

ПОЗИЦИОНИРУЯ АСЕКСУАЛЬНУЮ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ И ВОСТОЧНОЙ ЕВРОПЕ: КАЧЕСТВЕННОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ

Илья Малафей

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асексуальность, *sexusociety*, Фуко,
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Аннотация

Эта работа исследует повседневный опыт тех, кто идентифицирует себя как асексуальные и цисгендерные женщины, проживая при этом в странах Центральной и Восточной Европы (Беларусь, Россия и Польша). Я использую понятие *sexusociety*, обозначающее широко распространенные в обществе представления о том, что такое секс и как им нужно заниматься, для того чтобы контекстуализировать и объяснить опыт участников. Я провел шесть нарративных полуструктурированных интервью, чтобы выяснить, как участники понимают свою идентичность, а также как они позиционируют ее в обществе и какое значение она имеет в их повседневной жизни.

Negotiating an Asexual Identity in Central and Eastern Europe: A Qualitative Study

Ilya Malafei

Keywords:
asexuality, sexusociety, Foucault,
qualitative interviewing.

Abstract

This study inquires into the everyday experiences of individuals self-identifying as asexual and cisgender women and residing in Central and Eastern European states (Belarus, Russia, and Poland). I use the concept of *sexusociety* denoting the ideas widespread in society about what sex is and how it should be done to contextualise and explicate the participants' experiences. I conducted six narrative and semi-structured interviews to investigate how the participants make meaning of their identity, as well as how they negotiate their identity and navigate their everyday lives as asexuals.

Introduction

Only a few years ago, I was not aware of the existence of people who identify as asexual, yet since then some of my closest friends have come to an asexual identification. The more I discussed asexuality with these friends, the more acutely I realised that sex was widely taken for granted. **I started being aware of how much time and space in the lives of the people around me and in the media is devoted to sex, and more importantly, how its constant presence goes unnoticed.** It is not surprising then that one of the most popular questions that followed me introducing the topic of my research to other people was, “How did you come up with it?” The most striking fact was not that people did not know what asexuality was (even if they did not, it was fairly easy to infer at least *something* from the word) but the fact that my interlocutors could not comprehend why this was an issue worthy of inquiry. “But what is the problem?” they asked, “They just don’t have sex, so what, who cares?”

Ladelle McWhorter writes about how heterosexual people are not aware of the extent to which the question of sexuality is prominent in everyday life since there are (relatively) no consequences in disclosing heterosexuality: it is “seamlessly received” (as cited in Taylor [2017, 190](#)). Notably, people who identify as homosexual were also surprised by my choice of the topic because while they can see how a homosexual person may be constantly aware of their sexuality, they are unclear on why an asexual person would be. In a way, sexuality is like the Heideggerian hammer: when it works “in the right way” (like for heterosexuals in a heterosexist society) – it is not noticed, when it “breaks” (like for homosexuals in a heterosexist society) – you become aware of it. But what if you do not have a hammer? Yes, in a society where everyone has different occupations, the lack of a hammer is unproblematic. However, what if seemingly *everyone* has a hammer, and you do not? How does one negotiate an *asexual* identity in *sexusociety*? Academic literature and online articles gave me *some* answers, but all these answers came from North American and other Western contexts. “But life in North America is very different from life in Belarus, Russia, and Poland, where my friends live. What is it like to identify as asexual in Central and Eastern Europe?” I thought.

In large part, this research is an attempt to answer this question in order to better understand my friends. I believe that the best in-depth exploratory research is done from a position of genuine personal interest; it is then that you as a researcher do not settle for superficial answers. Apart from playing an important role for me personally, an in-depth exploratory study into the experiences of asexual people in Central and Eastern Europe has societal and academic relevance: it not only addresses

a largely unexamined area in academic research but also challenges some assumptions of sexuality studies and can help us better accommodate asexual people to live fruitful lives in our sexual societies.

Asexuality: an (a)sexual orientation?

