



**Anita Kwok:** Welcome to the Silberman Center for Sexuality and Gender or SCSG podcast. My name is Anita. I am an intern at SCSG. This episode features our founding director, SJ Dodd, and Anna Kurowicka from the University of Warsaw. They discuss asexuality, which is chapter four of the Routledge International Handbook of Social Work and Sexualities, and discuss Anna's work.

**SJ Dodd:** So I'm thrilled to have with me today, Anna Kurowicka from the University of Warsaw, and as Anita said, Anna contributed Chapter Four to the handbook. So it's in part two under Sexual Identities, and it's entitled Asexuality. And today we get to talk to Ana about that chapter, and also about what she's working on now. So I'm gonna let you do a little bit of an introduction yourself.

**Anna Kurowicka:** Yeah, great. Thank you so much for having me here. It's such a pleasure to share my work. And, you know, as you said to talk about the chapter a little bit. So I work at the University of Warsaw at the American Studies Center, and my main fields of research are actually Gender and Sexuality Studies, but more in the humanities angle, so to speak. So what I do most of the time is I look at representations of asexuality, or I look at science fiction. I like to say that I get to like watch TV and movies and read novels for work. But I also do a little bit of intersectional asexuality study for the chapter. The angle that I tried to take to look at the social context more generally, and particularly about how that might be relevant or how it certainly is, but also hoping that my own work might be relevant to people who do social work as well.

**SJ Dodd:** Yeah, absolutely. And definitely, the piece that you created was definitely very relevant. And I love the fact that the humanities angle comes in, you know, that's how we're socialized. That's how we learn our scripts. And so it makes sense that that's really relevant. One of the things that I was going to start with was just a definition of asexuality because it seems like that would be a straightforward place to start, but actually, it's quite complicated, right? So if you were sharing this with someone, where would you start? I think in the chapter you started with the Aven definition of an asexual person is a person who doesn't experience sexual attraction. Right? So that's your starting point. But take us a little bit from there on why defining asexuality isn't necessarily that straightforward.

**Anna Kurowicka:** I would agree that I would probably have to start with a bunch of disclaimers. The definition I used in the chapter that you just quoted, it is one of the



most commonly used definitions and especially use as the first sentence essentially. So, it's by no means enough, and it certainly doesn't encompass the entirety of asexuality spectrum or asexual experience. But it is a good starting point because it talks about what asexual people in general share, which is that they experience little to no sexual attraction. And already in this little sentence, we can see the shades of gray so to speak. There is a significant difference between little and no sexual attraction ever, whatsoever in one's life. But the little is there because asexuality as a spectrum is also often used to refer to people who are called gray asexual, meaning that they experience sexual attraction rarely, under specific circumstances and they don't really find that allosexuality, which would be the opposite of asexuality, as in people who generally do experience sexual attraction. So gray asexuals don't really feel like that describes their experience very well. And this is certainly also among other things, the reason why they might not feel this way is because the world that we all exist in for the most part, very much includes or even perhaps have at its core ideas of compulsory sexuality, which is what Christina Gupta, among others, define as the system of institutions, but also you mentioned cultural scripts and sort of the legal framework, the psychological and medical understandings of humanity, which most generally hold that sexual attraction and being sexually active is something central to being a human being and it's something that brings one happiness and health and without which one's existence is essentially not enough.

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**Anna Kurowicka:** The context of compulsory sexuality also I find helps define asexuality because it is in this cultural milieu and it is in a sense, it's not only against compulsory sexuality that asexuality is constructed, but among other things, it is against this norm and it perhaps for that reason speaks most to people who find that they don't meet this norm in some sense. So asexuality can, as I said, refer to little or no sexual attraction. One very common and very important caveat is that it doesn't define one's behavior. And it seems obvious, of course, if you come at it from the angle of sexual orientation or identity in general, we would never say that a gay person needs to have had a certain amount of sex with the same sex partner to count. The same logic applies here. To say that asexual people, some of them can do and wants to have sex, which does not say anything about their identity as such.



