Title: Sex and ambivalence: LGBTQ youth negotiating sexual feelings, desires and attractions

Short title: Sex and Ambivalence

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Abstract: In popular and academic discourse, sexual identity is regularly linked to a concept of sexual engagement with others. Recent thinking on sexuality has, however, opened up the possibility of understanding 'identity' in ways different from sexual behaviour. This paper considers data from the Australian *Queer Generations* project, in which findings indicate that young Australian participants express complex ambivalences towards sex and sexual expression, and disavowals of the importance of sex. We consider what this might mean for young people's gender and sexual identities as well as implications for support for LGBTQ young people.

Keywords: sexuality, sexual attraction, sex education, media, popular culture, Australia

Sex, sexuality and ambivalence: LGBTQ youth negotiating sexual feelings, desires and attractions

Introduction

Sexual identity, subjectivity and the articulation of a felt sense of sexual selfhood have traditionally been linked to sexual engagement with or sexual attraction to others. In relation to the representation of gay and lesbian sexuality, stereotypes of sexual identity have tended towards representations of people who are either “over-sexed” and “promiscuous” (Baruccio, 2016) or “under-sexed” (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) by virtue of loneliness and isolation. Such claims are often reliant on stereotypes which fail to account for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer)¹ peoples’ diverse lived experiences of sex and sexuality. Either way, if identity is understood as a non-voluntary performance and articulation of selfhood in accord with prevailing norms and discourses, then a major aspect of LGBTQ identity has been made intelligible and recognisable through an over-determined association with sexual behaviour rather than, for example, participation in community, cultural practices, or non-sexualised relationships in everyday life. Given this, a number of important questions are opened: why does an identity marked by sexuality have to be either through sexual excess or lack? What does this binary suggest about sex and sexuality? What aspects of subjectivity, selfhood and community belonging are submerged in order to produce this intelligible identity? And how can we engage such concepts to better understand the complexities of experience? This paper looks to answer some of these in relation to drawing out instances of ambivalence about sexual expression, as well as ambiguity and complexity about sexual subjectivity among younger people.

Evidence gathered from participants in a recent study of LGBTQ youth support help expand our understanding of the changing perceptions of sex and sexual subjectivity among young people, and the way in which these complicate the relationship of a sense of self to belonging, sexual citizenship and processes of support. Our key research findings indicate that among the present generation of young people born in the 1990s, there exist deeply ambivalent attitudes towards sex and sexual

¹ In this paper, we use the term LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) as a recognised western and Anglophone clustering term to describe a set of identities affiliated through community, minority politics and cultural practices, especially in the context of its differentiation from heterosexuality and heteronormativity which remain culturally ‘invisible’ in everyday life. The term LGBTQ is however in flux, particularly in youth cultures, and we acknowledge that it is both problematic (in that it tends to foreground lesbian/gay over bisexual and transgender, while clustering all other identifications under ‘queer’) and changeable (in that additional terms, such as intersex and asexual have been appended). For consistency, we use this term but acknowledge that it is not a term that should always be used with comfort. All participants identified as he/she, and we preserve the use of these pronouns throughout the paper.

expression as well as new complexities and disavowals of the importance of sex. In this paper, we consider where such notions may have their origins and what this might imply for belonging, sexual citizenship and support, particularly in relation to future forms of education and health.

The term sexual citizenship has been used to refer to the intersection between one's sexual life, sexuality and the society in which one lives. Rights as sexual citizens have traditionally been based on models which feature straight, white, "western" masculinity, excluding or restricting the behaviours of those identified as "others" (Mackie, 2017, p. 144) and are thus experienced differently according to, for example, a person's gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age and ability. Defining sexual citizenship, Weeks notes the similarities to citizenship more generally: 'It is about enfranchisement, about inclusion, about belonging, about equity and justice, about rights balanced by new responsibilities' (1998, p. 39). However, for LGBTQ people, the "balance" between rights and responsibility means options are often confined within 'a model of citizenship that reinforces both normative assumptions about sexuality and gender, and the desirability and necessity of monogamous marital-style sexual coupledness' (Richardson & Monro, 2012, p. 20). This may exclude 'LGBT people whose lifestyles and identities do not fit with dominant norms concerning gender and sexuality' (p. 20). As such, current Australian and global/western political trends that emphasise equality, belonging and sexual citizenship may arguably be contributing to the "desexing" of LGBTQ people—and the sidelining of sex in order to represent LGBTQ people as ordinary, everyday people with identities determined not only by sexual choices or orientations but as social participants more broadly.

