

Sexuality in a non-binary world: redefining and expanding the linguistic repertoire

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Abstract: In this paper I consider how recognition of non-binary identities and trans people more broadly might require us to revisit the vocabulary of sexuality prevalent in the Anglosphere. I begin by examining the relationship between (neo)liberalism and inclusion practices. I then discuss linguistic innovations arising from the asexual (and aromantic) community before using data to highlight issues around trans and non-binary inclusion that exist with the current language. Next I use speculative, philosophical reasoning to break down what lies beneath sexuality when language is taken out of the equation, exploring identity, aesthetics and morphology. On the back of this exploration, I consider the question of how to distinguish fetishes and attraction, and what counts as sexuality. In the final two sections, I suggest which areas of the language might require revision to be trans-inclusive and reflect what lies beneath sexuality, and highlight a few cautionary concerns to be taken into account when considering the potential for language change. My exploration is primarily theoretical and philosophical in nature, but I complement and motivate my exploration with a small amount of data from my own original research on contextualised identity construction through speech by non-binary and other queer people in Southern England.

Keywords: sexuality, gender, transgender, non-binary, language

Introduction

While sexuality categories beyond lesbian, gay, bi and straight have not necessarily become widely understood beyond queer communities, they have at least begun to achieve somewhat mainstream visibility. In 2014, for example, popular dating app/website OkCupid expanded its options for sexual orientation to include such categories as “asexual, demisexual, heteroflexible, homoflexible, pansexual, queer, questioning and sapiosexual” (Buchanan 2014). Within these categories there is recognition of different levels or lack of sexual attraction (asexual), different motivations or requirements for sexual desire (demisexual; sapiosexual), fluidity (hetero/homoflexible), more than two genders (pansexual), uncertainty (questioning) and – arguably – ableism (sapiosexual; see e.g. Blum 2016; Moss 2015).

Using Google Trends, a tool that tracks the popularity of search terms over time starting from 2004, a gradual but clear upward trend in the terms asexual, demisexual, heteroflexible, homoflexible, pansexual and sapiosexual is observable (based on worldwide data). Asexual, demisexual, heteroflexible, pansexual and sapiosexual started to show consistent growth from around 2010–2012, with demisexual and sapiosexual appearing to be almost entirely unused before 2011, while homoflexible gained increased popularity from around 2014. These similar patterns of growth are not simply a quirk of Google Trends (e.g. all search terms experiencing growth

from around 2010–2012): queer shows a downward trend from 2004 to 2008, then relative stability since (except for a few spikes in 2018); bisexual is similar; gay and lesbian show small upward and downward fluctuation but overall have changed little in popularity from 2004 to 2018.

This expansion in the vocabulary (or linguistic repertoire) surrounding sexuality goes some way to recognising the diversity of human experience. It helps to create a sense within the marginalised that not fitting the normative mould (re)presented and reinforced by mainstream media does not make you somehow perverse, alone or abnormal (at least in a sociological rather than strictly statistical sense), but rather a natural product of human variation. It also illustrates a trend to conceptualise and recognise aspects of sexuality beyond orientation to a particular gender or genders (as well as recognising orientation to more than two genders). However, returning to OkCupid, orientation to binary genders still fundamentally shapes the user experience. On the app, the 22-strong gender category currently allows you to pick up to 5 options and – for better or worse – includes intersex and gender-adjacent categories like transgender, transfeminine and transmasculine. So I can now identify myself as genderqueer, non-binary, transgender and transfeminine, and have this appear in my profile alongside other identity-related information. However, the moment after you pick anything other than *either* woman or man and select “Done”, the joy of recognition is quickly cut short by a sudden slap of ‘administrative violence’ (Spade 2015).

As seen in figure 1, you are asked whether you wish to be included in searches for women *or* men: “pick one”.

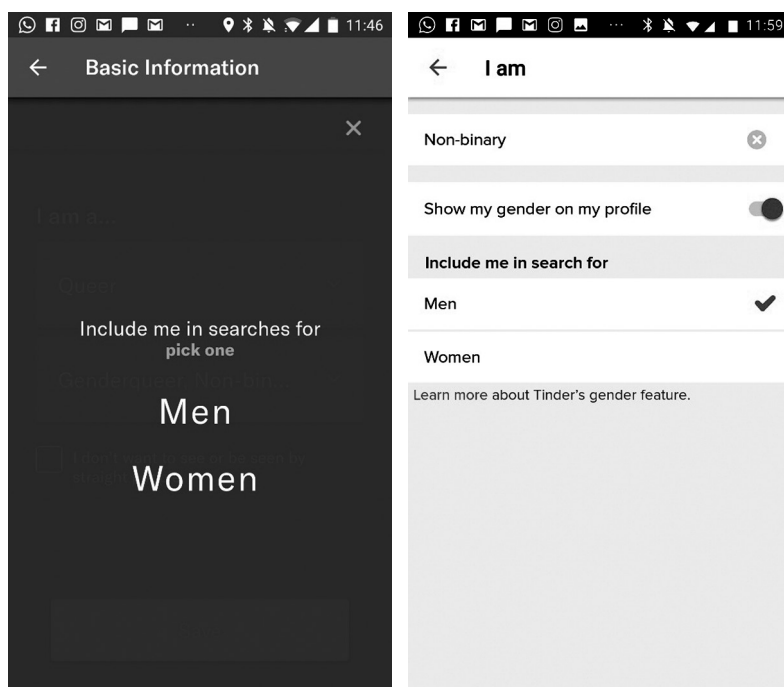


Figure 1: OkCupid (left) and Tinder (right) requiring users to select which binary gender they are included in searches for

