

Gender uncoupled: Asexual people making sense of high school sex talk

Sexualities

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Abstract

Sociologists have documented sex talk as a crucial mechanism in the reproduction of heteronormativity in schools. In this highly sexualized context, how did asexual people make sense of sex talk? Drawing upon 21 retrospective interviews with asexual adults (between 18 and 31 years of age), I examined their accounts of sex talk in high school. Contrary to expectation, most of my respondents did not link sex talk to issues of masculinity/femininity, but instead framed it as about discovery of asexual identity, friendship, immaturity and inappropriate conduct, and/or simply meaningless noise. I suggest that the diverse range of gender ideologies and abundance of gender-coded symbols in our society enabled many respondents to assert asexuality-compatible femininities/masculinities, foreclose potential gender dilemmas, and retain a sense of security in their gender subjectivity. While the diverse narratives of sex talk encounters remind sociologists to appreciate asexual people's heterogeneous experiences, the possibility of subjectively degendering sex talk and desexualizing gender challenges sociologists to adopt a multidimensional approach to understand gendered sexuality.

Keywords

Asexuality, high school, gendered sexuality, sex talk

In recent years, sociologists have repeatedly showcased the dynamic tension between gender and sexuality (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009; Schilt and Windsor, 2014). This tension is particularly evident in high school as students enact and regulate masculinity/femininity through “sex talk”—discussions about, for example, sexual adventures/experiences (Pascoe, 2011), sexualized body parts (Martin, 1996; Pascoe, 2011), and

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sexual “drama” (Khan, 2012; Miller, 2016). In such an environment, people who do not comply with the hegemonic feminine/masculine practice of expressing and discussing sexual attraction to others are likely to face “gender dilemmas” (Wilkins, 2009)—situations where individual actions deviate from institutionalized means of signifying masculinity/femininity in ways that can generate stigma.

Asexual people—people who do not feel sexual attraction to others—may be partly apt to face such gender dilemmas (Mitchell and Hunnicutt, 2019). However, we know very little about how asexual people experience the tension between gender and (a)sexuality and much less about how they experience high school. Indeed, only recently have asexuality scholars turned attention to issues of masculinity and femininity (Cuthbert, 2019; Gupta, 2019; Przybylo, 2014). How, then, did asexual people make sense of sex talk in high school? Given the importance of sex talk in signifying masculinity/femininity, how did they manage potential gender dilemmas?

This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the narrative frames asexual adults used when talking about their encounters with high school sex talk. These thematic patterns in “storied ways of knowing and communicating” (Riessman, 2004: 706) reflect the cultural resources people use to make sense of sex talk (Gimlin, 2013). Contrary to conventional knowledge, only rarely did my respondents link sex talk to issues of masculinity/femininity. Most respondents framed sex talk instead as about discovery of asexuality, friendship, immaturity and inappropriate conduct, and/or negligible episodes of high school. Such subjective uncoupling of gender and sexuality also happened in the way they talked about gender: many respondents utilized alternative gender ideologies (e.g., biological essentialism) and/or gender-coded symbols (e.g., apparel and makeup) to desexualize gender and assert femininities/masculinities that are compatible with asexuality. Taken together, these strategies help foreclose the potential gender dilemma—the inconsistency between the importance of sex talk for signifying masculinity/femininity and their lack of sexual attraction to others—as a non-problem. My findings contribute to feminist sociology in two ways. Empirically, it invites sociologists to appreciate asexual people’s agency and diverse experiences. Theoretically, it challenges sociologists to consider the multidimensional organization of gendered sexuality and recognize the potential discrepancy across individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions.

Gendered sexuality in schools

Theories of gendered sexuality state that gender and sexuality are inextricably tied, such that when people are doing gender, they are also doing heteronormativity (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009; Schilt and Windsor, 2014). On the one hand, sexuality is gendered because gender norms inform sexually tinged social interactions (Hamilton and Armstrong, 2009; Vanwesenbeeck, 2009). On the other hand, gender is sexualized. As MacKinnon (1982: 517) notes, whereas in labor relations “many work and few gain,” in gender relations “some fuck and others get fucked.” But the sexualization of gender goes beyond sexual intercourse to social intercourse, as manifested in sex talk, including

slut shaming (Armstrong et al., 2014), flirtatious exchanges (Mora, 2012), and sexual comments (Paap, 2006).