The starting point of this research for me was to conceptualise a society “where everyone has a hammer”. Here the concept of *sexusociety* developed by Ela Przybylo (2011b) is useful. In her explanation, she departs from the notion of *sexual culture* (or, as it is also called, *sexual world*). Przybylo states that *sexusociety* is conceptually close to sexual culture and indeed shares its characteristics, yet she motivates the departure from it by emphasising *sexusociety*’s dispersed character and its manifestation through the individual. Sexual culture refers to a complex of ideas held in a society about what sex is and how it should be done. Przybylo (2011a) claims that Western sexual culture is characterised by the sexual imperative which denotes the following: it privileges sex over other activities, fuses sex, sexuality, and the self, and it poses sex as unambiguously good, healthy, and necessary to keep a romantic relationship together. One of the main aspects of sexual culture is that it is hegemonic and all-encompassing. It transmits the “sexuality assumption” meaning that any person is by default perceived as having sexual desire and practising sex (Carrigan 2012, 17). Precisely this assumption is part of what fuels stigmatisation and discrimination of asexuals. The term “*sexusociety*” is more productive than the term ‘sexual culture’, Przybylo (2011b) argues, since just like sexual culture it allows us to talk about the omnipresence of sex and sexuality and their centrality, but *sexusociety* does not locate sex somewhere *there*, outside; instead, it emphasises its distributed character within society. As Przybylo puts it, “*Sexusociety* is everywhere, it is within us, it is us” (446). *Sexusociety* is dispersed and incoherent. Thus, *sexusociety* is a structure but one that manifests itself through individual actions and interactions, making the term suitable for my discussion.

The manifestation of *sexusociety* on the individual level is explained by Przybylo (2011b) with the help of Michel Foucault’s genealogy of sexuality and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. To convey the specificity of *sexusociety* I explicate a Foucauldian understanding of power. For Foucault, the times of sovereign, coercive power are in the past, and he sees power as disciplinary in character. It implies that power is not explicitly exerted but penetrates through all societal realms. It is not the king who possesses the power *over* his subjects; power is distributed among people and institutions. Power for Foucault is also productive:

it produces individuals as subjects. Such an understanding of power manifests in Foucault's discussion of the history of sexuality. In his analysis, Foucault introduces the "*repressive hypothesis*", which is an image of sex that people widely hold. The repressive hypothesis assumes that sexual drive is inherent in human beings, and therefore universal, while power silences sex. It puts forward the idea that a free society is a sexually liberated society in which love is free and everyone has the space to express their sexuality. However, as Foucault demonstrates, sex is not repressed, but it is rather an expression of *productive* power. Foucault argues that sexuality is not an instinct that society tries to repress; for him, sexuality is what is produced by power. He demonstrates that sexuality is a historical construct. Heterosexuality is produced as a norm through the construction of homosexuality as its aberrant opposite. Understandings of sexualities, in turn, construct what it means to be a man or a woman. Males are supposed to desire females who are feminine, and females are supposed to desire males who are masculine. Thus, a gendered subject is produced. As Butler argues in relation to the production of a gendered subject, subjectivity is produced through repeated *performances* of gender, and it entails certain modes of interaction (*social scripts*) with people of "the opposite sex" (heterosex, marriage). These modes of interaction are repeated, which normalises them and creates the perception of them as given, while in fact, people's actual practices vary dramatically. The absence of romantic and/or sexual involvement offers alternative, non-normative performances. The "doers" of these alternative performances can be seen as undermining the regulatory heterosexist frame, which evokes a negative response from society, and that leads to real, material consequences.