An alternative broader definition relating to sexual citizenship can be found in Plummer's concept of "intimate citizenship": 'the *control (or not) over one's body, feelings, relationships: access (or not) to representations, relationships, public spaces, etc; and socially grounded choices (or not) about identities, gender experiences*' (1995, p. 151 in Plummer, 2005, emphasis in original). By going beyond traditional concepts of civil, political and social rights, to include how 'we "do" the personal life' (Plummer, 2005), such an articulation of sexual citizenship may better account for the diversity of LGBTQ experiences around sex and sexuality and the complexities involved in navigating both sexual and romantic attractions as parts of everyday intimate life.

While much of the scholarship and writing on queer youth today implies a shift to positive accounts and representation of sexuality, we argue that a complex relationship with ambiguity and ambivalence towards sexuality and sexual behaviour underlies the more simplistic, narrow sexual citizenship regime of stable identities. After a brief discussion of the Queer Generations project,

whose data we utilize, and its findings on attitudes towards learning about sex and sexuality, we present an analysis of the ways in which young people articulate an ambivalence or ambiguity towards sex and sexual expression.

Our analysis of ambiguity explores three key ways in which we witness a contrast to the stereotype that LGBTQ identity is overdetermined by sexual interest or behaviour: namely, through (a) the prioritisation of 'romantic' relationships over sex and sexual activity; (b) the rise of asexuality as an identity category alongside the more traditional LGBTQ acronym; and (c) an acknowledgment of bisexuality as both identity category and ambiguous articulation of gender-based desire. A key finding from this study is that situated in this space of contradiction (between deficit and positive representation), members of the younger generation display profound ambivalences towards sex and sexuality – both their own and that of others.

Queer Generations

The *Queer Generations* Project is an Australian Research Council funded study examining the experiences of two different generations of gender and sexual minority youth growing up in Australia. The study focuses on the sources of support found most useful by young people, and the ways in which cultural formations of participatory sexual citizenship prove useful to young people in making sense of sexual and gender differences, lived realities of subjectivity and identity, and perspectives on growing up. The project involves archival and media research, as well as focus groups and interviews with LGBTQ respondents in three Australian states (Western Australia, New South Wales and Victoria) in both state capitals and regional areas with two generations: those born in the 1970s and those born in the 1990s. Participants were recruited through community festivals and events; notices shared on Facebook and email mailing lists; a study website; LGBTQ community and youth groups; and snowballing. Participants self-identified their gender and sexuality.

This paper focuses on data from Western Australia in which unsolicited discussions across both interviews and focus groups revealed ambiguities and ambivalence towards sex. There was no significant difference whether discussions on this topic occurred in one-on-one interviews or focus groups. Western Australian 1970s-born participants reported gender identities including non-binary, transman and transgender female and sexual identities including queer, bisexual, lesbian, gay. Across both interviews and focus groups, eight of the 27 participants who were born in the 1970s grew up in regional areas and most participants in this cohort identified as Anglo/Australian

or white. The 1990s-born Western Australian cohort in contrast reported greater diversity in terms of gender identities (gender fluid, transgender, non-binary) and sexual identities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, asexual, pansexual, demisexual, biromantic, panromantic, polyamorous, and demi-romantic), being part of an emerging cultural shift in taxonomies of sexual identity among youth; arguably, such new languages of sexual and gender diversity are a response to the perceived need for a more nuanced, inclusive language to ensure representation of diversities not captured by masculine/feminine, hetero/homo and straight/LGBTQ dichotomous regimes (Cover, forthcoming). Of the 29 participants born in the 1990s, nine grew up in regional areas and among both groups included those who identified as Australian-Burmese, Australian-Korean and Indigenous Australian.