High school is a fruitful case to examine the co-constitution of gender and sexuality because it is a main institution where normative and unequal structures of gender and heterosexuality are reproduced (GLSEN, 2012; Smith and Smith, 1998) and where sex talk is prevalent. A nationally representative study in the US reveals that 48 percent of the students surveyed “experienced some form of sexual harassment in the 2010–11 school year,” with verbal harassment constituting “the bulk of incidents” (AAUW, 2011: 2). Another study finds that from middle to high school, the percentage of girls experiencing public sexual rumors and jokes almost doubled (Gruber and Fineran, 2007). These are, at best, conservative measures of the prevalence of sex talk because students also talk about sex in ways other than harassment: bragging or sharing sexual histories (Martin, 1996; Pascoe, 2011), telling cautionary tales (Khan, 2012; Miller, 2016), communicating views on virginity (Carpenter, 2005), etc. In short, high school is a highly sexualized space of interaction not necessarily because students are having sex, but because they are talking about it.

Qualitative evidence further shows high school is a “sexusociety”—a term Przybylo (2011: 446) coined to “textually indicate the diluted omnipresence of sexuality”—where sex talk is central to masculinity/femininity. Pascoe’s (2011) high school ethnography is a case in point. She shows that talking about heterosexual acts and conquests signifies boys’ ability to exercise control over girls’ bodies, defends them against emasculating insults, and affirms their masculinity. With peers policing each other’s masculinity through discussions of sexual experience, many boys feel pressured to have sex (or at least pretend they had sex) to shore up their masculinity. While some queer girls also claim masculinity via discourses of “getting girls,” others gain social power by engaging boys’ sex talk as high school girls’ status is often tied to the status of boys they date. Furthermore, Miller (2016) argues that in the absence of positive and diverse sexuality and gender education, sexual rumors serve as “case studies” for girls to negotiate sexuality and gender norms. Such sex talk also provides girls with stories by which to evaluate other girls’ self-esteem and femininity (Wilkins and Miller, 2017). In short, sex talk is a critical way of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987) in high school.

Based on this literature, the dynamic relationship between sex talk and gender in school is likely to exacerbate gender dilemmas for those who are not sexually active or who do not participate in sex talk in socially appropriate ways, as they “struggle to create socially recognized masculinities” or femininities (Wilkins, 2009: 343). To explore this point, I draw on in-depth interviews with asexual people—people who do not feel sexual attraction to others.

Asexuality and gender dilemma

Under the broad definition of asexuality as “never having felt sexual attraction to others” (Bogaert, 2015: 364), asexual people use a variety of modifiers to describe themselves: aromantic asexuals who do not desire partnership, heteroromantic asexuals who desire partners of a different gender, homoromantic asexuals who desire same-gender partners,

demisexuals who experience sexual attraction only if they feel romantic attraction, Grey-As who fall in the middle of sexual-asexual spectrum, etc. (Carrigan, 2011; Scherrer, 2008). They also distinguish asexuality from celibacy, arguing asexuality is not a matter of choice (Scherrer, 2008).

Research on asexuality has grown significantly in the last decade. However, “[r]esearch on gendered experiences of asexuality is in its infancy” (Cuthbert, 2019: 845). The small but emerging literature on this topic suggests that asexual people face strong gender dilemmas as their lack of sexual attraction contradicts traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Drawing upon three interviews, Przybylo (2014: 233) asserts the male sexual drive discourse, which assumes “to ‘be a man’ is to be sexual, have sex, and overtly perform one’s (hetero)sexuality,” puts extra burden on asexual men and can result in pressure, guilt, or embarrassment. Gupta (2019: 1198) extends Przybylo’s finding into a cross-gender comparison, showing that while asexual men “may live in greater conflict with dominant gendered sexual norms” than asexual women, they also experience greater sexual autonomy than asexual women in refusing sexuality (see also Mitchell and Hunnicutt, 2019). Comparing the dating experiences of twelve asexual women and three asexual men, Vares (2018: 533) finds that whereas male dates denied asexual women’s asexuality by reading their “passivity” as in need of awakening by men, female dates denied asexual men’s asexuality as not a “real thing.” Cuthbert (2019) explores how so many asexual people come to an agender subjectivity. She argues that agender subjectivity arises from the broader socio-structural context of hetero-patriarchy: because many participants understand gender as fundamentally about sexuality, their disinterest in sex results in an alienation from gender. Given the inextricability of gender and sexuality, identifying as agender “just made sense” to them (Cuthbert, 2019: 859).