Now that I have set the context for the discussion of asexuality, I turn to the literature in the field to introduce a tentative general definition of asexuality, explain the nuances of asexual identification, and explicate some of the issues that asexuals have been reported to face. To explain and define asexuality, I use the definition of sexual orientation provided by Stephanie Gazzola and Melanie Morrison (2012) since they articulate asexuality as an (a)sexual orientation. For them, sexual orientation is an aspect of one's personal and social identities, indicating either the presence or the absence of people who constitute targets of sexual attraction and behaviour. The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), which was created in 2001 to raise awareness about asexuality and became a catalyst for the development of self-consciousness of the asexual community worldwide (Carrigan 2011), defines asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction and/or desire (Gazzola and Morrison 2012). While seemingly straightforward, the term includes a variety

of configurations of self-identification (Carrigan, Gupta, & Morrison 2013). Asexual people can feel little sexual desire to none; they can only feel sexual desire in particular circumstances (e.g., after establishing a high level of intimacy); they can have a neutral attitude to sex, or they can be sex-averse; they also differ in their approach to romance (Kurowicka 2013). In this paper, I rely on self-identifying asexuals as opposed to people whose behaviour fulfils predetermined criteria of asexuality. Mark Carrigan (2012) offers support for such a position, identifying it as the most suitable route for asexuality research; he claims that it is hardly possible to draw a distinction between physiologically grounded asexuality (if such is to be found at all) and its subjective affirmation epistemically.

Discussing how asexually identifying individuals speak about their identification helps us to understand how they position themselves in sexusociety. Anna Kurowicka (2013) reports that many asexuals use essentialist language when speaking about their identification. They describe themselves as ‘naturally so’ and as having always been like this, while the community (or the mere awareness of its existence) has given them the language to talk about their identification. This can be seen, in her opinion, as a strategy to legitimise asexuality as another non-normative sexuality. What is more, she gives evidence that the road to identifying as asexual is similar to that of homosexuals (Kurowicka 2013). At the same time, within the asexual community, as represented by AVEN, there is an emphasis on self-identification and freedom of choice (Kurowicka 2013). This can imply the potential fluidity of asexual identification. Thus, the community manages to combine a commitment to the expression of individual difference with the strengthening of a group identity, which resonates with the ways in which both queer theory and identity politics articulate politically productive identity formation (Carrigan 2011). Asexuality, then, can be seen as a sexual orientation that draws both on the essentialist rhetoric of identity politics and the constructivist rhetoric of queer movements. It implies that asexually-identifying individuals have to play by the rules of sexusociety to seek legitimation by producing an asexual identity, yet at the same time the community as a whole attempts to create a safe and welcoming space through its emphasis on queer rhetoric.

I have found evidence that asexually-identifying individuals encounter negative experiences linked to their identification. Sexusociety exploits the idea of an asexual essence and pathologises asexuals by creating a link between being sexual and normalcy: having a “normal” body *implies* being sexual (Kim 2010). In turn, being normal means being healthy. Given the high level of concern for health in the contemporary West, it is not surprising that asexuality is negatively perceived (Carrigan 2012). In

such context, Gazzola and Morrison (2012) highlight that a non-offensive language and norms of behaviour are yet to be developed. They conclude that asexuals are likely to be discriminated against, analogous to other people with non-normative sexualities. Carrigan (2012) notes the prejudicial and damaging lack of understanding from family, friends, and peers of asexuals as one of the sources of emotional distress. He has discovered that in the case of family, prejudice is particularly emotionally destabilising for asexually-identifying persons. Przybylo (2011a) argues that for women, asexuality can have a specific meaning due to the social and cultural policing of the female body and state claims for female reproduction.

Research design

Given the pervasiveness of sexism as well as the stigma and discrimination of asexuals in the Western context, I focus on the experiences of people identifying as asexual and female in the highly explicitly and implicitly regulated and coercive environments of Central and Eastern Europe (particularly Belarusians and Russians living in Belarus, Russia, and Poland) where any deviations in the realm of sexuality are met with suspicion at best and hostility and aggression at worst (ILGA Europe 2021, 30). I inquire into how they perceive themselves, as well as the strategies that they utilise to negotiate their identity. Therefore, the research question I pose is: *How do individuals who self-identify as asexual and cisgender women and reside in Central and Eastern Europe negotiate their asexual identity?*