**SJ Dodd:** Right. But I think that's a piece that people get hung up on, right, that people who identify as asexual have some experience sexual fantasies, some of them masturbate, and some of them engage in sexual behaviors. And I think people have a hard time navigating their understanding based on those actions.

**Anna Kurowicka:** Yeah, absolutely. And I think part of this confusion comes from a very narrow or maybe not narrow, but just that if you think about it really in detail, people have sex for a whole bunch of different reasons. And perhaps most people who have had sex if they fought back to their sexual history and thought about all the reasons why they decided to have sex, sexual attraction would certainly be one of the reasons would that be the only one probably not, to be honest, that can sound kind of grim. Because I don't mean to imply that the other reasons are bad, or that the other reasons are, you know, you have to force yourself to make somebody happy, or that it's non-consensual, or that you do it only for, let's say, practical reasons of, I don't know, reproduction. There are a number of or in a whole array actually, of different motivations, people have to engage in sex, many of them sort of, you know, perfectly fine and conventional, including, the need for intimacy, wanting sexual release. Many sexual people do experience libido and sort of desire that is not directed necessarily at somebody. It might be to feel close in a relationship. It might be, you know, just a neutral activity. For some that they don't really assign much meaning to, they wouldn't necessarily maybe seek it out by themselves, if given other choices, but also at the end of the day, why not? So I think the other piece of the puzzle that speaking about asexuality brings to our understanding of human sexuality, in general, is that it can also help decenter sex or help think about sex as not necessarily something that is qualitatively completely different from other human experiences, needs, wants, pleasures. It can also, in a sense, become mundane. And I again, don't mean this in a bad way. You know, one of the many things we do in life or many of us do, because, again, not everybody does in life. And the other thing I wanted to mention here is asexuality is also a place where the so-called split attraction model is very useful for thinking about what needs people have and how they go about meeting them. And the split attraction model usually refers to the different kinds of attraction that people experience which often go together, but they don't necessarily have to. And maybe the best example of that would be distinguishing between sexual and romantic attraction.

**SJ Dodd:** I was definitely going to ask you about that because I think that's actually one of the positive things that more visibility about asexuality has bought out -- this



distinction between sexual attraction and romantic attraction. And that not to decouple those things I think is important.

**Anna Kurowicka:** Absolutely. And I don't think it's very easy. And I don't think it's easy for people who get reinforced this idea that sex should be connected to love, and it is naturally connected to romantic love. And that again, these two needs are natural and universal in a sense, but also, they often at the end of the day go together, despite the fact that there is now, of course, much more acceptance and understanding of casual sex than in the past. Still, the idea that one can experience romantic attraction, be interested in a romantic relationship, fall in love, and you know, fulfill a lot of the norms associated with living in a romantic relationship without necessarily also being interested in the sexual dimension of the relationship. That is an experience of many asexual people. And, again, maybe not a super easy one to grasp, especially from the outside, and especially that it's not also necessarily part of our everyday conversation to ask in detail what it is that you do in bed with your partner. So certain things might be assumed about what the sexual dimension of a relationship is. And that might, of course, be good for privacy and everybody you know, every person does whatever they feel like they should do about that. But it may also lead to making asexual people in relationships invisible because it doesn't seem like they exist because it is assumed that they are not in fact asexual if they are in the romantic relationship.

**SJ Dodd:** And for social work -- The work I do on Sex Positive Social Work would say you said many of the principles of it right there, right? Don't make assumptions. Don't be judgmental. And if somebody comes into your office to see you, and they're in a romantic relationship, you might be making all sorts of assumptions about their identity based on the gender identity of their partner based on the fact that "Are they married?" And if they are, you might be making all sorts of assumption that they're then sexually connected to this person, or sexually attracted to them, or have a sexual identity rooted in that relationship, when in fact, they might be romantically connected to this partner and carrying an asexual identity. And I think that that just reinforces those notions of Sex Positive Social Work, but you don't assume. You don't assume the connection or the relationship or the identities, and you make space for those conversations, and maintain a curious stance to develop that.

