

Reply to Hinderliter (2009)

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Hinderliter's (2009) Letter-to-the-Editor, entitled "Methodological Issues for Studying Asexuality," was a thought-provoking and interesting critical exploration into measuring asexuality for research. Hinderliter is a member of the Asexuality, Visibility, and Education Network (AVEN) project team and AVEN is the largest international online community for asexuals. He is also a member of the AVEN DSM Task Force (a working group of asexuals aimed at contributing to the discussions of the DSM-V Subworkgroup on Sexual Dysfunctions), a frequent blogger on the topic of asexuality and sexual dysfunction (see <http://asexystuff.blogspot.com/2009/03/hypoactive-sexual-desire-disorder-and.html>), and an asexual himself. He is clearly well informed of the available literature on asexuality—historical and more recent—and explored the potential methodological difficulties in conducting research on asexuality as well as proposed hypotheses for future study.

One of the key issues Hinderliter raises is that of formalizing an operational definition for asexuality. He notes that "Asexuality has been variously operationally defined: in terms of (little or no) sexual attraction, sexual preference, and asexual self-identification." AVEN has been an important source for recruiting asexuals to participate in research; however, there are two problems that Hinderliter does not consider. Firstly, AVEN subscribers may, themselves, be a very heterogeneous group as stated on their website: "There

is considerable diversity among the asexual community; each asexual person experiences things like relationships, attraction, and arousal somewhat differently" (www.asexuality.org/home/overview.html). It is unclear whether this diversity is truly a feature of asexuality or whether AVEN is appealing to a large number of individuals, some of whom are asexual but others who may be exploring asexuality because of a lack of identification with conventional categories of sexual orientation. This implies that if AVEN alone is used to recruit research participants our conclusions based on studying that sample may not take us any closer to fully understanding asexuality.

The second difficulty in using self-identified asexuals from AVEN in research aimed at understanding asexuality is that this draws from a very select segment of the asexual population, i.e., those who have already identified with the asexual label. AVEN has been described as being important in the "identification" process among a number of asexuals because it has validated their experiences, provided them with a label, and enforced a sense of community. However, what are the experiences of those asexuals who have not yet "come out"? Bogaert's (2004) study found a 1% prevalence of individuals who lack sexual attraction; however, what proportion of those might then proceed smoothly on to identification and acceptance as asexual? One might argue that the former group is more emotionally distressed, confused, and isolated than asexuals who have identified as asexual and found a community. Thus, the two groups may differ qualitatively from one another. By focusing research only on those who have already adopted the asexual label, our research findings are skewed, and prevalence estimates as well as correlates of asexuality may not be generalizable to the full group of asexuals.

It is likely that Hinderliter as well as those conducting research on asexuality are well aware of this dilemma. In our

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more recent research, we have used a variety of means to recruit asexuals, including AVEN, but also with posted community advertisements that do not make any reference to asexuality. Instead, we are using descriptions such as “Do you experience a lack of sexual attraction?” or “Do you find it hard to relate to others who talk about sexual attraction?” Ultimately, how this group of recruited asexuals by description versus asexuals recruited by label may differ from one another remains to be explored.

Hinderliter also points out that asexuals are defined as having a lack of sexual attraction or as “people who experience little or no sexual attraction.” Just what is meant by “little sexual attraction” is unclear and, in research recruitment, there is the potential for overlap in this group and in the individual with hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). For the asexual with “little sexual attraction” who may not yet have identified as asexual, and may be experiencing significant distress over the low sexual attraction (perhaps due to perceived stigma from others), it may be impossible to distinguish this individual from the person with HSDD, who has low sexual desire and also experiences personal or interpersonal distress.

Hinderliter noted that there is difficulty in creating an operational definition of asexuality that is specific and sensitive. We would argue that such an operational definition and the associated measure or instrument used to capture such a definition are critical for the advancement of research and understanding into asexuality. Given the potential for con-

fusion that Hinderliter outlines in previous methods of assessing (asexual) orientation (e.g., Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes, & Erskine, 2009; Prause & Graham, 2007), development of a measure of asexual identification is urgently needed. This might best be accomplished through qualitative individual interviews or focus groups of those identifying as asexual where participants are probed for their definitions of asexuality both as they apply now and before the individual identified as asexual.

Hinderliter’s critical examination of methodological issues in studying asexuality will be a useful guide for those who study the topic. Because of his multifaceted perspective as a consumer of scientific research as well as the first-hand experience of asexuality, this contribution is very valuable.

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