In this paper I consider how recognition of non-binary identities and trans people more broadly might require us to revisit the vocabulary of sexuality prevalent in the Anglosphere. After defining a few key terms, I return to the themes of this introduction to analyse the relationship between (neo)liberalism and inclusion practices. I then discuss linguistic innovations arising from the asexual (and aromantic) community before using data to highlight issues around trans and/or non-binary inclusion that exist with the current language. Next I use speculative, philosophical reasoning to break down what lies beneath sexuality when language is taken out of the equation, exploring identity, aesthetics and morphology. On the back of this exploration, I consider the question of how to distinguish fetishes and attraction, and what counts as sexuality. In the final two sections, I suggest which areas of the language might require revision to be trans-inclusive and reflect what lies beneath sexuality, and highlight a few cautionary concerns that need to be taken into account when considering the potential for language change. My exploration is primarily theoretical and philosophical in nature, but I complement and motivate my exploration with a small amount of data from my own original research on contextualised identity construction through speech by non-binary and other queer people in the South of England.

Definitions

Before I begin my analysis, I will define terms that are key to the ensuing discussion. My definition of gender is largely in line with both Bornstein (2016) and Vincent (2018). In describing ‘gender identity’, Bornstein talks of being – “Gender identity answers the question: ‘Who am I?’ Am I a man or a woman or a what?” (2016: 28) – and belonging: feeling like you belong with people of a particular gender or genders (more than other genders). Vincent (2018: 18–19) talks of a “felt sense of gender” – meaning that gender, while socially influenced, is ultimately about what you feel internally – and recites an adage common in the trans community that “sexual orientation concerns who one wants to go to bed *with*, whilst gender identity is who one goes to bed *as*” (emphasis original). My view, shared by many gender scholars, is that individuals have some sense of what different gender categories mean to them (influenced by their sociocultural background), even if that sense is very rough and unclear, and perhaps unconscious. Their own gender identification is a result of self-evaluation against these senses of gender and making a judgment of best fit (or lack thereof, as may be the case for many agender people). Feelings are important in this trans-inclusive definition of gender: while I am firmly of the view that there’s no singular way to be male, I am of equal conviction that that category (which I was assigned at birth) doesn’t *feel* like a good fit for my inner sense of self. An attempt at developing this view of gender into a dynamic system can be seen in figure 2.

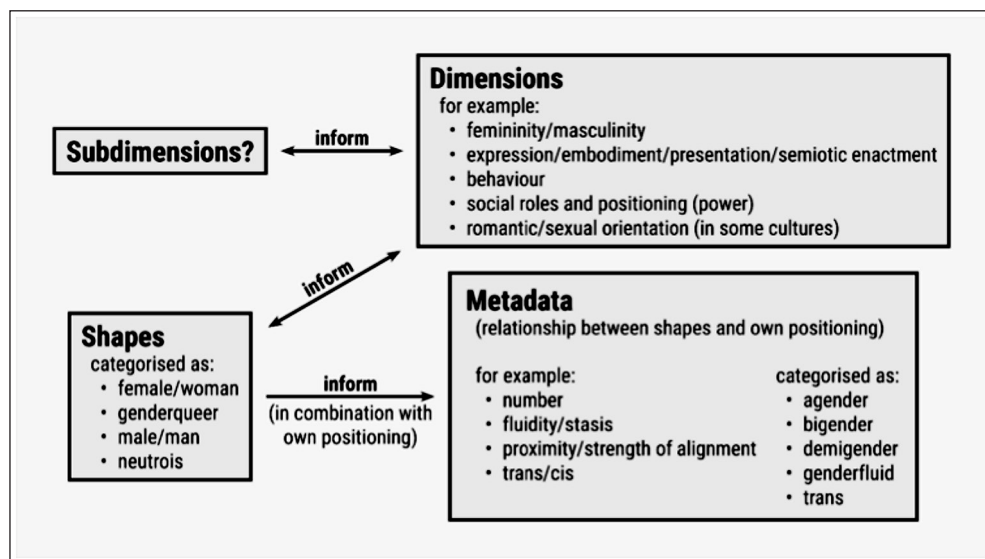


Figure 2: a hierarchic system of gender including gender-adjacent information. The ‘dimensions’ are what create our own sense of what it means to be a woman, man, genderqueer, non-binary etc., which here I term ‘shapes’. The shapes are essentially specific gender categories. The idea is you map out these categories on a multi-dimensional space to illustrate how each gender shape relates to other gender shapes in your own mind. Then you position yourself on the map to give an idea of where your identity sits in relation to the different shapes. Your own positioning, the shapes, your assigned gender and the relationship between them inform the ‘metadata’. So if you have two positions on the map, you might categorise yourself as bigender, or if you are close to male perhaps demiguy, or if you shift between two positions then genderfluid. What might be classed as a subdimension is unspecified, but this is essentially what you feel constitutes the dimensions, e.g. femininity and masculinity or a particular sexual orientation (as explored in this paper).

In the quote from Vincent (2018: 18–19) above, sexual orientation is defined as “*who* one wants to go to bed with” (emphasis mine). While I’ll work with this definition for now, sexuality (in contrast with sexual orientation) can be considered a much broader concept. Van Anders (2015: 1178), in her paper proposing ‘Sexual Configurations Theory’, noted:

“Sexual orientation as defined by gender (or is it sex?) is largely positioned as the singular defining feature of people’s sexual selves, but should it be? There are a number of other axes along which sexuality could revolve, including age, partner number, type of sexual activity, consent, solitary sexuality, and intensity among others.”

I am in complete agreement with this, as well as her proceeding statement that “there is no a priori reason why these should be secondary or less important relative to gender for characterizing sexualities”. However, in this paper I wish to focus on sexual orientation specifically, looking at what lies beneath orientation to specific (types of) people and what this means for non-binary genders.