I argue that such an inquiry is both academically and societally relevant. First, Przybylo (2013) asserts that writing and researching from an asexual perspective is a significant and unique contribution to the study of sex and sexuality thanks to its questioning of dominant norms of relating between people. Second, the focus on Central and Eastern Europe offers a non-Western-centric perspective and contributes to the study of asexuality by providing an insight into the lives of asexuals in a different sexual paradigm (as explained in the following section). Third, the findings will be of interest to specialists working with asexual people because they will allow developing a deeper understanding of barriers and discrimination asexually-identifying individuals face and of the kinds of support they might need, if any at all.

The study is inductive, exploratory, and uses qualitative methods (grounded theory). A relatively small sample of six people who identify as asexual was recruited through convenience sampling (Table 1). The primary method for data collection was in-depth qualitative interviews, which were conducted via Skype. This methodology is considered suitable

for an inquiry into subjugated subjectivities such as asexual people in environments that are hostile to alternative sexualities (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2007). It is important to note that the interview with Yulij, in contrast to the others, was conducted in real time via text messages on VK social networking site, since they preferred such means of communication, notwithstanding my concern that it was less productive. The structure of the interview (narrative combined with semi-structured) was preserved. The interview still managed to provide rich data.

I conducted the interview in the language that each interviewee preferred (all of them preferred Russian). This was done so that they were able to communicate freely without a language barrier. The interviews lasted from 45 to 140 minutes, with the average length of 80 minutes, and were audio recorded. I made brief reflexive notes during the interviews that were later used to navigate and interpret the data. I then transcribed recordings of the interviews verbatim.

My personal position should be illuminated in relation to the topic. First, I do not identify as asexual. At the same time, my sexuality does not lie in the realm of the normative, though I do not identify with any label particularly. My motivation for such an inquiry is based on the interest in all non-normative sexualities, and asexuality is particularly interesting due to its symbolic resistance to the omnipresent sexuality. Importantly, I am allosexual¹, therefore I risk overlooking some aspects of the perspectives of the interviewees. To address this issue, I made an effort to stay as open as possible to the accounts of the participants and to be critical about my ideas on sexuality. Nonetheless, there is a possibility that I have missed issues that the interviewees do not explicitly emphasise. Second, I was born and spent most of my life in Belarus. On the one hand, this allowed me to build rapport with the interviewees more easily, as well as better understand their cultural context. On the other hand, the entangled assumptions that are taken for granted by me and the interviewees may pose a problem of me misinterpreting the interviewees' words. To address this, I am committed to the practice of reflexivity (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2007), which means that I questioned my position continually throughout the research process and marked it in my reflexive notes. Lastly, I have been educated mostly within the Western intellectual tradition. Given the unequal power relations between Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe, the application of theories that originate in the West in my inquiry can be seen as a drawback that inhibits a better understanding of the participants' accounts. However, I argue that the primary reliance on the interview transcripts and grounded theory approach facilitate productive interaction between the data and theory.

1. *If one is allosexual, it means they feel sexually attracted to other people*

Preferred pseudonym	Age	Gender identification	Place of residence
Katya	21	Female	Warsaw, Poland
Yu	21	Non-conforming female	Saint Petersburg, Russia
Maria	30	Female	Vitiebsk, Belarus
Olga	19	Female	Minsk, Belarus
Yulij	20	Non-conforming female	Minsk, Belarus
Helena	18	Female	Moscow, Russia

Table 1. Participant profiles

One's (a)sexuality is an intimate topic, and the findings of this study are sensitive. Therefore, I took the following measures to ensure adherence to high ethical standards. I thoroughly informed the interviewees about the study, including its aims, the process of data handling, as well as its use, to then ask them to give informed consent by signing a form. The participants then were encouraged to ask any remaining questions. To exclude the possibility of revealing the participants' identities, their names were changed in this report and the data that allows identification was eliminated.

