decker's belief that she wasn't interested in sex. Decker, now a 27-year-old bookstore employee and writer of fantasy fiction, considers herself asexual.

Decker doesn't date. She's doesn't masturbate. She's never experienced oral sex or intercourse. And she doesn't believe she's missing anything as a result.

"I'm not interested in finding a long-term companion," said Decker, who lives in Gainesville, Fla. "I have a lot of friends and I'm not lonely." Added Decker: "I'm in a distinct minority, but there is nothing wrong with that minority."

A Canadian researcher believes he's uncovered a clue about how many people have traits that are similar to Decker. In August 2004, Anthony Bogaert, PhD, a Brock University professor, published "Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample" in *The Journal of Sex Research*.



David Jay, founder of the Asexuality and Visibility Network

Using data from a 1994 British sexuality survey of 18,876 people, Bogaert estimates that 1.05 percent of people in the U.K. are asexuals. The sample included males and females between the ages of 16 and 59 who were asked to complete either a long- or short-form questionnaire. When asked to complete the statement "I have felt sexually attracted to ...", respondents were given five choices: (a) "only females, never males" (b) "more often to females, and at least once to a male" (c) "about equally often to males and females" (d) more often to males, and at least once to a female" (e)

"only males, never to females" and (f) "I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone."

Nearly 200 people (138 women and 57 men) said they weren't attracted to either gender, leading Bogaert to conclude that these respondents were asexuals.

In his paper, Bogaert defines asexuality as "the absence of a traditional sexual orientation, in which an individual would exhibit little or no sexual attraction to males or females."

The Bogaert study and the existence of an online support group called the Asexuality and Visibility Network has sparked several articles in the media on the topic. Most of these stories explored the possibility that asexuality is a new sexual orientation. That's an assertion many sexuality experts dismiss.

"Just because someone calls themselves an asexual doesn't mean that they are asexual in the scientific definition of the term," said Leonard

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## Asexuality gets more attention

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R. DeRogatis, PhD, director of the Center for Sexual Health and Medicine at Johns Hopkins University. "It doesn't mean that they don't have a sex drive, it just means that they are choosing not use it."

Marty Klein, PhD, is an AASECT-certified sex therapist and publisher of *Sexual Intelligence*, agrees. "Every clinician has seen people with no interest in sex, sometimes lifelong," he said. "Some have been exploited; some have personality disorders; some are terrified of their own sexuality; some are, well, just not interested in sex."

Neither DeRogatis nor Klein believes asexuality deserves special recognition.

"No, it's not a sexual orientation," DeRogatis said.

Added Klein: "The entire issue here is the question of the identity/orientation 'asexual.' The fact that ... one researcher refers to people who are uninterested in sex by a special name doesn't mean that it is a meaningful or clinically valuable category."

Eli Coleman, PhD, professor and director of the Program in Human Sexuality at the University of Minnesota, would like to see more academic effort put into the question of whether asexuality is a sexual orientation.

"In a sense, asexuality defies one of the basic tenets of sexuality: That we are all sexual beings," Coleman said. "Some people may not have much of a sexual drive. But does that make it an orientation? It's a very interesting question that is certainly worthy of investigation."

In thinking about the issue, Coleman agreed with Klein that there might be pathological reasons why some people identify themselves as asexual. But he left the door open for other possibilities.

"Some people don't develop [a sex drive] because of some sort of pathology," Coleman said. "But for others, it might be a normal variant of the complexity of human sexuality. So is it pathogenic or a normal variant? I would guess that there's probably a bit of both."

In addition to extrapolating data to estimate the number of asexuals, Bogaert also analyzed how participants in the British survey answered other

questions in an attempt to identify traits that may contribute to one's lack of sexual desire. "Asexual people were more likely to have adverse health, and the asexual women had a later onset of menarche relative to the sexual women. Asexual people were also shorter and weighed less than sexual people. Finally, there was some evidence that asexual people were more religious than sexual people, at least in regard to attendance at religious services," Bogaert wrote.