Throughout the paper I use the terms ‘arousal’, ‘attraction’ and ‘desire’. While they are not mutually inclusive or synonymous, they are connected and can inform

each other. By arousal, I mean something that causes sexual excitement – something that makes people wish to have sex. Attraction is people-focused and based on finding specific qualities (of their body or personality, for example) pleasing in some way. Desire is about actually wanting to have sex with someone, based on attraction or interpersonal dynamics (for example, you might be aroused by the idea of sex with much older or much younger people, regardless of any aesthetic attraction or lack thereof).

While some of the theoretical analysis and discussion that follows may resemble a form of queer theory and queer analysis, I do not necessarily see my positions and motivations as entirely in line with some of its most salient features. As a descriptive sociolinguist, I have no problem with the word ‘queer’ having taken on a large number of meanings, including as an identity category. Indeed this is how I most often use the word throughout this paper (referring to an amorphous, fluid and perhaps somewhat ambiguous – but definitely non-heterosexual – sexuality), which is in contrast with the anti-identity stance generally considered to be one of the central tenets of queer theory (Wiegman and Wilson 2015). Further, some of the discussion that follows seeks more clarity and definition regarding sexuality, going against queer theory’s more standard resistance towards this. While I do seek to complicate our assumptions around sexual orientation, I wish to do this through understanding where our current definitions are incomplete, bringing light to the areas they leave in the dark. That said, I am not of the view that a single identity category can generally provide an accurate idea of the entirety of someone’s experience of sexuality, gender or other psychosocial phenomena: somewhat like mainstream queer theory, I don’t see identity categories as without limitations.

(Neo)liberal versus radical inclusion: dating apps

In the introduction, I illustrated the limits of OkCupid’s approach to recognising gender diversity and how this results in effectively falling back on binary-oriented sexuality categories where it matters (you can only search for women, men or both, and can only be categorised as a woman or a man for the purpose of other people’s searches). No doubt owing to a shared owner (Match Group, which itself is majority controlled by IAC/InterActiveCorp), Tinder’s approach is almost identical. The only notable difference is an extra linguistic distinction between “show” and “include”. In addition to the “Include me in search[es] for” setting, there’s an option labelled “Show my gender on my profile”. So my gender can be *shown*, but it cannot be *included* unless it’s one of two: woman or man. What all of this means is mainstream dating apps are willing to let you stamp your identity on your profile, but they won’t take the extra, more consequential step of recognising us within their core function: connecting people (for romantic, sexual or otherwise intimate purposes, primarily). The stamp (and no doubt a well-funded press office) is more than enough to get them good press. One particularly congratulatory article proclaimed in its title “OKCupid Just Exploded The Gender Binary With a Huge New Range of Orientation Options”, and went on to state “OKCupid [...] has just laid down the gauntlet when it comes to

inclusivity” and “the changes that OKCupid has just started rolling out to users are revolutionary” (Smith 2014; see also Greider 2018; Grinberg 2015; Lampen 2018; Mallenbaum 2016; North 2014).

This willingness to engage with inclusion on a liberal level (making small changes within the existing framework) but failure to demonstrate radical inclusive practice (by changing the system) highlights a few major barriers:

1. The willingness to accept (or tolerate) trans people at a superficial surface level – in practical terms meaning little more than not engaging in hate speech – but neglecting to go deeper and challenge underlying trans-exclusionary assumptions about gender and the world (Nicholas 2019).
2. The ubiquity of binary gender in how we conceptualise sexuality. Recognising non-binary people in search algorithms would then require people to indicate whether they wish to see non-binary people come up as potential matches. Crucially, it would require those who know little or nothing about gender beyond the binary to make such a decision. This could in turn undermine the ontological stability of categories like lesbian, gay, straight and the (increasingly antiquated) binary gender definition of bisexuality: a poststructural collapse of order (Butler 1990).
3. Relatedly, the neoliberal agenda, which puts profit over people (Chomsky 1999). OKCupid’s efforts are arguably just corporate virtue-signalling, dealing only with the technologically trivial matter of correct labelling and identification while neglecting to invest real resources in developing a solution to enabling trans and/or non-binary people to use their service in a truly gender-affirming way. It’s profitable to take a liberal approach and appear to be progressive to the mainstream, but not so much to actually work out the details of how to reshape the system to include a diversity of genders (e.g. Nicholas 2019). As mentioned in point two, working out those details may result in a collapse of order. Given the profit of such apps is no doubt largely dependent on straight-identifying, and secondarily lesbian, gay and bisexual-identifying cisgender people, undermining, complicating or otherwise calling into question those very categories is unlikely to be in their business interests. Neoliberalism will put a pretty plaster/band aid over the wound, but it won’t go as far as changing the environment that created the wound in the first place. The environment is still hostile: much like neoliberalism embraces only homonormative and not radical queer inclusion (Duggan 2002), it too embraces only cissexist transnormative forms of inclusion (Johnson 2016; Lewis 2016; Petersen 2017; Vipond 2015). Arguably, this kind of liberal approach to inclusion may harm the cause of activists seeking more systematic inclusion by making it seem as though the battle is already won (as evidenced by the congratulatory and hyperbolically positive press coverage).

Asexual innovations

Before turning to the main focus of this paper – the conceptualisation of sexuality – I wish to highlight a couple of linguistic and conceptual innovations from the asexual and aromantic communities. The main purposes of discussing these is to motivate my use of specific language henceforth and to be clear on the limitations of this paper. However, these innovations also serve as contemporary examples of how the language and underlying conceptual frameworks around sexuality and attraction more broadly have been reworked and expanded to better reflect the diversity of human experience.

