

2018

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Oliva-Farrell, Devin. "Asexuality: To Include or Not to Include a Slice of Cake in the LGBTQ+ Community" (2018). *Tredway Library Prize for First-Year Research*.

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Devin Oliva-Farrell

Asexuality: To Include or Not to Include a Slice of “Cake” in the LGBTQ+ Community

“Sex can be a weapon – a dagger that can leave wounds that will never fully heal,” expresses Lauren York in their article, “The ‘Threat’ of Sex.” Working towards becoming a writer and architect, York paints a vivid picture of what it is like to be asexual, which is defined as a lack of sexual attraction to others, in a society that is so utterly obsessed with sex. Because of the common assumption that everyone desires sex, York faces discrimination from family members, their therapist, and society. Society’s views on sex and sexual orientations have raised several issues for members of the LGBTQ+ community, and they have caused similar issues for asexuals like Lauren York as well. Because asexuals have faced discrimination from a lack of understanding of what asexuality is and due to misconceptions of it, asexuals desire to join the LGBTQ+ group in order to educate people on this sexual identity and have their sexual orientation be recognized as valid. However, asexuals have been struggling to be accepted in the community because some members feel that asexuals are either not queer enough to join the community or have not faced enough discrimination to be considered a part of LGBTQ+. This is simply not the case, though. In fact, Absolon and Doré highlight in their article, “Asexuality and LGBT: The Case for Inclusion,” that asexuals only desire to be recognized as a valid sexual orientation and want to feel accepted by people. Because there is so little information about this sexual identity, asexuals feel that joining the LGBTQ+ group will be one of the best ways to contribute to the group while also receiving acceptance (Absolon and Doré 6). Thus, asexuality should be included in the LGBTQ+ community for three main reasons: 1) to deconstruct and analyze how society’s assumptions about sexual identities cause harm for those who do not align

with these assumptions; 2) to aid people in thinking critically about assumptions related to sexual activity and norms; and 3) to provide acceptance of people who identify outside society's norms and are not included in the LGBTQ+ group.

Before jumping directly into the debate, there needs to be an explanation of what asexuality is and how this definition can affect the way society views relationships. As defined in "General FAQ" by The Asexual Visibility & Education Network, also known as AVEN, a person who self-identifies as an asexual is "someone who does not experience sexual attraction." In Anthony Bogaert's article, "Asexuality: What It Is and Why It Matters," the author explores whether this definition fits asexuality or not and analyzes the differences between sexual attraction and romantic attraction. In the beginning of the paper, Bogaert highlights that the subjective definition will be used over the physiological definition. The subjective definition is how people internally view their sexual attraction, while the physiological definition results from sexologists studying people's physiological arousal while using devices like the penile strain gauge and vaginal photoplethysmograph. Bogaert argues that the subjective definition fits better because it best captures "the 'psychology' of sexual orientation" (365).¹ Moreover, Bogaert believes that if these people do not perceive a sexual attraction toward others, then they would be much less likely to have sex with them, even if these people exhibited sexual arousal during physiological study. From there, Bogaert launches into the history of the definition of asexuality,

¹ Regarding the definition of "sexual orientation," the physiological definition excludes asexuality as a sexual orientation because there is no sexual attraction that is oriented to another person. As a result, people who do not experience a sexual attraction to anyone could not self-identify as asexual. While a person is able to identify or dis-identify with a sexual orientation, it appears odd to identify as a sexual orientation that is not considered a sexual orientation. This would create the same issue for people who self-identify as aromantic because there is no romantic attraction directed to anyone. In addition to this, because asexuality would not be considered a sexual orientation, people who identify as asexual could not be protected under the law that protects people from facing discrimination towards their sexual orientation. Thus, the subjective definition of sexual orientation (and romantic orientation) aligns better than the physiological definition.

