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Note: In the published book, there is an error in the spelling of my name. Please cite my initials correctly, as above (i.e., “**C. D.**” and not “*C. J.*”).

16. Asexuality & Re/Constructing Sexual Orientation

This chapter explores some conceptual complications of reconciling asexuality, with all its diversity, with ideas of sexual orientation^[1]. It highlights some of the criteria that have been used to assess whether asexuality should be regarded as a sexual orientation while questioning the value of this kind of classification project. Taking a broader view of sexual orientation as a historically specific, political category, this chapter explores implications for integrating asexuality into a contemporary framework of sexual orientation, or, alternatively, for radically reconfiguring sexual orientation through an asexual lens.

Who is Asexual/Ace?

As discussed in the introduction, there is a complex, multifaceted spectrum of experiences under the ace umbrella, including those in the vast and varied grey-zone. The ace community is extremely diverse along many dimensions. It includes high proportions of people who identify as bi+ and aromantic, and high proportions of women and people whose genders fall outside the gender binary. Ace community members engage in various kinds of significant relationships—romantic relationships (monogamous and non-monogamous; celibate and involving sexual contact, etc.); non-romantic/non-normative partnerships; conventional friendships, etc. They also include people with a wide range interest in personally participating sex, though significantly most aces are either some degree of sex-repulsed/averse, or sex-indifferent.

In short, “asexuality” as articulated by the asexual/ace community is a “hodge-podge” of different experiences that cannot be articulated by a single theoretical construct— not even *absence of sexual attraction*— and there is no single construct or set of constructs that could function as either a necessary or sufficient condition for completely defining asexuality. The substantive multiplicity of aceness presents a problem for anyone looking to define asexuality in terms of anything other than self-identification, or even for researchers looking to

assess asexuality. As discussed elsewhere in this volume, scholars have already written extensively about how they should define asexuality. However, regardless of the definition they ultimately adopt, if researchers define asexuality or aceness differently than ace communities do, they will produce research findings about a population that presumably overlaps with ace community members but which is substantively different both theoretically and practically. In other words, research findings from asexuality scholarship risks only applying in limited ways to actual ace community members.

Considering Asexuality as a Sexual Orientation

Bogaert (2015) and Van Houdenhove, Enzlin and Gijs (2017) discussed some of the limitations of using self-identification to define sexual orientation and asexuality in particular. Relatedly, Bogaert outlined many arguments generally deemed relevant to the appropriateness of classifying asexuality as a sexual orientation— possible etiological factors, patterns of genital arousal, the theoretical overlap between asexuality and the updated DSM criterion for sexual disorders, etc. In short, Bogaert provided a thorough discussion of how conceptualising asexuality as a sexual orientation “works”. Moreover, various researchers have framed their explorations of asexuality in terms of sexual orientation, and this has also seemed to “work” with little finagling, across a very disparate collection of studies. Such studies have ranged from positivist-empiricist explorations of biological markers, finding some significant differences between asexual and other sexual orientation groups (Yule, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2014), to more *social* science scholarship, such as qualitative work with themes emerging that parallel experiences of other sexual orientation groups, such as coming to an asexual identity with respect to sexual orientation and coming out as asexual (e.g., Scherrer, 2008; Haeffer, 2011; Van Houdenhove,

Gijs, T'Sjoen, & Enzlin, 2015).

Similarly, Brotto and Yule (2017a) assessed available evidence for whether asexuality should be considered a mental disorder, a sexual disorder, and/or a sexual orientation. They found insufficient evidence to justify regarding asexuality as either a mental disorder (or symptom of a mental illness) or a sexual disorder, and independently found evidence to support the tentative classification of asexuality as a sexual orientation. Others remained unconvinced (Levine, 2017), critiqued the criteria for making such determinations (Scherrer & Pfeffer, 2017; Van Houdenhove, Enzlin, & Gijs, 2017) and questioned the usefulness of attempting such judgements in the first place (Chasin, 2017; Scherrer & Pfeffer, 2017).