While the term ‘allosexual’ has gained ground within some online queer communities (e.g. Tumblr and Facebook groups and pages by/for queer people), the majority opinion on the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (or AVEN) – the “world’s largest [online] asexual community” (AVEN 2018a) – is that ‘sexual’ is the preferred term (e.g. AVEN 2014, 2018b, 2018c). Under AVEN’s (2018d) definition, “[a]n asexual person does not experience sexual attraction – they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way”, though they may experience (sexual) arousal. ‘A’ is a prefix of Ancient Greek origin meaning ‘not’ or ‘without’, so ‘asexual’ is literally not sexual, with sexual taken to mean experiencing sexual attraction. ‘Allo’, on the other hand, is a prefix (again of Ancient Greek origin) meaning ‘different’ or ‘other’ – many users on the AVEN forum note that the logical definition of allosexual as ‘different or other sexual’ is somewhat opaque and nonsensical. Therefore the most etymologically accurate and transparent opposite of ‘asexual’ – as commonly argued on the AVEN forum – is simply ‘sexual’.

Another innovation of the asexual (and aromantic) community is the split attraction model (e.g. AVEN 2018d; mod j 2016), which separates out sexual and romantic attraction as well as, less commonly, other forms of attraction such as aesthetic or sensual. While terms like heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual all include the suffix ‘-sexual’, it’s common to assume that someone identifying as homosexual (or more likely gay) would only consider people of the same gender as romantic partners. However, by this logic of grouping sexual and romantic attraction into one -sexual category, it would follow that asexual people never desire intimate partners of any kind, which is patently untrue for much of the community. While it would be fascinating to explore what informs romantic (and other forms of non-sexual) attraction, the split attraction model highlights that these forms of attraction are unique and should not be treated as a singular, unified phenomenon. It is therefore beyond the scope of both this paper and my expertise to unpick attraction as a whole, hence the focus shall solely be on *sexual* attraction (and sexual arousal and desire outside of/beyond attraction).

Traditional sexuality categories and trans people: irreconcilable differences?

For the rest of this paper I will focus on the second point I raised in the first section: the conceptualisation of sexuality. First, I will examine the meaning behind traditional sexuality categories. We typically think of the orientation in ‘sexual orientation’ as being in relation to gender: commonly to the same, ‘opposite’ (within a binary), ‘both’ (within a binary), or multiple genders. But is sexual attraction amongst the sexual population based on identity, aesthetics, morphology (physical aspects of the body such as genitalia and chest shape) or something else? I will outline a few standpoints that I believe to be relatively uncontroversial in the Anglosphere among those who are trans-positive (not transphobic) and then pose a question.

1. Sexual people *can* experience sexual attraction to people based purely on looking at them. Note that the asexual/sexual distinction is not binary. It could be argued either way as to whether demisexual¹ people exist outside of these categories, or whether they are a subcategory of sexual people who simply have additional requirements for attraction. My use of ‘can’ is important in leaving room for this to be optional and thereby leaving the definition of ‘sexual’ somewhat open, however my focus in this paper is not on demisexual experience. This is perhaps an example of umbrella versus narrow definitions of identity categories. Indeed under an umbrella definition, demisexuals may also be included within the asexual spectrum, further demonstrating that the asexual/sexual distinction is not a case of two completely discrete and separate camps with no potential for overlap. To me this cloudy, amorphous, fluid nature of queer language is itself very queer.
2. Trans women, trans men and non-binary people (trans-identifying or not) exist and are valid.
3. Having undergone or intending to undergo medical transition is not a prerequisite for identifying as trans and/or non-binary.
4. Leading logically on from (2) and (3), identity, aesthetics and morphology need not align with the norms of gender-conforming cis people. Rather, they have infinite potential combinations: femme-presenting men who have protruded chests, sometimes hidden by a binder or tape; women who present neither femme nor masc – or perhaps both – and have a flat chest; masc-presenting non-binary people with large hips who have had a breast reduction; and so on.

All of this logically leads to the question of who or what are (sexual) lesbian, gay and straight people attracted to if women and men can look like anything both clothed and unclothed? Do these categories – under their traditional definitions – retain meaning (or semantic coherence) when we include trans people as potential subjects of sexual attraction?

¹ A demisexual is someone who doesn’t experience sexual attraction until they’ve formed a strong emotional bond.

These questions and confusion around what to do with these categories of sexuality are reflected in interview data from my own research. When asked how they identify in terms of gender and sexuality, one informant (pseudonym used below and for all informants henceforth) replied with regard to the latter:

“My sexuality... queer, but I think more recently I’ve been thinking I guess I’m bisexual as well. But I for a long time you know I was- I did call myself a lesbian for a long time, and then felt that wasn’t right because I’m not a woman and not everyone I’m attracted to is a woman and- so then I was like oh just queer and now I’m like well hang on that means bisexual doesn’t it (laughter) so like I don’t know.”

“But then I also think about like uhm homosexual and heterosexual and so like- and for a long time I thought like okay I’m homosexual and then because I used to even be attracted- like I’ve always been fairly kind of butch or like masculine-ish presenting and, uhm, was mostly attracted to other people who were also kind of masculine presenting. Uhm, but I’ve noticed that since I have come out as non-binary and got more comfortable with that I’m definitely attracted to femme women, yeah. And so then I think about well is that homosexual? And it’s like oh I dunno homosexual/heterosexual is meaningless I guess but it’s all these different-like it’s more an attraction to difference rather than sameness.”

(Thom, 31 year-old queer assigned female at birth (AFAB) non-binary informant)

Another answered:

“So, I definitely like guys. Uhm, but then that that’s a fun issue isn’t it cause uhm you know uhm gender identity like... who are guys?”