Accordingly, I expected asexual people would find themselves at odds with sexualized high school gender culture and frame their experience in a gender narrative that links their sex talk encounters with their sense of masculinity/femininity or lack thereof. I did not simply seek confirmation for this expected finding in my analysis. Like Cuthbert (2019) and Gupta (2019), I respected my respondents’ own perspective and meaning-making. As I will show, it is the unexpected absence of the gender narrative that challenges us to appreciate the diversity of asexual experiences and to revise and advance theories of gendered sexuality.

Methods

Following the model set out in the majority of asexuality research (e.g., Gupta, 2019; Scherrer, 2008), I recruited self-identified asexual people from the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), the largest asexual network around the world. Upon receiving my IRB approval, I contacted AVEN for their permission to make a call for interview participants on their forum. The post explained the purpose of my study and eligibility criteria for participation—participants must be at least 18 years old and have attended high school in the United States. After interviewing respondents, I also asked them to advertise the link to my study if they felt comfortable doing so.

My respondents were between 18 and 31 years old. For this article, I restricted my respondents to this age range due to their closer temporal proximity to high school for the sake of more accurate recall. This criterion meant excluding two older respondents, yielding a final sample of 21 respondents. Most are white, from middle-class families, and attended public high schools. Eight respondents identified as aromantic, four as heteroromantic, two as biromantic, and five did not describe their romantic orientations. The remaining four respondents identified as demiromantic demisexual, demi/panromantic asexual, hetero/demiromantic gray asexual, and pan-asexual, respectively. Nine respondents identified as asexual during high school (eight of whom came out as asexual during high school).

Nine respondents identify as women. Two identify as female but one of them said she was “starting to question that,” and the other said she was “confused by the concept.” Six identify as gender nonconforming (four of whom identified as nonconforming during high school). Like most qualitative studies of asexuality (Cuthbert, 2019; Przybylo, 2014; Sloan, 2015; Vares, 2018), asexual men are underrepresented in this study. Even after updating my post for more asexual men, I was only able to recruit three cis-gender men and one transman. This means I cannot make any conclusive generalization about how asexual men and women experience asexuality differently. Making a methodologically robust assertion about gender difference requires a larger sample of male participants than most existing qualitative studies of asexuality were able to obtain (for exception, see Gupta, 2019). Instead of a gender-difference approach that takes “men” and “women” as pre-given categories (Connell, 1987), I pay more attention to the ground on which my respondents claim themselves as masculine/feminine. That is, I do not consider gender as an independent variable, but an outcome to be accomplished (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Because my respondents lived in different parts of North America, I conducted all interviews over Skype, Google Hangout, or by phone, depending on my respondents’ preference. While online and phone interviews limit the degree of face-to-face interaction and reduce the richness of nonverbal data, these methods do have certain benefits. First, they allow me to “go” beyond my city and talk to asexual people living in both conservative and liberal regions. Online interviews not only result in more heterogeneous samples than face-to-face interviews, but also better protect anonymity, thus enabling respondents from marginalized groups to be more open about their experiences (van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2008). These indirect data-collection methods are especially common in asexuality studies (e.g., Sloan, 2015; Vares, 2018).

The interviews lasted for about an hour and a half on average and were audio-recorded. As a non-native speaker of English who attended high school in China, I was able to use my “outsider” status to solicit elaborations on certain words and expressions. Because most of my respondents had graduated or were about to graduate from high school, my interviews were retrospective, asking what they remember about their high school experience. Following Miller’s (2016) approach in her study of college girls’ retrospective account of high school sexual drama, I focused on meaning more than interactions. Specifically, I examined thematic variations in my respondents’ stories of high school sex talk to explore what sex talk *meant to them*. After each interview, I wrote a memo to

summarize my respondent's story and noted emergent themes. I conducted flexible coding (Deterding and Waters, 2018) in MAXQDA2018, a commonly-used qualitative data analysis software, after transcribing all interviews. I first indexed the major topics in my transcripts, while developing a list of sub-codes for each topic after taking notes on relevant themes and sub-codes. Then, I narrowed my focus to sex talk, grouping sub-codes by thematic patterns in my respondents' narratives of their sex talk encounters. Noticing that gender narratives were less common than I expected, I turned to places where my respondents talked about gender directly. Following the Extended Case Method (Burawoy, 1998), I kept theories of gendered sexuality in mind throughout my research while being open to unexpected findings for theory reconstruction. Doing so enabled me to remain sensitive to both the "said" and "unsaid" in my respondents' accounts.