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In their assessment, Brotto and Yule (2017a) used LeVay and Baldwin's (2012) definition of sexual orientation as “an internal mechanism that directs a person’s sexual and romantic disposition toward females, males, or both, to varying degrees” (p.623).^[2] This is consistent with the definition in the American Psychological Association's Dictionary of Psychology (APA, 2015a). Similarly, they evaluated evidence of innateness from biomarker research, and also for the sexual orientation criteria outlined by Seto (2012): “age of onset, one’s sexual and romantic behavior, and the stability of the attraction over time (p. 624). They found evidence lacking *only* for the criterion of temporal stability. They also acknowledged the heterogeneity of the asexual population, suggesting a complexity that bears further exploration. Meanwhile, I (Chasin, 2017) and others (e.g., Scherrer & Pfeffer, 2017) have questioned the relevance of asexuality's stability over time, given that asexual populations are predominantly women and the lifelong narrative of sexual orientation is only one of many “typical” sexual orientation narratives for women (e.g., Diamond, 2009; Golden, 1987; van Anders, 2015). Furthermore, Cranney (2017) illustrated that even based on extremely limited longitudinal data, asexuality does show *some* evidence of temporal stability, noting that asexuality should not be held to a higher standard evidence than other accepted sexual orientation categories.

However, these considerations are limited to assessing whether asexuality fits with current understandings of sexual orientation. They cannot judge the value of these understandings nor can they determine whether or how they might need to be changed. Unfortunately, essentialist notions of sexual orientation (i.e., as biologically based, intrinsic and unchangeable) are so pervasive that Brotto and Yule (2017b) summarily dismissed my naming of this limitation and some of its consequences (Chasin, 2017) on the basis that the argument is not specific to asexuality. Ironically, the vastness of this issue—well beyond the scope of anything pertaining to asexuality—was precisely my point: why are people clinging to this understanding of sexual orientation and what might be gained by changing it through an asexual lens? Even the American Psychological Association is moving toward a broader definition of sexual orientation which acknowledges elements such as “social affiliations” (APA, 2015b, p. 862).

Conceptual/Moral History of “Sexual Orientation”

“Sexual orientation” is an historically recent, culturally specific concept. It began emerging in freshly post-industrial Europe, in the context of

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turbulently shifting social mores and nostalgic backlash against them (Katz, 1996). Within this context, contemporary sexologists (e.g., Ellis, Hirschfeld, Benkert/Kertbeny, Bloch, etc.) wrote and theorised prolifically in their fight against the mounting criminalisation of same-sex sexual behaviour and those who engage in it (Robinson, 1976). Much of this work was preconfigured by a legal-moral discursive context wherein moral responsibility is predicated on free choice (i.e., grounded in post-enlightenment Liberalism and Humanism). In other words, this context provided the scaffolding for the now-familiar

arguments which oppose two pairs of ideas: *non-heterosexual orientations as inborn and therefore morally neutral and worthy of protection* vs. *non-heterosexual orientations as chosen and therefore morally deficient and just targets of marginalisation*.

Between the late 19th century and mid 20th century this political struggle radically transformed the conceptual landscape, and theorists from Kertbeny to Freud in various European and American intellectual traditions produced newly-articulated “heterosexuality” as something parallel in nature to “homosexuality”, to be explained in its own right. This allowed for same-sex inclinations to be conceptualized as a particular (possibly-deviant) “phenotype” or “flavour” of a characteristic that everyone has, and which drives experiences of (sexual and romantic) attraction, behaviors and relationships (Katz, 1996). In particular, sexual orientations became morally defensible *specifically* as flavours of a *universal human characteristic*. In other words, in societies of American, British and other European colonial histories, sexual orientation has become a sort of “box” that everyone is presumed to have, which can be filled with a number of different options, but that box is part of what it means to be a person. Accordingly, for people who are socially desexualised because of systemic oppression, such as ableism or racism, presuming an “emptiness” of that sexual orientation box is part of denying people their full humanity.