Participants in both social generations were asked a list of questions corresponding to six domains of experience or 'lenses' through which we interrogated the data: health, kinship, schooling and education, communication technologies, work and sex. Two or three prompting questions relating to support, identity, belonging, personal and interpersonal experience were asked under each of these six headings. These six lenses shed light on key dimensions of the life course and the kinds of support participants utilised, with the capacity to organize the effects of such uses for experiences of belonging and sexual citizenship. This paper discusses the material relating to sex and sexuality in terms of the ambiguities and ambivalences it exhibits, especially among members of the 1990s-born generation. As in many studies, participants were asked to reflect on their youth after the fact, via what Plummer notes as 'speculative "remembering" and restorying to capture the past' (2010, p. 173). How sexual and gender minorities frame the past, including early childhood, is often influenced by the languages, identity norms and cultural expectations of present liberal-humanist perspectives on sexual and gender identity (Cover, 2010) as well as by perspectives of individual 'progress' towards identity coherence and belonging (Cover et al., 2017). There can be a tendency to 'historicise' past events of growing up queer, and Love (2007) among others notes that practices of personal historicisation seal 'it off from the present, burying it in a superseded realm of ignorance, shame, and suffering' (p. 17). However, for many of the participants in both elements of our study (the 1970s-born generation and the 1990s-born generation), narratives of 'growing up' continue to have resonance in their lives. By thinking through our findings in the context of the 'sex' lens, we uncovered a range of participant attitudes among, particularly, the 1990s-born generation that contrasted with both popular and theoretical discussions that articulate identity as performatively constituted in sexual desire. While participants did not disavow sexual attraction as a key aspect of how they identified themselves, their responses suggested that there had been a generational shift towards a greater complexity in 'identity knowledge'. To consider this, we start

by contemplating participants' discussions of learning about sex and the ambivalences and diverse perspectives this revealed.

Learning about Sex; Having Sex

Recent literature has argued the value of ambiguity and confusion in learning about sex (Gilbert, 2014), with space being required for 'conversations about what makes for good sex advice and good sexual learning' (Attwood et al., 2015, p. 536). Participants in both social generations indicated that much of their understanding of sex, sexual subjectivity and sexual behaviour was acquired outside of the school and education settings. This aligns with recent research indicating that young people learn about sex through a range of sources (Albury & McKee, 2017; Fine & McClelland, 2006), with classroom and curriculum-based approaches often criticised as being simplistic, overly focused on penetrative heterosex, or wholly concerned with STI or pregnancy prevention (Clarke, 2017, p., 4). Acknowledging the need for a more multi-dimensional understanding of sexual learning (Gourlay, 1995) that goes beyond reproducing existing exclusions and inequalities (Sanjakdar et al., 2015), both the 1970s' and 1990s' born placed significant focus on entertainment media, including films, books and magazines, as importance spaces for learning about topics that remain unacknowledged in classrooms (Hillier et al., 2010), especially those of relevance to queer youth (Rasmussen, 2006; Bragg, 2006; Cover, 2000; Cover, 2002).

Porn was raised in many of our focus groups and interviews as one of the methods of learning about sex, although some noted this could be a source of "negative", "bad" or "incorrect" information (Xanthe, 90s; Oscar, 90s).² However, television and film were described as the dominant space for learning about marginal and alternative sexual identities, acknowledging the extent to which representation of non-heterosexual characters, themes and narratives was scant during the growing up years for the 1970s cohort, and likewise criticised as very limited by the 1990s cohort. What these discussions indicated was that while participants from both social generations were broadly critical of the available resources for learning about sex and sexual subjectivity, from schools to family to media, there was a clear articulation of diverse views about sexuality that went beyond narrow perspectives that tie identities to strict behaviours (Allen, 2015) and stereotypes that link sexualities with specific attributes (McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017). Their reflective accounts on sex and sexuality pointed not only to alternatives to the scant and limited

² Our participants have been de-identified, and pseudonyms have been used. We distinguish participants in this paper by pseudonym and by 'generational' cohort (born in 70s or 90s).

available resources, but to the complex ambivalences towards sex and sexuality that formed part of their felt sense of identity.

