Asexuality is often defined as “lack of sexual attraction” and by this definition asexual person is a person who feels none or very little sexual attraction towards other people. In this master's thesis I am using anthropological ethnographic methods to paint a picture of what it means to be “asexual” in contemporary Japan.

From the theoretical point of view I have found great inspiration from the concepts of socio-cultural construction and cultural discourses, though this thesis does not strictly belong to the field of discourse analysis. I am working with the research question “how the normative social relations and wider cultural discourses related to gender and sexuality shape how people identifying themselves as asexual perceive asexuality and their personal experiences in Japan?”

Interviews conducted in Japanese with 7 individuals identifying themselves as asexual are the core of this project, but I have also referred to Japanese internet materials (such as blogs and web articles), as well as academic written materials and my personal experiences related to the larger cultural discourses on sexuality and gender in Japan.

Thus far, many researchers have approached asexuality either deliberately or inadvertently with a substantialistic or essentialistic theory base (i.e. there is a distinct group of people called “asexuals” and the aim of the research is to find the universal “facts” about these people). Instead of looking for a universal definition of asexuality, I am interested in the possible socio-cultural ways of talking about asexuality.

There has been hardly any research on asexuality in Japan and even in international research the socio-cultural point of view has been underrepresented. This thesis answers to the academic demands for more qualitative asexuality research, as well as the need for research on asexuality in different cultural contexts.

I argue that the ways how asexuality can be perceived varies in different cultural contexts in relation to multiple interrelated factors, such as the local cultural discourses of gender and sexuality. For instance, besides "lack of sexual attraction", in Japan “lack of romantic feelings” (ren'ai kanjō) has also a central role in making sense of the asexual realities. In this thesis I illuminate some of the cultural logics that shape what it means to be asexual in Japan.

Key words: Asexuality, anthropology, ethnography, gender studies, Japan, love, sexuality, social construction; aseksuaalisuus, antropologia, etnografia, Japani, rakkaus, seksuaalisuus, sosiaalinen konstruktio, sukupuolentutkimus
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1. Introduction

“It's obvious.”
“Well then, why didn't I see it?”
“You have to have some familiarity.”
“Then it's not obvious, is it?”
(Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. 1974: 135)

During the past decade, a new category of sexual identity – that of “asexuality” – has found its way to the academic discussion. Asexuality has often been defined as the “lack of sexual attraction” (Carrigan et al. 2014: 1), and accordingly, an asexual person is a person who does not feel (or feels very little, depending on the definition) sexual attraction towards other people.

On the internet, the first asexual communities started to emerge in the beginning of the 2000s (Hinderliter 2014: 59) and in 2004 Anthony Bogaert conducted the first extensive academic research on the topic. Nowadays the largest asexual internet community, Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), has around 95 000 members (www.asexuality.org). The community has had an important role in shaping the asexual discourses in English by creating new vocabularies to describe the asexual realities, that do not always fit the contemporary understanding of sexuality. Since Bogaert's study, asexuality has been gaining more attention in the academic circles, but the concept keeps still puzzling researchers.

Even if recent interest in studying asexuality ultimately aims to develop a deeper understanding of sexuality more generally, the enterprise takes the form of adding asexuality-informed bricks to the building, maybe even adding a new sun room, without fundamentally changing the underlying structures of the building (Chasin 2011: 719)

Thus far, many researchers have approached asexuality either deliberately or inadvertently with a substantialistic or essentialistic theory base (i.e. there is a distinct group of people called “asexuals” and the aim of the research is to find the universal “facts” about these people). Considering asexuality as “the fourth sexual orientation” is one example of such an approach.

In addition, although it has been acknowledged that cultural presumptions affect asexual experiences (e.g. MacNeela and Murphy 2014) it has not been common to analyze these socio-cultural aspects on a deeper level. There have not been many studies on asexuality in different
cultural contexts, and even most of the international research (e.g. Van Houdenhove et al. 2015; MacNeela and Murphy 2014) has for the present focused on North America and Europe.

In the past it was common to believe that humans know innately what is sexually “natural” or “normal”, but anthropological studies have shown us that there is a vast variation between cultures in what is considered “normal” (Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 5). According to this logic the ways how asexuality can be perceived varies also in different cultural contexts in relation to multiple interrelated factors, such as the local cultural discourses of gender and sexuality. It should not be assumed that “our conceptions” are by any means neutral or natural compared to any others.

In this thesis I will be using anthropological ethnographic methods to paint a picture of what it means to be “asexual” in contemporary Japan. I am working with the research question “how the normative social relations and wider cultural discourses related to gender and sexuality shape how people identifying themselves as asexual perceive asexuality and their personal experiences in Japan?” I hope this approach can also illuminate the socio-cultural aspects of the western conceptions of asexuality.

Instead of looking for a universal definition of asexuality, I am interested in the possible socio-cultural ways of talking about asexuality. When it comes to the English research from the fields of social sciences, the common definition of asexuality has been “lack of sexual attraction”. While the largest asexual internet community, The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) describes an asexual person also as “a person who does not experience sexual attraction” (AVEN: 11.8. 2017), the community in the meantime has taken an inclusive approach that is based on one's self-identification as an asexual (Chasin 2015: 175). There have also been attempts to define asexuality in the terms of lack of sexual behavior (Van Houdenhove et al 2015), but since people identifying themselves as asexual can be sexually active and on the other hand sexual people can be sexually inactive for reasons that are not related to asexuality, this has not been regarded a meaningful way for defining asexuality. As will be seen from the informants' accounts and other Japanese materials on asexuality used for this thesis, besides “lack of sexual attraction”, in Japan “lack of romantic feelings” (ren'ai kanjou, 恋愛感情) has also a central role in making sense of the asexual realities.

In the fields of gender studies and social sciences generally, there have been theories on the social construction of gender and sexuality for decades (e.g. Berger and Luckmann 1966). Anthropology also has a long history in presenting accounts on sexuality in different cultural contexts (e.g. Malinowski 1927, 1929; Mead 1928). Ethnography, that has a central role in anthropological research, is sometimes regarded simply as a synonymous of field work or participating observation.
of different degrees, but the ethnographic method can also be much more than this; The anthropological ethnographic method that makes use of a holistic approach (e.g. using multiple sources of information to draw the whole picture of the research subject) and critical theoretical thinking (including the readiness to abandon the former hypothesis and presumptions if so needed) is very suitable for a topic that has limited previous research, such as asexuality (Rastas 2010: 65). I will explain more in detail about my methodological and theoretical standpoints in the following chapters.

Japan is an interesting field for socio-culturally focused asexuality research in that while there are self-produced asexuality-related materials (such as blogs), and there have been attempts for creating small scale asexual internet communities for quite some time (Asexual.jp since 2002), the Japanese asexual discourses have developed in some respect to be different from the mainstream English discourses. Being able to compare the ways asexuality is perceived in different cultural contexts gives us an interesting opportunity to consider the socio-cultural aspects of asexuality, and human sexuality in general.

Not much academic research on asexuality in Japan has been conducted so far. As far as I am aware there has been one publication in the field of social studies (Fotache 2016) and one in literature (Urata 2014). There have also been a few studies in the field of medicine and psychotherapy that are namely related to asexuality (e.g. Haraguchi & al. 2009), but these studies have not approached asexuality as a sexual identity or orientation. For the lack of previous accounts, the interviews conducted in Japanese with the 7 individuals identifying themselves as asexual (or nonsexual in the case of one informant) in the spring 2016 are the core of this project, but I have also referred to Japanese internet materials (such as blogs and web articles), as well as academic written materials and my personal experiences related to the larger cultural discourses on sexuality and gender in Japan.

I would like to take this chance to introduce my own background when it comes to Japan studies; I have majored in East Asian studies at the University of Helsinki for my undergraduate degree. I specialized in the Japanese language and culture for four years before applying for master’s degree program in Social Anthropology at the University of Tampere. I have also passed the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test's (JLPT) highest level “N1” in spring 2015. The interviews for this thesis

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1 Ioana Fotache's “Matters of the Flesh: Japanese Herbivore Men and the Asexuality Umbrella” was published in November 2016 issue of ICU’s Journal of Center for Gender Studies after I departed Japan, and I have not been able to gain access to this article.

2 My knowledge on the existence of academic publications on asexuality in Japanese is based on searches done using Japanese databases (such as Cinii and NDL) with keywords such as “asekusharu”, “asekushariti”, “museiaisha”, “nonsekusharu”, “nonsekushariti” and “hiseiaisha”.

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have been conducted in Japanese. The academic year 2015-2016 was my third time living in Japan for a longer period of time. All combined I have spent 2 years of my life in Japan and it has been over 10 years since I first started learning about the language and the culture in Tampereen Työväenopisto, a local community college in Tampere.

I had originally planned to do the thesis as a small scale ethnographic field work in my host university's golf club on the topic of hegemonic masculinity as a continuation to the theme of my undergraduate thesis. During the summer when the departure to Tokyo was drawing near, I started to feel more and more that I should write my thesis on a new topic that would remain personally interesting and motivating for the whole time I was working with the project and that would have potential future prospects had I still the will to continue to the academic world after my master's degree. It did not take long for me to come to the decision that asexuality was a topic that personally interested me and that had also need for further academic research.

I will begin this thesis by introducing briefly the history of anthropological studies and social theories of sexuality, to give an image of the ways how the conceptions of human sexuality in the social sciences have changed from something innate and natural to something that is constructed and sustained by the cultural and the social. Next, I will continue to introduce the ways asexuality is perceived by asexual internet communities in Japan and overseas and how asexuality has been approached in previous academic research. After this I will go through the methods and materials used for this thesis, before continuing to the analysis section. The analysis is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on how asexuality is perceived in Japan; The available information related to asexuality and the specific ways of talking about asexuality in Japan. The second part concentrates on why asexuality is perceived this way; How the wider cultural discourses related to gender and sexuality are interconnected with the conceptions of asexuality in Japan. After the analysis I will finish the thesis with the conclusions and visions for further research.
2. Anthropology and Social Theories on Sexuality

In this chapter I will shortly introduce some of the ways the topic of human sexuality has been approached in anthropology and other social sciences. I want to draw attention to how the understanding of sexuality has changed through time and how the political climates and motivations have influenced and are still influencing the ways we perceive sexuality. I will begin with the introduction of sexual topics in early anthropological accounts, moving chronologically towards the contemporary studies of gender and sexuality. I will also take this opportunity to consider the rather complicated relationship between anthropology and Japan.

2.1. Sexuality in Early Anthropological Texts: Accounts on “Primitive Societies”

Though already some of the early anthropologists (e.g. Malinowski 1927, 1929; Mead 1928) addressed the topic of sexuality during their field work, sexuality has not been regarded a common focus in ethnographic research. One reason for this is that the subject can be relatively hard to deal with and getting reliable information through interviewing has been considered challenging. When it comes to observation, for ethical and practical reasons there have been restrictions to what anthropologists could and could not do and what kind of spaces or events they could access during their fieldwork (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 2).

The first anthropological accounts on different cultures were often created using second-hand materials (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 16). In the earliest years of anthropological history in the 1700s and 1800s people from “more primitive” societies were often portrayed as lacking control over their sexualities. Men were described as aggressive and immoral whereas descriptions of women were often ambiguous (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 7). The anthropologists' anxieties towards both “the primitives” and sexuality in general were influenced by their cultural views combined with the political atmosphere in their home societies and the colonies they were studying (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 14, 18).

As fieldwork and participant observation became more common in the 1900s there started to be more accounts that proved to Western audiences that not all “primitive societies” were the same and that there were multiple ways sexuality was present in human societies (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 8). During the relatively culturally liberal years of the 1920s there were major anthropological accounts on sexuality (Malinowski 1927, 1929, 1932; Mead 1928), but the situation changed with the Great Depression and the Second World War. During the economic depression of the 1930s, the Second World War and the post-war conservative climate of the 1950s, directly addressing sexual topics
was often avoided or at least treated with caution by many anthropologists (Marshall and Suggs 1971: 220-221).

2.2. The 1930s to the 1950s: Avoidance of Sexual Topics

In some cases, the silence surrounding sexuality was quite straightforward. E. E. Evans-Pritchard had collected data on sexuality of Zande during the 1920s, but he did not publish this part of his studies until 1971. Sometimes sexuality was camouflaged. Themes related to sexuality were observed and analyzed, but they were discussed under less controversial topics, such as marriage and kinship (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 10). Lévi-Straussian structural anthropology studied sexual matters like the incest taboo through myths and sexual symbolism (1958). Some forms of sexuality (e.g. heterosexual male sexuality) were also easier to address than others (homosexuality, female heterosexual sexuality) (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 276). The War and its aftermath asked for keeping up the motivation and the morale of the troops and the people at home. When sexual topics were addressed there was often some element of morality that commented the sexual practices in the cultures observed through the western eyes (Firth 1957: 599). Anthropologists were often working in colonies and might have also been afraid of losing their rights to keep up their research if they got into trouble with the authorities (Greenberg 1988: 77). It has also been argued that the fact that during this time period anthropologists were trying to make the academic world approve anthropology as a valid field of science, might have discouraged handling controversial topics (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 11). Though the political climate was not favorable for sexuality research, anthropological data of sexuality in different cultures was still utilized as will be seen from the examples below.

Until the 1960s Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis (1905-1933) had a major influence in the studies of human sexuality. Psychoanalysis views sexual drive as a natural instinct that is repressed and in tension with the cultural and civilized human (Jackson and Scott 2004: 12, 19). Childhood experiences have an important role in the theory since they are seen as the source of conflicts that affect the adult unconscious (Jackson and Scott 2004: 15). Later on, Freud's psychoanalysis has met with critique, but newer versions of the theory still have their supporters in the field of psychological medicine and the psychoanalytic way of thinking continues to influence the humanities and the social sciences as well (Garton 2004: 186).

Freudian views of sexual normality were challenged by Alfred Kinsley and his colleagues. The Kinsey Reports (Sexual Behavior in the Human Male 1948, Sexual Behavior in the Human Female 1953) refer to large statistics and interview-based research published under the present-day Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. Though the reports were published and
discussed in the 1950s it was not until later that the ideas made a breakthrough, and in the public climate of the Cold War the writers were met with moral accusations (Lyons & Lyons 2003: 267).

In contrary to the Freudian ideas of “normal” or “deviant” sexuality, The Kinsey reports avoided making absolute statements on human sexuality and instead emphasized that there was variation between individuals. The reports also showed for instance that masturbation was far more common than had been believed at the time and should thus be considered “normal sexual behavior”. Another idea the Kinsey reports are known for is “The Kinsey Scale”, that has scaled sexual orientations from “0” representing “exclusively heterosexual” to “6” representing “exclusively homosexual”, with different degrees of bisexuality between them. The Kinsey Scale acknowledges also a group “X” with “No socio-sexual contacts or reactions” that has later been connected with the concept of asexuality (Kinsey Institute 2017; Bogaert 2006). Anthropological accounts were used in the research to back up cultural relativism – the idea that members of other cultures should be appraised by their own cultural standards rather than by the moral of others – (1948: 547), but anthropologists were also criticized for avoiding matters of sexuality and biased gathering of information through key informants, group interviews and observation of sexual behavior in the public (1953: 92). Though the research had some problems for instance with the collection of the data, the reports had an important impact on the ways the general public viewed sexuality and the study on sexual orientations has been crucial in the sexual minority right debates of the later years (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 267).

In addition to the variation in human sexuality, the commonalities between human societies have also been approached by using anthropological research data. Clellan Ford and Frank Beach's “Patterns of Sexual Behavior” (1951) used anthropological data from 191 different societies along with zoological data on mammals to define differences and common features between sexual practices in human societies. Although their results gave interesting clues about the socio-cultural nature of sexuality (Ford and Beach found out for instance that in 49 societies of their sample “homosexual activities of one sort or another are considered normal and acceptable for certain members of the community”, 1951: 129), the writers themselves did not focus much on sexuality’s symbolic side. Instead they limited their definition and observation of sexuality to “behavior involving stimulation and excitation of the sexual organs” (Ford and Beach 1951: 4). Lyons and Lyons comment on this decision by noting that “Although the authors fully understood that language, intentionality, social rules, socialization patterns, and symbolism accounted not only for the difference between human sexuality and that of other mammals but also for differences in sexual behavior in the societies in their sample, they did not attempt to explore the domain of sexual symbolism” (2004: 268).
The more liberal socio-political climate of the 1960s made addressing sexual topics easier in general and as the theory of social constructionism started to gain popularity in the 1960s (Berger and Luckmann 1966), human sexuality as a socio-cultural phenomenon started to interest a growing number of academic researchers. It took however until the 1970s that anthropologists started to actively take part in this line of academic discussion (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 277). In “The Social Construction of Reality” (1966) Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann used anthropological accounts from different cultural contexts to argue that sexuality is not a biologically fixed human nature, but an outcome of socio-cultural formations (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 67). Though some scholars, like as Ford and Beach, had already circled around the issue, it was not until now that the socio-cultural aspects of sexuality were approached as the main interest.

Michel Foucault's “The History of Sexuality” (1976) had a major influence in the academic studies of sexuality. By this time the socio-cultural nature of sexuality had already started to interest scholars, but it was Foucault who took the task of writing about how the Western concept of sexuality came to be. He begins his book by presenting the common view of the Victorian age when sexuality was repressed and silenced but moves on to critique this “repressive hypothesis” (Foucault 1981: 8-9). He argues that instead of simply repressing the human sexuality, the modern power has created new sexual discourses (such as that of homosexuality as a distinct sexual category). He presents that these new norms and expert knowledge on sexuality have enabled control over individuals and social groups through self-identification and internalization of the external norms (Gutting 2005: 93, 96). Foucaultian theory of sexuality and power can be very inspirational, but it is also very much concerned with the sexual discourses in the western societies. When reading Foucault for anthropological purposes cultural relativism has to be kept in mind; Sex and sexuality have also been tools and manifestations of power in all of the societies anthropologists are studying (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 14). These manifestations can be partly in connection with the western discourses through colonialism and western attempts of “education”, but each region has also their own histories and cultural meanings of sexuality.

Starting from the 1970s there was a new wave of interest in the sexuality studies among anthropologists (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 277). During the 1970s anthropologists were also questioning the discipline’s relation to the colonial history. As more and more of the former colonized nations were gaining their independence, there was a growing demand for native anthropology (e.g. Asad 1973), ethnography written by former colonized nationals instead of ethnography that was written by western scholars for western audiences.
Edward Said (1978) brought into academic discourse the concept of “orientalism” that is used to refer to how the cultures in Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia have been presented as unchanging and underdeveloped by westerners for instance in literature and art. One aspect of orientalism is the eroticization of “eastern” women, who are portrayed as exotic, whereas men can be portrayed as old-fashioned or even barbarian. Japanese anthropologists have also taken an active part in this discussion (Kuwayama 2004, Katou 2016). I will return to the topic of Japan and anthropology later in this chapter.