**Anna Kurowicka:** Absolutely right, of course, until I'm not a practitioner of social work myself, but the article I've read that are mostly based on the research with asexual



participants, and that's asked them to talk about their experiences, whether it's medical professionals or therapists, or very broadly speaking, people engaged in all sorts of social work. Some of the articles also formulate certain guidelines or suggestion for the professional. And certainly, this idea of openness, as you said, and coming to the table without assumptions about what follows from what because it usually does, but maybe not necessarily that only one of the most important thing that people bring up.

**SJ Dodd:** We unpack a lot sort of cisnormativity, heteronormativity, all those things to make sure we're not coming in assuming somebody is cisgender, or that they're heterosexual. But I think we don't take the same step yet to be assuming that somebody is allosexual and that we take that bias in, and that we have to, you know, work hard to take that assumption away.

**Anna Kurowicka:** And this is something that a lot of asexuality studies people talk about asexual people themselves as well, the idea that it is difficult, again, in the system of compulsory sexuality to avoid, of course, this process bias essentially, and certain assumptions that come with somebody coming out asexual or coming out as not experiencing sexual attraction or as not being interested in sex, for example, that can also take many forms, because it's also a question of the difference between experience, orientation perhaps if you want to use medical framework for that, and identity, which many sexual people do have and come out as asexual and consider themselves to be part of this community. But taking on the social identity of an asexual person is also separate from a whole number of other experiences that might be congruent with asexuality or asexuality spectrum that people might come into social work specialist with.

**SJ Dodd:** Right. And I think that the compulsory sexuality sets up this hierarchy that somebody who isn't somehow falls down in the hierarchy. And I think that's very dangerous, and that we have to work to sort of unpack that and knock away this compulsory sexuality. Somebody was saying to me the other day, because Sex Positive Social Work, they're like, "Well, why are you doing something on asexuality?" And I said, well, it absolutely falls in line, because the whole point of Sex Positive Social Work is actually that we've had such a taboo around sex and sexuality that we haven't included it in our conversations with clients in our assessments, we don't add the sexual dimension to the biopsychosocial, which is the assessment that social workers do. And if you come from this position, that the sexual dimension is relevant, then it makes space for the person, and you invite the questions, and you make the space for the



conversation so that you're not making an assumption about asexuality, but that in fact, somebody can define their sexual identity and explain their relationships or not, and also not assuming that there's distress attached, but I'm sure we'll talk about that in a minute because of the way pathologization has happened around the conflation between low desire and asexuality and the fact that sort of the medicalization of asexuality and trying to figure it out as a symptom and pathologizing it.

**Anna Kurowicka:** Yeah, absolutely. This is another thing that asexual people bring up a lot and a lot of anxiety is connected with the the assumptions and how they play out especially in a doctor's office, essentially, because the disconflation, you mentioned means that some people who are asexual are anxious about revealing their identity because they are worried that certain assumptions will be made about their medical status and that their identity, as such, will not be respected. And this of course comes from a long history that you are hinting at of pathologizing and medicalizing low desire. The fact that there are medical solutions or medical solutions are proposed to low sexual desire is not in and of itself a bad thing, because there are people who would like to use the medical solutions. But that doesn't apply to all people who are not all that much interested in sex. And putting them in the box immediately certainly feels coercive, if not violent, in a sense, especially that, as you say, there is this hierarchy of assumption that it's better and healthier for you. Also, there's the whole discourse about health of being morally good. And this is also this, of course, still relates to disability studies. There is a whole body of research that tries to dismantle this association of health, and able-bodiedness, with happiness for one, but also with goodness, existing in a proper way in the world. So this is actually one of the challenges in talking about asexuality with disability, which is that both of these communities, so people with disabilities and asexual people have a long history for understandable reasons of proving that they are not the other one. So people with disabilities has put a lot of effort and a lot of activist work into arguing for the fact that many of them are in fact allosexual. And this is due to the long history of desexualizing them of course. But at the same time, asexual people have also been putting a lot of effort into arguing that they are not in fact disabled, they are not ill, nothing is wrong with them, which is an understandable strategy in as far as that goes because it is meant to combat these negative assumptions and this unwanted medicalization. But on the other hand, of course, all it does is it reinforces this hierarchy. And it is always under an assumption that being a person with disability that being ill is not something you want to be. If you want to, at any cost, prove that you are fine, right that you are the right kind of asexual whose asexuality is not for example,