(Alexis, 18 year-old gay assigned male at birth (AMAB) non-binary informant)

The changing stances of the informants both within their lifetime as their queer subjectivities develop and within the interviews when talking about their sexuality illustrate the confusion, tension and discordance – or ontological instability – they sense in trying to reconcile their advanced understanding and non-normative experiences of gender with ostensibly gender-based categories of sexuality. I argue that this is one of the key problems with the current language: these categories are only *ostensibly* gender-based. Alexis starts off with certainty: “I definitely like guys”. A few seconds and three uncertainty-marking ‘uhm’s later they ask “who are guys?” Alexis had only learned about and come to identify as non-binary within the few months prior to the interview, but it’s clear that they were already beginning to question the assumptions and foundations on which their much longer-established gay identity were built. Who are guys?

Thom, who has identified as non-binary for considerably longer, covers more ground in a good minute of self-reflection. They touch on aesthetics (or presentation), identity and the relational nature of the traditional monosexual (orientation to one gender) sexuality categories (and the antiquated binary bisexual definition) when they mention attraction to sameness and difference.

Similar ontological paradoxes show up throughout my data, a small selection of which I present below:

“If you’re doing things off of gender then like you know, I’m not exclusively attracted to men cause there’s non-binary as well and stuff like that, and so you know it all gets really messy using language”

(Aiden, 20 year-old gay/queer AMAB non-binary transfeminine informant)

“She [my wife] doesn’t identify as anything other than straight, so it is- it challenges her identity as well.”

(Fiona, 41 year-old bisexual AMAB genderfluid informant)

“Thinking about gender in a different way, uhm, it’s sort of changed the way that I think about who I’m attracted to. Uhm, so, it- it’s a bit murky at the moment. Uhm, and yeah I don’t – I don’t have sort of immediate words for- for how I would describe myself. But yeah I suppose probably queer is the c- closest.”

(Leela, 32 year-old queer AFAB non-binary informant)

“He [my partner] identified as straight when we got together, so that was kind of a big thing to work through like mentally I guess, if that’s what you thought you were and then you are suddenly with a guy.”

(Stan, 21 year-old pansexual/queer AFAB male informant)

Fiona and Stan’s contributions here raise the issue of reconciling a partner’s gender-based sexual orientation with a change in the way they identify in terms of gender. If we take transition to be a shift in identity, and assuming at least some partners of trans people remain attracted to their partner post-shift, then they are attracted to a person of a different gender than before. If we take transition not as a *shift* in identity, but rather a *realisation* of identity (which individuals may have always been, unknowingly), then any attraction their partner(s) felt towards them was always to a person of the gender they are. In Fiona and Stan’s cases, their partners identify as straight – attracted to men and women respectively – and yet they find themselves in relationships with people of the same or fluid gender. Assuming sexual attraction is sustained, to maintain the line that they are solely attracted to people of a gender their partner is not risks invalidating and erasing their partners’ gender and trans identities. All of this suggests traditional sexuality categories and trans and/or non-binary people have irreconcilable differences. Time for a divorce?

Delanguaging sexuality: what are we attracted to?

Language is important: some words hurt and are best avoided. But that hurt is culturally contextual, not universal: words that are harmful within one context may be entirely benign in another (Butler 1993). As such, some of the distinctions we focus on policing, particularly around gender, are based more on meaning by association (based on the main contexts of their use) than semantic or etymological coherence. These distinctions can in some contexts become ‘enregistered’ as ‘shibboleths’,

meaning linguistic forms that mark (are indexical of) group membership, or are at least perceived that way. For example, ‘transwomen’, as distinct from ‘trans women’, is often seen as a marker of trans-exclusionary ‘radical feminism’ or otherwise transphobic ideology (Vincent 2018). However, strict policing of this and other linguistically arbitrary distinctions can also result in highly culturally-contextualised language which can exclude people not because they are against – or even outside of – a given community, but simply because they are unfamiliar with the conventionalised, prestige language. While I have seen many trans and/or non-binary people use the form ‘transwomen’ without controversy within online communities, trans people themselves can sometimes be subject to accusations of transphobia from other trans people simply for not adhering to convention (which is ironic within a social group discriminated against for going against convention).

The existence of different languages of gender and sexuality in both ‘Western’ (e.g. Valentine 2007) and non-‘Western’ cultures (e.g. Jackson 1989; Kulick 1998) illustrates that our conceptual frameworks and resulting language are rarely if ever one-size-fits-all, nor are they natural systems free of subjectivity and cultural and historical context. In some cultures, it could be argued that gender and sexuality are not conceptualised as quite so distinct as they are in the Anglosphere (Altman 2001). Many (anthropological) descriptions of what we might call trans and/or non-binary people in the Anglosphere include sexuality (and birth assignment) as a fundamental, constitutive characteristic. Attempting to apply one system of understanding universally can easily stray into the territory of linguistic and cultural imperialism.

For now, let’s throw out the existing (Anglosphere) language and investigate to what, behind it all, are we actually attracted. I’ll go through each of the areas I’ve mentioned in turn: identity, aesthetics and morphology. Note that while I make a distinction between these three categories for the purpose of analysis, in reality there is clear overlap and intercategorical influence: morphology can be considered part of aesthetics (or to be a source of aesthetic appeal), and identity can play an obvious role in informing aesthetic (and other) presentation.

Identity (and character)

The foundation of this section is the anti-essentialist, poststructural notion that – even amongst the cisgender population – anyone could be any kind of person and put any (identity) label on top of that (e.g. Amer 2018; GLAAD 2019). Affiliation to a particular identity might shape the kind of person we become, but theoretically under the trans-inclusive model of gender I’m working with, anyone can be anything and identify any way they like (with regard to gender). We can identify as women, men or non-binary for our own very individual reasons. If we accept this as true, then logically identity should not be a factor in sexual attraction. Even among demisexual and among sexual people whose attraction is enhanced by romantic attraction or a sense of intimacy, it’s not the category woman, man, non-binary or anything else that constitutes any fondness for an individual. Identity does not equal character. Which leads to the question: is character (or personality) important? Per-

haps character directly or indirectly – given its role in creating and developing an emotional connection – is a way of capturing what leads to sexual attraction among demisexual people.