Sexually more liberal socio-political climates lasted until the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s that caused conservative reactions to the liberation of sexuality, but there was still a continuing rising interest to the studies of gender and sexuality among scholars (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 5). Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead’s “Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality” (1981) was written right before the worst epidemic in the still sexually allowing socio-political atmosphere (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 286). Anthropologists Ortner and Whitehead argue that prestige, gender and eroticism interact in societies in ways that make their relationships seem natural. Their analysis of sexual meanings “proceeds by seeking and showing the contexts within which [such] constructs ‘make sense’ whether the context is a wider set of symbols and meanings, or whether it is some particular ordering of social relations” (1981: 2-6). Ortner was concerned that the western ideas of homosexuality had blinded researchers in their analysis: “[A] good many of the cross-cultural investigations have been, explicitly or implicitly, aimed at mustering support for one or another interpretation of ‘our’ homosexuality rather than at laying bare the meaning of ‘theirs’” (1981: 80). I find this an important point also when it comes to “asexuality in Japan”.

The new focus on the impacts of the researcher and her cultural interpretations on the research lead to the “reflexive turn” in anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Critical self-reflection has
also been an important part of the anthropology of homosexuality developed in the 1980s (Elliston 2005). During this time period there started to be more anthropological studies that aimed to draw attention to the idea of cultural construction of the western homosexuality. Gilbert Herdt’s “Guardians of the Flutes” (1981) is such an example. Herdt studied homoerotic initiation practices at the New Guinea Highlands, where the same-sex sexual practices were not considered a threat neither to heterosexuality nor masculinity like they often are in the western cultures. Like Lyons and Lyons point out: “‘Gayness’ was not the same thing when encountered across temporal and spatial boundaries; in fact, there didn’t seem to be such a thing as ‘homosexuality’ at all” (2004: 299).

2.4. The 1990s to the Present: Essentialism versus Social Construction of Sexuality

The matters of gender and sexuality are often deeply interrelated, and the theories of “sexual orientations” and “gender” are also in many ways overlapping. The fact that there are societies that recognize more than two genders (e.g. Herdt 1994) has been used as an argument for acknowledging more gender (and sexual) diversity in the west as well (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 301). The advocacy for having more gender identities than the two commonly acknowledged in western societies brings up one of the dilemmas approached by the contemporary gender studies: that of social construction of gender and sexuality and the belief in essentials. Having more choice on gender and sexual identities can mean that there are more people who find a category that they feel they can identify with, but this sort of further categorization can also strengthen the image that gender and sexuality as such, exist outside their socio-cultural labels. A contradiction is born if the normative or commonly known gender and sexual orientation categories (e.g. male, female; heterosexual, homosexual) are believed to be socio-cultural constructions, but “other genders” and “other sexualities” are in the meantime believed to present pre-existing sexual identities (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 301). I will return to what this idea means for the studies of asexuality in the later chapters.

Queer theory refers to an approach that emerged in the 1990s challenging all identity categories and binaries such as those of heterosexual-homosexual or man-woman (Jackson and Scott 2004: 19). Judith Butler's work has had a major influence on the theory, though Butler herself did not use this term. In “Gender Trouble” (1990) Butler writes on the “compulsory order of sex/gender/desire” that she calls the “heterosexual matrix”. This refers to the normative, unquestioned way of thinking that one's (biological) sex (e.g. female) supposedly determines one's (socio-cultural) gender (e.g. female) and as well as the object of one's desire (e.g. male).

Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub among other scholars have been worried of if more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality in the end can free people from the idea of pre-existing
identity categories (Epstein and Straub 1991: 10, 25). As CJ DeLuzio Chasin has noted, while a socio-cultural category “may not be rooted in an objective, substantive reality, the category itself has a social reality with real impact on people” (2011: 718). Although the categorization of people under different socio-culturally constructed labels can be the base of discrimination and feelings of not belonging in the first place, in the current situation the conceptions of sexual orientations as distinct categories can also hold strong personal meanings for individuals and create a sense of community for their support. The idea of distinct sexual orientations follows also the common rules of the contemporary political discussion of sexual minority rights, which can make the essentialistic approach “problematic, yet politically quite effective” (Elliston 2005: 27). Anthropological research might be one way to combine the socio-cultural aspects of sexuality with the actual lives of actual people affected by these aspects.

Human sexuality as a social construction was for a long time the dominant theory among anthropologists, but there have also been essentialists looking for “the real, natural facts” (Lyons & Lyons 2004: 278). For instance, the biological anthropologist Helen Fisher has studied love as a neurobiological phenomenon (e.g. 2002). The situation is not of course black and white, and there is variation between scholars in how much stress is laid on the biological and social aspects. As an example, it would be possible to think that there is a genetic or neurological basis for the individual variation when it comes to sexuality, but to still consider that the associations, reactions and feelings stirred up by these differences are born in the socio-cultural relations, and in the end, it is these aspects that built up what it means to be “heterosexual” or “asexual” for an individual.

In the past anthropological accounts have been used both as examples of “freer” or “more backward” manifestations of sexuality in human societies. Current anthropological research is also very much responding to the socio-cultural discussion and political climates of the time. I agree with Lyons and Lyons when they note: “there is nothing wrong with using the astonishing record of human variability as well as human uniformity to critique our own institutions, provided we do not harm the peoples we study and provided that our awareness of who we are and what we are doing stops us from misrepresenting what we see and hear” (2004: 19).

Before focusing on how this all relates to the studies of asexuality, I would like to take a short look at Japanese anthropology and Japan as a subject of western anthropological interest.

2.5. Japan and Anthropology

Japan has a long history of anthropological studies. The first Japanese anthropological association, the Anthropological Society of Tokyo (nowadays the Anthropological Association of Nippon) was founded in 1884 by Tsuboi Shougorou, who had studied anthropology in London. When, a decade
later, in 1893 the Department of Anthropology of the University of Tokyo was established, Tsuboi was the first professor of the discipline. In its early years, anthropology in Japan was mostly biological or physical anthropology (Takao 1961: 173). Socio-cultural anthropology started to gain popularity later; The Japanese Society of Ethnology was founded in 1934 and the Institute of Ethnology that worked under the Ministry of Education was founded in 1943 (Takao 1961: 174).

Like western anthropology, Japanese anthropology was often focused in the cultures under the Japanese occupation, both for political reasons and practical reasons related to access and financial support. Japan was a colonialist nation that occupied Taiwan for 50 years between 1895 and 1945 and Korea for 35 years between 1910 and 1945. During the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Second World War Japan invaded parts of China (1937) and Thailand (1941) and attacked and occupied areas in East and South Asia including Hawaii, Hong Kong, Malay, Philippines, Singapore and the Soviet Union (1941-1945).

Although Japan has never been technically a colonized nation, after the Second World War, the United States had a great influence in the nation, including its new constitution. Japan became an area of anthropological focus mostly for American anthropologists when there started to be political interest for gaining information on the Japanese cultures. The first non-Japanese anthropology on Japan was John Embree's “Suye Mura: A Japanese Village” in 1939. Right after the Second World War in 1946 Ruth Benedict published probably the most well-known and debated anthropology on Japan, “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword”. The book aimed at interpreting the Japanese “national character” for American audiences. “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword” was written during the war time, and Benedict never personally went to Japan. Instead she used written documents and interviews with Japanese American individuals.

With the end of the Japanese occupation in 1945, Japanese anthropologists could no longer access their former fields in locations such as Formosa (Taiwan), Korea or Sakhalin (Soviet Union). During this time many Japanese anthropologists joined projects with American anthropologists in Civil Information and Education Section of the Occupying Forces (C.I.E) and turned their focus to rural Japanese communities and Ainu, the indigenous people of Hokkaido (Takao 1961: 176). In the 1950s both sociology and social anthropology started to obtain footing in Japanese academics. More and more university departments of social and cultural anthropology were established, and by 1959 there were 49 universities and colleges that were providing teaching in social and cultural anthropology. With the rise of the discipline, it became again common for Japanese anthropologists to do fieldwork outside of Japan (Takao 1961: 177).

Given the history, anthropology of Japan can be a complex matter even today. Japanese scholars have critiqued the ways Japan has been presented by foreign anthropologists, for instance in

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anthropology textbooks (Kuwayama 2004). Katou Etsuko, a professor of anthropology in ICU, which was my host university for 2015-2016, has studied the representations of Japanese women by English-speaking feminist anthropologists (Katou 2016).

There has also been critique towards both Japanese and non-Japanese anthropological accounts on Japan, related on a phenomenon called “nihonjinron” (日本人論), “theories of Japaneseness.” Works accused of nihonjinron aim to explain Japanese cultural uniqueness or national character and may present Japanese as culturally and racially special compared to other cultures, often understating the influence of the surrounding cultures to the Japanese history and cultural heritage (Hendry 2015: 124).

The scene of social studies in Japan is changing. In June 2015 the Japanese Government announced a cut on state funding for social sciences and humanities³. The statement has been softened afterwards and the universities are not anymore forced to discontinue courses on social sciences and humanities, but many Japanese universities have already started to reform the disciplines (The University World News: 2016). Anthropology could well be one of the first disciplines affected by this change.

With this background information on the anthropological and socio-cultural views of sexuality, I would like to turn to the topic of asexuality. In the next chapter I will introduce the scene of asexual internet communities and discourses on asexuality, as well as take a look at the previous academic research on asexuality.

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³ There are 86 state-funded national universities (kokuritsu daigaku; 国立大学) in Japan.
3. Asexuality – Discourses and Previous Research

As mentioned in the introduction, in the English research from the fields of social sciences, asexuality is often described as the “lack of sexual attraction” and following this logic, an asexual person is a person who does not feel (or feels very little) sexual attraction towards others (Carrigan et al. 2014: 1). As will be seen from the accounts of the people I spoke with, in Japan, asexuality can also be described as “lack of romantic feelings”.

I want to underline that people identifying themselves as asexual are a very heterogeneous group and how an individual's asexual identity affects their daily lives differs from person to person according to their age, gender and various other socio-cultural factors. There are however also similarities in their experiences, often related to the normative expectations of the people around them.

3.1. Asexuality as a Socio-Cultural Concept

When I first started to go through the academic articles on asexuality in the fall of 2015, I felt that I had to learn a brand-new way of seeing the world. This partly was because this was also the first time I was getting to know more thoroughly the academic theories on sexuality in general. Another reason that made exploring the research more challenging was that most of the previous research on asexuality I managed to find had not been conducted using a similar theory and method base I was trying to use; Even many of the sociological studies were survey based and approaching asexuality from a substantialistic or essentialistic point of view (i.e. there is a distinct group of people called “asexuals” and the aim of the research is to find the “essentials” or the “facts” about these people), which meant I could not depend too much on the previous research.

There have been some interview-based studies on asexuality, that have also addressed the topic of how cultural presumptions affect asexual experiences. MacNeela and Murphy’s research on identity management of people self-identifying as asexual (2015) is such an example, though even they did not analyze the cultural effects on a deeper level. MacNeela and Murphy’s study shows that although asexuality could pose a threat to the individual's self-concept, it can also be an essential source of personal meaning (2015: 799). Notions on the interconnections between asexual identity and the individual’s other demographics (e.g. gender, age) were very helpful for me and I will make references to these later in the analysis sections.

CJ DeLuzio Chasin’s research on the other hand is not based on interviews or other types of qualitative data, but Chasin has written remarkably on asexuality and the normative cultural
conceptions of sexuality and sexual orientations from a theoretical point of view (2011, 2015). Chasin has for instance argued against the idea of distinct sexual orientations and has noted that instead of being too preoccupied with finding “potential asexuals” (i.e. “asexuals” who do not have asexual identity), researchers should take into account the diversity of the asexual community when they are looking for “a representative sample of the asexual population”.

The socio-cultural nature of sexuality and the prevalent and accessible cultural discourses are very central for asexual experiences; The marginality of the discourses and the impact this has on how people react to asexuality illustrates the importance of the socio-cultural realities. Unlike “homosexuality” that is already known at least to some extent by most people, “asexuality” remains still an identity that has to be found. A person has to be familiar with the word “asexual” to be able to identify as one (Van Houdenhove et al. 2015: 677). Without knowing about the term and the discourses related to it, even imagining asexuality as a plausible option might not cross a person’s mind. The potential stigma and suspicion stirred by the concept on the other hand indicate how deeply the matters of gender and sexuality are penetrated into our lives and how subtly the interrelated, complicated relationships make our cultural conceptions of the world seem “normal” or “natural” to us (Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 2-6).

Asexuality had already caught my interest before starting this thesis, but my exploration on the academic publications was the first time I was actually trying to get a deeper understanding of the topic. Before even getting a chance to talk with the informants, the topic in general left me confused for a long time and reading through the previous research was more of an emotional experience than I had been expecting. I had not been anticipating the way how many of the researchers of the topic did not seem to know what to think of asexuality. There seemed to be an idea, that asexuality could be something revolutionary for the fields of normativity studies or feminist theory (Carrigan & al. 2014: xx). What could for instance be the standing of asexuality in the movements that consider having sex or a freer sex life more desirable and liberal? And what on the other hand could the possibility of asexuality offer for the feminist arguments related to the marriage institution or the expected female role in sexual relationships?

Since there was no previous research on the lived experiences of individuals who identified themselves as asexual in Japan, I had to get an image of their lives mostly through non-academic sources. This meant reading through Japanese blogs, web articles and other unofficial internet sources. In this thesis I have decided to take first a look at the internet materials and their ways of presenting asexuality instead of just referring to the previous academic research concluded in other cultural contexts. I want to include these unofficial materials to help the readers to avoid some of
the confusion I was feeling when I first tried to understand the cultural discourses related to asexuality in Japan. I also hope that this arrangement will lead to a more personal view to the lives of the people I had a chance to talk with during this project. I will return more in detail to the topic of asexuality as a socio-cultural concept in the analysis and the final discussion, after we have taken a closer look at the accounts of the people who cooperated with this thesis.

3.2. The Asexual Visibility and Education Network

The largest asexual internet community The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (from here on AVEN) takes a very inclusive view of asexuality and advocates a philosophy of self-identification, which presumes that another person cannot decide if someone is asexual or not (Chasin 2014: 175). The forum had around 95 000 members in the summer of 2017, though not all of the members identify themselves as asexual nor are they necessarily actively involved in the community. The main language of the forum is English, but there are also threads in other languages. By contrast, the largest Finnish language asexuality forum aseksuaalisuus.fi had 280 members in the summer of 2017 (Aseksuaalisuus.fi foorumi).

AVEN underlines that not feeling sexual attraction does not mean a person does not experience other forms of attraction (AVEN, Overview). To borrow the vocabulary used at the forums there are people who identify as “romantic asexuals” and who in other words do not feel sexual attraction, but who do experience romantic or affectionate attraction. A contrasting category for the romantic asexual would be that of “aromantic asexual”, referring to people who feel neither sexual nor romantic attraction towards others. This way of taking into consideration the differentiation between sexual and romantic attraction has been adapted also by many researchers who work in English in the fields of social sciences (e.g. Bogaert 2006, Chasin 2011, Hinderliter 2014).

♥ Aromantic asexual (AVEN)
A person who feels neither sexual nor romantic attraction

♡ Romantic asexual (AVEN)
A person who does not feel sexual attraction, but who does feel romantic or affectionate attraction

The inclusive way of defining asexuality used in The Asexual Visibility and Education Network has had a huge influence in the asexual discourses in English, but there have also been other ways of defining asexuality. Around the same time David Jay started operating AVEN in 2002, there were
also other asexual internet communities, such as a Yahoo group called “Haven for the Human Amoeba” (HHA), which had their own views on asexuality (Hinderliter 2014: 59). Two major divisions between the asexual communities were between those who wanted to exclude people who masturbated from their definition of asexual and those who did not. The second was between those who promoted anti-sexuality and those who felt neutral or positive towards having sex. AVEN was the most inclusive in its definition of asexuality, and the community still underlines self-identification in determining a person’s asexuality (Hinderliter 2014: 60-61). Nowadays AVEN has an active internet forum with multiple threads on different topics. AVEN publishes also pamphlets and organizes events related to asexuality.

3.3. The Japanese Internet Context

None of the people I talked with for this project had taken part in the AVEN forums, though some were familiar with the name. Even though Japanese individuals who are comfortable with their English skills can benefit from the discussion going on at AVEN, there are likely more individuals who rely mostly on the materials written in Japanese, since many Japanese do not feel confident using English. I found out later on that AVEN forums do actually have a thread related to asexuality in Japan, that has been started in 2015 and includes also comments written in Japanese. The thread has also mentions of a Mixi (a Japanese social network service) group and a LINE (a Japanese communication application) group used by non-Japanese in Japan. The people I met did not use the groups in question, but one mentioned a group conversation that was going on in Twitter. Another person told about a Mixi group she had started some years ago. The group had had offline meetings for people identifying themselves “nonsexual”, but it had been inactive for some time. I will return to the concept of nonsexuality shortly.

When I first started to look for Japanese asexuality related materials on the internet, an internet site called “Asexual.jp” was among the first hits I got. The site is possibly the oldest asexuality related Japanese website (since 2002 according to the site). Asexual.jp has some information on asexuality and provides a public bulletin board. Sophisticated discussions on the bulletin board can however be somewhat challenging, since the writings have to be up to 130 characters, the writers’ names are not visible and commenting on other people's writings is not possible without starting a new post. During the year 2016, there were only 9 posts in total at the bulletin board. This might be related to the fact that every post is also checked by the admin, who had had health problems since the summer of 2015. When I visited the site for the first time the bulletin board had some negative comments by individuals who had been pondering the idea of asexuality, and I remember feeling...
discouraged by their tone. When I was looking for informants I also joined Asexual.jp’s SNS group, but the group was inactive and for an unknown reason I did not manage to log in to the account after a while.

In the beginning I felt that since it was unclear to what extent Asexual.jp was based on interaction between the users, it might be better to take the ways asexuality was defined on the site as an individual account that still had likely a wider viewership than a single blog would have. The site has however become more active after I left Japan. In the spring of 2017, there were already over 50 posts in the bulletin board, though without names it is difficult to say how many individual people have been taking part in the discussion. Along with the bulletin board Asexual.jp’s Twitter account has also become more active during the year 2017. It can well be that Asexual.jp will be having a more central role in the asexual discourses in Japan in the future.

The AVEN vocabulary introduced previously can also be seen used in Japan, but generally Japanese who feel neither sexual nor romantic attraction (overlapping category to AVEN’s “aromantic asexuals”) seem to identify themselves as “asexual” written as *asekusharu* (アセクシャル) or by using a Japanese equivalent *museiaisha* (無性愛者). The people who do not feel sexual attraction, but who do feel romantic attraction (overlapping to “romantic asexuals”) on the other hand can identify themselves as “nonsexuals”, *nonsekusharu* (ノンセクシャル) or *hiseiaisha* (非性愛者). There are also other spelling variations of *asekusharu* based on the English pronunciation, like “*eisekusharu*” (エイセクシャル) and “*A-sekusharu*” (A セクシャル). In both written and spoken informal language *asekusharu* can be shortened as “aseku” (アセク) and *nonsekusharu* as “nonseku” (ノンセク).