Findings

The gender dilemma of sex talk

Consistent with the literature on gendered sexuality in school (Miller, 2016; Pascoe, 2011) and recent work on gendered experiences of asexuality (Cuthbert, 2019; Gupta, 2019; Przybylo, 2014; Vares, 2018), four respondents did use gender narratives to frame high school sex talk encounter as a moment of gender dilemma. In this narrative, gender and sexuality are intertwined as their disinterest in sex contradicts dominant notions of masculinity/femininity.

Devon, who is nonbinary but tolerates she/her pronouns because people can find they/them "confusing," began identifying as asexual when she was 13. Despite her early identification, her teachers and classmates in her "very very white, very very Christian, and very ... straight and cis-gender" high school constantly ridiculed and rejected her asexuality. She described this experience as discrimination, leading her to internalize a feeling of inferiority. My interview with her was emotionally charged. At several times, she started tapping her table and her voice wavered as though she was about to cry. When asked to recall experiences of sex talk, she said:

I would hear a lot of guys talking about sex ... like saying, "Oh ... [her] pants are really tight, and her ass looks really good" ... people would make comments about me like that, and that would really piss me off ... Not only because I'm asexual, [but also] because I would be perceived as a girl ... a heterosexual cis-gender woman, which I'm not ... I felt like at the time, there wasn't anything I can deal about that ... that's how they thought ... and society reinforces that way of thinking ... there's no way I can even begin to fight back against that kind of thing, I just had to ignore it.

Devon's account echoes Vares's (2018) and Gupta's (2019) studies of gendered experiences of asexuality—asexual women have little freedom from sexual objectification. Even though Devon did not identify as a woman, she was often perceived as so. Facing institutionalized heterosexism at her school, Devon could neither avoid nor challenge being sexualized. Importantly, for Devon, this experience was not only gendered, but also

gendering: being viewed as a sexual object meant being a girl, which further exacerbated her gender dilemma.

Bryon, a transman perceived as a girl in high school, said he could not think of himself as a man in a context where boys talked about sex a lot:

When you're used to ... growing up around a certain expectation of male sexuality you don't have ... you're treated all in your life as female. It's saying that you can't be male.

...

I think [sex talk] communicated the I-can't-be-a-man kind of attitude. Like I'm not a dude ... because ... I only saw that kind of behavior in men. And ... where they're so explicit, I didn't identify with it at all. ... it's kind of the isolating thing with gender.

Like the asexual people in Przybylo's (2014) and Cuthbert's (2019) studies, the male sexual drive discourse, supported by sex talk, alienated Bryon from gender during high school. For Bryon and those around him, achieving masculinity required performing sexuality—more specifically, (hetero)sexual desire and prowess (Pascoc, 2011). Unable to experience such a desire and stage such a performance, Bryon found himself in a gender dilemma.

While Bryon was feminized by not expressing sexual drive, Tracey's dilemma with sex talk was about zir (un)attractiveness. Tracey started identifying as nonbinary around 2015 and as demiromantic demisexual in 2017. Ze came to the United States from China in 2008 as an exchange student in a public high school in Florida, where ze was perceived as a cis-gender straight girl. At the time, ze thought sex was "a grown-up thing" and subscribed to the traditional Chinese view on femininity—"if I had sex ... as someone who's born female, I lose some sort of value." When asked what ze felt when zir friends were talking about sex, Tracey said:

I actually felt a little lost, and misplaced. It's almost like, why do I not know anything about this and, is there something different or wrong with me? ... There was a time that I felt maybe I was just unattractive, or maybe I'm not appreciated.