However, even if logic would suggest identity itself should be unimportant, perhaps an individual could be aroused by the *idea* of having sex with someone who identifies in a particular way. For example, is it plausible that someone could be turned on by the perceived deviance of a sexual act, which may be influenced by the combination of identities involved (as well as the cultural and historical context)? Perhaps this would be classed as a fetish and not a sexuality, but is the difference between the two so black and white, or is it more based on notions of morality and perceived deviance? I'll return to this when discussing morphology, and more fully in the next section.

Aesthetics

This is perhaps the most obvious area. Returning to dating apps, this is – amongst sexual people – a big factor in what makes us 'swipe right' (and thereby tell the app that we would like to match with the person in question). How many people on OkCupid, and particularly apps like Tinder and Grindr (which place less importance on shared values and interests, with much more limited opportunity to provide biographical and ideological detail), swipe or message people without reading a word of the person's profile? Clearly, this is an area that can influence many of us.

What might be less obvious is the line to draw between aesthetics and morphology. Arguably aesthetics, morphology and character combine to form the larger category of presentation. Aesthetics and morphology are both within the physical domain, while character is more related to personality (though it can be indexed through physical/visual means). While I acknowledge that in reality morphology can be a constitutive part of aesthetics, here the distinction I make for the purpose of analytic and theoretical illustration is between aspects of the naked body and anything that goes on top.

Morphology

The prevailing perspective within the Anglosphere treats gender and morphology as unified and always congruent (according to the norms of cisgender endosex² people; see the 'heterosexual matrix', Butler 1990). This leads to the common conceptualisation of lesbian, gay and straight (monosexual categories) as indicating attraction to specific types of bodies, of which people assume there are (only) two distinct groups. Here lies one of the main issues with these traditional categories – while they are described and defined as gender-based attraction, what people are really talking about is morphology. As I said earlier, they are only *ostensibly* gender-based. Conflating

2 Cisgender (or cis) and endosex are common terms used by trans and intersex communities to refer to their opposites.

the two is rooted in cissexism and endosexism³. But, if we remove the language, is there something in morphology? One of my informants discussed this in response to a question about the main issues still facing queer people. Their response touches on what Kessler and McKenna (1978) refer to as the ‘cultural genitals’: genitals, and from that sex, and from that gender, are often inferred via secondary signifiers. People rarely expose their genitals in everyday interactions, yet assumptions about them inform how they are gendered by others.

“From my own personal experience, I’d say uhm there are a lot of issues around gender and making assumptions about people’s gender uhm and people saying accidentally transphobic things. Uhm genital fetishism is a big thing within the queer scene that uhm isn’t helpful for trans people I think. There’s a certain extent to which you can’t necessarily control your fetishes, but uhm I think uh some people feel that part of their gay identity means uhm being very explicit about the type of genitals you want on the person that you’re attracted to which I don’t think is helpful for trans people. Uhm so yeah biological essentialism basically is uhm one of the main issues both within society and within queer groups that I think really needs to be tackled.”

(Kay, 20-year-old gay AMAB non-binary informant)

While I completely agree that biological essentialism is a big issue, what Kay says brings me back to the question I raised earlier: is there a meaningful, qualitative difference between what we class as sexualities and fetishes, or are they all just ways of describing what arouses people? Is the distinction purely moralistic based on dividing subjects of sexual attraction and desire into what is *considered* a choice and therefore optional and what is *considered* prescribed from birth (unchoosable and essential – ‘born this way’)? I’ll continue this discussion in the next section.

Fetish versus attraction: what constitutes sexuality?

Interestingly, the way Kay uses the term ‘fetish’ is a marked departure from its classic definition. Freud (1927) and a number of major sexologists (e.g. Binet 1887; Ellis 1906; Hirschfeld 1956; von Krafft-Ebing 1896) considered fetishism to be (significant) sexual arousal stemming from non-living objects, body parts or bodily products. Freud considered fetishes to be sexual arousal toward a ‘substitute’ for the genitals (or specifically the penis). The fifth and current edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association 2013) was the first to integrate ‘partialism’ – arousal from a non-genital body part – into its definition of ‘fetishistic disorders’, rather than separating it out as a distinct paraphilia. It defines fetishistic disorders much the same as Freud and the sexologists of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries: arousal towards non-living objects or non-genital body parts. Kay, however, positions the genitals as a source of fetishism. As my questions at the end of the last section suggested, I believe this touches on another common use of the term fetishism, which may be based on moralistic

3 Cissexism and endosexism describe acts or attitudes that view cisgender and endosex people as the norm, and/or cement their positions of privilege over trans and intersex people respectively.

judgments, and may shift the definition away from anything other than genitals to anything other than identity. As a descriptive sociolinguist with limited knowledge of the history of conceptualising fetishism, I don't seek to take a stance on whether this new definition makes sense or whether 'genital fetishism' is something of an oxymoron, rather I will focus my discussion on the underlying question of whether genitals can be understood as a genuine source of arousal.

Genitals could potentially play a role in sexual arousal through the physical feeling of interacting with them (though this can at least partially be replicated with prosthetics), through the *idea* of interacting with them (including, for example, the idea of someone with a penis being aroused by you), or through what they represent to a person (which may, based on cissexist and endosexist assumptions, relate back to gender/identity). Again, the question arises of whether these are fetishes or components of sexuality, if indeed there is a meaningful difference.