Ambivalent attitudes towards sex

Ambivalence about sex was articulated in a variety of ways in both interviews and focus groups, particularly among the 1990s-born participants. In research with teenage girls published in 2002, Tolman notes ambivalence in the girls' discussions of sex, with ambivalence emerging in the space of contradiction between experience of sex and sexuality and the social norms that frame girls' behaviour (such as good/bad girl stereotypes). Lesbian and gay stereotypes are both important for identity, affirmation and visibility but simultaneously reduce individuality and diversity, suggesting a "natural" way of being LGBTQ (Cover, 2004, p. 81). Such contradictions can be problematic. As Gilbert writes, 'queer youth come to recognize themselves through their proximity to these stories and construct, for themselves, a narrative that is made always in relation to those norms' (2014, p. xxi). Given the stereotypical representation of LGBTQ sex and sexuality available in both education and media resources, ambivalence towards the idea or compulsion to 'have sex' among 1990s-born participants may reflect a negotiation of these contradictions and complexities, as well as the presence of agency and resistance on young people's behalf. In her discussion of the meanings that attach to loss of virginity, Carpenter (2001) for example notes an ambiguity in young people's definitions and suggests this 'affords people some, if limited, discretion in constructing their sexual identities' (p. 128). Indeed, Gilbert argues that to recognize the human rights of LGBTQ people and communities we must 'begin with a theory of sexuality that tolerates the ambivalent and contested relation we have to the categories that name us and that we use to name ourselves' (2014, p. xxii). Considering such ambivalences, we turn to examine some of the ways in which through their discourse 1990s-born participants prioritized relationships over casual sex.

Prioritising Relationships: De-emphasising Sex

While many participants spoke about having sex, for some the possibility of casual sex was de-emphasised in favour of relationships. A 'relationship' versus 'promiscuous sex' framework has been a longer-standing discourse that has remained relatively under-critiqued within queer theory and sexuality studies (Cover, 2010). 'Promiscuity' has long marked the way in which both male and female non-heterosexual subjects are often publicly perceived, although recent marriage equality debates and legislation in many western countries around the world have also established coupled relationships as part of the normative conceptualisation of being LGBTQ (Cover, 2010). Sex as a

confirmation of sexuality or an affirmation of feelings of sexuality, maturity and connection was particularly pronounced among 1970s-born participants (Anthony, 70s; Frank 70s; Brenda, 70s). Statements of affirmation were also found among 1990s-born participants (Yvette, 90s; Ursula 90s). The valuing of relationships and the articulation of a more ambivalent attitude toward casual or 'unattached' sex occurred across both generational groups, challenging stereotypes of LGBTQ persons as building identities based exclusively on sexual attraction. This reflects one of the ways in which a discourse of sexual citizenship has come to frame attitudes towards sex and sexual subjectivity in the 2000s: as individualised, made intelligible through rights and human rights claims, (Richardson & Monro, 2012, p. 78) yet also available to perspectives that understand sexual subjectivity as part of a "full human life" in which sexuality is an aspect of identity, not a whole.

1970s-born participants in particular placed an emphasis on relationships over casual sex, in contrast to stereotypes of LGBTQ persons as over-sexed or as giving precedent to same-sex attraction in the articulation of identity. Kimberly (70s), for example, commented that she and her partner 'kind of see a lot of the gay community as incestuous', implying an over-emphasis within the community on casual sex over friendships and non-sexual affiliation. In a similar vein, Frank (70s) stated that, 'relationships have always been very important to me'. He commented, 'I've always thought it's such a shame that such a lot of people in the gay and lesbian community don't think that they could have that or don't aim for that. They've already assumed they can't have that, they've already assumed it's sex only or brief encounters'. Here, these 1970s-born participants position themselves as very different to media examples and stereotypes. Similarly, Lewis (90s) was adamant in differentiating himself from what he considered to be a mainstream sexualised LGBTQ community. He described himself as having 'more conservative' values. While suggesting that sex is a 'healthy part of any relationship' he argued that if sex is all you think about, it is 'just pathetic quite frankly', going on to suggest that sex ought not be over-valued within the gay community.³ Broadly, both social generations articulated a tendency to disavow sex when it was discussed or described by participants as 'casual sex', or sex as without relationships or affection. While 1970s-born participants tended to favour relationships and de-emphasise casual sex, members of the 1990s-born generation tended to discuss sex as an important aspect of a relationship, but articulated relationships as providing greater stability, belonging and opportunities for self-expression than casual or anonymous sex (Cover, 2010). For example, Lewis (90s) described sex as a trusting experience, part of a relationship rather than a defining experience. Similarly, for Tyler

³ In this respect it may be significant that the media Lewis most connected to was *Will and Grace* which he noted was about relationships rather than sex: 'finding that special someone but not compromising your life just to find that' (Lewis, 90s). As Avila-Saavedra notes, in all of eight seasons, 'the American public never saw Will Truman go to bed with another man' (2009, p. 5).

(90s) sex 'was just another level of realisation [...] an addition to who I am'.