connected to their disability or their illness, or a trauma that you've experienced trauma. A common narrative of asexuality is that it's a response to a traumatic event, especially a sexual one, and as such again, it needs to be treated, and it needs to be fixed.

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**Anna Kurowicka:** This history of desexualization of disability also reminds me to make an important caveat about compulsory sexuality, which is that ironically enough, compulsory sexuality doesn't want every subject to be allosexual and sexually active, rather, it's about being sexual in the normative and appropriate way.

**SJ Dodd:** I think that normative piece really needs emphasizing right, there is a way to be allosexual that is held up as the standard.

**Anna Kurowicka:** Right, yes, exactly! And there are groups of people who are assumed and encouraged not to be allosexual. So disabled people have been this group for a long time. And the elderly, of course, we can sort of think about it along the axis of age and along the axis of race and other markers of identity, but it is mostly people who fall into racial class, gender, and able-bodiedness and all other norms that are really supposed to be sexually active and happy about it.

**SJ Dodd:** Thank you for making those important point. One of the things that came up when you were talking about the pathologization, and the concern to bring it up with medical providers. I think, in the DSM, one of the things that sets HSDD, which is hypoactive sexual desire disorder, which is focused on the decreased desire. One of the things that sets out apart from an asexual identity is that it creates stress that somebody is experiencing distress about this low desire. However, because of all this context that we've just talked about, about compulsory sexuality, expectations, norms, those things -- it's quite possible that somebody has distress, even though they have an asexual identity because we're putting this pressure on people to conform to a norm that doesn't fit them and doesn't feel right. And I think that's an important point to make, right? Because this notion of distress, it's like, well, where's the distress coming from? It may be that the low desire is creating the stress, but it also may be that the social context is creating that desire and that the asexual identity itself isn't distressing.





**Anna Kurowicka:** Yeah, exactly. This is a problem. There's also one of the many debates in the asexual community is exactly around drawing lines between asexuality and HSDD. Or there is a new diagnosis in the latest DSM that refers specifically to women, which is female sexual arousal disorder. And there are different gender expectations and the different diagnostic criteria there. But the element of distress you mentioned, which is very commonly brought up as the "Okay, well, we need to distinguish between those, this seems like a good way of distinguishing," of course, brings up exactly the problems you mentioned, which is what is the source of this distress? And, frankly, it seems to me, and I'm not a medical practitioner, so I'm not sure exactly how it works out in a medical setting; but it seems to me that for many people, it might be very difficult to distinguish between the different causes of experiencing the desire, especially as you've been existing in the world as it is for some years, and the causes of your feelings around your low attraction or low desire might be intertwined with one another. Somehow there might be some judgments from the outside, there might be things that you've internalized due to the cultural script and expectation around you. There might be ways in which having low desire or low attraction makes your life difficult, for example, because maybe you have an allosexual partner, and there is distress connected with that area of your life. Where does the distress come from? And is it really possible in all situations to very clearly make this distinction that seems problematic and very difficult in practice to me?

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**SJ Dodd:** I wanted to talk a little bit about the important role that the internet and online communities have served for the creation of asexual community, or people who identify as asexual finding community, and some of that community has been what's allowed these sub sort of groups or differential identities to emerge around demisexuality or aromantic. I wonder if you'd talk a little bit about the central role that the internet has played on asexual visibility and community?