The fetish question could also be asked about secondary sex characteristics and other body features. Are preferences for the following based on fetish or sexual attraction: muscular, slim or large build; short or tall height; flat, small or large chest; wide or narrow hips? Are these valid areas of preference? Where does preference start to become problematic? I'll return to this last question later in my closing thoughts, paying particular attention to the racialised and ableist nature of certain 'preferences'.

While skoliosexuals⁴ may consider themselves attracted to non-binary people – based on some generalisation of what non-binary people are like (aesthetically and character-wise) – could there be multiple reasons behind the wealth of people on apps like Grindr looking for trans(femme) people (also 'crossdressers' or 'CD', 'transvestites' or 'TV' and 'transsexuals' or 'TS', in which the predominantly cis gay male population of Grindr commonly proclaim an interest; e.g. Potts 2017)?

Some might simply find femme aesthetics attractive. This would lead to the question of why not cis women and AFAB femmes (assuming at least some of them identify as gay men and not bisexual or similar)? Perhaps they generalise and assume that most AMAB femmes can easily be read as AMAB and are therefore part of a distinct aesthetic category, however subtle the distinction. Or perhaps they genuinely feel attraction towards the aesthetics of a femme presentation combined with a small chest, small hips and a penis (an example of the fluid boundary between morphology and aesthetics).

Alternatively, is it possible that some are turned on by the idea of an AMAB person dressing femme, and perhaps the idea of 'topping' (penetrating) a passive AMAB femme? Or, for example, some of the many straight-identifying men on Grindr looking for femmes could be aesthetically attracted to femmes in general but aroused by the perceived deviance of having sex with (perhaps even cheating with) an AMAB femme, or specifically someone with a penis (or perhaps a 'man', transphobically categorised). Whether because of perceived deviance or something else, perhaps the hegemonic masculinity represented by such a scenario is a source of arousal, and perhaps the inverse might be true of AMAB femmes who enjoy ful-

4 A skoliosexual is someone sexually attracted to non-binary people.

filling a passive role in sex with hegemonically masculine people to whom they are not aesthetically attracted.

This may be where the line is drawn between fetish and sexual attraction for Kay and others who adopt a genital-inclusive definition of the former: the abstraction of sexual arousal to the level of ideas about interpersonal dynamics rather than the materiality of a subject of sexual attraction. But must our definition of sexuality be limited only to what leads to sexual attraction, rather than what leads to sexual arousal more broadly?

If we were to incorporate fetishes into the language but continue to see them as distinct from attraction, gender-focused categories like gay, lesbian, gynosexual and androsexual would become somewhat ambiguous: are androsexuals sexually attracted to men (or masculine people, depending on how you define the term) or simply sexually aroused by the idea of having sex with them? One solution is to adopt a split sexuality model, with terms distinguishing idea-based and aesthetics-based gender-focused sexual arousal and attraction. Arguably this is already accounted for in some versions of the existing split attraction model, which incorporate the idea of aesthetic attraction, but this has some problems. First, it would reduce sexuality only to fetishes, which feels like a rather dramatic shift in definition. Second, the idea within the split attraction model is that aesthetic attraction needn't be coupled with sexual thoughts: you might appreciate a type of aesthetic, but not necessarily wish to have sex with people of that aesthetic. The distinction I discuss here is very much between fetishes (or idea-based sexual arousal) and aesthetics-based *sexual* attraction, rather than simply aesthetic attraction.

One of my informants illustrated an experience of being “attract[ed]” to (or aroused by) an idea or an interpersonal situation (someone else being attracted to her) while not being attracted to the other person involved in that situation as they tried to make sense of their own sexuality.

“I’m mostly attracted to women. Uhm, there is a- an attraction to a male response to my femininity that, that I like. I- if a man finds me attractive I find that attractive, but if I’m honest I don’t find them attractive. Uhm, and I get the same response from a gay female that’s attracted to me – in fact more so cause it’s kind of double then. So I- I would say... I don’t know you see this is where the lang- language fails, is does that make me straight or gay? Because, my gender identity is ‘I don’t know’. So yeah, I’m whatever that makes me. I- I find describing myself as gay or trying to describe myself as lesbian would- it is uncomfortable.”

(Fiona, 41 year-old bisexual AMAB genderfluid informant)

Relanguaging sexuality: redefining and expanding the linguistic repertoire

Gender categories are not as qualitatively discrete as traditional sexuality labels would have us believe, which leads to a situation where we cannot consistently accurately identify the gender of individuals. In addition, aesthetics are a continuous, multidimensional variable. There are no hard lines. So is it natural for sexual people

to be attracted only to one gender or one aesthetic? Assuming the answer is no, how can we describe what we are attracted to and aroused by without relying on essentialist understandings of identity? Having taken a first pass at deconstructing sexuality by taking language out of the equation and incorporating a non-binary-inclusive, trans-inclusive and (hopefully) intersex-inclusive perspective, I will now briefly look at how the language of sexuality might usefully be developed. What might sexuality categories look like if we were to take more radical steps to recognise non-binary and trans identities at a more fundamental, systemic level, beyond simply seeing them as labels people stick on top of their ‘real’ (binary, assigned) gender? Returning to the potential sources of sexual attraction and arousal that I’ve discussed, I will take them in turn and suggest whether they should be newly explored, revised or rejected.

Identity rests on whether and how we distinguish fetishes from sexuality. If there is no meaningful distinction to be made, then we could use terms that denote an attraction to a specific gender (e.g. androsexual⁵, gynosexual⁶ and skoliosexual), to sameness (gay or homosexual) or to difference (straight or heterosexual). However if fetishes are to be considered distinct, then such labels fall down at the “Who are guys?” question, unless we are to accept cissexist generalisation.