Besides the categorization mentioned above, Asexual.jp uses also a term “asexuals by narrow definition” (kyougi no asekusharu, 狭義のアセクシャル) to refer to people who do not feel sexual attraction nor have romantic feelings (i.e. overlapping to “aromantic asexual” and “asekusharu”) and “asexuals by broad definition”(*kougi no asekusharu*, 広義のアセクシャル) to refer to people who “have romantic feelings, but do not experience sexual attraction” (i.e. overlapping to “romantic asexual” and “nonsekusharu”). In December 2017 the term “asexuals by broad definition” was used in some cases analogously to “nonsexual”, but the information on the site was not completely coherent. By the summer of 2017 the site had unified its information and nonsexual and asexual by
broad definition are now referring to the same group. “Narrow” or “broad” definitions were not mentioned during the 7 interviews conducted for this thesis.

All of the people I spoke with used “asekusharu” instead of “museiaisha” to identify themselves, and some had even negative reactions to the latter. Museiaisha would seem to be used often for instance in web articles, possibly because the kanji can hint what the term refers to even for people who see it for the first time. I have used the expression “overlapping” here, but I would not say that “aromantic asexual” and “asekusharu” are simply reversible categories, since the two hold different discursive positions and each person identifying themselves as “aromantic asexual” or “asekusharu” has also their own (a)sexual experiences and ways of giving meanings to their identities.

![Asekusharu / Museiaisha](chart)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heart</th>
<th>Defintions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asekusharu / Museiaisha</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrow by narrow definition (Asexual.jp)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person who feels neither sexual nor romantic attraction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person who does not have romantic feelings</td>
<td></td>
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![Nonsekusharu / Hiseiaisha](chart)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heart</th>
<th>Defintions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonsekusharu / Hiseiaisha</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asexual by broad definition (Asexual.jp)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aromantic asexual (Partly overlapping, AVEN)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person who does not feel sexual attraction or does not want to have sexual relations, but who does feel romantic attraction and has romantic feelings</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In the beginning, when I had learned about the hiatus situation at Asexual.jp, I felt anxious about how to find informants. I felt discouraged and put this idea on hold for a while. When I returned to the task of searching for informants later on I managed to find several blogs. In the end, this flow of events was probably for the better, since it forced me to take a good look at the previous research on asexuality before advancing to the interviews.

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4 無 (mu) = nothingess, none. 性 (sei) = sex, gender. 愛 (ai) = love, affection. 者 (sha) = person

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In the next section I will go through some theoretical discussion and important topics in asexuality research today. As I have mentioned before, the previous research on asexuality has often taken an essentialistic view to asexuality. I think that quantitative and qualitative studies, as well as essentialistic and socio-cultural approaches have both their places in the academic world. I am also aware that commenting on one theory by using the logic of another is not necessarily productive, but I will regardless try my best to introduce the previous academic discussion, while also taking into consideration the theoretical framework of socio-cultural construction of sexuality.

3.4. Asexuality as a Sexual Orientation

Anthony Bogaert was the first scholar to conduct extensive research on asexuality (2004). He has advocated treating asexuality as the fourth category of sexual orientations, alongside with heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality. There are other researchers who have also taken this kind of approach (e.g. Brotto et al. 2010, Prause & Graham 2007, Van Houdenhove et al. 2015). It has been commented, that for Bogaert describing asexuality as a sexual orientation might have been partly a counter argument against those who doubted the very existence of asexuality when he first began his studies (Chasin 2011: 714). Considering asexuality a sexual orientation has many upsides, like benefitting from the already existing liberal discourses related to sexual orientations; Asexuality could be considered something that a person is born with and thus asexual people should not have to take medication or to be converted into anything else for what they are. The situation can be reflected against the academic discussion on whether there should be more flexible understanding of human sexuality or whether the conceptions of sexual orientations as distinct categories should be favored because of the strong personal meanings the labels can hold for individuals and communities. From the anthropological point of view, it should also be noted that the western conceptions of sexual orientations are not universal, so for instance what might be seen as “asexual behavior” or a “nonsexual relationship” by the western eyes can have altogether different socio-cultural meanings in other cultural contexts.

Even if we do not consider the critique related to social constructionism or cultural relativism when it comes to the concept of “sexual orientations”, viewing asexuality as a distinct sexual orientation can have some practical shortcomings. Presuming that asexuality is a sexual identity category that excludes other sexual identities can lead to seemingly confusing results, if we ignore the common distinction made between sexual and romantic attraction in the English discourses. This is demonstrated in Van Houdenhove and colleagues’ survey (2015) that studied how many individuals could be identified as asexuals based on lack of sexual attraction, lack of sexual
behavior and self-identification as asexual, and how much these overlapped in describing the same group of people.

When asked “How would you define yourself as a person? Asexual, heterosexual, more heterosexual than homosexual/lesbian, bisexual, more homosexual/lesbian than heterosexual or homosexual/lesbian?” only a little over 70% of the before self-identified asexuals were labeled as asexual (Van Houdenhove et al. 2015: 677).

☑ Asexual ♥
☐ Heterosexual ♀
☐ More heterosexual ♀ than homosexual ♂ / lesbian ♀
☐ Bisexual ♂
☐ More homosexual ♂ / lesbian ♀ than heterosexual ♀
☐ Homosexual ♂ / Lesbian ♀

As mentioned before, in the English definition used for instance at the AVEN forums, it is recognized that there are people with asexual identity who feel romantic or affectionate attraction. This attraction can be directed towards a certain gender or genders, which means that a person identifying as an asexual can also identify themselves as oriented towards a certain gender (Carrigan et al. 2014: 1). CJ DeLuzio Chasin notes that people using the AVEN forums have invented further identity vocabularies such as “straight asexual”, gay asexual” and “bi asexual” to make sense of their experiences (Chasin 2011: 715).

In Van Houdenhove and colleagues research close to 80 % of the participants, who were self-identified asexuals, reported experiencing romantic attraction (2015: 673). The distinction between sexual and romantic attraction has been acknowledged by multiple researchers (e.g. Bogaert 2006, Diamond 2003, 2008, Hinderliter 2009). Some Japanese sources describe asexuality by using very similar definitions as those used at AVEN. For instance, the Japanese Wikipedia article on asexuality (museiai, 無性愛: January 2017) uses a direct translation of AVEN's introduction on asexuality as its main source. Asexual.jp has also edited its definitions of asexuality to be closer to those of AVEN since the time I started this research. However, besides the definition of asexuality as “lack of sexual attraction”, in Japanese it is also common to describe an asexual person as a person who “does not have romantic feelings” (ren'ai kanjou, 恋愛感情). This way of defining asexuality was also how the people I spoke with tended to present asexuality. In other words, the
distinction between romantic and sexual is recognized, but the people feeling romantic attraction are not necessarily included in the definition of asexual (asekusharu). Since the discourses surrounding “sex” and those surrounding “love” and how people react towards the two categories differ from each other and have a social reality, the fact is asexuality described as lack of sexual attraction or lack of romantic feelings has real consequences on people (Chasin 2011: 718).

CJ DeLuzio Chasin has come to the conclusion of treating asexuality as a larger concept analogous to sexuality that can still take a similar discursive position as sexual orientation. From this point of view, instead of thinking that there is a definite group of people called “aseosexuals” it might be better to think that all people are (a)sexual to some degree, and they differ only in the degree of their (a)sexuality. Quite in a similar way as the Kinsey scale describes sexual orientations as continuous categories with homosexuality in one end and heterosexuality in the other, it might be better to think that there is a continuum that has sexuality and asexuality at the opposite ends (Chasin 2011: 717).

![Sexuality spectrum](image)

Chasin argues that this way of thinking is also supported by how AVEN has terms such as “gray asexual” to describe people, who are “in the gray area” between sexual and asexual, closer to the asexual end (Chasin 2011: 715).

### 3.5. Asexuality as Lack of Sexual Attraction

Van Houdenhove and colleagues’ study on how many individuals could be identified as asexuals based on lack of sexual attraction, lack of sexual behavior and self-identification as asexual, and how much these overlapped in describing the same group of people, found out that only about 34 % of the respondent could be classified as asexual by all three criteria (Van Houdenhove & al. 2015: 675). Similar results have been reported in comparable studies with informants self-identifying as homosexual (e.g. 24 % Laumann et al. 1994). When it comes to asexuality, the results indicate for instance that an asexual identity or reporting lack of sexual attraction do not equal lack of sexual behavior. In other words, a person who has asexual identity might be currently or formerly sexually active for multiple reasons (such as social pressure or finding sexual behavior a meaningful way to be close to someone) (Van Houdenhove et al. 2015: 696). On the other hand, a sexual person can be sexually inactive for reasons that are not related to asexuality (such as celibacy).
Van Houdenhove and colleagues ended up with the argument that “the psychological core element for asexuality” should be defined as the subjective experience of lack of sexual attraction. They reasoned that though only a little under 70% of the participants were defined as asexual by lack of sexual attraction, some 80% of the participants reported that “not experiencing sexual attraction” should be considered important in defining asexuality, in contrast to “calling oneself asexual” that was judged to be important only by about 40% of them (2015: 676-677). Van Houdenhove and colleagues note, that this definition of asexuality is “in line with conceptualizations of sexual orientations” (2015: 676). From the point of view of social constructionism, it is interesting how the way of describing asexuality by the participants (a cultural understanding of what asexuality should be like) is acknowledged as an affirmation for its essence. It could also be that some of the participants did not agree with the light phrasing “calling oneself asexual”. The wording has a different nuance compared to for instance “self-identified asexual” that has strong discursive basis in the asexual community. The asexual community has also been somewhat suspicious towards academic researchers (AVEN, Open letter to researchers) and some participants might have wanted to give an impression that would make the researchers take asexuality more seriously (“It is not like just anyone saying the words ‘I am asexual’ is one. This is a real thing!”)

The concept of “sexual attraction” or “lack of sexual attraction” is not as simple as it may sound. Asexuality is often defined by “lack of” sexual attraction, an absence of the subjective feeling. It should be noted that for a person who feels none or who feels very little sexual attraction, understanding the outline of “sexual attraction” itself can be challenging, especially if the person herself has no sensation that she feels the world differently from the majority. Since asexuality is something that is defined by negation and lacks on cultural visibility, it can take a long time before a person starts to look into their situation, and some never do (Chasin 2011: 721). Defining asexuality by the subjective experience of lack of sexual attraction would also mean that people who do not recognize they lack feelings of sexual attraction would not be considered asexual. The situation is similar as with the case of self-identification; One has to be familiar with the word “asexual” to be able to identify as one. Similarly, a person has to be aware of what “feeling sexual attraction” might be like, to be able to note the lack of such feeling. Treating sexual attraction as simply subjective ambiguities also lines between sexual and romantic, since the two can be in many ways overlapping experiences. It is likely that what one person interprets as sexual attraction can be seen as love at the first sight by another.

Defining sexual attraction in the terms of physical arousal is equally problematic. Subjective arousal and physical arousal can be in contradiction with each other. This should be clear if we consider victims of sexual abuse, whose bodies have reacted physiologically to their abusers.

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The correlation between physiological arousal and subjective arousal is also reported to be weaker for women than for men (Chivers & al. 2010). Physiological arousal as the measurement of sexual arousal is not simple either when it comes to men. In phallometric assessment measuring it has been common to exclude the participants with low levels of physiological arousal, to get clearer results. This means typically excluding around 1 in 3 of the participants (Chivers et al. 2004).

There has also been a study with women identifying themselves as asexual, that shows that physiological sexual arousal does not indicate (subjective) sexual attraction. Brotto and Yule (2010) examined psychological and physiological sexual arousal on asexual women and noticed that the participants did feel sexual arousal and were aware of it in the same way non asexual women were. They concluded it would seem appropriate to say that asexuality is not a matter of disorder in sexual arousal, nor cognitive or attention processes.

Bogaert (2006) has noted that the psychological and subjective aspects, rather than our physical reactions, are in the end the ones that have social significance and that matter when it comes to our relationships, behavior and identities. I would also note that behind those experiences is the socio-cultural world that shapes what we can even begin to consider as “uncommon” or “meaningful”.

3.6. Asexuality as an Identity

Researchers who have wanted to focus on the feelings and experiences of individual people (e.g. MacNeela and Murphy 2015) have often made self-identification as an asexual a central point when looking for informants. For epistemological reasons – i.e. what can we know – focusing on sexual identity instead of subjective feelings of sexual attraction can be a more satisfying choice, since we cannot know for sure if do all of the participants feel or perceive “lack of sexual attraction” the same way, but it is easier to check if they define themselves as asexual.

I am also interested in the feelings and experiences related to asexuality, but because of my focus on the ways of talking about asexuality and asexuality's relations with the wider cultural discourses, I did not stress that the people cooperating with this research should be absolutely sure about their sexual identity. In fact, it would have been contradictory to take a theoretical standpoint that questions the idea of finding the “facts” about a distinct group of people called “asexuals” and still require that the informants “must be asexual”. When it comes to the culturally possible ways of talking about asexuality, an account given by a person who says they are still unsure about their asexuality and an account given by a person who says they are absolutely sure they are asexual, are equally interesting. Actually, it could have been possible to interview Japanese people who had never heard of “asexuality” in the first place as part of the research and this would have given

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important information on the relationship between asexuality and other discourses of gender and sexuality in Japan.

Many researchers (such as Chasin 2011, Van Houdenhove et al. 2015) have been concerned with the topic of “potential asexuals” – people who do not identify themselves as asexual, but who are asexual (note the essentialistic view) or who might define themselves as asexual were they aware of the possibility. When the focus of a research is essentialistic, it is understandable to be concerned about self-identification from the point of view of generalizability (i.e. is the sample representative of all asexuals, even those who do not consider themselves to be asexual), but if asexuality is approached as a socio-cultural concept it can be questioned whether “potential asexuals” who do not see their experiences as “asexual” can even be considered to be asexual the same way self-identified individuals are (Chasin 2011: 721). We can return here to the history of anthropology and sexuality, and the researchers who have insisted on looking for “western homosexuality” in societies that do not have the conception of homosexuality or sexual orientations. Chasin argues that “there is no reason to believe that, without encountering asexual discourse, non-self-identified asexuals would frame their experiences in the terms that self-identified asexuals have spent years developing with each other, through their conversations and interactions” (2011: 720). Instead Chasin asks for the taking into consideration of the diversity of the asexual community and thus including to the samples people who for instance differ in their romantic experiences and degrees of sexual attraction (2011: 721-722).

I think that we can get some ideas about the experiences of “potential asexuals” by considering the experiences of self-identified asexuals prior to when they found the asexual discourses. Though their memories and narratives are now seen through the filter of “asexuality”, I think it is likely that some themes, like not being able to relate to certain discourses of love and sexuality, are also shared by the individuals who are not familiar with the asexual discourses, but who might come to consider themselves asexual later.

The matter of self-identification is crucial also when it comes to the ongoing discussion on how asexuality is related to the potential overlap between asexuality and disabilities. Several articles (see Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives: Health, Disability and Medicalization, 2014: pp. 249-325) have been written on the distinction between asexuality and mental disorders, such as HSDD (Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder). DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) sees lack of sexual attraction as a disorder, if “the disturbance causes marked distress or interpersonal difficulty” (DSM-IV-TR, 2000 p.541) and unless “a lifelong lack of sexual desire is better explained by one's self-identification as 'asexual’” (p. 434). That is to say, officially the major distinction between asexuality and HSDD is one's identity as an asexual. This is problematic for so
called “potential asexuals”, since even if a person does not feel distress about their lack of sexual attraction per se, they might feel considerable social pressure from the people around them. Self-identification can also be affected by nonsexual factors, such as social bias (Van Houdenhove & al. 2015: 670, 677).

Chasin has also brought up the ethical problems, that come forth with the will to study non-self-identified asexuals (2011: 721-722). Does the researcher have the right to withhold information for instance from an individual diagnosed with HSDD, who might benefit from the asexual discourses and the support received from the asexual community?

It would be very interesting to study the matter of asexuality and disorder diagnosis from the point of view of Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge, but this would require different kind of materials than the ones used for this research. Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge focuses on the historical aspect of information forming. Discourses on the criminalization and medicalization of homosexuality as well as the new deviancy theories, that study the social construction of deviance, can provide some perspectives for this discussion.

In the next chapter I will go over some methodological points and introduce the research materials used for this thesis before moving on to the analysis section.
4. Methodology and the Research Materials

It was the end of March and I was on a spring break from the university. The interviewing phase of the research was drawing near, and I was suddenly feeling very nervous about the fact. I had had problems with changing gears and getting my motivation up for the master's thesis for the whole vacation, but now I was finally feeling up to it. On the evening before the first interview I read through one of the informants' – Hiro-san's – blog and listened to music at my one room apartment near the university campus on the western side of the Tokyo Metropolitan area. I had been in contact with Hiro-san for two weeks now, and I would be meeting her and her friend at the Shinagawa station the next day.

I went to bed somewhere after midnight and managed to sleep for an hour, after which I kept rolling around in my futon, finding it hard to calm down after I had finally switched my brain to the working mode. Up until now I had only interviewed other university students for course projects. What had me terrified was how much I should talk about my own sexuality or thoughts on sex during the interviews. Would I be able to speak Japanese properly? I dozed off at some point in the morning.

Little after 7 AM I woke up without an alarm, feeling way too perky for the situation. The interview would be at 11:00 at the Shinagawa station. I left home in good time and took the twenty-minute walk to the nearest JR station. The train was quite full, but I could get in just okay. The sleepless night made my eyes hurt and the morning coffee I had just had made my head feel light. When I was getting closer to the Shinjuku station where I was going to change trains I started to feel seriously sick.

The trip from Shinjuku to Shinagawa took about twenty minutes. After the first few stops many people got off and there was more room for standing. I took out my N1-kanji book that sometimes helped me to calm down my nerves and prepare for the upcoming Japanese conversation, but I felt it hard to concentrate. Next, I took a look at my interview questions, written with a pen in Finnish on a page ripped off from a notebook, but I could not focus. I tried to keep my back to the other passengers while taking deep breaths and stretching my fingers. The only person in my sight was a boy in a school uniform who was using his duffel bag as a dumbbell at the end of the train.

Feeling sick, I went straight to the restroom at the Shinagawa station. I kept checking my prepaid phone for the time, hoping I would not run into the people I was supposed to interview at the queue of the toilet. I made it to the meeting spot ten minutes early and took one last look at the screenshot of the e-mails we had been sending to each other so far.
I did not have to wait for long before I spotted the Moomin bag Hiro-san had mentioned she would be holding. In a moment Hiro-san and her companion came closer, and I finally dared to take a good look at them. The two women in their thirties were about the same height with each other, almost a head shorter than I was. “Are you Kaisa-san?” “You must be Hiro-san?” “Nice to meet you, this is the friend I was talking about.” Hi, you can call me Oo-chan.” “Nice to meet you. What should I do, I'm so nervous my stomach hurts...” “That much?” “Oh, don't worry, we came here thinking we're just going out to play with friends!”