As Pascoc (2011) argues, girls' status in school is tied to the status of the boys they date/attract. For Tracey, listening to sex talk was not only a cultural shock but also a gender dilemma. Tracey told me that, back then, ze did not realize zir lack of sexual experience was due to disinterest in sex, but instead attributed it to a lack of attractiveness. In other words, zir alienation from high school sexual culture was understood as a sign of undesirable femininity.

Rob recalled sex talk in a gender narrative without challenging his masculinity. He attended a rural and conservative Christian school in Pennsylvania, where finding a heterosexual marriage partner was a major component of high school life. Even though Rob said there was no "notch-on-your-belt" hookup culture, he felt the pressure to explain his lack of interest in sex and dating:

One thing I relieved that pressure was ... there's also the "man will not lie with a woman out of wedlock" ... It kind of gave me a shell, like ... because this is my religious beliefs. I just use that as an out. I didn't feel very strongly about that then ... if my friends were like ... you have to start sleep with people because otherwise people will think you're gay ... when I said that I don't do that because [of religion] ... I got a pass ... It gave them a framework for why I didn't fit their preconceived notion of sexuality.

Here, the sex talk between Rob and his friends was about contesting the meaning of masculinity. His friends suggested that not having sex with girls is gay (Rob explained that "gay was substitute for stupid ... someone feminine"). Facing this potential gender dilemma, Rob responded by redefining abstinence as a masculine quality with the help of religion. While I cannot generalize cross-gender comparison from my sample, the contrast between Rob's success in asserting abstinent masculinity and Devon's predicament in sexual objectification resonates with Gupta's (2019: 1198) finding that asexual men enjoy more sexual autonomy despite their "greater conflict with dominant gendered sexual norms."

Sex talk degendered

Finding her respondents associated gender with sexuality, Cuthbert (2019) titled her article "When We Talk about Gender We Talk about Sex." While this was the case for some of my respondents, the opposite was true for most of them. Most of my respondents did not reference masculinity/femininity when recounting high school sex talks. Instead, they adopted overlapping narratives that are not explicitly gendered/gendering, such as discovery of asexual identity, immaturity and inappropriate conduct at school, friendship, and/or meaningless noise. For them, high school sex talk was *not positioned as* a moment of gender dilemma. Through these narrative meaning-making, they "de-gendered" sex talk.

Nineteen respondents connected sex talk to their understanding of their (a)sexual selves—their difference from other students in sexual interests and the troubles and epiphanies of being different. Previous studies reveal that asexual people often have to negotiate boundaries of intimate relationship because they do not experience sexual attraction, which is assumed to be a crucial element of romantic attraction (Sloan, 2015; Vares, 2018). For some, this meant having the additional burden of adopting interactional tactics such as self-distraction and conversation-steering to navigate sex talk because they are different from other students. Chelsea, for example, said, "I thought [sex talk] was kind of gross ... I just tried to ignore it and read whatever book I was reading at the time."

Nessa, on the other hand, came to embrace asexuality during a sex talk with friends. When Nessa was about 12 years old, they first learned about asexuality via an online article. Confused by the concept, Nessa did a search and found AVEN, where a number of asexual people's stories about attraction resonated with their experience. Still, it was only several years later during high school that Nessa thought about their own sexual identity again. During a sex talk with friends, Nessa said sex was weird and could not imagine having sex with anyone. They described their friends' reactions:

[O]ne of my friends was talking about how much they enjoyed having sex and I kind of tangled up my nose at the thought, and ... they ended up saying, "Hey you know, you might be asexual!" ... I was like, "Oh! Really!" It was my first time thinking about that since the article many years back ... [This conversation] was just the first time I'm realizing, "Oh! I'm different! I don't seem to enjoy this thing other people of my age seem to enjoy."

After their friends brought up asexuality, Nessa responded, "Oh, well, maybe I am!" In other words, this sex talk was an epiphanic moment for Nessa during which their difference in sexual interests was highlighted and then accepted and interpreted by their friends as a sign of asexuality, which Nessa came to embrace publicly. While Chelsea's account framed sex talk as a struggle arising from her difference from others, Nessa's account framed a particular incident of sex talk as a resource through which their friends brought up the possibility of asexuality for Nessa.