From that ideological perspective, arguing that asexuality is a lack of sexual orientation presupposes a limited humanity for asexual people (though others have positioned asexuality as an absence of sexual attraction while arguing that asexuality should instead be approached and understood from asexual perspectives, Van Houdenhove, Enzlin, & Gijs, 2017). Similarly, presupposing everyone has a sexual orientation, if there is no other sexual orientation box-filler that makes sense for asexual people, and if asexual people are fully real persons (as we are), then asexuality per se must be a sexual orientation. This is the framework underlying the 4-quadrant model of sexual orientation based in a two-dimensional model of erotic attraction

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which positions heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and asexuality all as mutually exclusive, independent sexual orientations into which all members of humanity must be classified (Storms, 1980). However, that framework is severely limited.

Asexuality and the Neoliberal Moral Order of Sexual Orientation

Contemporary sexual orientation identity politics are framed by neoliberal ideology of decontextualised individualism and “personal responsibility” (for structural problems) (e.g., Harvey, 2005). This translates to people being responsible for their own “success” or “failure” as persons (defined in heteronormative terms) except when there is clear evidence that something is “beyond someone’s control”. Within this discursive context, things like homophobia and heterosexism are wrong *because* (and only to the extent that) they target innocent victims who have done nothing to deserve the marginalisation. In practice, this is accomplished by focusing on (same-gender) *attraction / desire*— constructed as passive & involuntary experiences— while generally avoiding focus on LGBTQ+ people's relationships and experiences. In contrast, emphasis is placed on the “morally respectable” choices LGBQ+ folks make toward assimilation into heteronormative society, such as the pursuit of long-term, monogamous relationships that form the basis of nuclear families (i.e., marriage).

Firstly, this framing would predict more general willingness to accept asexuality as a valid sexual orientation, worthy of protection, a) when it is recognised to be lifelong and unchangeable, and b) when it offers little challenge to the larger systems or structures of power. In fact, this describes the situation with regard to the recognition of asexuality within the DSM-5. Given that women comprise the vast majority of the population subject to diagnosis and treatment for “disorders of low sexual desire” (e.g., Cacchioni, 2007), psychiatric/psychological authorities hold a stronger claim over women than men with low sexual desire. Therefore, removing some of women's low sexual desire from purview of this authority should present a greater challenge than would removing some of men's

low sexual desire. Indeed, women who have low sexual desire and who self-identify as asexual are now exempt from diagnosis with Female Sexual Arousal/Interest Disorder *only if their low sexual desire is lifelong* (and therefore generally regarded as “unchangeable”, e.g., Montgomery, 2008); meanwhile, men with low sexual desire who self-identify as asexual have are exempt from

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diagnosis with Male Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder whether or not their low sexual desire is lifelong (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). I have discussed elsewhere in more detail other relevant issues with these diagnostic criteria as well as the struggle between ace community and psychiatric institutions for definitional authority over asexuality (Chasin, 2013; 2015; Chasin, 2017).

Secondly, this neoliberal framing of sexual orientation brings the profound disconnect between disembodied “identities” (based in “attractions” or “desires”) and the lived, embodied realities of the people who “have” them. However, people's interactions and experiences with structures of oppression do not divide neatly according to identity category or classification of attraction experience(s): lived, material realities are so much more complicated than that. Homophobia is a blunt instrument, equipped to impose punitive sanctions against *perceived* violations of heteronormative masculinity (e.g. Pascoe, 2005) and heteronormative femininity (e.g. Hamilton, 2007) within an institutionally heterosexual erotic market or economy (e.g., McCall, 1992). Generally, individual internal experiences like “attraction” do not govern how people interface with systems of marginalisation & oppression in their daily lives or the resistance or violence they may encounter.