The interview with Risa-san took place at the Shinjuku Central Park

In this chapter I will go through the methodology and the research materials used for this thesis. The interviews conducted with the 7 individuals identifying themselves as asexual (or nonsexual in the case of one informant) in the spring of 2016 are the core of this project, but alongside the interviews I am relying on the Japanese internet materials (such as blogs and web articles) that individuals are likely to encounter when they search for information about asexuality, as well as other materials
(e.g. news articles, visual materials) and my personal experiences related to the larger cultural discourses on sexuality and gender in Japan.

In this thesis I am approaching asexuality from the socio-cultural perspective and accordingly I want to avoid making any ontological decisions on “who is asexual” or “what asexuality is”. Instead I am interested in how the ways of speaking about asexuality shape and affect how the people identifying themselves as asexual in Japan see their lived experiences and identities.

In this chapter I will be especially focusing on the ethnographic research method, but I will also take a look at the concept of cultural discourses. “Ethnographic method” can be used to refer to participating observation of different degrees, but in anthropology the method can also be understood as a holistic practice that can be used to deal with research materials of many kinds (Aull Davies 2008). Anna Rastas describes the ethnographic tradition as a method of producing information, that is based on participation, utilizing different kinds of research materials and dialogue with the theory. She notes that the ethnographic method is especially justifiable in situations where the aim is to get a wide and versatile picture of the way the people in question perceive the world around them (Rastas 2010: 65). In the next sections I will take a more thorough look at the different aspects of the method.

4.1. Thick Description and Holistic Approach

Taking advantage of “thick description” and the holistic approach, has allowed me to get a deeper and richer picture on the discourses surrounding asexuality in Japan compared to what might have been accomplished focusing just on the interviews. My thesis may not represent traditional anthropological fieldwork in that sense that I did not have the chance to spend long periods of time with the people who helped with this study, but as noted above, ethnographic tradition can be much more than just participating observation. Though I did not spend much time with the individuals who cooperated with this project, I have spent long periods of time in Japan, which enables analyzing on a deeper level the individuals’ accounts in their socio-cultural context and grasping the ways how people who identify themselves as asexual perceive their lives in Japan, as well as how asexuality is in relation with wider Japanese discourses.

“Thick description” (Geertz 1973) of a cultural context can be needed to gain a deeper understanding, especially when previous research on a subject is limited. Even when it comes to more traditional fieldwork, simply reporting on what has been said and done is not enough since “[e]ach scene exists within a multilayered and interrelated context” (Fetterman 2010: 18). Different materials (e.g. interviews, field notes, newspaper articles, pamphlets, visual materials) are used to
complete one another, but they can also be used to raise questions about the whole picture (Huttunen 2010: 43).

Though ethnographers may often concentrate on small groups or local communities during their research, the holistic perspective is used to put the field notes and the interview materials collected into the larger cultural context. The researcher can include historical, political and economic aspects among others to paint a full picture of the research subjects and their lives (Fetterman 2010:18).

There has not been much academic research on the lived experiences of individuals who identify themselves as asexual and the case is even more so when it comes to Japan. From the beginning it looked like finding enough informants to be able to get a good picture of the asexual experiences in Japan just by interviewing people would be challenging, so it felt very meaningful to combine the spoken accounts with other available materials such as blogs and web articles.

Besides the more obvious materials that are strictly related to the research topic I have also used my years of expertise on Japan studies and my personal cultural knowledge as a reference when it comes to the Japanese society. Though I did not spend my days together with the people who helped with this study, I have lived in the same social context with them; I have for instance experienced firsthand what it is like to bring up topics related to the diversity of sexuality in Japan or how the gender relations manifest in the daily lives. I have decided to keep my personal information related to sexuality out of this thesis, but with the informants I spoke very openly about my own experiences related to gender and sexuality.

4.2. Dialogue with the Theory

Use of theory is important for all academic research, but critical theoretical practice can be especially crucial when it comes to anthropological ethnography that can be otherwise in many ways a flexible research method. Social facts are not something that can be simply picked up by a trained researcher; Instead, an ethnographer is always constructing new representations of the culture as she makes notes and decides what to focus on and what to ignore. Theoretical perspectives are necessary guidelines for observation, but the researcher has to be also ready to remodel and even abandon her previous ideas if they are in the way of understanding the phenomena observed (Malkki 2012).

Before starting the interviews in the spring of 2016, I had started going through the previous research on asexuality and getting myself familiar with the Japanese asexual discourses on the internet. The topics I had chosen for the interviews had been inspired in many ways by the previous research on asexuality (e.g. “finding asexuality as a word and a form of identity” and “the importance of the community”) and what I had read about the ways asexuality was addressed on the
internet in Japanese (e.g. the distinction between asexuality and nonsexuality made in Japan). As I
got to talk with more people I started to become aware of how the accounts on asexuality presented
by the previous academic research and the AVEN community had affected my own views of
asexuality, and through this the interview questions and my first drafts of the theory.

There were topics that I had not included in the first interviews, but that kept coming up in the
conversations, such as the topics of “men” and “marriage”. On the other hand, some of the topics I
had prepared were not as essential as I had thought. After reading about the importance of the
AVEN community in many academic articles, I had been expecting that the topic of “community”
would be an important one also for the Japanese informants. As the interviews continued I could not
help but notice that the people I spoke with did not consider themselves to be part of any
communities and were even skeptical if there were any feelings of community between the Japanese
who identify themselves as asexual. Since I was interested in the cultural discourses I had also
included questions about asexual themes on the media or popular culture but noticed soon that the
topic did not inspire my conversation partners. I changed some phrasings of the questions as I got
more interviews, but there were still some cases where I might have gotten different reactions had I
reconsidered the ways I was addressing some topics during the interviewing phase.

4.3. Ethnography and Cultural Discourses

When I am using the word “discourse” in this thesis, I refer to the Foucaultian use of “Discourse” as
a cultural macro structure that “involve[s] patterns of belief and habitual action as well as patterns of
language” (Johnstone 2008: 3). I do not regard my thesis to be part of the genre of discourse
analysis per se, but I do find the concept of cultural discourses useful in perceiving how the asexual
experiences are related to the larger cultural ways of talking about sexuality and gender in Japan and
elsewhere.

The ethnographic method enables observing multilayered social realities including cultural
contradictions. While there are researchers with positivist interests, who might use ethnography (i.e.
observation) to “make sure people are telling the truth” by comparing spoken accounts with
behavior, in social and cultural anthropology ethnography is not usually understood this way.
Instead, multiple factors like the cultural discourses, symbols and rituals are interlinked with each
other and together form what can be considered the society or the culture. Ethnography (i.e.
participant observation, thick description, holistic approach, self-reflection, dialogue with the
theory) makes it possible to produce information of these complicated cultural contexts.

One cultural discourse is not necessarily exclusive of other discourses, and thus seemingly
contradictory discourses can be manifested within the same society and even by the same individual.

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If we consider the western romantic discourses, a person who has just been on a blind date and has decided not to meet the person for a second time, might for example account for the decision by saying “I just did not feel it”, referring to the cultural idea that love or attraction is something that is felt instinctively. On the other hand the same person might come to regret later that they did not “give a second chance” to the person, implying that attraction could be born gradually. If we are interested in the cultural discourses and the socio-cultural construction of reality, it is not meaningful to ask which of these accounts is the truth, since both of the conceptions are real to the individual. Regardless to what “love” is “in reality”, people act and feel according to these discourses; The cultural discourses have real power in people’s lives.

4.4. Analysis Method

Next, I will consider how the socio-cultural theoretical and methodological approach affects the analysis of the research material. Ruusuvuori and colleagues (2010) argue that the ways how the members of a certain society talk and give accounts about any topic are always on some level related to what is considered “normal” or expected and what can thus be viewed as shared information in the socio-cultural context in question (Ruusuvuori et al. 2010: 27-28). People for instance tend to feel that there is a need for an explanation if they consider that their views are at odds with the common perspectives or if they identify competing discourses that have to be taken into account (“I am not a racist, but...”) (Suoninen 2012: 102-103). These kinds of accounts tell about the socio-cultural ways of talking about the subject (i.e. this kind of comment might be interpreted as racist by some people in this culture), and the focus is not in a sense on the person in question literally “telling the truth” (i.e. is the person actually a racist or not?) It can be presumed that the ways of categorization present in qualitative materials and analysis are always shared to some level in the cultural context in general (Ruusuvuori et al. 2010: 27-28).

If the approach of a research is essentialistic, it is appropriate and necessary to ask if the people taking part in the research are actually presenting the group of interest (i.e. are they actually asexual) or to consider if they are “telling the truth” (i.e. are they really not feeling sexual attraction). Research that is focused on the cultural discourses has a different methodological logic than quantitative studies that look for generalization and are concerned with reliability (i.e. is the measurement used for each case consistent) and validity (i.e. how well the measure reflects the phenomena it tries to measure); Interviews that focus on the cultural discourses do not have to be necessarily identical with each other (to have consistent measurements), since the ways how people talk can never be separated from their socio-cultural understanding of the world.
When it comes to the analysis, I will be looking into the ways of talking and the meanings given to asexuality by the informants while keeping in mind the larger picture and making use of other materials related to asexuality, gender and sexuality in Japan. I am for instance interested in what aspects of asexuality are presented as facts and what on the other hand are regarded as something that the informants are not confident about, what topics seem to be emotionally charged or maybe not even worth talking about, what discourses are shared among the informants in one hand and what differences there are on the other.

I will be trying to take into consideration also my own position and to observe the interviews as an interaction between two people, that is at the same time happening at a certain time and place, inseparable from the larger cultural discourses. In some cases I have left parts of the interviews in parenthesis in Japanese, to allow people who are familiar with the language to grasp the subtle nuances that are not always transferred to the English translation.

All of the informants have naturally their own stories and accounts, but there are also many similarities in their experiences. I do realize that the 7 individuals I got the chance to have a conversation with cannot represent all people who are identifying themselves as asexual in Japan, but I think that their ways of talking and the meanings they have given to their lives can provide us some idea of how asexuality and asexual lived experiences are related to other cultural discourses in Japan.

4.5. Prior to the Interviews

In the following I will give some background information on how I “got to the field”, or in other words how I ended up with this research topic and what happened before I met the people who helped with this thesis. After this, I will introduce the individuals and tell more about the interviews conducted with them.

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, the academic year 2015-2016 was the third time I was studying abroad in Japan. I have previously stayed in a host family as a high school student for 10 months in Osaka in 2008-2009 and studied abroad as an undergraduate degree student for five months in Kyoto University in 2012-2013. This time I studied in the International Christian University (ICU), a private university in the Tokyo Metropolis area.

My previous plan had been to conduct ethnographic field work in ICU’s golf club on the topic of hegemonic masculinity. The university's golf club was also one of the reasons I applied for the university in question. Before completely switching to my new topic of asexuality I considered for a while combining my previous key theme of hegemonic masculinity with asexuality. At some point I
decided to take more a general approach when I realized finding enough asexual men as informants would be very challenging on such a short notice.

When I had been deciding on the university to attend, besides the existence of the golf club, I had also paid attention to the fact that ICU had many lectures on anthropology and gender studies, which was not the case for many other options I was considering. It was not until I had actually started to study at ICU before I realized that the university is actually in many aspects a special case when it comes to gender studies in Japan. I was for instance told that ICU is the only university in the country where one can major in “Sexuality and Gender Studies”. I was pleased to notice that the library had multiple books on sexuality and gender, including two books on asexuality. Furthermore, there was an active community of students interested in multiple issues related to the diversity of gender and sexuality under “Center for Gender Studies” (CGS). The center organizes events and monthly meetings among other things.

I started to go through the previous research on asexuality in September 2015 and conducted the interviews between March and May 2016. In the beginning I was worried about how to find any informants at all. The previous academic research on asexuality has been heavily dependent on the internet communities such as Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), but I could not take the same approach, since the only Japanese asexual internet forum (asexual.jp) that I managed to find had been on hiatus since summer 2015 for the hospitalization of the admin. The biggest asexual Twitter group in Japanese was also managed by the same person, and I could not find any Facebook groups with keywords such as “asekusharu” or “museiaisha” on the title.

At some point I made a poster that I planned to put up at the ICU campus. I even had the language checked by my Japanese teacher but ended up not using the poster. Before conducting the interviews, I believed that the Japanese asexual discourses would be largely influenced by the discourses on AVEN. The poster I made, as well as my first drafts of the theory section, were very much in line with how asexuality was talked about at the AVEN forums. I for instance used terms such as “aromantic asexual” (aromantikku asekusharu; アロマンティック・アセクシャル) in the text. After the first interviews I started to notice the informant's vocabulary and ways of looking at asexuality did not match that of AVEN to the extent I was expecting. The biggest difference was probably that AVEN included people who had romantic feelings as asexuals, whereas the Japanese discourses separated “aseexuals” and “nonsexuals” as different categories, and some of the informants were even a little confused that I asked them about nonsexuality in the first place.

One reason for making the poster was that at the time I felt it would be important to get in contact also with so-called “potential asexuals” who might not be familiar with the term asexual, but who
might feel they fit the general description in the poster. Concentrating the search on the internet forced me to contact only people who already identified themselves as asexuals or were at least to some extent familiar with the vocabulary prior to the interviews. Later on, as my thoughts on the theory evolved, I understood that while interesting, working with potential asexuals could also bring in some ethical issues for instance related to withholding information. It would have also been possible to search for informants with an open message, but since Asexual.jp was out of order and I was working alone, looking for people to talk about sexuality, I came to the conclusion it was better I was the one with the initiative and did not look for informants by using open description of asexuality. On the next section I would like to give a general introduction to the people who were kind enough to give me their time.

4.6. On the Individuals

In the spring of 2016 I sent private messages or e-mails to eight bloggers who identified themselves as asexual. In the messages I introduced myself shortly, told I was interested in asexuality and nonsexuality in Japan, and asked if the bloggers would be interested in cooperating with my research. I underlined, that there was no need to be absolutely sure about their sexual identity to take part. The names used in this thesis (Hiro, Oo-chan, Tana, Okutsu, Satou, Kaine and Risa) are alias decided by the informants. I will be using the Japanese honorific “san” when referring to the informants except for Oo-chan whose alias already includes a suffix.

Five out of the eight bloggers answered my message. Two out of the three who never returned a reply had not been active on their blogs for some years. I had contacted them in spite of this in hope that they would get a notification about the comment to their e-mail accounts in any case. Outside these direct messages I got two informants through a snowball effect thanks to Hiro-san.

In the end I got 7 interviews in total. The interviews with Tana-san and Kaine-san were via Skype because they were living too far away for us to meet, but with the rest we managed to meet face to face. Of the face to face interviews most were done in Tokyo, but for the one with Okutsu-san I traveled to another prefecture in Central Japan.

Oo-chan was the only person who identified herself as anything other than asexual (“nonsexual, bi-sexual, still thinking”), though Risa-san and Satou-san were still a bit unsure of their asexual identity. I had actually sent the first message only a month after Satou-san had started writing the blog. Most of the people I spoke with were in their thirties with the exceptions of Risa-san who was still in the latter half of her twenties and Satou-san who was a university student. Satou-san was also the only one who had encountered the word at this early age.
Everyone except for Satou-san had already graduated and were working. In the Japanese education system, children start school at the age of 6. The compulsory education consists of six years of elementary school (*shougakkou*; 小学校) and three years of junior high school (*chuugakkou*; 中学校), after which most continue their studies with three years of high school (*koutougakkou*; 高等学校). An undergraduate degree at a university (*daigaku*; 大学) takes usually four years, but shorter degrees at junior colleges (*tankidaigaku*; 短期大学) or vocational schools (*senmongakkou*; 専門学校) can take only two to three years. Unlike in Finland, most students do not continue to master’s degree in a graduate school (*daigakuin*; 大学院), so university graduates can be closer to 20 years old.

Six out of the seven interviewees identified themselves as female, and Satou-san wanted to keep their gender anonymous. Okutsu-san had also been thinking about gender issues lately. Gender caused me some headache when I designed for the messages to be sent to the informants. I had not been planning to inquire for the informant's gender in the beginning, but after Hiro-san seemed concerned about my own gender (that was not obvious from my foreign name) before promising to meet up with me, I started to introduce myself as “a female graduate student from Finland” on the following messages. It was not until talking with Okutsu-san that I noticed that bringing up my gender might have caused some discomfort for the people who were in the middle of thinking about their sexuality and gender critically. I will return to the topic of gender later in the analysis section.

4.7. The Interviews

The interviews were done in a half-structured manner. I had a list of potential topics and questions that I laid on the table – or in the case of the Skype interviews sent to the informants – to look at. I felt that having the printout to look at made the atmosphere more relaxed and probably relieved some of the stress prior to the interview for some of the informants. However, in some cases the list seemed to make the informants feel obligated to give answers to the specific questions and might have made them forget about some topics of their own. Starting from the second interview, that was also my first Skype interview, I also sent the tentative topics for the informants to look at before the interviews.

During the exchange of e-mails prior to the face to face interviews, we usually decided on a date, a place to meet, and often told each other what we would be wearing on the day of the interview. I also gave my mobile phone number to the informants, which actually proved useful once when my
train was late because of an earthquake before meeting with Okutsu-san. Some informants also gave me their number in reply. In the first messages I asked the informants where they wanted to meet, but later I started to give suggestions myself to eliminate sending unnecessary e-mails back and forth. Writing the e-mails caused some stress for me and I think this might also have been the case for some of the informants, though in my case the language and especially the honorific speech were part of the distress.

Since I got to know the informants through theirs blogs I did not always know their real names until later, and many asked me to address them by the nickname they used in their blog even after telling their real name. In Japan the way how a person is called (e.g. first name, last name, title) and which honorifics are used depends on the relationship between the two people. Sometimes the way of addressing is negotiated later, as the relationship changes, but it is not unusual to keep calling a person in a way that reflects the beginning of the relationship. Most of the informants called me by using my first name and the neutrally polite suffix “san”. For instance, Hiro-san and Oo-chan used the more familiar suffix “chan”, as they were in many ways trying to make me feel comfortable after I had confessed I was nervous because the interview was my first.

I told the people I contacted that I wanted the interviews to be more like a conversation than anything too formal and encouraged them to ask me questions in return. My decision to make the interviews conversation-like made me sometimes regret afterwards that I had talked too much myself. I also wrote it was okay to invite their asexual friends or other friends who were interested in talking about the subject, but in the end the first interview with Hiro-san and Oo-chan was the only one with more than one interviewee.