Findings: Negotiating an asexual identity

Many participants underscore that the interview is important for them since it gives them space to try and comprehensively articulate their identification. Two participants jokingly mention that they expected the interview to be a sort of psychotherapy session. This implies that it is a highly personal and complex issue that needs working through, potentially even with a specialist. It also means that it is not something that can be easily discussed with friends in depth.

Some participants claim that while they see asexuality as a term that is applicable to them by virtue of them not experiencing sexual attraction and/or desire or experiencing it to a small extent, it is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of identifications as discussed above. I have

identified six main dimensions that can help explicate the participants' understanding of their asexual identities as well as the related experiences: romantic attraction, sexual attraction, sexual desire/arousal, sexual acts, and attitudes to sexusociety.

It is notable that some participants do not use the word "asexual" to talk about themselves if the topic comes up in a conversation. Instead, they resort to a descriptive explanation. However, if they are to put on a label, asexuality resonates with them. Katya explains:

Why I have issues with these labels... I find it difficult to talk, I don't use "I am something." I can't, I don't want to say it, because I understand how people's... mental, linguistic operations work, and when people hear something like [asexuality], notwithstanding what you are, they use their background knowledge that can be non-existent, and that is why what they hear is an unknown word. They hear something-sexual, and they... They have no information, that is why they imagine some wild things that do not have any connection with reality. The funniest thing is that they will just freak out, well, if they are not aware.

She states that once one uses a label, a reference to a "dictionary entry is created". What I infer from this is that there appear a number of characteristics that should be adhered to, and she does not want to be automatically associated with whatever ideas people have about asexuality, especially in a context, as she perceives, where people are under-informed about alternative sexualities. In other words, she is aware of the *stigma* associated with alternative sexualities and of the fact that it can manifest itself in the case of asexuality by transference.

Goffman (1963) defines stigma as a particular relationship between one's discrediting attribute and stereotype. If his terminology is further applied, asexuals are *discreditable* as opposed to *discredited*, which implies that their asexuality is not immediately perceivable by others. It is being different from others in a way that is not desirable in society that stigmatises asexuals. The perceived stigma can explain the participants' hesitation to disclose their asexuality: they do not want to shift from being discreditable to being discredited. Additionally, Goffman argues, in the case of stigmatised individuals, people have a tendency to reduce their personality to this one stigmatised attribute, which the interviewees would like to avoid. However, as I will demonstrate later, even without mentioning asexuality directly, the interviewees are still stigmatised.

Many interviewees also find important the fluidity of their identities and the presence of space for transformation. Yu explains:

I think there are people who have no sexual desires and impulses at all, and the physical part is just off. I don't think that it's my case and that I never feel any desire or something [...]. I don't swear that I will never have sex, it is not celibacy, [it doesn't mean] I will never get pleasure from it, but for me particularly now my beliefs are rather in some culturally-philosophically-theoretical paradigm.

She contrasts her identification with celibacy. For her, celibacy means commitment, and she does not want to commit to asexual identification. She emphasises its rootedness in the present moment and in the feelings that she has now. The interviewees do not close themselves to new experiences, they are just not interested in sexual experiences at the moment. Helena shares this attitude, but in her comment, she stresses the social dimension of identification and her unwillingness to declare her identification to others:

I thought about it, and I think it could cement the label on me. It would be a barrier to me being open to new experiences, in case it reveals itself. It is the same thing as telling everyone that... I don't know, that I am moving to Berlin, and then something will go wrong, and everyone will point it out to me. I do not wish for any changes [that would lead me away] from asexuality. However, in case something comes up, I don't want to have some... Hey guys, I am rewinding everything, nothing happened.