In order to understand how these regulatory forces of marginalisation act on ace people, it is first necessary to understand the diversity of aces' lived, embodied experiences, and of how aces do relationships, participate in community spaces, form group affiliations, and are perceived by others. I've argued before that *being asexual* (with all that entails) can provoke the violence of homophobia specifically targeting the asexuality— i.e., asexuality-related (or ace-related) homophobia— while also provoking homophobic and heterosexist regulatory forces in more conventional ways, i.e., by being or being perceived as gay, lesbian or to a lesser-extent bisexual (Chasin, 2015). Having said that, a more thorough understanding of the diversity of experience among people within other sexual orientation categories should be equally crucial to understanding how homophobia and heterosexism play out for everyone, and the general failure to consider such things has resulted in understandings of homophobia and heterosexism that are, among other things, often white-centric, and specific to class, ability and other factors— generally lacking in intersectional nuance.

At the same time, internal experiences of attraction indeed are often tied to state recognition and property rights, moments of homophobic violence, etc., precisely *because*, people generally build their personal lives and families around relationships that are relevant to their sexual orientations. Sexual orientations, for the most part, guide the type (i.e., gender) of person that

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people are likely to choose to build their own nuclear families around (and some gender choices are considered “more legitimate” than others). In this way, sexual attraction is socially relevant insofar as it is connected to how people are inclined to do significant (and state-sponsored) relationships, how they interface with certain types of state-sponsored rights and prohibitions, structural and systemic heterosexism and homophobic violence, etc., and how people build their social lives and families. In other words, this framework of compulsory sexual orientation exists *because* sexual orientation (based in individual feelings of attractions and desires) and its associated outcomes (i.e., via significant relationships, criminalisation of same-sex sex, etc.) are *socially relevant*. However, asexuality troubles this relationship: (non)experiences of sexual attraction *may or may not* function as a shortcut to determine what is socially relevant for ace folks, and this underscores the importance of considering

that possibility for others too.

Asexuality Re/Constructing Sexual Orientation

Integrating asexuality into the framework of sexual orientation may lead in various directions. For example, given the vast diversity of romantic orientation among aces, depending on what is socially relevant in any given context, asexuality may function as a meta-category positioned in opposition to non-acedness (e.g., Chasin, 2011), as a unique sexual orientation category in opposition to other sexual orientations, as both simultaneously, and/or neither. Sexual orientation is a sociopolitical category and whether and how asexuality qualifies will depend on sociopolitical context. For example, an asexual lesbian should not be interpreted as only partly or liminally asexual and only partly or liminally lesbian: she (or xe— some lesbians are non-binary and may use non-binary pronouns) *can be* fully and legitimately both simultaneously, without contradiction. Whether one aspect of her (or xyr) identity takes precedence in terms of “sexual orientation”, or alternatively whether both function together in either cooperation or combination, will likely depend on the individual and the context. Sometimes ace lesbians might have more in common with non-ace lesbians than other aces; sometimes ace lesbians might have more in common with other aces; sometimes ace lesbians might not have that much in common with either group or might relate to both. (And any/all of these things may also be true for some ace lesbians all or most of the time.)

This has serious implication for what categories might be useful or relevant when it comes to comparing “sexual orientation” groups, with respect to

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things like health needs/outcomes and experiences with discrimination, etc. What this means politically is still taking shape for *when/how* asexuality will function properly as a sexual orientation. Should aces as a group be compared against all non-aces collectively or against specific other sexual orientation groups? Should aces with different kinds of experiences (whether romantic orientation, approach to relationships, or something else) be compared with non-ace groups matched to those experiences? Should they be combined with non-ace folks who have those similar experiences in terms of how they do relationships or other things? (When) should various ace identities be grouped together? There will likely be times when it makes sense to consider all of those possibilities and comparisons, because which one makes the most sense in any given situation is an empirical question.

At the same time, accepting this level of nuance does not require transforming romantic orientation into a reified, compulsory orientation, nor does it require fracturing “sexual orientation” into constituent parts (e.g., of romantic, aesthetic, sensual, etc.). Granted, one possibility— the most straightforward within a neoliberal context— is the creation of a new, independent, mutually exclusive and compulsory “orientations” (like romantic orientation) corresponding to each type of attraction or desire that can be articulated, excising it from the concept of “sexual orientation”. However, I caution that this set of compulsory orientations will be required to expand indefinitely to account for experiences it invariably fails to describe. Nevertheless, there are alternatives.