Tana-san had had previous experience with being interviewed about their asexuality, and Hiro-san, Oo-chan and Kaine-san had talked about their thoughts among themselves. Risa-san had also talked about the subject with her friends, but Satou-san and Okatsu-san had never talked about asexuality face to face with anyone. My position as an outsider – a foreigner who they would not likely meet afterwards – might have made talking easier for most. In a sense I was also an insider who knew about their situation that they did not get to talk about with other people that often.

The first interview with Hiro-san and Oo-chan lasted for three hours and the two of them asked me not to use a recorder. In this case I wrote notes as we talked and re-wrote the flow of the conversation later on based on the notes. For the other interviews I used a recorder and though I made some notes, I often ended up using the notebook only when I wanted to for instance draw a picture for the other. The interviews lasted usually about an hour and a half, the shortest being one hour and the longest three hours. I tried to write down some of my thoughts right after the interview without listening to the tape, but in some cases finding a place where I could concentrate on the
notes was difficult. The interviews that were not done via Skype took place in family restaurants and once in a cafe, which also made listening to the recording afterward challenging in some cases.

In the beginning I was worried about how the surroundings and the crowd around us might affect the content of the conversation in places such as a family restaurant full of people. In the end this did not seem to be a problem, maybe because most of the informants were from outside of the city center where the interviews took place and the people around them were thus strangers. There were still times when I felt there was a worried swift of attention to an approaching waitress or a group of people sitting next to us. Once during the interview with Risa-san I remember asking should we pause the conversation for a moment, when a father and a child came wandering towards our direction, but I was told firmly it was okay to go on.
5. Perceptions on Asexuality in Japan

To answer my research question “how the normative social relations and wider cultural discourses related to gender and sexuality shape how people identifying themselves as asexual perceive asexuality and their personal experiences in Japan?” the analysis will be divided into two separate chapters. Common theme for both of the chapters is my interest in the social relations in which asexuality is manifested and the cultural discourses that make asexuality something that cannot be ignored both for the informants and for the people around them reacting to the idea of asexuality.

In the first analysis chapter I will concentrate on how the informants came to identify themselves as asexual and how people identifying themselves as asexual in Japan can perceive asexuality and their personal experiences. Next, against this background, I will in turn consider why asexuality is perceived this way in Japan. To understand this, I will take a closer look at how the wider cultural discourses related to gender and sexuality in Japan are linked with the conceptions of asexuality.

I will begin the first analysis chapter by going chronologically through how the informants came to consider themselves as asexual. By doing this I want to draw attention also to how the informants' feelings and experiences related to asexuality were interpreted and understood in the framework of more socially and culturally available discourses prior to the finding of the word “asexuality”. After this I will take a look at the interview and blog materials, alongside with other available information related to asexuality in Japan, from the point of view of the asexual discourses presented in the previous chapters (such as the differentiation between asexuality and nonsexuality).

5.1. Feelings of Difference – Culturally Available Explanations

It was often the people around them, that made the informants first realize that they saw and felt the world somehow differently from the others. Satou-san had started to feel left out as a high school student, after realizing how hard it was to follow the peer talk about crushes and relationships. Okutsu-san described her experiences similarly: “I felt somehow different, restless with other people”. Not being able to relate or identify with others came up often in the interviews.

Many tried to go out with people out of social pressure despite not being interested in them. Tana-san told me that she had felt she should try falling in love “as much as anyone normal would” (futsuu no hito namini, 普通の人並みに). Kaine-san explained somewhat in the same manner: “Of course I was not interested in love in the first place, but I just tried to date someone as an experiment like decent people do” (matomoni ne, nanka toriaezu tameshini tsukiattemita, まともにね、
なんかとりあえず試しに付き合ってみた). This kind of social pressure can apply to anyone regardless their sexual identity (e.g. Carpenter 2005) but might be especially confusing for people who might not wish to take part in sexual relationships in the first place.

Next some of the informants tried to come up with possible explanations for their disinterest. At one point Okutsu-san read through blogs written by people who had a fear of men, but realized that many of those people with androphobia did still feel attraction towards men in a way that she could not relate to. For Tana-san and Risa-san one possible reasoning for not being interested in men was that they might like women instead. MacNeela and Murphy note also that homosexuality has a much stronger social profile compared to asexuality, which lacks in social acknowledgement. This can make it easier for an individual to consider homosexuality as an identity compared to asexuality (2015: 800).

_Tana-san: In the beginning I thought that “I am not interested in men; Maybe I’m a lesbian.”
So, once I went to this bar that lesbians go to... had some alcohol and all (laughs) interacted with the lesbian people there and was like “Ah, does not look like I’m a lesbian either... But what am I then”, like that._

Risa-san was a little bit different from the others I talked with in that she told me she had fun hanging out with men and at the time of our interview she had not completely ruled out the possibility that in the future she might still end up liking someone. Later on she wrote on her blog that she felt more and more convinced that she was asexual.

Before finding the asexual discourses Risa-san had used to think she was not romantically interested in any of the individuals she had met so far. I could also identify with this cultural discourse related to falling in love, that I find to be quite common in the west as well: You are not supposed to fall in love with just anyone. In the strictest sense it can be taken that you should be waiting for “The One”, or at least the idea is that some people are more compatible than others and when you meet the right person, you are supposed to “just feel it”.

As is the case with cultural discourses, there are often more than one culturally normative ways of thinking. Seemingly conflicting discourses can be observed concurrently in the same cultural context and even in the accounts of one and the same individual. Another cultural way of thinking about falling in love came up, when Risa-san talked about her difficulties in finding anyone she liked with her friends. The friends gave her advice:
Risa-san: Other people are like, there are cases when you start to like someone only after you have started to date them, or like after you have spent some time with them, or like if you kiss them you’ll like them – None, none of that for me!

This cultural way of thinking indicates that one should make effort to fall in love, and that love can be born gradually as a person gets to know the other. Love could also be born after physical contact. The cultural expectations that indicate a person will eventually like someone and that one should be actively searching for romantic love can be stressful for a person identifying as an asexual. Tana-san pointed out the way “having never liked anyone” had been approached at a psychologists' Q&A corner (“wait patiently and you will find someone”), and after our interview Risa-san wrote on her blog on a similar topic. Someone had submitted a question asking, “Is it weird that I cannot fall in love?” on an internet-based Q&A site.

I get a feeling that if it were me asking the question, and I got an answer like “It's not weird! One day you are going to meet a wonderful person, so don't belittle yourself?” I would probably just answer properly “thank you very much”, but that would not have been the answer I was looking for. While the person is saying that there is nothing wrong with not having fallen in love, it includes still the idea that “even if you cannot fall in love now, one day you will”. I get a feeling that the person making the question is asking am I, who will most likely never fall in love, “weird”. (Risa-san's blog)

The cultural expectations related to romantic relationships do not simply expect that anyone would fall in love with just anyone; They include the possibility that a person is not interested in someone, if the individual in question is not their type or they do not like them for one reason or another. However, the common presumption is still that even if this is the case there will be another person that they will like at some point.

Many of the informants felt that they should at least try to find someone they liked despite their disinterest. However, dating people they were not interested in made some of them feel they were behaving immorally towards the other. Risa-san who enjoyed the company of men, but who did not like them in a romantic way in the end told me that before she heard of asexuality she had thought that “maybe I'm just being selfish” and “maybe I'm just a terrible person”.

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The normative ways how lack of sexual attraction or romantic interest are discussed can make individuals question not only their moral, but also their physical health: Hiro-san wondered that if someone were to examine the brains of asexuals, would there be something that was not working correctly. She told me and Oo-chan that she used to think she might have an illness of some sort, which took us by surprise. Oo-chan replied that though she had not thought she was downright sick, she had been thinking that maybe there was something she was missing. Prause and Graham (2007) also report feelings of concern, such as “Is there something wrong with me?” among their participants. The ongoing academic discussion on the overlap between asexuality as a sexual identity and the ways of diagnosing lack of sexual attraction as a disorder (such as “hypoactive sexual desire disorder”, HSDD) is one aspect of this issue. The cultural ways of labeling lack of sexual attraction as something deviant in a negative sense causes real effects on people, who otherwise might have a positive self-image. AVEN takes part to this discussion by noting: “People do not need sexual arousal to be healthy, but in a minority of cases a lack of arousal can be the symptom of a more serious medical condition. If you do not experience sexual arousal or if you suddenly lose interest in sex you should probably check with a doctor just to be safe” (AVEN, Overview 11.8.2017).

The informants’ feelings of difference show that the ideas of romantic love and discourses surrounding them are so strong that a proper explanation is needed if one wants to depart from the norm. Many had also tried to date even though they did not feel romantically attracted towards their partners, which also indicates the prominence of the cultural conceptions related to romantic relationships. The informants’ early ideas on the possible reasons for not feeling romantic attraction reflect on what kind of explanations are considered appropriate or at least possible if not always socially acceptable (e.g. homosexuality, androphobia, illness) for disinterest in relationships with the opposite sex. It would seem that although all of the informants had ended up discovering asexual discourses in the end, asexuality is not among the first culturally available explanations for disinterest in relationships or not feeling romantic attraction in Japan.

5.2. Search for: No Romantic Feelings

After the informants had tried dating and considered different culturally available explanations for their lack of romantic feelings without coming up with satisfying answers, they usually ended up looking for an explanation for their situation on the internet by using a more open description. For the informants “not having romantic feelings” towards anyone seemed to be the key point of their experiences; Everyone told me that their internet searches had included something along the lines of
“I don't have romantic feelings” (ren'ai kanjou ga nai, 恋愛感情がない) or “I don't understand romantic feelings” (ren'ai kanjou ga wakaranai, 恋愛感情がわからない).

This is how the Japanese discourses on asexuality seem to be different from the ways of talking about asexuality in English. For The Asexual Visibility and Education Network the matter of attraction is so important, that it is clearly stated: “There are many forms of attraction. Asexuals feel many types of attraction. Romantic attraction being the most common. Asexuals can desire close relationships and bonds of many types and forms” (http://wiki.asexuality.org/Asexuality). I want to note that as will be visible from the accounts given by the Japanese individuals, the fact that asexuality is often described in terms of “lack of romantic feelings” in the Japanese discourses, does not mean that a person identifying oneself as an asexual in Japan would not want to connect and have close relationships with other people.

When Googling with the phrase “ren'ai kanjou ga nai” (no romantic feelings, 恋愛感情がない) in January 2017\(^5\) The first results were related to topics such as “how one can make up their mind whether they have feelings for a person or not” and “is it okay to date a friend one does not like in a romantic way”. These questions reflect on similar cultural discourses introduced in the previous section (One is supposed to “just feel it” if they like someone, but more a gradual approach is also possible; Dating is so culturally desirable, that one might date even if they do not like the other romantically). One of the first articles related to asexuality is “Cannot have romantic feelings? Who are these museiaisha?” (Naver Matome 2013/03/06). The article presents asexuality as a sexual orientation and uses Wikipedia and an interview with an asexual individual as its main sources. The article written in March 2013 had approximately 70 7000 views and had been favorited by around 150 people by January 2017. Another asexuality-related article that came up on the top page is titled “What hardships do the people who cannot have romantic feelings... museiaisha (asekusharu) have...” (Naver Matome 2014/07/05). While the web article begins by describing asexuality as a sexual orientation, it ends up presenting a view of asexuality, that associates asexuality with physical or physiological deviance, and discourages people to take on an asexual identity lightly. This article has half the viewers compared to the one mentioned above, but it has been favorited by close to 400 people.

These articles in question have been published in 2013 and 2014 and while many of the people I spoke with had looked for information about the lack of romantic feelings with a different timing, it

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\(^5\) NB: Search engine results vary based on the previous search history etc.
is likely that web articles such as these can be where people later identifying with asexuality first read about asexuality. The way how Okutsu-san, Risa-san and Kaine-san all mentioned that “1% of the population are asexual” (an information given in both of the web articles) might indicate that they have read these kind of articles or writings that have referred to similar texts. The statement that “1% of the population are asexual” originates likely on Bogaert’s study from 2004.

MacNeela and Murphy have conducted a qualitative study on how self-identification as asexual is managed on a personal level. They found that even though asexuality could pose a threat to the individual's self-concept, it was often seen as an important source of personal meaning (2015: 799). In some cases, especially in the beginning of the interviews I had a feeling that some of the informants were on the alert waiting to see how I would respond to them, but as the interviews proceeded many of them gave me a more relaxed impression considering the potentially unnerving situation. I got the image, that for the people I spoke with, asexuality was indeed a meaningful part of their personal identities, but they were still conscious of the possibility that another person might react to them in a way that would upset or threaten them.

For the people I spoke with, the materials created by other asexual individuals (e.g. blogs, Twitter posts) were important when it came to their self-images and conceptions of asexuality, but the ways how asexuality is described by non-asexual people are also inextricably part of their lived realities. All of the informants told me that they found the internet to be the only source of information when it comes to asexuality. No one mentioned LGBT minded groups or the possibility of consulting a specialist. ICU – my host university for 2015-2016 – was very active when it comes to the matters of diversity of gender and sexuality, and there was a weekly opportunity to talk with a contact person about matters related to gender and sexuality, but I am not positive if do many Japanese universities have similar consultation opportunities. Blogs written by individuals identifying themselves as asexual might have a more open and positive view of asexuality compared to materials created by people who are not familiar with the asexual discourses, though, blogs can also be used for letting out one’s anxieties. Becoming aware of other people with similar experiences had also made Satou-san realize that the normative ways of talking about asexuality were not the only way:

Satou-san: I felt like “wow, it's actually okay for people to be like this.”

5.3. Community and Nakama
As mentioned before, in the beginning of this project I was thinking that the topic of community would be an important one for the informants. This was mainly because AVEN and part of the academic research on asexuality in English (such as Chasin 2015, MacNeela and Murphy 2014) have often underlined the importance of the asexual internet community for the individuals. It is not surprising that the ways of speaking about the community in AVEN and in the English research are in line with each other, since it has been common to look for informants through AVEN forums (Chasin 2015: 177).

The internet community has been described as the environment for forming asexual discourses and creating asexual realities. Chasin writes: “In generating new discourses of relationships and identity, people self-identifying as asexual are making possible to make sense as asexual people – making asexual people make sense (Chasin 2015: 177. Italics original). Another example of the importance given to the community is the asexual flag. The flag has four stripes, and from the top to the bottom the meanings of the colors are:

Black – Asexual
Gray – Gray asexual / Demisexual
White – Sexual
Purple – The Community
(http://wiki.asexuality.org/Asexual_flag).

I realized later on that my own expectations regarding to the importance of the community might have made me address the matter too straightforwardly during the interviews, and I might have gotten different kind of answers had I asked in a more roundabout way about what the existence of other asexuals meant for the informants. I also wondered afterwards did my choice of word “komyuniti” (コミュニティ) have too formal nuance, that the informants perhaps associated with organizations or activism. In any case all of the people I spoke with told me that they did not feel they were part of any kind of community and many were doubtful if there even was any asexual sense of community (komyuniti kan, コミュニティ感) to speak of in Japan. As for AVEN, none of the informants had actually used the forums, though some had heard the name and had taken a look at the site. Language was a common reason for not using the forums:
Tana-san: I don’t understand English at all, so... I thought that “Ah, for the people in the English-speaking world it's a big community”, but for me... I can't read any of it.

Even Kaine-san who lived abroad and could read English had not heard of AVEN prior to the interview. It is unclear how much interaction there is between AVEN and Japanese discourses on asexuality, but at least for the individuals I spoke with, the internet community and the ongoing discourses there did not seem to hold much importance. My own assumption is that since many of the Japanese people identifying themselves as asexual are not likely personally part of the creative discussion and asexual realities shaped in the AVEN forums (language barrier being one of the reasons), the Japanese discourses might be living in part their own lives. I want to still note, that the ways of speaking about asexuality on the internet in any language are part of the same reality and are not completely separate from each other. Even though many Japanese do not feel comfortable with their English skills, there are also those individuals who use English internet materials on a daily basis. Later on, I have found for instance, Japanese blogs that introduce asexual symbols (such as an ace of spades or a black ring in one’s right middle finger) familiar from the AVEN community.

People with asexual identity in Japan are connected with each other to a lesser extent for instance through Twitter and blogs and this is also likely to lead to creative discussions and new ways of defining (a)sexual experiences. For me, what was more interesting is what kind of shared realities and ways of speaking about asexuality (regardless their origins) there are among Japanese, even if the individuals do not feel that they are part of any wider communities per se. I had contacted the informants through their blogs where they identified themselves as asexual, so it was not surprising that everyone was aware there were asexual bloggers and had read others’ blogs as well. Hiro-san, Oo-chan and Kaine-san had even met up face-to-face through their blogs, but every one of them seemed to think that the blogs were more about individuals sharing their personal experiences than about creating any asexual sense of community. Some of the informants followed also asexuality-related Twitter accounts.

Despite not warming up to the idea of a community, some mentioned they hoped that their blogs had helped people who were still wondering about their sexuality and mentioned that knowing that there were other people like them had been important. Tana-san thought that those aspects were also central when it comes to communities:
Tana-san: I mean it has been some years already since I came to identify myself as an asexual, so I don't really feel any need to join a community or anything at this point (laughs) but most likely... for those people who are wondering whether they are asexual and... people who have just started to learn about asexuality... for that kind of people... I'm sure it would be nice.

Hiro-san suggested also that wanting a channel to talk about her feelings was a type of motivation for writing the blog. Hiro-san told me that through the blog she had found a nakama she could be herself with. “Nakama” can be in practice overlapping with a community, but the word has a very informal feeling. A nakama refers usually to a group of close friends, mates or companions. However, being part of the same nakama does not necessarily mean being close friends, since for instance “shigoto nakama” means one’s team of co-workers. Hiro-san has written about the central role of the connections made with other sexual minority friends in her blog.

Lately I have been hanging out mostly with people with the same interests I have met after I graduated and sexual minority friends, and I have not been forced to listen to any of the typical love stories thanks to this. This [meeting with old friends from her studying days] made me feel gloomy for the first time in a long while. Made me remember that oh I guess it was this feeling, that made me write the blog in the first place. (Hiro-san's blog)

Instead of searching for people to talk to on the internet, some of the informants preferred talking with people right around them. In MacNeela and Murphy's study, typically the informants told about their experiences only to their closest friends and ended up passing as sexual in many other social situations (p. 804). The situation was somewhat similar with the people I talked with. Tana-san and Hiro-san had come out as asexual to their parents and Risa-san told me she was the type of a person who just had said to her friends right away “so I found this thing called asexuality”. Kaine-san was also openly talking about her disinterest in romantic relationships but told me that she did not even want to talk about her sexuality with other people that much. Instead she hoped people would “just let her be”.

Satou-san and Okutsu-san had never talked face-to-face about their asexuality prior to the interviews. Okutsu-san was touched by being able to so talk openly with someone.