**Anna Kurowicka:** Oh, yeah, definitely. So the place on the internet to start is certainly the Asexual Visibility and Education Network, which is this hub of all things related to asexuality. As the name of the website suggests, this is a place explicitly set up to promote visibility of asexuality and to educate people about asexuality. And it is interesting because it plays a dual role. It is external facing. The website address is [asexuality.org](http://asexuality.org). So it's likely that it's one of the first places you get on if you are searching





for information online. So it does have this purpose of being the first place and the first source of information for people looking for it. And from that perspective, it offers relatively simple definitions and information about asexuality. It does include, of course, the information about the asexuality spectrum and the different experiences people have, and the romantic, aromantic, other different kinds of attraction, but it's also relatively easy to digest. There is also the other side to AVEN, which is the forum for a long time, it was one of the most prominent places where members of the asexual community would meet and talk to each other online. I feel like this is changing now. And over the last few years, Tumblr has taken up this role, Twitter, various other social media, and groups of social media have been used to promote that kind of community as well and exchange of information but a lot of it did originate on AVEN forum. And this sort of disentangle their own feelings about their identity and situation and also talk more theoretically about asexuality, how they understand it, what they think it says about the world. They talk about the various micro labels much less common than race, sexuality, or demisexuality, for example. And they also talk about broader significance of asexuality. And this is, for example, among other places where some of these discussions about disability, illness, asexuality, and the intersections of those take place. So these are not conversations that are necessarily very easy to summarize and to neatly serve to people who are only looking for the one-on-one version. But I would say that these are the two equally important aspects of asexual online community to both promote awareness of asexuality in general, but then also to go deeply into the various shades of asexuality and how it might be lived.

**SJ Dodd:** I think that the importance of AVEN originally, and you said it's shifting to other platforms now, but ties into your other work, which is the lack of Asexual Visibility in media and in movies, TVs, books, and I know that you spend some time looking at that. Has it improved?

**Anna Kurowicka:** I think it has improved quite a lot, actually. So when you read about representation on television or in popular culture, one of the things that is most commonly brought up is the infamous episode of House MD, this procedural medical TV show where House who is of course, infamous for being incredibly sort of straightforward, but also impolite to his patients. He has this couple who are asexual, or they claim to be. And of course, he is incredibly skeptical. He does not believe that there is such a thing and he turns out to be right. So when the episode he discovered that the man is ill, and the woman is pretending to be asexual to stay in the relationship. So



essentially, this is, you know, one brief episode of television that encapsulates quite a few of the most negative stereotypes and assumptions about asexuality. That's quite amazing. But you know, it has come a long way from there, mainly by centering asexual characters, as opposed to making them tied characters in someone else's drama. One of the most prominent examples of that recently has been one of the characters on *Bojack Horseman*. *Bojack Horseman* is an animated show on Netflix. It's animated, but it's for adults, actually. And it's rather grim overall. His best friend is called Todd Chavez, and he is an asexual character. His arc of discovering his asexual identity actually plays out over three seasons of the show, which means that there is so much time that we can spend with Todd as viewers, and we can go into a lot of details about how he thinks about himself, how he also meets asexual community, how he eventually ends up in romantic relationships with women. So there is simply a lot of room to breathe for that character. And I think this is very important so that we're not limited to this one story or one vision of asexuality. The other interesting source of asexual stories I want to mention is that there is really a great number of young adult novels that have come out recently that also deal with asexual characters and Alice Oseman. She's a British writer, for example, she wrote a book called *Loveless*, which is about an asexual and aromantic girl who goes off to college and discovers her identity there. There's a few others, Kathryn Ormsbee wrote *Tash Hearts Tolstoy*, also takes place online by the way. It's really interesting to see how those authors of YA literature that centers romantic storyline.

