

A Discursive Look at the Friend / Partner Distinction: Implications for Asexual People

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Asexuality 101

Asexual -noun:

A person who does not experience sexual attraction
(Asexuality Visibility & Education Network)

Between 1% (Bogaert, 2004) and 4% (Poston & Baumle, 2006) of people are asexual. Asexuality is distinct from the DSM diagnosis of Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder, and has been discussed as a potential sexual orientation (Bogaert, 2006; Prause & Graham, 2007). The asexual community has been compared with LGBTQ communities, reflecting their shared emphasis on respecting self-identification (Scherrer, 2008). Scherrer noted the asexual community's critical distinction between the *sexual* and the *romantic*, which is especially important for asexuals who desire and participate in romantic relationships. Additionally, many asexuals also consider friendship paramount, with *friend-focused* asexuals organising their social lives around friendships instead of romantic partners (Jay, 2007). Asexuals are diverse, be they straight, gay or lesbian, biromantic, or otherwise maromantically inclined (or disinclined).

Friend:

One soul dwelling in two bodies
(Aristotle)

Friendship

Friendship in adulthood is considered to be a less intense, non-sexual analogue of romance. Researchers focus on (heterosexual) (1) same-gender friendship, assuming it to be uncomplicated by sexual desire; and (2) cross-gender friendship, presuming it to be unavoidably threatened by sexual desire. Yet, even heterosexual people sometimes report non-sexual, same-gender romantic desires for friends, and also same-gender sexual attractions in friendships that never become romantic (Diamond, 2003). The sexuality-based distinction between friendship and romance is problematic at best, especially given historic romantic friendships and modern *friends-with-benefits*. Even so, people easily discuss all their relationships without confusion.

How do people accomplish the distinction between friendship and romance in their conversations?

Example— Jean and Ann

I: What's the, you know biggest difference or between friendship and a dating relationship with you then?
A: hmm
J: **SEX?** (*A laughs*) (*J laughs*)
A: Yeah that's a big one. (*J laughs*) And I finnd th- well you usually **spend more time** with somebody when you're dating them, so (*J: umhum*) An uh the bound-aries I think are different [...] And **you can get mad** at different things at guys when you're in a relationship and when you're dating.
I: What do you mean by that?
J: Yeah like **you can't get mad at a guy friennnd** for =
[
A: or them when you're friends
A: = for not calling you. (*J: yeaaah*) **It's not the same** (*J laughs*) **as if your boy-friend doesn't call you.**
J: **Yeah totally**
[
A: **It's totally different than a guy friend not calling** (I: okay) **you =**
J: = **a guy friend not calling you, they'd be weirded out if you got upset =**
[
A: **that doesn't matter**
J: = probably they'd be like (*A: yeah*) **Come on I'm not your boyfriend**, as m-probably what I think.
A: **Umhum**
I: Okay
J: And I also wouldn't, I w-. **I don't think I'd get upset if guy friend didn't call me. If a GUY FRIEND SAID I'll call you, and then didn't I'd be like, Yeah whatever they got buussy. But you expect your boyfriend even if they're busy to make that time, that's why they're your boyfriend.**
A: yeah (I: okay) **you're supposed to be special** and (*J: YEAH*) kind of **set above everything else**, not aboove EVERYTHING but e- =
J: = **higher on the totem pole** (*A: yeah*) than if you were **just a friend**

Jean and Ann situate themselves morally (as upstanding persons) by aligning themselves with their moral order

Sex (sexuality) is the clear initial difference. They delve deeper: sexuality is not enough

Explicit prioritisation: valuing romantic partners above friends

Moral prescriptions for friends' and partners' behaviour & acceptable responses to violations
• Partners (not friends) should be priorities,
• Anger is permitted if a partner (but not friend) violates the moral order

Participants corroborate each others' accounts by acknowledging points and co-speaking

Discourse Analysis

Discursive psychology begins from the perspective that people's social worlds, including their identities and relationships, are constituted through their conversations and interactions both with other people and with themselves. Instead of treating language as transparent and merely descriptive, language is seen as constructing the very things it describes. Discursive psychology is not concerned with what people think or believe, but instead with what they actually *do* when they speak: *what* do people accomplish and *how*?

People hold each other accountable for what they say in conversation, and in doing so, they produce moral prescriptions about behaviour. Looking at what people explain or demand explanations for, and also what "counts" as a satisfactory explanation, discourse analysts infer the moral orders that speakers are orienting toward (Gergen & Walter, 1998). As people speak, they are constantly making themselves out to be moral persons in conversation (Harré, 1992).

Method

- 12 friend-pairs ages 18-25, post-secondary students
- Cross-gender and same-gender friends
- Variety of sexual orientations (straight, gay, bi)
- Conversation guide with friendship topics
- Research interview approximately 1 hour
- Recorded, transcribed and analysed

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Implications & Conclusions

Sexuality is deployed first to distinguish friendship from romance

- Asexuals must do more work to maintain this distinction & may need to generate new discourses
 - Online asexual communities *do* support extensive discussions about ways of doing relationships

Morally prescribed prioritising of romance over friendship = Morally sanctioned devaluing of friendship

- Since sexuality distinguishes romance from friendship
 - Asexual romantic partnerships will be taken less seriously than sexual romantic partnerships
 - Primary relationships of many asexuals (e.g., friendships) will not be fully recognised

People make themselves out to be moral persons by devaluing friendship

- Education about asexuality & promotion of friendship will not be enough to combat *sexual normativity*
 - All people (not just asexuals) need new discourses before they can stop devaluing friendship
 - All people need new moral prescriptions for relationships that will let them make themselves out to be moral persons without a) presuming sexuality; or b) devaluing friendship and asexuality