Twelve respondents emphasized such affective connection with friends while reflecting on sex talk in high school. Some, like Nessa, focused on what their friends did for them. Others, such as Val, suggested that the direction of care and support can go the other way around:

The person is telling me a story that means a lot to them. I'm going to pay attention ... I'm not going to be mean about it. I'm not going to ignore them. I'm going to listen to their story, listen to what they have to say. If they ask for my opinion, I would give it to them ... I felt I had very little to offer, but I also feel obligated to give them everything, anything of value that I could.

Here, Val situated sex talk encounters into a close-group context, where participants were expected to care and support each other. For him, in this context, sex talk does not mean sex per se, but his friends and his obligation as a friend.

In contrast to sex talk in a friend circle, when I asked Val about sex talk in his school more generally, he stressed his indifference to sex talk. Describing these sex talks as "background noise," he said:

It's been so long, and I didn't really care, but I do know that it was ... a very popular subject ... the boys would talk about girls; the girls would talk about boys. The details, I couldn't tell you. It was in through in one ear and out in the other.

Val's account testifies the institutionalized heteronormativity at school and its prevalence in everyday interaction that [Pascoe \(2011\)](#) observes. However, in contrast to the conventional knowledge that the male sexual drive discourse alienates asexual men ([Przybylo, 2014](#)), Val did not feel it had impacted him. In total, twelve respondents recalled some sex talks with such apathy. As Amanda commented, "It was kind of forgettable ... I didn't have any interest in it." Neither Val nor Amanda attached much emotion to these sex talk encounters. Neither framed these encounters as isolating or found it exciting or interesting. They did not recount feeling any stress or any incentive to participate.

By framing sex talks as negligible episodes of high school, they rendered the content of sex talk trivial.

Thirteen respondents ascribed negative value to sex talk, framing it as morally problematic in high school. Bruce, for example, said:

[I]n a high school setting, students should not be freely talking about sex ... Like, I just don't feel like that is a conversation to have in public ... I don't want to know what you do in the bedroom personally ... If they have sex, and they say they have sex, I would consider that to be ... the limit of appropriateness. As soon as they start getting into details of their sex life, the details of their sexual experience, then I would say that is not appropriate to have publicly.

Many of my respondents did support comprehensive sex education over abstinence-only programs. But some, like Bruce, stated that the only situation where sex could be legitimately discussed is an educational context led by a qualified instructor. Some further considered those who talked about sex publicly as immature. Devon told me:

[I]mmature kids talk about sex a lot more (laugh) ... I always felt like I was a lot more mature than the kids in my age ... their conversation and their obsession with sex and sexual relationships was in part due to their immaturity. I tried to be more involved in German club ... and I found some of the kids that were in the German club to be, maybe a little bit more mature, because they were actually interested in ... trying to speak the language, and ... they had interest outside of ... partying and getting laid.

Devon constructed a binary in which sex talk signals immaturity and self-cultivation indicated maturity. By contrasting their stance with that of students who talked about sex publicly, respondents like Bruce and Devon constructed a moral hierarchy that placed people engaging sex talk of any kind—heterosexual or homosexual—beneath them. For them, sex talk was about immaturity and inappropriate conduct.

Desexualizing gender

If most of my respondents did not talk about gender when recounting sex talk experiences, what did they talk about when they talked about gender? While interview data do not allow me to observe my respondents' interaction with others directly, they do reveal how my respondents understood gender and the cultural resources available to them.

When asked directly about understandings of gender or gendered expectations at school, my respondents referenced cultural resources other than sex talk. Kay identified with "some traditional masculine traits" in her "endeavor not to seem incompetent." By incompetent, she meant "not being able to take care of [herself], or ... needing a guy to help lift something." From the universe of "masculine traits," she chose the "traditional" ones that associate masculinity with competence, rather than those associate masculinity with sex (cf. Pascoe, 2011).

Val claimed masculinity is unchallengeable—"I never considered that there was a spectrum of masculinity. I figured if you're a man, you're a man ... [no man] could be

more masculine than another if they were in fact male.” In this statement, Val invoked two widely circulated gender ideologies: gender-as-a-spectrum and biological determinism. By refuting gender-as-a-spectrum and favoring biological determinism, Val uncoupled masculinity from sex talk and sexual experience. While religious doctrine about marriage enabled Rob to resolve his gender dilemma by claiming an abstinent masculinity, biological determinism allowed Val to foreclose his potential gender dilemma by taking his masculinity for granted.