By comparing informing others about identifying as asexual to informing others about one's intention to move, she also invokes the idea that in people's minds identification necessarily entails a fixed set of behaviours, which can be problematic if the identification is reconsidered. The concept of a *social script* is helpful to explicate this account (Przybylo 2011b). While there are dominant social scripts regarding sexuality with which asexual people do not comply by default, sexusociety, by making people with alternative sexualities define themselves against the norm to gain recognition, prompts the creation of asexual social scripts to make asexual people intelligible and comprehensible. What the interviewees are cautious of is the accountability for not complying with the asexual script that identification entails.

Fragmented identification

Even though fluidity plays a big, and positive, role for the participants, it creates space for distress and self-doubt. Katya shares:

I have thought that it is impostor syndrome. As in, if something changes, what will it be for me? As in, again, it is some collapse of identity. What was it? Have I been lying to myself? How can I even live if I know that I might be lying to myself and to others now?

What she calls the “impostor syndrome” is her fear that she *is not* asexual. She believes that, though she does not want it now, she might become willing to engage in sexual/romantic interactions in the future, and if that happens, she will think of her asexual identification as a lie to herself as well as to others. What this brings with it is the doubts about whether any identification in a particular moment is representative of her personality. This, in its turn, makes navigation through life and communication with other people difficult. The origin of this fear is also in her surroundings because she perceives that she might be held accountable for not conforming to the ideas that people have about asexuality. Particularly pressing this issue is with people who exhibit romantic or sexual interest in her. Katya states that she will feel guilty if she enters a sexual or romantic relationship after rejecting other people.

Przybylo develops a related concept “asexual impostor” (2011b, 450). It emphasises sexual people’s disbelief in and refusal to acknowledge the experience of asexually identifying individuals. Przybylo (2011b) claims that sexual people tend to expose asexuals “as a fraud” and to actively and vocally express doubts about the truthfulness of their identification (450). This prompts sexual subjects to remedy the enactments of sexuality that they view as improper; to *discipline* their *performances* (to use Foucault’s and Butler’s terminology). From this stems their insistence that the interviewees need to “find” their sexuality and the attempts to help them do that by insisting on having a sexual encounter (a situation that comes up in multiple accounts).

A peculiar manifestation of the pervasiveness of sexusociety is Yu’s account of her doubts:

For me, internalised homophobia is tightly linked to asexual discourse, because I can never be sure that I am asexual by nature. Or for instance, if I think that the male body is repulsive, maybe I should think about female bodies. But I cannot think about them in a sexual context. Maybe this is because I am internally homophobic, and I need to work on opening up and liberating myself.

Her unwillingness to engage in sexual interactions with men also evokes thoughts that she might be lesbian. However, it does not seem that she exhibits sexual desire towards women. This leads her to the idea that she might be repressing her homosexuality, and it, in turn, feeds her doubts about her identification and causes discomfort. It is the context of a pervasive sexusociety that constructs sexual desire as necessarily present and that makes her feel this way. However, while thinking about the potential need to “discover” her sexuality and experiment in order to do so, she says:

I don't know, for instance, you eat brussels sprouts and you don't like it at all. The whole society tells you “eat more” and it's unclear: maybe you'll try another one and you'll like it, but you'll have to try ten types of brussels sprouts that you dislike, and it's not like you want any brussels sprouts in the first place. So, like, what for?

Through the metaphor of brussels sprouts, she invokes the idea of sex as an *option*, not a necessity, and underscores her lack of motivation to have it. While such a claim constructs sex as a choice, it is clear that she is not suppressing any sexual desire. Cacchioni (2007) explains that for those women who do not enjoy sex, prioritisation of relationships and activities that do not involve sex is a meaningful choice of a lifestyle.

The interviewees underline the lack of language resources to help them articulate the nuances of their identities. The label “asexuality” proves to be significant in the majority of cases. The interviewees state that before they came across the term, they had been experiencing distress concerning their lack of conventional sexual life. Katya claims:

I was very happy when I found [information about asexuality]. I was thinking, “damn!” I found a verbal explanation for some of my frustrations caused by what was happening in my head, emotionally and mentally. I couldn't explain what was happening, and when I understood... Damn, it is great.