**SJ Dodd:** That's a good point.

**Anna Kurowicka:** There's also fantasy versions of stories with asexual characters that, you know, oftentimes, there is a romantic element to it. And there is a love story at the center. It's only a little bit more complicated because the sexual element needs to be negotiated explicitly. And I find these to be also a fascinating reworking of the formula of YA novels. But at the same time, they do offer a lot of visibility, especially for young readers, which I think is very important.

**SJ Dodd:** Right, young readers that fall into that developmental place of identity versus role confusion, figuring out who they are. And that's that moment to be reading those things, at least having a different array of possibilities in front of them. One of the things I always like to ask is sort of what key takeaways for social workers or mental health providers you would have? And I think we've had a lot of them. What are the key things



that if you wanted to tell a mental health professional, here's what I think you should hold around asexuality? What would those be?

**Anna Kurowicka:** So I do think it would be the things we discuss openness and lack of assumptions and also coming in with certain knowledge that the possibility because without the knowledge or awareness of asexuality, you won't know what to ask. And the other perhaps paradoxical thing, it seems to me that you should also be open to the possibility asexuality is maybe not relevant. It can be the thing that somebody wants to focus on or something that plays a key role in this moment in their life. But it can also be a neutral thing, or it can just be a thing that doesn't distress them doesn't do anything to them at the moment. So I think it's paradoxical because, you know, we've talked a lot about how important it is to bring it up and not to make assumptions and to know that it's a possibility, and it certainly is. But I would say it also includes openness to hearing "Yes, I'm asexual, but that's not the point. That's not what I'm coming here with. I don't feel like this is a relevant part of me for the conversation we're having here."

**SJ Dodd:** Right, that's very parallel to the same conversation we've had about gay, lesbian, pan, trans identities. Just because the person brings it into the room and takes that as part of their identity and integrates that, it doesn't mean that that's a presenting problem or something that's causing distress or that that's something that they need to unpack with you; so I think that's really an important point. What are you currently working on? What are your current projects? What are you engaged in right now?

**Anna Kurowicka:** One thing is that I'm working on a book which is a long process. We'll see when that ends. It'll be a book about asexual representations in popular culture, and some of the ideas I've discussed briefly here will come into it, definitely. A different angle on asexuality that I've taken is this chapter that's under review now, which is about the anti-aexual slogan used at political protests in Poland. So, I won't go into detail there because there is background there. But, the leader of the ruling conservative party in Poland is famously, life-long, single men. A lot of the liberal, not so much, critique but more like liberal making fun of him centers around the fact that he lives with a cat and he used to live with his mother for a long time. And he is single, and seemingly he has no sex life and knows nothing about sex. So I'm looking at how asexuality operates in that and how it can be used as a political charge against somebody essentially. And again, ironically enough, from the part of the political theme that



should be and typically is more open to a sexual variety of source. Yet, there is this very strong judgemental undertone in how this life choice or this way is treated.

**SJ Dodd:** Wow, that's fascinating, right? There's an example right there. The pull of compulsory sexuality and the fact that we're allowed to just make fun of somebody that doesn't fit that notion.

**Anna Kurowicka:** Yeah it puts me in a very weird position because I'm not a political supporter of his by any means, and all of a sudden I find myself, you know, kind of at a different place.

**SJ Dodd:** You're critiquing the attack. You're not supporting him!

**Anna Kurowicka:** Of course. In the process of writing it, I felt maybe more empathy towards him than I ever have in my life. Still not much, but you know.

**SJ Dodd:** Well that's fantastic. Thank you so much. I really appreciate the time you've taken to be with us today. I thoroughly enjoyed it -- thank you so much.

**Anna Kurowicka:** Oh it's been my pleasure. Thank you so much for inviting me and for talking to me about all that.

**Anita Kwok:** Thank you to SJ Dodd for hosting this podcast and Anna Kurowicka for participating. For more information on SCSG, visit our website [silbermanscsg.com](http://silbermanscsg.com), or visit our social media, all under the handle SCSG\_SSSW. Thank you for listening!