Okutsu-san: To think that it is possible to get through to another person like this...
I had contradictory feelings about this expression of trust, and I felt I should try to encourage Okutsu-san to try to convey her feelings with other people more often, but Okutsu-san was afraid that other people would deny her. To my comments that she could not know for sure before trying, she responded that “being accepted and being actually understood are two different things” (ukeireru to rikai sareru wa betsu, 受け入れると理解されるは別), which left me thinking.

Even though the topic of an asexual community did not interest the people I spoke with as much as I had been expecting, it was clear that they were still looking for connections and channels for talking about their feelings and experiences. All of them had reached out to the internet by starting a blog and some were opening up to the people around them.

5.4. Asexuality and Nonsexuality

Oo-chan: I like the sound of “romantic asexual”

Hiro-san: Well, you are quite a romantic (laughs)

Before getting to know the Japanese internet discussion on asexuality I assumed that the Japanese would also perceive asexuality as “lack of sexual attraction”. Having familiarized myself with the AVEN discourses related to the many forms of romantic attraction among asexual individuals, I was first confused when I found the term “nonsexuality” at Asexual.jp and supposed during the first interviews that it was just another term for AVEN’s “romantic asexual”.

After speaking with the informants, I however begun to realize that many of them were not comfortable or even familiar with the way I wanted to mix asexuality and nonsexuality in the same questions. Asexual.jp (11.8.2017) describes nonsexuality as “not feeling sexual attraction, sexual interest or sexual desire towards other people, but feeling romantic or affectionate desire” (hoka no hito ni taishite seiteki miryoku / kanshin / yokyuu wo kanjimasen ga, tasha ni tai suru ren'aiyokyuu ni kan shite kanjiru joutai, 他の人に対して、性的魅力・関心・欲求を感じませんが、他者に対する恋愛欲求に関しては感じる状態). As has been mentioned before, it is unclear how much the information at Asexual.jp is based on interaction, so I am not sure to what extent this definition is shared by people identifying themselves as nonsexuals.
I want to underline that since most of the people I spoke with identified themselves as “asexual”, the following accounts tell more about how nonsexuality is perceived by people identifying themselves as asexual or to some extent how the asexual discourses are related to the category of nonsexuality. Thus, the accounts do not indicate how people with nonsexual identity understand their own sexualities.

During my second interview Tana-san told me that she had started to use the word “aromantic asexual” when she had understood that outside Japan using just the word “asexual” did not always get through. The fact that Tana-san had been previously interviewed about her asexuality might be one reason she referred to the ways asexuality was talked about in English (despite telling me she could not understand English); The experience of speaking about her experiences for a larger audience might have made her more sensitive about the uses of vocabulary also when talking with a non-Japanese person such as myself, compared to some of the informants who wrote mainly for their own purposes.

_Tana-san: For me the distinction between asexuality and nonsexuality – the distinction between the words is something I am familiar with – or how should I put it, I think it’s good since it’s … easy to understand? Like… not having romantic feelings (ren’ai kanjou, 恋愛感情), the fact are you “romantic” or “aromantic” … I think it is something very essential… Well, I do realize that people outside of Japan might not understand it but… How should I say this, I think the gap between having and not having romantic feelings is huge, so by having the distinction between asexual and nonsexual makes it possible to say: “hey, the two are different” (laughs)_

My confusion with Tana-san’s (to me) upset reaction for asking her about the differentiation between asexuality and nonsexuality resulted in me confirming from my Japanese teacher did the word “kubetsu” (区別, distinction; differentiation; classification) that I had used have some sort of negative nuance I might have missed, such as “segregation”. The teacher told me that she did not get that kind of image but noted also that since she was not familiar with the ways of talking about the subject on the internet, there was a possibility that the word had indeed had some negative nuance for my conversation partner.

Later on, I came to realize that most likely it was not the word “kubetsu” that had created the tension, but my way of asking about nonsexuality in the first place. Though none of the people I spoke with were downright offended by my attempts to bring nonsexuality into the conversation,
there appear to be also individuals who take a stronger view on the topic. I found for instance a blogger who argued quite straightforwardly that it is impossible for a person to be both “asexual and heterosexual” or “asexual and homosexual”, since there are no asexuals who feel romantic attraction, and thus the terms “asexual” and “nonsexual” should never be confused with each other.

Kaine-san’s way of talking about nonsexuality shows clearly that “nonsexuality” holds a different position in the Japanese discourses compared to “romantic asexuality” on the AVEN forums:

Kaine-san: Well, I just thought that I am an asexual, so I never really looked into nonsexuality; I just searched for information about asexuality (KL: I see.) This “nonsexuality” …? What was it again? They have affectionate feelings (aijou, 愛情) and…? (KL: They have aff – right.) Right [...] I don’t really get how it feels like, but so in the end they do have romantic feelings, huh?

(KL: Yes.) And... they do not like to touch other people sexually (seiteki sesshoku, 性的接触) or something?

KL: …Uh, right. One way of saying it is they “do not feel sexual attraction” (seiteki miryoku wo kanjinai, 性的魅力を感じない).

Kaine-san: Oh, oh, I see. Well, like I said I have no idea about these nonsexuals (KL: [Laughs] Right.)

Some of the other informants did not seem to have a clear image of what “nonsexuality” refers to either. They talked still in a way that indicates they were ready to accept that there is a distinct group of people called nonsexuals, instead of challenging the idea that such people exist:

Risa-san: I wonder if nonsexuals do not have sexual desire (seiyoku, 性欲)? If they cannot have sex, I wonder if that's also the case.

It is possible, that the informants felt that questioning the existence or appropriateness of nonsexuality could also weaken their own position and the arguments that asked for taking asexuality seriously. Asexual.jp (11.8.2017) indicates however that there is also an ongoing discussion going on about whether the term “nonsexual” is appropriate or relevant against the international asexuality movement (nao, sekaitekina koudou ni awasete, “nonsekusharu” to iu
Nonsexuality in the Japanese context seemed to hold a different discursive position from that of “romantic asexuality”. I got the impression that nonsexuals were seen as people who could fall in love and feel romantic attraction towards others, but who did not want to have sex or were for one reason or another not interested in it. I understood that nonsexuality was not necessarily associated with “lack of sexual attraction”, but instead there could be a spectrum of reasons for not wanting to be in sexual relations.

One quite straightforward reason for the different reactions to nonsexuality compared to romantic asexuality at the AVEN discourses might be in the naming: Having two separate terms like “asexuality” and “nonsexuality” makes it easier to conceptualize the two as separate, whereas “aromantic asexuality” and “romantic asexuality” give more an impression of being subcategories to the concept of “asexuality”. Hiro-san who identified herself as asexual and Oo-chan, who identified herself as “nonsexual, bisexual, still thinking” were familiar with the English way of categorizing asexuality and nonsexuality under the same term, but found this way of thinking confusing:

Hiro-san: In English they (asexuality and nonsexuality) are put together and in Japanese separated, but some people have started to talk about the two at the same context in Japan too.

Oo-chan: I wonder why they want to merge two different matters into one?

Hiro-san: I guess because that’s how it is in English. I mean there really aren’t many differences between the two of us, are there?

Hiro-san referred to how she and Oo-chan had found out that their experiences related to feeling left out from topics like dating and sex were in many ways alike. Oo-chan told me that she felt there were some similarities between how people reacted to bisexuality and how they reacted to nonsexuality:

Hiro-san: There are some people who write on the internet things like “you and us, we are not the same!” The fact that nonsexuals can be in a relationship is a problem for some...
MacNeela and Murphy have also noted that asexuality (by the English definition) shares in many ways a similar cultural position with bisexuality in that individuals identifying themselves with asexuality and bisexuality are both met with responses such as denial or positioning it as a transitory stage compared to homosexuality which has a stronger social profile (2014: 800).

The Japanese Wikipedia article on asexuality uses a translation of AVEN’s description on asexuality, which does not include the identity category of “nonsexual” found from the Japanese discourses.

The ways of talking about asexuality in Japan are constantly negotiated and they are, though not always through direct interaction between individuals, in connection with the ways of perceiving asexuality in the English discourses. As asexuality can be defined in the terms of lack of romantic feelings (instead of sexual ones) in Japan, the different position “nonsexuality” holds in the Japanese discourses, compared to the position “romantic asexuality” has in the inclusive definition by AVEN, is quite understandable. Since I am focusing in the ways of talking about asexuality, I do not find it meaningful to discuss further does the word “nonsexual” refer to the same group of people as “romantic asexual”, since both of the terms are used by a diversity of individuals who each have their own unique (a)sexualities and ways of perceiving them. I do however think that the way romantic feelings and sexual attraction are addressed differently in the discourses has its influence on the asexual experiences. I will return to these discourses in the second analysis chapter.

5.5. Ongoing Negotiation
How people identifying themselves as asexual in Japan perceive asexuality and their personal experiences is very much related to the normative expectations and the discourses related to romantic love. As has been noted in the previous sections, discourses on romantic love do not assume that anyone will fall in love with just anyone, so it can be said that the possibility of not liking someone romantically is considered perfectly normal. The idea is however that even if a person does not like anyone in a romantic way at the moment, they will like someone else at some point. This was one reason why some of the informants felt that they might just be too inexperienced or too young to say anything for sure even when they had come to feel like they were not interested in other people in a romantic way. This also made explaining oneself for others difficult:

Kaine-san: I was already thinking around 20 – though I didn't know about asexuality at that point (KL: Yes.) – that I guess I'm just someone who will never fall in love or get married. But if you go and say something like that when you are in your twenties it's like “Oh please, you're just young” and I hate it when they say that (KL: Ahh.) “You've only lived for 20 years, you've not even tried to be with people that much, don't just go on deciding by yourself.”

Okutsu-san had encountered the word “asexuality” when she was around 25 years old and thought that this might be it but had decided to wait for another 5 years before making any final conclusions. Unlike Kaine-san, who had felt that though she herself was okay with the situation, the people around her would not respect her opinion, for Okutsu-san finding the term did not seem to be a simple reassuring experience. Many of the informants told me they had felt relieved when they found an explanation and had a word for their situation, but not being able to accept the identity right away is also very understandable taking into consideration the social non-normativity of asexuality in Japan.

The conventional way of talking about “sexual orientations” presumes that each person has a sexual orientation they are born with and that does not change with time. It is interesting to note that though people who identify themselves as homosexuals at a young age might get told that they cannot be sure about their orientation if they have never tried to have sex with a person of the
opposite sex, there might still be much more room for declaring oneself as a homosexual at a young age than taking up an asexual identity when you are young. The age factor is also visible in the way how Van Houdenhove and colleagues excluded from their quantitative research all of the participants who were under 18 for they considered the younger participants could be “presexual” instead of asexual (2015: 672).

In the end, the strong discourses regarding romantic love, the socio-cultural invisibility of the asexual realities, and the denying that results from these facts, can make it difficult to recognize the possibility that a person might not be interested in anyone in a romantic way at all. Kaine-san pointed out how proving or being sure about one's asexuality might be in the end impossible:

\[
\text{Kaine-san: I tried to go out with people, but well yeah. When I tried they were like “You have not gone out with enough people.” So, like, how many people does one have to go out with to prove that they are asexual? (KL: Ah, ah, ah...) Right? It's like the Devil's Proof [...] In the end, even if I'll never fall in love with anyone ever; they can just say that she had not met The Right One yet, right?}
\]

Asexual experiences were often manifested in situations where the informants felt it was hard to relate with others. Many talked in a way that indicated that other people might consider asexuality as “not normal” or even “weird”, but in the meantime, questioned the normative way of thinking. While asexuality was often a meaningful part of their identity, the social un-visibility of asexuality and the centrality of the romantic discourses could make it so that the identity had to be negotiated and defended over and over again.

Despite having encountered the asexual discourses and having taken up an asexual identity, the people I spoke with had to still continue to face the cultural discourses that presumed the centrality of romantic relationships. In the next chapter I am going to concentrate on those cultural discourses. I will take a look at topics such as love, marriage and the public discussion on sexual diversity.
6. Asexuality and Cultural Discourses in Japan

Now, after we have taken a look at how the informants came to identify themselves as asexual and how they perceived asexuality, I want to consider why asexuality is perceived the way it is perceived in Japan. To understand this, I will take a closer look at how the wider cultural discourses related to gender and sexuality in Japan are linked with the conceptions of asexuality.

6.1. Gender

Besides having men’s and women’s sections at clothing stores or separated restrooms, the emphasizing of gender differences can come forth in everyday life in Japan for instance in the shape of gender-specific school uniforms or “ladies only”-train cars. However, it has not always been taken for granted that aspects such as femininity and masculinity are tied to female or male bodies; The discourses of gender ambiguity have a long history in Japan. In contemporary Japan, everyone knows of Kabuki theater, in which all the roles are played by men and Takarazuka in which all the roles are played by women (Robertson 1998: 51). There have been deep Japanese expert analysis on the issues of gender and sexuality in the context of theater as early as the 1600s (Yoshizawa Ayame 1673-1729).

When it comes to the contemporary gender archetypes, many researchers – such as Romit Dasgupta (2000, 2009, 2012), Masako Ishii-Kuntz (2009) and Futoshi Taga (2005) – have conducted research using the idea of “salaryman” (sarariiman, サラリーマン) as the hegemonic masculinity of Japan. Salaryman is usually used to refer to a middle-class white-collar worker employed in a big, private company, though sometimes civil servants or employees of smaller companies can also be recognized as salarymen (Dasgupta 2012: 1, 2). Dasgupta notes that not only doing well at the workplace, but also being able to get married at an appropriate age and to perform the expected role as daikokubashira (大黒柱), the mainstay of the family, are part of the image of a salaryman (2000: 194, 235-286). The traditional counterpart for a salaryman would be that of a housewife, a “good wife, wise mother” (ryousai kenbo, 良妻賢母) (Dasgupta 2000: 192). Besides the stereotypical gender views, Japan has naturally many cultural discourses that provide alternative images of the ways genders and sexuality can be perceived. From the point of view of asexuality, the cultural discourses related to so called “herbivore men” (soushokukei danshi, 草食系男子) are especially interesting. “Herbivore man” is a word used in popular discourse to refer to a man who is...
not actively interested in competition or pursuing sex, and who is thus countering the traditional male stereotype (Morioka 2013).

I want to remind again that people identifying themselves as asexual are a very heterogeneous group of individuals, and thus there is a huge variety of the ways people perceive their experiences and identities. It would however seem, that people who have taken asexuality as a part of their identity can be also more open to consider their gender identities critically. This has also been noted in other cultural contexts: In MacNeela and Murphy's sample of self-identifying asexual participants around 30 % gave themselves a different label than “male” or “female” (such as genderqueer or androgynous) as their gender (2015: 799). Van Houdenhove and colleagues on the other hand omitted 40 people from their final analysis for giving “other” as their gender, because they wanted to be able to make comparisons between those who had given “male” and those who had given “female” as their genders (2015: 671). Chasin has also noted that “it is conceivable that asexual individuals are statistically more likely to be trans-identified or to claim a gender identity beyond simply man or woman” (2011: 716. Italics original).

My research seems to reaffirm this observation. Out of the seven people I talked with, Satou-san and Okutsu-san told me about their thoughts related to their gender identities during the interviews. Satou-san, who had been more concerned about the issues of gender than those of sexuality at the time of the interview, wished also to keep their gender anonymous altogether. Okutsu-san seemed pleased with the open-ended option of “Other” in the gender category section of my short survey, though in the end she circled “Female” as her gender. For Okutsu-san not being interested in interaction with men or dressing up in a way that is considered to be pleasing for “the opposite sex”, it made her sometimes question what it meant to be a woman and whether she was living up to par. She told that her parents had once bought her men’s clothing as a present, thinking that was what she preferred, which had been confusing for Okutsu-san. It would seem that for some individuals their identity as an asexual could threaten the gender identity given for them at their birth. On the other hand, Risa-san told me that though she was aware of asexual bloggers who wrote also about their gender identities, she had never really questioned did her asexuality have any impact on her gender identity as a woman. The qualitative study by MacNeela and Murphy had similar results; While some of the informants felt that asexuality and gender interacted strongly with each other there were about as many opinions that saw the two as separate.

Gender came up in the interviews also in other ways. I had not been anticipating how the topic of “men” would be discussed during the conversations; Most of the people I talked with were cautious of men and some were even avoiding any unnecessary contact with them. At first, I was confused,
but afterwards I started to understand some of their concerns. When it comes to other cultural contexts, there have been studies on the gender stereotypes that picture men as wanting sex and women as wanting romantic relationships (Holland & al. 1996: 124), and it was clear that the cultural image of men as naturally sexually active and women as not that interested in sex was also present in the Japanese discourses.

I noticed that at comments related to gender stereotypes I tended to feel uneasy and a couple of times I brought up my Finnish background and the Finnish discourses of gender equality. There had been however moments, when I could not help but notice that my attitude towards men did not match the cultural expectations in Japan. One such instant was when a NHK (Nippon Housou Kyoku, the Japanese national broadcasting corporation) personnel came to ask for my television license late at night. I lived alone in a small worn out apartment, and the man at the door had probably not been expecting to see a woman and a foreigner at that. I opened the door with my hair slightly wet after taking a shower. The NHK person noted this fact aloud and got so embarrassed his voice was shaking and he did not seem to know where to look at. I was told not to open the door at night without putting the chain on first: “It is okay if it is me or some of my colleagues, but you really should not open your door like that.” My wet hair probably worsened the matter; Taking a bath right before having sex is considered common in Japan and having wet hair can thus be associated with sexual situations. I noticed that my Finnish cultural knowledge did not seem to teach me to be on the alert when it comes to men the same way that can be the case in Japan.

Japanese proverbs and idioms such as “all men are wolves” (otoko wa minna ookami, 男はみんな狼) and “okuri ookami” (送り狼) referring to a man who offers to escort a woman home just to take advantage of the situation, tell also about the cultural images. Offering the before mentioned “ladies only” cars for women in trains is related to a problem with public gropers, who touch mostly women in crowded trains. I myself started using the cars during rush hours after I had also encountered a groper personally. During my first study abroad in Japan I noticed that not interacting with men on a daily basis was actually quite easy. I went to an all-girls’ high school, so besides my host-father and brother, our home-room teacher was basically the only Japanese man I interacted with.

The cultural conceptions of “men” and “asexuality” can be in many ways in contradiction with each other. MacNeela and Murphy have analyzed that among the self-identified asexual informants the gender stereotypes made male asexuals generally feel more pressure for not behaving sexually compared to female asexuals, who could take advantage of the sexually passive role of women that
the gender assumptions provided (2015: 807). There have been suggestions that there might be more women than men who are asexual (Bogaert 2004), but partially it might also be that gender stereotypes make taking on an asexual identity a lot harder for people identifying as male (Chasin 2011). Kaine-san made also a notion that asexual men were hard to find. When I asked was she familiar with the AVEN forums, her reaction was:

*Kaine-san:* But I'm sure it's mostly women there? Men have sexual drive, so I bet they just won't turn asexual in the first place. There will be like men who do not feel attracted towards others but who will have sex anyways.