Helena describes her feelings when she discovered the notion of asexuality as “as if someone hacked her brain.” The label becomes a referent to the experiences of others: since there is a word that describes my experience, I am not the only one, and knowing that brings relief. It helps to transform thinking about asexuality from “it is a deviation” to “it is as normal as being sexual”. Przybylo (2011b) calls this process *recentering*. The label creates a symbolic safe space “outside other people's matrices”, as Yu puts it, that is, outside the dominant ideas of sexusociety where an asexual person is exposed and devalued.

In the accounts of the interviewees, asexuality appears to be a fragmented rather than monolithic identity. Tension can be observed, and this tension, in Yu's words, makes the negotiation of asexuality the most complex part of her identity. The participants seek an explanation for the fact that, in contrast to others, they do not find the presence of the sexual realm necessary, which stems from them not wanting sex. Here the label of asexuality is helpful and allows the interviewees to feel that their experience is validated and to feel relieved. To an extent, it involves stating that "this is how things are", that there is something about them that makes them not want sex, that they do not arbitrarily *choose* not to have sex, that is, they are not celibate. Thus, there is a mild reference to an asexual essence. At the same time, like a box, an essence-based identification limits the range of behaviours that they can practise without being made to feel bad and guilty. The interviewees lament this and emphasise the instability of their identities. This unwillingness to construct a stable identity around sexuality can be seen as linked to the queer approach to sexuality that emphasises contingency and individual agency in the construction of one's identity. These approaches echo the claims by Kurowicka (2013) about the construction of the asexual identity as the middle way between essentialism and social constructivism.

Such a path to identity construction runs counter to both the liberationist rhetoric of LGBT discourse and the compulsory sexuality of the heterosexist system (Taylor 2017) with the former emphasising the role of practising sex to achieve liberation and the latter utilising sex for population control. Foucault (1978) argues that sciences dealing with sexualities produce the subjects that they claim to merely categorise and describe. I emphasise the multidimensionality of the concept and the fact that the word asexual is and should be used with reservations: as an umbrella term with a multiplicity of configurations and not as a monolithic identity category. This approach allows one to avoid "sexual colonisation" that involves "discovering, delineating, organising, boundary-drawing, and setting rules for normative sex and sexuality" (Przybylo 2011a, 6).

Conclusion

The focus of this research is on the lived experiences of asexually- and cisgender-identifying women in Central and Eastern Europe. My findings are based on six in-depth narrative and semi-structured interviews. Asexual identification is in no way monolithic for the interviewees, and there are various dimensions to it. What unites them is the general scepticism towards sexual desire and sexual practices. The identification of the interviewees

contains traces of both identity-based and queer rhetoric, which echoes the findings of the previous studies done in Western contexts.

The chosen approach has provided in-depth insights into the lived experiences of self-identifying female asexuals in the Central and Eastern European space. It fills an academic gap: the lack of non-Western (non-American) accounts of lived experiences of asexuality. This study provides an account of *some* experiences of self-identifying asexual cisgender women in Central and Eastern Europe and serves as an entry point into the understanding of the functioning of sexusociety through these experiences. For further research, I suggest an in-depth study of the lived experiences of older people in Central and Eastern European contexts. My paper covers only relatively young people who were born after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and who are currently in an active process of negotiating their (a)sexual identity. Since different places are attributed to younger and older people in sexusociety, particularly in terms of power relations (Taylor 2017), there is a potential for such an inquiry to be fruitful. Additionally, the experiences of male-identifying asexual subjects who have had male socialisation are worth researching. In the context of persisting patriarchy, males are perceived as necessarily sexually active (Taylor 2017), and there can be specific configurations of pressure that asexually identifying males experience.

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Илья Александрович Малафей
Амстердамский университет,
магистерская программа
«Анализ культуры»
ilya.malafei@protonmail.com

Ilya Malafei
University of Amsterdam,
Research Master's
"Cultural Analysis"
ilya.malafei@protonmail.com