An emphasis on relationships was also present in young male identified participants' discussion of dating/hookup apps (such as Grindr) commonly associated with 'casual' or 'no strings attached' ('NSA') sex.⁴ For example, Lewis (90s) dismissed Grindr noting that 'it was just a platform to find anonymous sex or people to hook up with or like it was never really anything serious'. Lewis's reactions were perhaps the most extreme, objecting to receiving unsolicited naked pictures on Grindr and Snapchat and described sexting as 'extremely inappropriate' and 'horrifying'. He had, however, had a long-term relationship with someone he met on Tinder. Tinder is often differentiated from Grindr in popular discourse as the former is more often associated with heterosexual dating while the latter with male same-sex dating and casual hook-ups. The use of Tinder among gay and same-sex attracted youth is, arguably, an instance of drawing on heteronormative discourses that prioritise dating and coupledness over casual sex and fleeting hook-ups. Similarly, Tyler (90s) commented that apps like Grindr are 'not my thing' because 'sex has just never been a really massive part of like who I am as like a gay guy, like it's just an addition to meeting a really awesome person'. Oscar (90s) and William (90s) differentiated between Grindr and Tinder, with Grindr being associated with casual sex and Tinder with finding boyfriends/relationships. It is significant however that both men had had negative/unpleasant experiences with Grindr. William, who identified his gender as queer/nonbinary and his sexuality as asexual, had met his first and only boyfriend on Tinder, commenting that he found it 'easier to use these apps than to like hook up with friends or anything because I don't know how they're going to think of me and of my body and I find it very hard to read when people are attracted to me'. On Tinder, William could set parameters: 'being able to say on Tinder I am a boy and I have a vagina and if you're not okay with that then fuck off, and I want a relationship, I don't want casual stuff -- so it eliminates a lot of the trouble'.⁵

Women did not discuss the hook up dimensions of apps in the same detail. Rather, digital and mobile applications were primarily framed in terms of "friendship", although Jennifer (90s), as one exception, noted that she met her 'now-fiancee' on a dating app. Such dating apps served additional purposes. Isabella (90s), for example, commented that using Tinder 'set to "I'm a female,

⁴ NSA = 'No strings attached'. The term is most often used in dating apps in relation to seeking casual sexual encounters that are not expected to lead to romantic relationships. Noteworthy here is that while dating app users may seek casual sexual encounters through the app, this does not in itself preclude seeking for or maintaining romantic relationships in other ways or through other digital platforms.

⁵ Identifying as asexual, William was also one of the only participants to talk about having sex in online chat rooms: 'I have found that I can be quite stimulated at least or like enjoy a lot more than sex like reading about sex and reading erotic stuff' (90s).

but I want to see other women”” had made her more accepting of herself: ‘there was just something kind of normal about it’. While a couple of the 1970s women spoke of using dating apps, the topic of digital dating applications was more often brought up by men in both focus groups and interviews and across both generational cohorts. This was often in ways which reflected on how the applications were used. Anthony (70s), for example, related such apps to earlier print-based hookup technologies, putting an ad in the classifieds in a magazine for gay identifying men: ‘I think that’s how I first got laid [laughs]’. The association of dating apps and the practices of their use and outcomes with gender identity is notable. Indeed, online spaces were broadly perceived as enabling connections for *some* people. Henry (90s) noted ‘Grindr and stuff is very NSA’ and, as a non-white transman, felt he was often fetishized in a way which prevented him from forming relationships or deeper engagements with others in that space.⁶ Dating apps and their connotations (Tinder and relationships, Grindr and casual sex) were used by young male-identifying participants to establish a sense of sexual selfhood. Particularly for young gay men, sexual subjectivity was formed within a sense of relationships or potential for relationships, hence the disavowal of casual sex outcomes of apps and online spaces designed for that purpose. In contrast, as we will explore, a degree of fluidity may be found in articulations of absence and ambiguity among the responses from non-male identifying participants.