Such taken-for-grantedness also appeared in accounts about femininity. For example, Sharron said, “I didn’t think about it too much. I just think girl, long hair, and wear, well we don’t have to wear dress, but I guess, mostly thinking about femininity.” When asked to elaborate, she added, “Like umm ... I wasn’t even ... umm ... I don’t really know how to explain it.” Such equivocation shows, for Sharron, femininity is not something she achieved reflexively and does not require explicit performance of heterosexuality.

Like Sharron, Mia also highlighted gender-coded symbols, such as dresses, when talking about femininity. When asked about what the popular girls at her school were respected for, she focused her answer on “feminine traits”:

[F]eminine would be someone who would ... look nice ... conventionally attractive ... their hair would complement their face well, their hair will look well groomed ... they would be thin, and have attractive looking bodies, and they would dress themselves in nice clothing that accentuate the curves on their bodies ... They’re giggly or they’re bubbly, or maybe flirt around the popular guys.

While this description reveals the heterosexualized interactional rituals for staging femininity at school (Pascoe, 2011), Mia’s personal take on femininity was slightly different:

It was natural for me to also try to be feminine, to also have a nice haircut, to dress up, to wear makeup, because that’s something I was naturally drawn towards. So I could relate to them in that aspect of beauty and fashion and looking good. But just personally I was going through Dysthymia, which made me pretty anti-social. So, I wasn’t as outgoing as they were.

Although it is tempting to argue from a feminist scholarly perspective that beauty and fashion are shaped by gendered sexual culture, this was *not* what Mia emphasized when she highlighted her personal preference for femininity. Indeed, Mia dropped the sexualized connotation of flirting. For her, it is outgoingness, rather than arousing boys per se, that engenders ideal femininity. Furthermore, given the wide range of gender-coded symbols available, especially in beauty and fashion, being anti-social and not initiating sex talk would not totally erase her femininity.

Some respondents also showed a disinvestment in femininity/masculinity. Drina identified female but has “started to question that.” She said, “[M]y family doesn’t conform to gender roles so much, so I never had to be super girlie or anything.” She did mention that she “stood out” in high school, because “guys with long hair would stand out, girls with short hair would stand out, any girls who don’t wear makeup would stand

out ... girls who would just wear t-shirt and jeans would stand out.” Drina was critical about this, arguing “it was silly ... everyone should just wear and appear however they’re most comfortable appearing.” While still framing masculinity and femininity as about apparel and appearance, Drina also benefited from cultural resources at home to withdraw from such dichotomy. This does not mean gender nonconforming asexual people are automatically free from gender dilemmas. As Devon’s experience and Gupta’s (2019) studies show, many still face the dilemma for being sexualized as heterosexual cis-woman.

It is important to note that all my respondents are millennials. As Risman (2018) shows, growing up in an unfinished gender revolution, millennials are equipped with diverse cultural resources to make sense of gender: not all traditional views have faded away, yet feminist ideologies and information about ever-expanding gender categories are increasingly accessible through the Internet. With such a large “cultural toolkit” (Swidler, 1986), my respondents could make sense of gender in variegated ways, referencing apparel, competence, biological determinism, or even question whether gender is meaningful at all. Previous studies have at most mentioned (sub)cultural resources in passing. Gupta (2019) suggests that asexual men may find acceptance in nerd/geek culture and consistency with breadwinner masculinity. Cuthbert (2019) describes one respondent started to feel their agender subjectivity as separate from their asexuality after engaging with LGBT+ discursive space, where the separation model of gender and sexuality prevails. Like them, many of my respondents drew upon the cultural resources available, consciously or unconsciously, to desexualize gender and degender sex talk. By doing so, they foreclosed the gender dilemma that could arise from the social importance of sex talk and personal disinterest in sex.