AASECT-certified sex therapist Joy Davidson, PhD, believes asexuality could be "explained or partly explained" by one of several conditions:

- "Endocrine imbalances that are undiagnosed or not understood;
- An extreme adaptation to unusual or distressing conditions such as pain or punishment for sexual feelings;
- Defense against intolerable anxiety such as trauma, religiosity, anger at oversexualizing of women, expectations of how to be sexual that conflicts with desires, lack of knowledge about desires, pathological narcissism, history of anorexia in girls as a way to give 'meaning' to asexuality or bulimia in males with its higher incidence of asexuality as indicative of other comorbid conditions;
- Shameful sexual arousal pattern that the individual doesn't want to have triggered."

After examining Bogaert's study, Davidson, the author of "Fearless Sex: A Babe's Guide to Overcoming Your Romantic Obsessions and Getting the Sex Life You Deserve" has also reached the conclusion that asexuality is a movement in search of an identity.

"Saying, 'Hi, I'm an asexual' is a cozy way to create a place in a highly sexual culture, but it doesn't mean their condition is rooted in some unusual set of circumstances," Davidson said.

However, not every sexuality expert is skeptical about the existence of asexuality. The *New York Times* quotes Dr. John Bancroft, former director of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction at Indiana University as being open to the idea. (Bancroft was traveling and not available for a *Contemporary Sexuality* interview.)



Joy Davidson, PhD, author of "Fearless Sex: A Babe's Guide to Overcoming Your Romantic Obsessions and Getting the Sex Life You Deserve"

"I think it would be very surprising if there weren't asexuals, if you look at it from a Kinseyan perspective, that there's this huge variation in human sexuality," Bancroft said.

In his paper, Bogaert acknowledges that sexual aversion disorder and hypoactive sexual desire are issues that may be related to asexuality. However, he argues that these two conditions tend to occur within couples whereas asexuality can be an individual designation.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) notes that three conditions must be met for sexual aversion disorder (302.71): "deficiency or absence of sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity," "the disturbance must cause marked distress or interpersonal difficulty," and it "is not due exclusively to the direct physiological effects of a substance ... or a general medical condition."

Sexual aversion disorder, meanwhile, is defined by the DSM-IV as "aversion to and active avoidance of genital sexual contact with a sexual partner." The entry (302.79) adds that "the disturbance must cause marked distress or interpersonal difficulty."

Decker, the bookstore worker, and David Jay, the founder of the Asexuality and Visibility Network (who is also a self-described asexual), would undoubtedly argue they have no "marked distress or interpersonal difficulty" as a result of their asexuality.

"It's not a lack of interest so much, as it is a 'sexual orientation of no,'" said Decker. "It's not 'no sexual orientation.' It's important to draw that distinction because some people believe that people like me just need to find the right guy or gal."

Said Jay: "It's very much a sexual identity. It's not a lack of sexual identity. We still have things to identify around. There is a common asexual experience."

The researcher, Anthony Bogaert, would like to see other social scientists explore the issue. "I think it is reasonable to be cautious about the percentage found in one sample, even if that sample is a good one (i.e., national probability sample)," he said.

Clive Davis, professor emeritus of social psychology at Syracuse University, believes there's "good news" and "bad news" in Bogaert's research methodology. "A probability sample is certainly better than a non-probability sample. So many of the samples in sex research are voluntary so nothing can be generalized. In this case, there's a lot more to go on."

What troubles Davis though is that about 30 percent of would-be participants refused to answer survey questions. "Immediately, the probability nature is gone [when that happens]," he said. Those conducting the original British study took that into account and made "reasonable" adjustments to ensure probability, he said.

The 30 percent of people who declined to participate probably did so for a reason, Davis argues. Earlier sexuality surveys are thought to have underestimated the percentage of gays and lesbians in the populations because of refusal rates among those groups. That's a point Bogaert doesn't hesitate to make.

"It is interesting to speculate about whether the rate of asexuality is actually higher than reported here given that some of the participants who decline to participate in this survey (about 30 percent) could also be asexual," Bogaert wrote.

In the final analysis, Marty Klein believes the flood of news reports in *The New York Times*, *Salon.com*, *Toronto Star*, *Utne Reader* points to another issue that isn't likely to go away anytime soon.

"The more important story here is how this is simply the latest example of a 'trend' that the media picks up, legitimizes, and disseminates on a regular basis," Klein said. "We can expect to see an Oprah episode on it, and our patients will ask about it. One way our field could really help people is if we talked more about the phenomenon of sexual trend-creation that shapes public consciousness and public policy about sexuality."

— Todd Melby

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