Kaine-san's comment reflects the conflict between asexual identity and the idea of men as sexually active by nature. Kaine-san herself described her way of dealing with men as quite extreme though she also softened her account by saying that it’s not like all men are bad:

*Kaine-san:* Well, I'm the kind of person who wants to have lots of friends, really (KL: Yes.) And, I want to just maintain this perfect sense of distance, that's what I’d want to do. (KL: Oh, oh.) But you see, when you are on good terms with the opposite sex, the other starts closing that distance, right? (KL: Ahh.) And, I really really hate that. I just do not talk to single men, I'm quite extreme – (KL: Ahh.) Really, that’s how it goes. I just hate it! Like, if it is someone who is married or like someone who has a partner he is dating with an intention of getting married, then I can talk to them at ease. (KL: Ahh, I see.) I’m sure there are many good single men out there, I’m sure there are. There might be many of the kind you can interact with just as a friend, but I’ve gone through too many unpleasant experiences, so I have just decided not to get familiar with single men in general. (KL: Ahh.) I don’t want to have anything to do with them except at work or such.

The cultural association with men as active pursuers of sex or intimate relationships was visible in the other informant's accounts as well. Okutsu-san, who had considered she might be androphobic before finding the word asexuality; she was also keeping her distance from men except during work. Even though all of the informants did not go this far, many gave me an impression that one should be somewhat careful around men. Oo-chan, who identified as “nonsexual, bisexual, still thinking”, told me that she could get along with gay men, since she could be sure they were not interested in her that way.
After the conversation with Kaine-san, I started to ask the people I met about their thoughts on friendship between men and women. Risa-san told me that she liked the idea of having male friends but found it difficult to realize. She had at the moment about two people she said she could consider her “male friends”, and one of them was over 10 years her senior. Risa-san thought that the age difference was likely also something that made the friendship possible, because they were “out of each other's range”. When I told Risa-san I had several male friends and I had even been on a road trip with only men as my travel companion, she was interested and asked how come they did not make passes at me.

An exception from the suspicious attitude towards men was Tana-san, who did not mention the subject during our interview, but who has drawn some comics on her blog that picture her with her male friends. In one comic strip she is in a café with a male friend when another friend comes up and starts asking if the man is Tana-san’s boyfriend. This continues despite her telling that is not the case. The strip shows that although Tana-san and her male friend do not find their relationship problematic, Tana-san’s other friend is very aware of the cultural expectation presented by the other informants; When a man and a woman get along well, there must be something between them.

![Comic strip showing a conversation about relationships between men and women.](image-url)
It seemed that for many of the people I spoke with having a closer relationship with a man was possible only when there was a factor that made the idea of a romantic relationship between the two difficult to realize or if there was a guarantee that the other would not be interested in them. This seemed to be the case for instance with Risa-san's 10 years older male friend, the gay men Oo-chan knew and Kaine-san's attitudes towards married men. Interaction with men was also considered easier when there was a clear reason for the contact, such that of being work colleagues. In the next section I will turn into how the informants described love and relationships, as well as their accounts on their personal special relationships.

6.2. Love, Physical Closeness and Special Relationships

We can identify with love stories not because they record some preexisting emotion, but because our cultural tradition supplies us with the narrative forms with which we begin to be familiarized in childhood and through which we learn what love is. Narratives are not only encountered in novels, plays or films – they are very much part of everyday cultural competencies. We constantly tell stories to ourselves and others and we reconstruct our own biographies in narrative form.” (Jackson 1993: 46)

The One. Love at the first sight. Cultural images of romantic love can be deep and strong. In the Sino-Japanese folklore “red string of fate” (unmei no akai ito, 运命の赤い糸), an invisible red string around one’s little finger, connects two lovers to each other. Cultural discourses can contain ideas of destined partners and promises that love will make things better. Love is something you “just feel” and True Love never withers.

Risa-san told me she had always felt sort of admiration and longing (akogare, 憧れ) towards the idea of romance despite the fact that she did not feel comfortable being in a romantic relationship with other people. So far Risa-san had ended her relationships after realizing that on the top of the fact that she did not feel romantic attraction towards her partner, she also did not want to spend time with the other as much as they would have wanted (When they were “Let’s meet up!” I was like “What, but we just met!”), and because she was not comfortable with the physical closeness that came with the relationship. She writes in her blog about the difficulties she had had in explaining to her friends why she did not want to have a boyfriend at the moment, and tries to come up with easy to understand arguments for the future:
If I try to make it simple:
☆ It's not that I hate men, but I do not want to date them
☆ I do not fall in love (as in I do not regard anyone as a target of sexual love) (seiai no taishou, 性愛の対象)
☆ Dating would probably mean kissing and having sex. So. Well. No.

(Risa-san's blog)

Risa-san's ex-boyfriend had told her that kissing was his way to show affection and telling him that she did not like to be kissed made him feel hurt. Satou-san told me with discomfort about a similar experience; It had seemed that Satou-san’s older ex-partner had enjoyed the fact that Satou-san did not feel comfortable being kissed, and that the partner had the chance be the first one to teach how to enjoy it. Tana-san has also drawn a comic about her friend who defines having sex to be the main difference between being a friend and being a girlfriend.

"What do you mean by 'going out'? Is being friends no good?"
"Isn't the difference whether you're f*cking or not?"
"EH?! Then that's a no." "Huh...?"

These reactions reflect on the strong association between romantic relationships and physical contact. The socio-culturally compulsory nature of physical contact in a relationship and the idea that enjoying this contact can be taught for a reluctant individual where likely some of the reasons that made refraining from interaction with men altogether an appealing opinion for some of the people I spoke with. Physical closeness and especially having sex were matters that many of the informants found hard to relate to. The cultural associations of “men as pursuing sex” and “women as pursuing love” (Holland & al. 1996: 124) were also reflected in many of the conversations.
Hiro-san and Oo-chan wondered would a woman have sex with a person they did not like in the first place and were surprised at my comment that I knew of women who seemed to have sex just because they wanted sex. They suggested that those kinds of women must be kind of rare, at the other end of the spectrum from asexuals. Risa-san had difficulties in understanding how people usually ended up having sex with each other, and presented a similar view of women who pursued sex as uncommon:

*Risa-san: I just don't get the flow of the events there: How people get from starting a relationship to having sex?*

*KL: And you hear that in some cases people start to date after they have had sex.*

*Risa-san: An exception, an exception! (laughs) (Reigai, reigai! 例外、例外!)*

Some of the people I spoke with told me that they felt they could have sex if it was necessary but preferred not to. One mentioned masturbating but did not feel that the sexual desire was oriented towards anyone. Previous research on asexuality shows also that having an asexual identity does not indicate lack of sexual behavior (Van Houdenhove et al 2015). As has been mentioned before, people who identify as asexuals are just as diverse in their actions and their ways of making sense of their lives as any other people. Reasons for being or having been sexually active despite feeling no or little sexual or romantic attraction towards others can include motivations related to cultural expectations or social pressures, or for instance finding sex a meaningful way of being close to someone.

In Japan it is possible to define asexuality as the lack of romantic feelings, but as should be obvious from the informants’ accounts, this does not preclude feeling other forms of affection or having wishes for closer personal relationships. Cultural discourses in Japan acknowledge also the spectrum of affectionate feelings of different kinds. Besides feelings of romantic love (*ren’ai, 恋愛*) or sexual love (*seiai, 性愛*) the language has different expressions for romantic love in a sudden, passionate sense (*koi, 恋*) and love as an affection that can grow into a person (*ai, 愛*). The latter can include the love felt for one’s spouse or romantic partner, as well as love towards one’s family or friends. The expression “I love you” in Japanese is “*Ai shiteiru*”. “*Koi shiteiru*” on the other hand refers to “falling in love with someone”. For myself this Japanese categorization was something I was aware of, but that did not always feel familiar against my Finnish cultural knowledge:
Kaine-san: I can understand affection (ai, 愛) but what I don't get is romantic love (koi, 恋).

(“Ai” wa wakaru kedo, “koi” wa wakaranai,「愛」は分かるけど、「恋」は分からない。）

KL: Ah, in Finnish both “ai” and “koi” are the same (rakkaus, love), so I still feel sometimes that I don't quite get the difference...

Kaine-san: “Ai” is something that comes gradually, something you have growing on you, like the love you feel towards your family.

For some of the people I spoke with, the cultural expectations about the relations between opposite sexes (e.g. being close indicates having romantic relations; being in a supposedly romantic relationship indicates having sex) were so strong, that compared to trying to find compromises by negotiating new meanings for their relationships, resigning from the interaction with men altogether felt like a more satisfying opinion. However, there were also people who were hoping for or who had tried to negotiate ways for having meaningful close relationships outside the normative discourses.

Kaine-san shared with me the story of one of her special relationships; In Japan she had helped to raise her friend's child together with her for two years. The arrangement was ideal for Kaine-san, who was not interested in a romantic relationship, but who had always thought she would love to have children. After moving overseas, she had tried to persuade the friend to come there with her, but without success. Kaine-san told me, that the fact that the child's father was not Japanese made it harder for the child to live in Japan and raising a child alone was challenging with the mother's income. She noted also that marriage between two women would have been possible in Kaine-san's current home country.

Kaine-san: These have been taken with a mobile phone, so I'm not sure how well you can see...
(Shows a photo collage to the web cam)

KL: Oh, that's so nice. Cute, cute!

Kaine-san: I mean for real, it would be so much better for the mother and the child if they just came here. With her line of job, she does not earn that much money no matter how much she works... But well, since I'm an asexual, though I have feelings for her (jou ga aru, 情がある), they are not romantic. I mean I don't have so deep feelings towards her that I'd make her come
here by force or anything. If she'd like to come on her own will, I'd give her all my support. But then again, it looks like she does not want to be that much of a burden. It might be that if I had deep feelings towards her and I could tell her to come here because of that, it might work. But you know, in the end that's just not the case.

Kaine-san had tried to negotiate her relationship with the friend she had raised a child with both by using already existing normative structures (e.g. marriage) and by stepping out of them (e.g. being a life partner despite the lack of sexual or romantic attraction). It seemed that for Kaine-san's friend having a non-normative relationship was still too much to handle. Kaine-san's analysis was that if she could have told the other she had deeper feelings towards her (perhaps if she could have told she was in love with her), the other might have been more willing to receive her support.

This story helped me to understand another notion of Kaine-san that had left me puzzled for a while; Kaine-san told me that lately she had started to use a dating site and was trying to look for an asexual or gay male partner to be in a fake relationship with her. After the way Kaine-san had previously told me that she wanted to stay away from all single men in general, this action had left me a bit confused. This was especially the case when Kaine-san said she was not really that serious and was not expecting to find anyone. She had actually received many discouraging or even mean responses from other people using the site. Later on, I connected the search for a fake partner with Kaine-san's mention during a conversation of a different topic about how having a “sharemate” or possibly being a foster parent might be nice. These future prospects combined with the current situation, that her friend she had raised a child together with was not likely going to join her in her current home country, made me understand that Kaine-san was looking for ways for finding meaningful, close relationships outside the romantic discourses, and using the dating site to find men who would not be romantically interested in her was one such channel.

Risa-san enjoyed the company of men, but never liked anyone in a romantic sense. She had talked about the possibility of a friendship marriage during our interview, and wrote later on her blog about longing for a life partner:

I think I'd like to search for someone, who would be with me always, even if there was no sexual relationship between us. Or maybe someone who could restrain themselves with me. I'm sure it's difficult and I don't even know whether there is a person who would make me feel that way, that I would want to be with them forever. I'm just struggling around (Risa-san's blog)
Chasin writes “[T]he normative prioritizing of (presumed sexual) romantic relationships above friendship […] is the topic of many discussion threads on the AVEN forums. Asexual/ace\(^6\) people are subject to other people systematically devaluing their most important (romantic and non-romantic) relationships or failing to recognize them altogether” (2015: 176). While the asexual discourses in Japan might not always be based on the same vocabularies that are used at the AVEN forums, the same tendency for valuing other meaningful relationships is present in the interviews. Some, like Hiro-san held their friends dear, some had decided to live with their families and others like Kaine-san and Risa-san were looking for other non-normative close relationships outside the dominant discourses.

6.3. Marriage and the Normative Life Courses

Marriage can be considered an important part of the expected life course of an individual in Japan. According to the OECD statistics from 2014 the percentage of Japanese people living in a marriage is notably higher than the OECD average\(^7\) (p. 93). Although the reported percentage of young people who do not intend to get married in the future has slightly risen compared to the past, the proportion of the never-married singles\(^8\) who want to get married in the future is nevertheless very high, approximately 85% (The Fifteenth Japanese National Fertility Survey, from now on JNFS 2015: 1). There is a strong association between marriage and having children in Japan, which is visible for instance in that only 2% of Japanese children are born outside wedlock (Raymo et al. 2008: 8). In the European Union the percentage is around 40% (Eurostat 2012). This difference is likely related to the different attitudes towards common-law marriage in Japan and EU.

Originally, I had not included marriage as an interview theme, but gradually I started to pay more attention to the topic that kept coming up in the conversations. The social pressure and practical benefits of getting married, as well as the association between marriage and having children were already present in the very first interview with Hiro-san and Oo-chan. Hiro-san, who was living with her family, was worried about the future, and Oo-chan, who loved pet hedgehogs and other small animals, was starting to feel pressure from her parents who seemed to want grandchildren.

\textit{Oo-chan: My parents say that the fact that I like animals is part of the reason I'm not interested in getting married…}

\(^{6}\) Ace can be used to refer to asexuals as well as anyone who is pro-asexual or identifies with the perspectives presented at AVEN even if they do not have a strong identity of not being sexual (Chasin 2015: 175)

\(^{7}\) Japan: 65.4%, OECD average: 52.4%, Finland: 44.9%

\(^{8}\) The results refer to ages 18-34
Hiro-san: Well, they say that when you get a dog, that's the end of the game (Inu wo kattara owari, 犬を買ったら終わり). *I'm not really interested in leaving decedents or anything neither; but with the taxes and all it's tough. Money's gonna be a problem, but I'm trying to live without spending too much.*

Over 70% of Japanese young people of ages 18-34 live with their parents, and the percentage is even higher if we consider only women (JNFS 2015: 10). In comparison in Finland – where the education is free and there are student benefits by the state – under 40% of 15-29-year-old live with their parents (OECD 2016: 85). I have often met Japanese exchange students in Finland who seem worried about living without their families for the first time. I have also myself received concerned comments from Japanese friends who have heard I am living on my own. The word “*hitotigurashi*” (一人暮らし, a single life; a solitary life; living alone) does seem to hold slightly negative nuance compared to the neutral meaning “living alone” has in the Finnish culture.

I did not ask everyone about their living status, but I got the impression that everyone except for Satou-san, who was still a university student, were working and the only one I knew for sure not to live with their parents was Kaine-san, who was not living in Japan. Hiro-san and Tana-san, who were in the first half of their 30s, mentioned living together with their families. During my first study abroad in Japan, my around 30 years old host-brother was also living with the family. I got the impression that though there might be some people who would find this arrangement a little unusual, the situation was not anything too unheard of.

Besides traditional reasons, the financial motivations related to high rents and education fees can make living on one's own unappealing for many young people who do not have much income, but who are used to certain living standards. For students and young working adults whose families live too far away, living in a dormitory can be an affordable option, since many universities and some companies offer their own dormitories. For a reference, I was myself renting a small (16m²) studio flat in a worn-out apartment that had a 20-minute walking distance to the closest train station. The rent was around 400 euros. Water, gas, electricity and the internet were not included in the rent, so the total living expenditures were closer to 500 euros. Close proximity to a train or subway station is appreciated in larger cities like Tokyo, where commuting to work can easily take over an hour. My apartment had an old refrigerator and an induction cooker, but it is not uncommon to have to buy these separately. In southern Japan, apartments are often made so that the draft can blow inside the house, which is convenient during the summer, but the indoors can get quite cold in the winter.
Light, flexible materials are partly to make the houses more earthquake resistant. Central heating is not common in the cheaper apartments, and the house can be warmed with local heating units, such as mobile gas stoves or kotatsu-tables with a heat source. Electricity can also be quite expensive in Japan. When I was living in Mitaka city of Tokyo, it felt like the local family restaurants and small shops were constantly looking for part time workers, but the hourly wages were often 8 euros or less. I would say that with the high education fees and without student benefits like those in Finland, combining working and studying to be able to live on one’s own could be very challenging in Japan.

Tana-san had come out to her parents who were not pressuring her to get married anymore. Before she started working from home, people at Tana-san’s work place had sometimes asked whether she had a boyfriend or had aspirations for getting married (kekkon ganbou, 結婚願望), but she did not have this problem anymore. Hiro-san had also come out to her parents, which made living with them easier. She mentions in her blog, that there are sometimes people who criticize whether a person can become truly independent if she continues to live with her parents, but I would still argue that living with one’s family is socio-culturally a more acceptable option in Japan than it is for instance in Finland. The opinion of living with one’s family can be reassuring for those individuals, who do not want to enter marriage but who do enjoy the company of other people. The family can also provide them with emotional and financial support.

However, it might also be that especially for those individuals who have not talked about their asexuality with their parents, living with the family can mean having to face more social pressure related to marriage and having children, compared to a person who is living on their own. Oo-chan was feeling anxious because her parents seemed to be hoping for grandchildren:

Oo-chan: Maybe if I were the emperor and had the responsibility to keep the line going on or something like that, then maybe I would consider having children. My parents are the ones who want it.

Hiro-san: Mine have already given up

Oo-chan: That’s so nice!

Hiro-san: For their generation getting married and having children has been something so obvious.

The older generation’s image of marriage came up also during the interview with Risa-san. At the time of our interview it had been only some months since Risa-san had found the word asexuality,
and she had not yet talked about her asexuality with her parents. Her mother seemed to think, that her relationship with their father had given Risa-san and her siblings a bad image of marriage:

*Risa-san: Well, none of us siblings is married so, especially my mother she was like “Is it that our marriage does not look good to you?” [...] I told her it's not like that, but she told me that that's how it ends up looking like in any case. Ugh this is so hard, I thought.*

Besides the discourses of romantic relationships, the socio-cultural expectations related to normative life courses are also something that are unavoidably part of the asexual experiences. Looking at the high marriage rate and the percentage of unmarried young people who want to get married in the future, I would say that getting married is part of the expected life-course in Japan. Having children seems to be also associated with getting married at least on the ideal level. However, the fact is that declining birth rates combined with the aging population have become a huge concern in contemporary Japan (Ishii-Kuntz 2003).

The fear of the upcoming workforce shortage has lead into the pressure for having more babies, but also for women to take a more active part in the workforce. For this to be possible it has been argued that there is need for more flexible child care services and for parents to divide the responsibility of the child rearing and home making more evenly. The prime minister Shinzou Abe's “Abenomics” has been one political attempt to make combining childrearing and working easier for parents (Japan Revitalization Strategy 2016).