Approaching Asexuality: Absence and Attraction

The second framework in relation to sex and sexual interest that can be read as indicative of ambivalence relates to the emergent identity category of asexuality. Asexuality—or sometimes ‘Ace’—has emerged in recent years as a recognisable category of sexual identity that is increasingly expressed as ongoing, coherent, intelligible and worthy of recognition, including by being recognised in non-heteronormativity acronyms such as LGBTQA (adding asexuality at the end). Rather than being perceived as an anomaly, abnormality or failure, asexuality as an identity is increasingly discussed through pride and citizenship discourses. It is seen to sit outside heteronormativity. As importantly, it is articulated as being at odds with homonormativity which Duggan (2003, pp. 65-66) perceives as a recoding of non-heterosexuality into a narrow, consumer-oriented, lesbian/gay, coupled, domestic set of representations that actively exclude diversity.

There are a wide range of definitions of asexuality. As Chasin highlights, ‘for the asexual community, asexuality is a matter of self-identification: it is defined as a lack of sexual attraction combined with

⁶ Henry (90s) described one benefit of Grindr, however, being that it enabled conversations about issues including racism.

one's identification as asexual' (2013, p. 405). Indeed, Chasin suggests asexuals' writing online indicate 'that diverse asexuals derive different meaning from being asexual and that there is considerable nuance of variation in how to be part of the asexual community' (p. 406). Such varied identifications create some difficult questions for feminism and queer theory. Cerankowski and Milks, for example, observe that it 'seems like a tall order: to radically rethink sexuality, queerness, desire, and intimacy in terms of *not* desiring sex, *not* having sex, or *not* experiencing sexual attraction' (2014, pp. 46-47).

So what then do our data show? Three participants among the 1990-born participants articulated their identity in terms of asexuality (a little over ten percent of the 28 participants of that age-group), while a range of 1970s-born and 1990s-born participants articulated their experiences growing up in relation to the absence of (sexual) desire. When recalling growing up, school and learning about sexuality, participants from both generations often spoke of coming to understand their attraction to people of the same sex or gender *in retrospect*, utilising the terminology of the 'crush'.⁷ More broadly, there is a sense of ambivalence in such an identification of sexuality across many of the participants, including those who directly spoke about an *absence* of feelings for others, and how they came to understand this absence retrospectively. While this is not necessarily "asexuality" in the traditional or identity-based uses of the term, we may consider this in relation to what Przybylo and Cooper (2014) call 'asexual "resonances"—or traces, touches, instances' (p. 298). Such descriptions might enable a recognition of diversity, and we question what we can learn by considering sexuality, attraction and absence beside one another in ways which point to sexual complexity and ambivalence rather than to lack.

For some 1970s-born participants, an overt absence of attraction was perceived as differentiating them from some of their classmates back when they were at school. For 1970s-born participant Michelle (70s), key markers of her lesbian sexuality were seen in retrospect: being unaware of the possibility of lesbian sexuality when younger she stated, 'I actually thought I was asexual because I didn't feel like I had any of those feelings for anyone'. Another significant illustration of this same phenomenon came from Erin (70s) who retrospectively recalled having crushes on celebrities and 'a girl in year eight', but noted 'I had no words or awareness of being that as being sexuality related'. Attraction and its absence were particularly significant in Erin's recognition of her sexuality when she commented that her 'coming out as gay wasn't so much because I had an overwhelming

⁷ In the wider youth and young adult literature, such terminology has been perceived as problematic, 'trivialising' 'lesbian love/desire' for example as a crush that 'the young female will eventually grow out of' (Mallan, 2004, p. 347). However, the terminology "crush", or the absence of a crush *was* used by participants to indicate their attraction to same gender/sex others at school, and thus their history as a lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer person.

attraction to women, ... that developed over time. It was more that I didn't have an attraction to men'. In this way, Erin suggests her sexual identity was based around an absence rather than a positive attraction. From a deconstructionist perspective, Erin's comment both reinforces a hetero/homo binary while acknowledging that such a binary is socially maintained on the basis of disavowal and exclusion (Sedgwick 1990, p. 9).

Carrigan (2011) has noted the diverse range of experiences among those who identify as asexual, including the articulation of a relationship-seeking trajectory alongside a reduced desire to engage in sex. This can be seen in Danielle's (90s) definition of asexuality. As she explained to another focus group participant:

It's not feeling the desire physically to have sex [...]. On that spectrum, there are people who are completely repulsed by sex, which is like my best friend. Then I'm kind of in the middle where it's like, I don't know, maybe if I fell in love with someone...?