Asexual spectrum identities are and can be intelligible otherwise, but they may require a shift in perspective— letting go of the idea of sexual orientation as a series of obligatory, mutually exclusive categories, and reconstructing “sexual orientation” completely. Recall that sexual orientation (based in individual feelings of attractions and desires) has been reified as inherent characteristics of the neoliberal subject *because* its outcomes (i.e., via significant relationships) are—and historically had become— socially relevant. Sexual orientation situates people according to whether/how they fit within the socially normative expectations for *doing (significant) relationships*: are people inclined to do them “properly”?

Through an ace lens, the normative expectations about whether relationships are being done

“properly” are revealed to govern not only the *gender* of the people involved (as is conventionally assumed), but also other factors, such as *whether* people structure their lives at all around romantic relationships, and if they do, whether these are “properly” sexual— which depends on the context and positionality of the people involved— or alternatively whether people

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focus on other kinds of dyadic or non-dyadic relationships altogether. For example, ace communities have produced discourses of non-romantic, non-normative relationships, such as queerplatonik/quirkylatonic^[3] relationships, which have in turn been taken up by not-specifically-ace aromantic spectrum communities, and more broadly to a limited extent as well.

Through an ace lens, the regulatory force of amatonormativity comes into focus, making it possible to recognise the normative privileging of romantic relationships that are *supposed to be* central to people's lives (i.e., as the basis of nuclear families— presupposing sexuality within marriage or civil partnership) and more intimate and valuable than other kinds of relationships. Through an ace lens, we can start to see more clearly expectations around sexual entitlement/obligation and the commodification of sex and consent, offering new perspectives for unpacking those ideas. With an ace lens, we can challenge the sexualnormative expectations that shape our desires and our sense of who/what we *should* be and want, and the underlying structures of compulsory sexuality (e.g., Chasin, 2013; Gupta, 2015), focusing our energy to burn these structures down.

These perspectives open up new possibilities for personal relationships— for everyone, ace and otherwise— and more broadly, radical possibilities for (re)structuring families and societies. But realising such possibilities can only happen in resistance against neoliberalism. As time passes, we will see whether/how asexuality will ultimately allow itself to assimilate into a neoliberal discursive and moral order of sexual orientation, and whether/how it will support currents of resistance against this order and toward radical change. The stakes as sexual orientation responds to asexuality's challenge are high.

Notes

[1] This chapter addresses “sexual orientation” and not “sexual identity” for several reasons. While often used interchangeably, the words have different histories and meanings— the arguments in this chapter rely on the historical development of the social category of “sexual orientation” per se, as well as ongoing debates specifically about whether asexuality should be considered a “sexual orientation” within a discursive framing where “sexual orientation” would ascribe legitimacy. The pathologisation of asexuality has proceeded very differently than the pathologisation of lesbian, gay and bi+ identities to the point where many people accept that asexuality is a valid “identity” for an individual without accepting asexuality as a “sexual orientation” available to anyone, and therefore leaving open the possibility of “treatment” to “cure” (at least some people's) asexuality. Furthermore, framing asexuality in terms of “sexual identity” is less than straightforward: asexuality may be an identity, but it is not necessarily a *sexual* one— and individual

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aces will differ on this point. Finally, much of the asexuality scholarship discussed in this chapter approaches asexuality as something other than an “identity” using various different definitions and criteria to define the “asexual” target population— since not all the “asexual” people described by this work would self-identify as asexual, it seems inaccurate and epistemologically inappropriate to label asexuality within this discussion as a “sexual identity”.

- [2] It is unfortunately common for definitions like this to erase intersex people— most of whom are assigned either male or female at birth— to conflate sex and gender, and to erase non-binary people of any assigned sex.
- [3] Queerplatonic/quirkyplantonic relationships (QPRs) are relationships that are *not romantic relationships* but which are also *not adequately or properly described by “friendship”* (even if the people involved are indeed friends). QPRs are a meta-category “catch-all” for a diversity of non-romantic, non-normative relationships.

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