Morphology also rests on the fetish-sexuality distinction. Beyond that debate, the main conceptual issue here is considering a set of morphological features to be fundamentally linked to one of two genders or sexes. While the terms AFAB and AMAB have been very useful in detaching genital-based birth assignment from gender (and, to an extent, highlighting that there is a moment of subjective assignment), they are often used as a binary-reifying proxy for (perceived) morphology (e.g. Nelson 2016). Indeed, in my own research on gender and phonetics (the sounds of the voice) I have argued that birth assignment is *better* than gender for talking about morphology. While that may be accurate, it is far from perfect – birth assignment is based on:

“a cursory glance at the genitals [which] does not accurately determine an individual’s chromosomes or gonads, the secondary sexual characteristics they will later develop, or what hormone levels will be produced” (Vincent 2018: 18)

Further, as sex is bimodal not binary (Blackless et al. 2000; Vincent 2018), binary birth assignment cannot represent the true diversity of morphology. And lastly, morphological characteristics can be meaningfully modified well into adulthood – using birth assignment as a proxy for morphology does not adequately recognise the potential for this.

The obvious solution is to talk about specific aspects of morphology. However this raises a new problem: how to categorise continuous and/or multidimensional variables. Binary or ternary categorisation obfuscates the true diversity of bodies. Rather than relying on a large set of neologisms, we could simply describe in plain terms what we tend to be aroused by (e.g. small, medium or large hips or chest size). Or we could gradually develop the linguistic repertoire while shaping our definition of new terms around the principle that hard boundaries are artificial.

5 An androsexual is someone sexually attracted to men (or alternatively masculinity).

6 A gynosexual is someone sexually attracted to women (or alternatively femininity).

Much the same can be said about aesthetics and character. While for aesthetics the categories ‘femme’ and ‘masc’ (also ‘butch’) have gained some ground within trans and wider queer communities to refer to different kinds of (gender) expression, there still exists in both areas a great level of diversity that cannot be captured within a simple binary system of categorisation. Some people have taken to referring to their attractions as being primarily towards ‘femme-of-centre’ or ‘masc-of-centre’ people (or similar phrases like ‘femme-leaning’). This does recognise that other ground can exist (i.e. ‘centre’, which still suggests a one-dimensional scale) and that it is not a clear cut either/or situation, leaving room for tendential rather than strict orientation. Femme and masc can also be applied to presentation more broadly, taking account of character. However these categories are highly culturally-contextualised and simultaneously subject to individual interpretation in a similar way to gender categories, and they are problematised for simply creating a new binary. Again, potential solutions are more specificity or neologisms with nuanced definitions.

Closing thoughts

A key issue in expanding the linguistic repertoire is how we categorise areas of great variation without resorting to creating new false binaries or otherwise essentialising taxonomies. Why not just use queer as a catch-all, nuance-recognising (but not detailing) category (or gay, which is increasingly being reclaimed as the new queer – see figure 3)? Queer for many people recognises that none of this is about discrete categories of difference but rather continuous, multidimensional areas of variation, which cannot be captured by essentialist identity-based orientation (e.g. Mitchell 2017; Minus18 crew 2017; Miriam 2010; Ziyad 2016). Perhaps it depends on the extent to which you are happy with a more poststructural, cloudy, amorphous, fluidly defined, ‘everything is complicated’ kind of label as compared with a richer, more detailed description of the specifics. Why not both? Specificity can create visibility for alternative ways of being, which is perhaps the first step to (positively) normalising variety and diversity, while queer or similar terms perhaps have a place as the ‘it doesn’t matter’, ‘be what you want to be’ ideal. This is a common theme within other papers in this issue.

It would be remiss not to return briefly to a sociopolitical question I raised in the fetish versus sexuality section: where does preference start to become problematic? This is increasingly being discussed within progressive queer communities and in academia, fuelled by a desire to resist the normalisation of expressing certain types of aesthetic and morphological ‘preference’ (or prejudice) on dating and hookup apps, Grindr in particular. Morphological preference introduces the potential for racism, fatphobia and ableism (Conte 2017; Daroya 2018; Raj 2011; Robinson 2015), and aesthetic preference can be subject to charges of femmephobia (Conte 2017). Such preferences are often considered an artefact of toxic masculinity and whiteness. Speaking as a femme-identifying non-binary trans person, I’ve experienced femmephobia first-hand in situations where a sexual and/or romantic relationship (and attraction) had already been established, and I could no longer fulfil a ‘pref-



Figure 3: a meme that came up in my Facebook feed while I was writing this paper. This both illustrates the reappropriation of gay as new version of (the catch-all) queer and some of the ideas I've discussed in this paper.

erence' for masculinity. Character is also a potential source of discrimination, as I noted very briefly in the first section when mentioning the ableist intelligence-based term sapiosexual. While linguistic innovation around sexuality may be motivated by a desire to counter underlying cissexist and endosexist assumptions, it's vital to be informed by intersectional perspectives so as not to unwittingly open up the potential for deepening and validating other forms of social prejudice.

A final note, to end: more empirical data would be helpful. A potentially illuminating exercise would be to ask people to describe what they are sexually attracted to and what arouses them sexually without using any reference to categories of gender or sex. Of course, it may be impossible to detach such thinking from the influence of ideology. Even morphological and neurological responses to stimuli may be conditioned by what people have come to believe about gender and sexuality based on their sociocultural background. Perhaps ideology can become so deeply ingrained that it influences even automatic reactions. But discussion with people who experience gender and sexuality in a range of different ways may help to develop and revise some of the ideas presented here, and potentially reveal areas I have neglected to recognise as a result of my own specific, subjective lens.

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