stating that this definition has, in part, come from theories of sexual orientation. For instance, using Michael D. Storms's model, Bogaert explains that heterosexuals are rated high on having attraction to the opposite gender, gays and lesbians are considered high on same-gender attraction, bisexuals are rated high on opposite-gender and same-gender attraction, and asexuals are rated as low on both of these attractions (364).² For the purposes of this paper, gender is defined according to Judith Butler's interpretation in *Queer: A Graphic History* by Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele as the following: "[gender] is *performative* – our gender *is* our expressions and behaviors (rather than those expressions and behaviors being the result of some underlying gender identity)" (79). As Bogaert indicates in the article, because asexuals either have a very low sexual attraction to other people or have none at all, this would exclude anyone who is chaste or celibate (people who choose not to have sex at all) if these people still have a sexual attraction (364). In the article, "Asexuality: Myths, Misconceptions and Other Things That Are Just Plain Wrong," the author discusses common misconceptions about asexuality which "are things that people have actually said to or about asexual people." One particular misconception the author highlights is the belief that asexuality is identical to celibacy. However, as the author indicates, sexual orientation is determined by people's sexual attraction to others whereas celibacy is indicated by people's behavior. For instance, self-identified asexuals can also be celibate because they do not have sex, or they cannot be celibate because they do have sex. Because society often views asexuality as a choice and not just a lack of attraction, this can lead

² In "Asexuality: What It Is and Why It Matters," Bogaert uses the term "sex" instead of "gender" when defining sexual attraction. Because biological sex is often conflated with gender, it is necessary to make the distinction between the two. For one, sexual orientation is often defined as having an attraction towards a gender, not towards a sex. Second, this is because using biological sex creates a binary of people experiencing attraction to either the opposite sex or the same sex. Asexuality, as will be shown, demonstrates that people experience no attraction to any gender, thus leaving open the idea that sexual orientations can involve the attraction to no genders, multiple genders, etc. Thus, this is why "gender" is used instead of "sex."

to people denying asexuality as a sexual orientation.³ Thus, it is important to realize that chastity and asexuality are not equivalent (“Asexuality: Myths, Misconceptions...”). From there, Bogaert examines the difference between sexual attraction and romantic attraction. On AVEN’s website, romantic attraction is defined as a “[d]esire of being romantically involved with another person” while sexual attraction is a “[d]esire to have sexual contact with someone else” (“General FAQ”). According to Bogaert, it is often believed that these two attractions will align; however, there is evidence to suggest that this is not always the case. Thus, as the author explains, asexuals are capable of feeling romantically attracted to the opposite gender, same gender, both genders, multiple genders, non-binary gender identities, or neither gender.⁴ Whatever the romantic attraction, it does not mean that people who lack a sexual attraction are not asexuals (365). The significance of this lies in the fact that society tends to believe that good, well-functioning relationships are based on people having sex. In *Queer: A Graphic History*, Barker and Scheele highlight that Gayle Rubin created the sex hierarchy, which demonstrates society’s views on acceptable and unacceptable sexual activities and behaviors. The socially acceptable behaviors are considered part of the “good charmed circle,” while those outside of this circle are known as “bad outer limits.” Within the “good charmed circle,” socially acceptable activities include conventional sex, heterosexual relationships, being married, having a monogamous relationship, being procreative, sex being free, being in a relationship and there only being two people, having

³ The argument that asexuality is equivalent to celibacy may stem from the idea that all people experience sexual attraction, thus anyone who does not desire sex with other people must be celibate (again, choosing not to have sex with people) instead of not experiencing sexual attraction to others. This idea also shapes how people view bisexuality as a choice of wanting to have sex with multiple genders instead of people experiencing sexual attraction to their gender and other genders. With this in mind, it is important to understand how celibacy does not determine people’s sexual orientation, for this is simply a behavior and not an attraction felt by people.

⁴ Once again, Bogaert lists the term “sex” when defining romantic orientation. As noted in the previous footnote, “gender” will be used instead for the same reason.

same generational sex, having sex at home only, no pornography, and not using anything but bodies to have sex (49). Through examining how asexuals can still have well-meaning relationships without sex, people can begin to realize that society's views on acceptable behaviors towards sex are restrictive and oppressive. After understanding this, sexual activities and sexual identities that are scrutinized for being outside of the norm can be understood as being just as socially acceptable as everything listed in the "good charmed circle." Therefore, by understanding people who identify as asexual, society can avoid harmful misconceptions and realize how relationships can be valid without adhering to society's ideas of normal.