Discussion

Recent studies of the gendered experience of asexuality (Cuthbert, 2019; Gupta, 2019; Przybylo, 2014; Vares, 2018) have joined the literature on gendered sexuality (Miller, 2016; Pascoe, 2011; Schilt and Westbrook, 2009; Schilt and Windsor, 2014) to assert gender and sexuality are inextricably intertwined. My study advances this literature by examining how asexual people made sense of sex talk in high school. Contrary to the dominant academic narrative that the co-construction of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity/femininity puts asexual people into gender dilemmas, only a few of my respondents find themselves in such a situation when it comes to high school sex talk. Rather, most of my respondents used other frames to understand sex talk as about discovering their asexual selves, supporting/supported by their friends, immaturity and inappropriate conduct, and/or nothing. In other words, for my respondents, sex talk could, *but did not necessarily have to*, be about their masculine/feminine status.

“Given gender’s omnipresence in social life, it must be spoken to or made irrelevant” (Salzinger, 1998: 2). My study suggests that variegated gender ideologies and omnipresent gender-coded symbols available to my respondents allowed some of them to make gender irrelevant to sex talk. By desexualizing gender and degendering sex talk, they were able to foreclose the contradiction between their disinterest in sex and the critical role sex

talk played in signifying femininity/masculinity at school. A potential gender dilemma thus became a non-problem.

This unexpected finding does not necessarily refute what previous studies have found, but rather complicates it. Instead of making universalist claims that gender is always interlocked with sexuality (MacKinnon, 1982) or that they are separate entities (Rubin, 1984), my study challenges sociologists to approach gendered sexuality multi-dimensionally. As Risman (2004) argues, gender operates at three dimensions: the individual dimension of gendered selves, the interactional dimension of cultural expectations and accountability, and the institutional dimension of resource distribution. This means that to talk about gendered sexuality, we must distinguish their tension across these three dimensions and recognize their tension at one dimension may not correspond to their tension at another dimension.

Much of the existing literature on gendered sexuality focus on interactional and institutional dimensions, whereas my study focuses primarily on the individual dimension. Importantly, uncoupling gender from sexuality at the individual dimension does not necessarily challenge the entanglement of gender and sexuality at interactional and institutional dimensions. Individual understanding of masculinity as guaranteed by male biology or femininity as about fashion and beauty does not challenge the prevalence of sex talk at school, the pattern that “boys talk about girls; girls talk about boys,” or the hierarchy that most popular girls flirt with most popular boys. Their masculinity/femininity may still be “held accountable” (West and Zimmerman, 1987) by other students. Conversely, that hegemonic masculinity and femininity are, respectively, defined by sexual desire for women and sexual attractiveness to men does not mean that asexual people always face gender dilemmas. The multiplicity of non-hegemonic masculinities/femininities (Connell, 1987; Gupta, 2019) and gender ideologies (Risman, 2018) are all potential cultural resources for establishing a sense of security in gender subjectivity, reflexively or unreflexively. In this sense, asexual people are not always passive victims of a sexsociety (Carrigan, 2011) but agentic interpreters who carve out space for themselves in a society that marginalizes them.

Like all studies, this study has limitations. First, while retrospective interviewing helped me reduce selection bias, because asexual people who identified as asexual during high school may have different experiences than those who identified later in life, it limited the richness of details, especially in comparison to thick-descriptive ethnography. Second, as in many other qualitative studies of asexuality, male, working-class, and non-white respondents are underrepresented in my sample. Accordingly, I cannot make rigorous cross-gender comparisons. More research on this population is necessary for the future development of asexuality studies. Relatedly, this study draws upon a small sample of asexual people. Hence, I do not intend to claim that the gender dilemma of high school sex talk is an “atypical” experience for asexual people in general.

Instead of generalizing statistically, I present the empirical possibility of uncoupling gender from sex talk at the individual dimension to generalize “ontologically” and theoretically (Small, 2009). On the one hand, the diversity of narratives about high school sex talk challenges sexualities scholars to appreciate asexual people’s agency and heterogeneous experiences (Dawson et al., 2018). On the other hand, the empirical possibility

of uncoupling gender from sexuality at the individual dimension challenges us to take a multi-dimensional approach to gendered sexuality. Under what circumstances, and with what resources, do people uncouple gender from sexualities? To what extent does such individual uncoupling disrupt or uphold interactional/institutional gender order? Studying those who are not sexually active/attracted can be particularly fruitful for answering these questions—examining the tension between gender and sexuality from this standpoint will enable feminist sociologists to consider the reproduction of gendered heteronormativity in new ways.

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