Public discussion on the declining birth rates can also be stressful for individuals with an asexual identity. Parents were often mentioned asking about marriage aspirations, but sometimes work colleagues or friends would also bring up the topic. While getting married had been something taken for granted for the parent's generation, there seemed to be room for conversation; Tana-san and Kaine-san had come out to their parents and were currently living together with them.

**6.4. Diversity of Sexuality and Gender in the Public Discussion**

“Hi. Did you say you were writing your thesis on asexuality?”

“Ah, yes.”

“I find the topic very interesting.”
I finally took a proper look at the person who was talking to me. It was after a lecture. Around 7 in the evening in April it was already pitch dark outside, and the classroom felt very bright in contrast to the black windows. There were two others beside me waiting to talk with the lecturer, who was at the moment occupied with another student. I had been wanting to ask was it possible to turn in my assignments in English, but the lively conversation in front of me did not look like it would end soon. I had been looking at the direction of the teacher and the student without actually looking at anything in particular. I had just started to weight in my mind had I already waited too long to quit or was leaving without asking my question still an option. The two students behind me looked like they knew each other well, and I felt both pleased and uneasy when the boy suddenly addressed me. I realized absentmindedly that he was one of the five students, who had nodded during my earlier self-introduction, when I had asked were there people who were familiar with the word asexuality. The boy, who told me he was majoring in gender and sexuality studies, took his friend in and we started to have a conversation, though I felt for the most part that I was just listening the two talk. They brought up topics like the sexuality and gender studies lectures at the university. How sexuality and gender were handled at some of the other lectures. Teachers who made them feel safe because they clearly tried to understand. Later, me and the boy ended up in the same group work team during the course and even conducted an interview together related to sexuality studies.

I had been already aware of the LGBT community at the university, centered around the Center for Gender Studies (CGS). As a matter of fact, I had taken part in one of CGS's gatherings during the autumn, though I will not explain about the gathering in detail, since the privacy of the participants and the confidentiality of everything talked at the gathering was strongly emphasized. Even this one visit gave me an important lesson on the difficult atmosphere surrounding issues of gender and sexuality diversity in Japan. I felt very fortunate when I ended up in the sexuality group work team, since thanks to the team I got to meet some of the gender and sexuality majors of the university and got a bit more positive image of the LGBT community at the university.

There does not seem to be much information on the diversity of gender and sexuality available in Japan unless one starts to look into the topic on their own. I was left with an impression, that many of the people who took part in the interviews did not consider asexuality to be that strongly part of the LGBT movement in Japan. One reason for the lack of information might be the comparatively

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low social profile of the movement in Japan. I had been aware of the fact previously but looking at the ICU Cultural Festival’s rainbow theme for the festival of 2015, it became clear to me, that the rainbow is not considered to be a self-evident symbol of the gay pride or the LGBT movement in Japan. Interestingly, pride parades in Japan are sometimes called “rainbow parades”. I did not attend the Tokyo Rainbow Pride 2016 (Toukyou Reiboo Puraido; 東京レインボーパライド) myself, but I was later shown pictures of people who had English signs with “Asexual Pride” and the internet address of AVEN written on them. The asexuality flag and a general description of asexuality was also included in a board that introduced several sexual minority flags.

Another reason for the lack of information on the diversity of gender and sexuality is likely related to Japanese sexuality education. Hashimoto and colleagues report that the conservatives have opposed school-based sexual education increasingly since 2002 (Hashimoto et al 2012: 26). Japan does not have one national sexual education program or minimum standards for sexuality education, and thus the details of sexual education given by each school can vary a lot (Hashimoto et al 2012: 26). It is alarming to note that when it comes to the content of the sexual education classes, less than 10% of junior high schools⁹ had content on sexual diversity (Hashimoto et al 2012: 30). The lack of information about sexual diversity can be negatively related to the fact that bullying and discrimination of LGBT students and staff is reported to be common in Japanese schools (Human Rights Watch 2016). Personally, I have noticed that the young Japanese people I have met can be fast at declaring “I’m not gay!” or making comments such as “Is he one of those or something (socchi no hito, そっちの人)?” in a way that would not be considered appropriate in a similar social context in Finland.

Okutsu-san: I mean the alphabet's not there. That kind of gets my attention...

While in the English discussion on the diversity of gender and sexuality one can see sometimes the use of “LGBTA” or LGBTQ⁺¹⁰ many of the people I spoke with seemed to associate the Japanese gender and sexual minority community mainly with homosexuality and bisexuality. Some thought like Kaine-san that other sexual minorities had a different agenda from asexuals:

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⁹ Hashimoto et al 2012. n=5158
¹⁰ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Transsexual, Asexual or Ally, Queer or Questioning. “+” including Pansexual and Intersex among others

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Kaine-san: I mean asexuality is a minority within the sexual minorities, isn't it? (KL: Ah, that's right.) So, kind of... the voices of gay people and lesbians are just so big (KL: Ah, ah, ah). Those people want others to acknowledge their rights, right? (KL: Mm). Because like, for the same-sex couples to be able to get married you have to change the law and all... (KL: Right.) There's all that. But to be honest asexuals don't really need anything to change in the world, do they?

Starting from 2015 a slowly growing number of wards\textsuperscript{11} and cities in Japan have begun to acknowledge same-sex couples by providing an opportunity to register as a couple. Shibuya Ward and Setagaya Ward of the Tokyo Metropoly (Japan Times 2015/11/05) and the city of Naha in Okinawa Prefecture (Japan Times 2016/07/08) are such examples. “Although the papers are not legally binding” Shusuke Murai writes in Japan times, “hospitals and businesses such as real estate firms are requested to treat certificate holders in the same way as married couples”.

Many of the informants told me that they paid attention to the news and mentions of sexual minorities in the media, and indicated they wanted to support the members of other minorities, but many did not seem to think that the community was the right place for them. Expectations to this were Oo-chan and Hiro-san. Oo-chan who identified herself also as bisexual told me that though she had once been an organizer in a Mixi group for nonsexuals, lately she had started to hang out more with lesbians and LGBT-minded people. Hiro-san who is a friend of Oo-chan's writes also about the importance of other sexual minority friends on her blog.

I tried to ask the informants about asexuality related themes on the media or popular culture, but the question seemed hard to answer for most. When it comes to the popular culture, there are references to the diversity of sexuality and gender to a certain degree. Interestingly, Japan has a huge market for \textit{shounen ai} (boys love) and \textit{yaoi} (man to man pornography) comics and fan art written mostly by women, for women (Aida 2010). These comics feature homosexuality but appear to be more about entertainment than about supporting the LGBT movement. There are also quite frequently gender bending characters featured in popular culture. The manga Hourou Musuko (Wandering Son, 2002-2013, animation 2011), that tells about a boy who wants to be a girl and a girl who wants to be a boy is an example of a work that approaches the matters of un-normative gender identities seriously. Later on, I found out also about a manga called “\textit{Kiryuu-sensei wa Ren'ai ga Wakaranai}” (Kiryuu-sensei does not understand romance) through a new Japanese asexuality blog. The manga is based on the idea that stereotypically most women enjoy romance,

\textsuperscript{11} Metropolitan of Tokyo has 23 autonomous special wards
but the main character is a manga writer who writes popular romantic stories despite having never had romantic feelings.

However, though there are some references to sexual and gender diversity in the Japanese popular culture, mentions of such diversity are not always addressed straightforwardly in the content with wider viewership; Humor can be used to make a situation or a person something that does not need to be taken seriously. The television personality and professional wrestler “Hard Gay” has appeared in television dressed in tight leather. In the spring 2016 there were posters of the cross-dressing television personality and comedian Matsuko Deluxe advertising kitchen utilizes in the train car I was riding. As a more positive remark there are also non-comedian public figures such as politicians who have come out as openly homosexual.

In networking services like Twitter there are people who are active when it comes to multiple matters related to sexual and gender diversity, and sometimes they share also articles or post related to asexuality. Satou-san, who had been thinking lately about their gender identity, mentioned a lesbian video blogger, who had featured asexuality in one of her vlog. When I asked did the university Satou-san was attending have any groups for gender and sexual minorities or perhaps lectures related to gender studies, the answer was negative. As has been mentioned previously, the university I was attending was very active when it comes to issues of sexual and gender diversity, but this is not likely the case in that many other universities.

I realized later on that the fact that I had looked for people through blogs might be visible in the way that most of the people I had talked with did not seem to think there was any asexual community in Japan or that asexuality was part of the Japanese LGBT community. It is possible that Japanese people who identify themselves as asexuals do not feel asexuality is part of the discussions on sexual minorities, but people who take part in local sexual minority groups might have different kind of accounts.

6.5. Asexuality Does Not Make Sense

I would like to return here to Ortner and Whitehead’s anthropological analysis of sexual meanings. This analysis “proceeds by seeking and showing the contexts within which (such) constructs ‘make sense’ whether the context is a wider set of symbols and meanings, or whether it is some particular ordering of social relations” (1981: 2-6).

It is quite understandable that in the terms of the “common sense” cultural meanings or sets of social relations in Japan, “asexuality” – as a marginal socio-cultural concept – does not “make sense”. Though asexuality is not part of the normative discourses in Japan, there are however
contexts, within which asexuality makes sense. As is the case with sexuality in general, there are more than one socio-cultural way of making sense of asexuality. We can use Ortner and Whitehead’s approach to understand the difference between the cultural interpretations and definitions of asexuality used in Japan and for instance at the AVEN forums. It is not about whether the English or the Japanese way of defining asexuality is “right” or “wrong” since both of these definitions have their own cultural logic that is interrelated to a wide range of cultural meanings and discourses. In the following I will try to discuss these cultural logics.

I will begin with the Japanese conception of asexuality as lack of romantic feelings. Taking into consideration the cultural association between women and romantic love, and the fact that there seem to be a more women than men who identify themselves as asexual – or at least it can be easier for a woman to take on asexual identity because of the cultural associations – it is quite understandable to focus on lack of romantic feelings instead of sexual ones. The interviews and Japanese cultural images show us the strong associations between men and sexual drive that can be contrasted with the cultural images of women as not being that interested in sex, and instead being interested in love and romance by nature. If the idea is that women are not that interested in sex to begin with, “lack of sexual attraction” in women might not get that much attention as something exceptional. Instead, if the feelings of not belonging or difficulties relating with others are the strongest when the talk turns to the topics of crushes or dating, it is understandable to emphasize that those identifying as asexual do not want to be part of these (normative) romantic discourses: They “do not have romantic feelings”.

If this is the case, why is it that asexuality has been defined through “lack of sexual attraction” in English, even though similar cultural logic could also be applied to the English-speaking societies? The influence of David Jay, the founder of The Asexual Visibility and Education Network, might be one reason, why male asexuality has been taken for granted and the male point of view has been taken into consideration in the AVEN discourses right from the beginning. Another point why lack of sexual attraction instead of lack of romantic attraction has become central in the English discourses might be related to the American cultural context and the ways how the discussion on sexual minority rights and the LGBT movements have shaped the ideas of sexual minorities. As is the case with any cultural conceptions, the concept of asexuality has not been born in a vacuum, outside its socio-cultural context.

AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network) as an organization has an agenda for promoting asexual visibility and spreading out information about asexuality, which makes it necessary for the community to take part and define itself through the public discussion. The ways how asexuality is described at the AVEN homepage can be seen to reflect on wider discourses on
sexual minority rights in locations such as North America and Europe. Active members are also likely to be aware of the functional arguments and potential counterarguments also present in the political discourses.

Being aware of the public view and having to answer others’ arguments might also be visible in the way AVEN highlights that asexual individuals can love and wish for close relationships; In the political discussion the idea of “love” has been a crucial argument for legalizing same-sex marriage. This account can also be considered a precaution against those, who might associate asexuality with emotional coldness and even inhumanity. The cultural discourses related to love as the most wonderful and universal human feature are so powerful that advocating the idea that (normative sexual and romantic) love might not be necessary for all people or having a good life without (normative sexual and romantic) love could be possible, can cause strong reactions in anyone regardless of their political views.

It would seem, that partly because of the lack of a uniting community, the Japanese asexual discourses might have been born more through individual accounts, that are not so strongly related to the LGBT movement and the public discussion of sexual diversity in Japan. Compared to an organization with an agenda, for individual people writing their blogs it might not as necessary to consider the public image or to define asexuality in terms familiar from the ongoing political discussion. As Kaine-san noted, people identifying themselves as asexual might not need any actual changes to the preexisting systems in that sense that there is no law that one must be in a romantic relationship or to get married. I think people with asexual identity are also less likely to have a motivation for finding a partner, which might be part the motivation for some sexual minority members to look out for communities.

Though changing the marriage institution might not be part of the asexual agenda, there are still some other institutional changes that could improve the situation of those with asexual experiences. The potential overlap between asexuality and diagnosis of sexual disorders is a matter heavily dependent on the official diagnosis and directives. The discussion on the medicalization of asexuality (i.e. prescribing drugs for people who are not sexually interested in other people) and corrective/reparative therapy for people who do not want to have “enough” sex (i.e. therapy for couples) (Chasin 2015: 174) have been some topics AVEN has been taking actively part in.

It might be that for those individuals who have already found the asexual identity and who are not personally in contact with the medical or psychological institutions, these kind of matters are not great practical problems. Closer to the interests of the people I had the chance to talk with might be a change in the cultural discourses that are behind the current socio-cultural expectations that can cause anxiety for the individuals with asexual identities. Changing the discourses is possible
through getting more visibility for the asexual lived experiences, but if people feel that there are no concrete changes to be made it can be harder for them to get motivated for any “asexual activism”.
7. Conclusions

In this thesis I have made use of anthropological ethnographic research methods (i.e. participant observation, thick description, holistic approach, self-reflection, dialogue with the theory) to find an answer to the research question “how the normative social relations and wider cultural discourses related to gender and sexuality shape how people identifying themselves as asexual perceive asexuality and their personal experiences in Japan?” In the following I will try to conclude some of my findings.

The normative social relations and wider cultural discourses related to gender and sexuality shape how people identifying themselves as asexual perceive asexuality and their personal experiences in many ways. So far it would seem that the internet is the most important source of information for individuals who wish to know more about asexuality, but for the time being there do not seem to be any strong asexual communities, that would have the information collected in one place. Asexuality is not part of the normative socio-cultural discourses, neither does it have the relatively well-known social profile of homosexuality. This means, that a person is not likely to get to know about the possibility of asexuality through everyday communication and instead the person has to be active and search for the information on her own. The information between different sources on the internet is not always coherent and the ongoing discussion on the Japanese definition of asexuality (and nonsexuality) against the inclusive definition of the AVEN community might also be confusing for an individual.

The LGBT community in Japan could provide peer support and information for people interested in the diversity of gender and sexuality, but it might be that people identifying themselves as asexual do not consider that easily the possibility of taking part in such groups. It can also be, that since it can take relatively long before a person starts to consider the possibility of asexuality, people who identify themselves as asexual are more likely to be older when they start to explore their sexuality. This might mean that they do not get the benefit of university groups such as CGS and as adults with less free time it might be more challenging to search for new social networks. Again, the person needs to be active on their own to find the resources for their support.

Asexuality’s socio-cultural invisibility is also reflected in how the normative discourses do not have a place for asexual experiences in them. Feelings that do not fit the “common sense” perceptions of the world can be confusing and discourage articulating the feelings to others. A person with asexual experiences can try to act according to the rules of cultural “common sense”, but this can be quite stressful way of living. Some people can try to fit in the normative perceptions...
by going out with other people despite lacking interest in them, but next they have to encounter the socio-cultural expectations of physical closeness in intimate relationships.

In the accounts of the people I had the chance to talk with, asexuality was often “activated” by social relations with other people. The activation could happen when there were topics that were difficult to relate to, like love stories or inquiries about having a relationship partner. Some of the people I spoke with avoided situations that could make them feel uncomfortable by staying away from men or by hanging out with people who understood their worldview.

There are also practicalities of everyday life that can remind of the central role of (normative conceptions of romantic and sexual) intimate relationships, that can make ignoring asexual experiences difficult. For an individual identifying herself as asexual, devaluing of non-romantic or non-sexual relationships can make the individual concerned about becoming marginalized as she grows older and the cultural expectations ask for having a romantic partner for emotional and financial support. Asexuality could also threaten the individual’s gender identity by making one question whether a person failing as a woman, if she does not want to dress up in a way pleasing to the opposite sex, act like a woman is expected to or if she does not want what women are supposed to want (romance, a boyfriend, children).

Lack of socio-cultural feedback combined with the discrepant information online can make an individual feel lonely and question her own feelings. During the interviews, many of the people I spoke with noted that there are not many asexual people. The fact that there is no much coherent information on asexuality or chances for meeting other individuals with similar experiences (or just getting reminded of their existence), can lead to feelings of loneliness and being different, which can have a great impact on the person’s mental health. Still, if we think for a moment, for the sake of an argument, that about 1% of people are asexual (NB. essentialism), in Japan with the population of 127 million, this would mean around 1 270 000 other people with similar experiences. Even in a small university like ICU with around 3000 students, there should be about 30 people one could talk with about their experiences. Finding even one such contact could be very important for an individual, but the socio-cultural invisibility of the asexual discourses can make it so that people are either not aware of the possibility of asexuality or they prefer to pass as a sexual instead of drawing attention to their private matters in most social situations, making it hard for people identifying themselves as asexual to notice each other.

When I first started this project I also felt it would be very hard to find people identifying themselves as asexual, but now I have a feeling that I have more knowledge of potential ways for contacting such individuals. I searched for the informants mainly through blogs, but later on I felt

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12 As of May 1st, 2017
that I had not made full use of the internet networks such as Twitter, Mixi and LINE. Another potential way to look for Japanese people with asexual identities could be through groups related to the diversity of gender and sexuality.

The field of asexual discussions and the ways sexual diversity is addressed in Japan and elsewhere is constantly changing. Since the beginning of year 2016, when I started looking for Japanese people identifying as asexual, some of the people who gave me their time have stopped writing their blogs and on the other hand there are new blogs by people who consider their experiences through the concept of asexuality.

During the time I collected information on asexuality in Japan, there did not seem to be strong asexual communities in Japan and the AVEN discourses did not hold that strong influence. Searching for Japanese blogs related to asexuality after my return to Finland, I however found also bloggers who stated they wrote the blogs to promote asexual visibility and others who used symbols of asexuality familiar from AVEN (e.g. black ace, black ring at the middle finger, the asexual flag) in their blogs. It is possible, that in the future the Japanese conceptions of asexuality and the conceptions used in English will influence each other increasingly.

Conceptions of human sexuality in different cultural contexts are affected by complicated, constantly changing interactions between social relations and cultural discourses. Anthropological studies can be one way to get information about these complex matters. Understanding the logic behind these conceptions can help us to make sense of our lives as well as the lives of others and to consider alternative ways of perceiving the world around us.

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