In the debate of including or excluding asexuals from the LGBTQ+ community, opponents argue that asexuals have no place for a few central reasons. One of these key reasons revolves around self-identified asexuals not experiencing a similar level of oppression like other members in the community. In Dominique Mosbergen's article, "LGBT, Asexual Communities Clash Over Ace Inclusion," this point is discussed by Julie Decker. Author of *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality*, Decker explains that "[t]here are a lot of gay folks who get angry when we suggest asexual people belong [in the LGBT community]. And that's primarily based on the supposition that asexual people do not experience oppression and that any prejudice, discrimination or discomfort we experience is not 'as bad' as theirs" (qtd. in Mosbergen, "LGBT, Asexual Communities..."). Essentially, Decker's statement exposes how members of the community base inclusion or exclusion on the amount of oppression faced from society. Despite whatever discrimination self-identified asexuals have encountered, LGBTQ+ members feel that this discrimination does not amount to what other gays and lesbians have experienced. This form of gatekeeping from members of the LGBTQ+ community highlights

how self-identified asexuals face oppression from outside and within the LGBTQ+ group. This argument, in addition to a few other points, is used in anon12's article, "Cishet Asexual People in the LGBTQ+ Community?" Combining these ideas, the author, who identifies as a lesbian, discusses why cishet⁵ asexuals should be excluded from the community, and thereby argues why asexuals should form a different community. To highlight this point, anon12 includes a description from Soren, a friend of anon12 who identifies as part of the asexual spectrum. Soren's first point centers on the asexual community being homophobic, using words like "allosexual" (anyone who experiences sexual attraction and is not considered asexual), which offends the LGBTQ+ community. This is because the word, "allosexual," is believed to group people who experience sexual attraction towards the same gender with heterosexual people, leading to the oppressed being grouped with their oppressors. Moreover, it causes SGA (same/similar gendered attraction) relationships to appear only as sexual relationships, which a lot of the members of the community find "dehumanizing" (qtd. anon12). To add to this, Soren highlights that cishet asexuals do not fit the criteria for being in the LGBTQ+ community, which Soren defines as "experience[ing] same/similar gender attraction or be[ing] under the trans umbrella" (qtd. anon12). As the final point, anon12's friend argues that SGA and transgender people have experienced a harsher oppression than asexuals have. Even if asexuals have faced some discrimination from society, Soren explains, they are still more privileged than SGA and

⁵ In the article, anon12 defines cishet as the following: "cisgender/heterosexual (being "cis" means you agree with the gender/identity you were assigned to at birth)." This definition, however, leads to a contradiction and a misunderstanding. While a person can be asexual and cisgender, it is not the case that this person can be asexual and heterosexual just based on the definitions of these two sexual orientations. By implying that asexuals are also heterosexuals, the author is stating that people who lack a sexual attraction to others also experience consistent attraction to the opposite gender. Thus, the author creates a contradiction. It is possible that the author meant to describe asexual people who are heteroromantic (experiencing romantic attraction to the opposite gender). Due to the definition used in the article, though, it is difficult to pinpoint the author's intention, but, as shown above, the definition leads to a contradiction and can create possible misconceptions about asexuals.

trans people. Building off of this, anon12 states that asexuals do not share a similar history with the LGBTQ+ community because activists back then were fighting for the right to exist, not for the right to have a sexual orientation be shown to society. Furthermore, anon12 explains that asexuality was never considered as a disorder such as HSDD (hypoactive sexual desire disorder), while homosexuality was considered to be an illness. As a result, people who claim that HSDD is connected to asexuality are “claiming a disprivilege that doesn’t exist” (anon12). Noting all of these points, anon12 and Soren’s argument mainly focuses on excluding cishet asexuals based on being homophobic, not facing the same level of prejudice as other members of the community, and being much more privileged in society. Because of these reasons, they propose that asexuals should form their own community. This would result in cishet asexuals not intruding into the LGBTQ+ community and allowing for asexuals to still educate others on the sexual identity. Plus, as pointed out by the author and friend, people who are “ace (a term used to describe asexuals) *and* LGBTQ ... get to reap benefits from both communities” (anon12).⁶ Therefore, as shown by the opponents’ views on the debate, asexuality should be excluded from the LGBTQ+ community and asexuals should create their own group.