Danielle suggests that it took many years for her to work this out, previously she had 'just assumed that I was fucked up or that there would come this mystical time in my life where it's like, I wanna bang everyone'. She also commented that her mother does not understand her sexuality, arguing 'I'm 22. How much older do I need to get before I want to have sex with someone?' Such a diversity of asexual experience places in question the idea that there is a singular asexual identity label with which to identify, and that the deeply-felt attachment to 'being' asexual was one which occurred through negotiation and self-reflection. Participants in that context highlighted the process of navigating social expectations that desire was normative, alongside resistance and the theatrical performance of desire in order to fit in.

Acknowledging Ambiguity? Bisexuality and its variants

The third framework to consider is the way in which certain variabilities and diversities were articulated as ambiguity in some participants' descriptions of their sexuality. This was particularly significant with respect to the bisexuality, pansexuality and queer identity labels among the 1990s-born participants: 17 of 29 participants born in the 1990s identified as bisexual, pansexual or queer—terms associated with contrasting against mononormative sexualities, or sexualities that are assumed to involve attraction towards only one gender, type or body. These terms have a variety of meanings and were used by participants in many different ways. The definition of bisexuality offered by Monro is particularly broad: 'attraction to people of more than one gender'

which she noted was ‘a strategic move that overlooks the binary composition of the word’ (2015, p. 22). Contemporary practices of categorisation and labelling have shifted the meaning of bisexuality from one which has sometimes been understood as a fluid identity to one which is seen as discrete, authentic, stable and meaningful to itself. It may, however, be useful to ask whether it is possible for a sexual regime built on discrete identities and citizenship to accommodate fluidity. Indeed, whether fluidity is the same as ambiguity or is better understood as an ambivalence *between* identity categories of citizenship and the non-category of fluidity has critical value for young people. As Richardson and Monro suggest, there are multiple ways in which bisexuality can be experienced although it ‘typically includes the experience of fluid and multiple desires’ and thus *any proper notion of sexual citizenship* requires *both*:

the recognition of bisexuality as a valid identity, and acceptance that desire can be fluid. This entails support for lesbian and gay rights but also an understanding that sexuality can be changeable, and that people with more fluid or complex identities and multiple (rather than monogamous) relationship forms also require citizenship rights (2012, p. 136).

Participants’ responses to questions about sexual identity, understanding and learning encompassed this ambiguity, with bisexuality being presented sometimes as a discrete identity and sometimes as a destabilisation of binary sexual identities or mononormative regimes of sexuality. Moreover, participants noted the ways in which their sexuality was restricted by others through stereotypical assumptions or misrecognition. Bisexuality as a form of sexual selfhood positioned between categories and fluidity is thus actively negotiated by young people, pointing to the roles of ambiguity and complex subjectivities in contemporary youth discourses sexual subjectivity.

Stereotypes of bisexuality have traditionally associated it with sexual excess and stereotypes of the figure of the bisexual as someone who seeks sexual engagement ‘indiscriminately’. As 1990s-born participant Paige (90s) noted, bisexuality is often stereotyped as promiscuous, an association which diminishes ‘other aspects of [...] identities’ including for some bisexuals, their asexuality (Richardson & Monro 2012, p. 121). Participants also noted stereotypical forms of media representation, for example, bisexual erasure in shows such as *Orange is the New Black* where the main (bisexual) character is often called a lesbian (Megan, 90s; Heather, 70s). Elsewhere, it has been noted that fictional bisexual characters are often represented not as implying a ‘genuine’ attraction to more than one gender, but as people utilising the term while transitioning between straight and lesbian/gay identities (Richardson & Monro 2012, p. 127; Beirne, 2012). This emphasis on

“transition” often reinforces a heterosexual/homosexual binary and fails to acknowledge ambiguity and choice in desire and attraction.

For 1990s-born participants, access to more diverse range of sexual and gender descriptors did not necessarily remove these restrictions. 1990s-born regional focus group participant Courtney introduced herself as,

gender fluid, but the majority of the time I sit on the demi-girl spectrum, um, I'm pansexual and polyamorous, which is all the fun, and, as it turns out, demi-romantic, which makes way more sense now I've figured it out.

She explained “demi-romantic”, commenting

at first, I thought, “Oh, maybe I'm just, for lack of a better word, a slut.” I was okay with that, I was like, “Hell, yeah!” At the same time it was like, I still want to have a connection with someone, but it's difficult.

Courtney noted that some of her friends had not necessarily embraced her demi-romantic identification. In many ways, Courtney enjoyed greater sexual citizenship in relation to information access and support—Gina's (70s) female friends presumed she would hit on them when she came out as bisexual—however, Courtney felt unsupported as her friends thought she had made her identity up, ignoring the ‘months of sitting there, figuring it out and being in inner turmoil’ instead perceiving it as ‘a cool thing that I'm gonna do’. As Monro writes, bisexuality in its ‘fluidity’ challenges social understandings of attraction and mononormativity – ‘social norms that enforce the idea that people should be monogamous’ and thus can seem ‘unintelligible’ disrupting scripts of behaviour (2015, p. 42). In this example, Courtney goes to a great deal of trouble to explain her attractions and sexual practices and yet as in previous generations these are “misunderstood” by those around her.

While an attempt is made here to define sexuality, available labels do not tell us the whole story. As Albury notes, such ‘designations ... actually tell us very little about what people do with their bodies, or what their desires, pleasures, or fantasies might be’ (2015, p. 654). Natalie (90s) suggested she had had difficulties when she was in relationships with men as this restricted her identification as bisexual with people presuming she was straight, commenting, ‘I miss people knowing or like because they're forgetting that's part of my identity’. Discussing a recent relationship break up with

a man and a subsequent relationship with a woman she stated, 'definitely being with her even for a short period of time made me identify a lot more'. Natalie believed her 'confusion' about her bisexuality in monogamous relationships would change as she got older, however, 1970s-born participants also noted such issues, particularly in "straight" (presumably monogamous) relationships (Heather, 70s; Thomas 70s), searching for support and questioning what they do with these bisexual identities, attractions and feelings.

Articulations or perceptions of fluidity may, however, be enabled in a variety of ways outside sex. Ursula (90s) spoke about what it meant to identify as bisexual without sex. She recalled a discussion she had had with a friend about her "percentage", after defining herself as bisexual 70-30, women to men. Noting that her friend stated the same percentage as herself, they discussed whether this was accurate given her friend had never had sex with a man, concluding 'people can not have sex with anyone and still have like a sense of their sexuality'. This conversation enabled a discussion of what it means to have sexual attractions, not necessarily sex, that contribute to a sense of sexuality, demonstrating a need for a greater acceptance and understanding of the diversity of sexuality and, pedagogically, different ways of talking about and discussing such identifications.

Conclusion

The diverse experiences of participants across the generations suggest that complexities in negotiating sexuality remains for all participants. While some may seek to establish sexual citizenship and a sense of ordinariness through coupled relationships and rejecting stereotyped symbols of sexualization, others articulated an appreciation of difference, complexity, ambiguity, non-fixity and nuanced understandings of sexuality as central to belonging. This was more marked among the 1990s-born participants than the earlier social generation born in the 1970s.

And yet these complexities are not generally accounted for in education – either that provided in school or that available through relationships and the media. Participants noted the profound and continued absence of formal education regarding sex and sexuality for LGBTQ people, suggesting where it existed it was limited and simplistic. Their experiences highlight how the restrictions imposed by stereotypes, and the failure to account for ambiguities and ambivalence, result in lost opportunities for health and education to engage with youth. As Carpenter notes, 'programs that assume homogeneity in beliefs may fail to affect their audiences as intended' (2001, p. 137). Rather than trying to simplify understandings, participants' ambivalences suggest a move to 'open out' their engagements with others. As Gilbert notes, 'not knowing or feeling confused (for both youth

and adults) are not problems to be solved by sex education, but rather the basis of learning about sexuality and, in fact, the very grounds of learning itself' (2010, p. 236). Starting from these spaces of ambivalence, instead of from abstract or scientific certainties, may provide the opportunity to better engage with young people and to do so, our understandings of sexual citizenship must also expand. In this study, participants stressed the importance of relationships, the absence of attraction/desire, as well as fluidity. Each of these facets of self-understanding demonstrates the complexity of the way in which sex is positioned in relation to sexuality – for gender and sexual minority youth at least. Rather than seeking to understanding sexuality through a form of sexual citizenship that requires adherence to a set of stereotypes and particular sexual practices, participants' responses suggest that ambivalence and ambiguity are central to accounting for the diversity of experiences, attractions and uncertainties inherent in contemporary sexual and gendered lives.

Funding: This work was supported by the Australian Research Council's Discovery Projects funding scheme [grant number DP150101292]. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Research Council.

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