Proponents, however, disagree with the idea that asexuals should be excluded from the community based on not experiencing a similar level of oppression. To begin with, Mosbergen demonstrates in the article, “LGBT, Asexual Communities Clash Over Ace Inclusion,” that several misconceptions have been raised due to asexuality not receiving any major attention. As

⁶ According to anon12 and Soren, the criteria for being a member of the LGBTQ+ community is based on being gay, lesbian, or being under the trans umbrella. Thus, in order for a self-identified asexual to be a member, this person must be considered under the trans umbrella. As discussed in the previous footnote, an ace person cannot be gay or lesbian any more than the ace person being heterosexual. This criterion not only excludes several sexual orientations from the community, but it also severely limits the amount of self-identified asexuals being a part of both communities.

pointed out by Julie Decker, self-identified asexuals face oppression like “a ‘coming out’ period and struggle with discrimination and alienation” (qtd. in Mosbergen, “LGBT, Asexual Communities...”). This is demonstrated in Lauren York’s article, “The ‘Threat’ of Sex.” When York came out to their family, they experienced a not-so-positive reaction. York described the experience as the following:

My aunt said I wasn’t really asexual, that I just hadn’t found the right person yet. My grandma said that if I was asexual, it was because I’d been abused as a child and just didn’t remember it – I still haven’t completely forgiven her for that. My parents didn’t say much, but looking back, I’m sure they either didn’t believe me or didn’t understand what I was saying.

As illustrated by York’s “coming out” experience, asexuals do face oppression due to society’s lack of education on the sexual identity, and this oppression can even come from family members. Thus, asexuals need to join the LGBTQ+ group in order to spread awareness of the sexual orientation. This will allow for family members and others to recognize that identifying as asexual does not equate to being broken or not finding the right person yet. Moreover, asexuals face other discrimination that is similar to the experiences of other sexual orientations. For instance, in Bogaert’s article, the author points out that society tends to favor sexual⁷ people over asexuals, thus giving more benefits to those in long-term relationships than those who are single (368). In addition to this, Mosbergen discusses in the article, “Battling Asexual Discrimination, Sexual Violence and ‘Corrective’ Rape,” that asexuals also tend to face issues such as the threat of corrective rape in order to “turn them straight,” a threat which has also been used towards

⁷ The use of “sexual” here is meant to represent anyone who experiences consistent sexual attraction to others.

gays and lesbians. In the article, Julie Decker describes her experience of being sexually assaulted at the age of 19 by a male best friend. Decker explains that, after describing her asexuality, she wished this friend goodnight. However, the friend tried to kiss her, and when she rejected him, the friend “started to lick her face ‘like a dog’” (qtd. in Mosbergen, “Battling Asexual Discrimination...”). Besides this moment, Decker highlights that this is common in the asexual community, and she has also “received death threats and has been told by several online commenters that she just needs a ‘good raping’” (qtd. in Mosbergen, “Battling Asexual Discrimination...”). Combining all of these points, it is evident that asexuals do, indeed, experience oppression that is similar to other members of the LGBTQ+ community. Thus, asexuals should be included in the community because awareness of this sexual identity can help eliminate society’s stigma towards sexual identities that are not considered normal.

After carefully examining both sides of the debate, it is evident that asexuals should be included into the community because, overall, it will create more benefits for both communities than keeping them separate. For a start, Absolon and Doré point out in their article that asexuals can find relief from being included in the LGBTQ+ community. This is due to being accepted by people who also do not fall under traditional sexualities. For instance, Absolon and Doré highlight that the LGBTQ+ community does not simply focus on obtaining rights but “also acts as [a] ‘safe space’ to bring people together, provide support and to promote awareness and understanding” (6). Because people who self-identify as asexual desire a place where they feel welcomed, it makes sense to combine the two communities. In addition to this, asexuals can benefit the community by challenging society’s ideas of normal sexual orientations, relationships, and gender roles. In the article, "Development and Validation of the Attitudes

Towards Asexuals (ATA) Scale," Hoffarth et al. created a method that evaluates the anti-bias towards asexuals but still controls for singlism (people who choose not to be involved in relationships). After analyzing the results from their experiment, the authors provide evidence which indicates that prejudice towards asexuals is "linked with rigid worldviews about heterosexist sex roles" (Hoffarth et al. 97). In other words, asexuals are targeted by people because they pose a threat to traditional gender norms. Even in cases where asexuals identify as a man or a woman, they still pose some challenges to society's views on gender, which is indicated in MacNeela and Murphy's article, "Freedom, Invisibility, and Community: A Qualitative Study of Self-Identification with Asexuality." These two authors conducted an open-ended online survey that consisted of 66 self-identified asexuals who were from an online asexual community. The open-ended questions allowed for these participants to answer questions around their gender identity, age, experience with disclosing their sexual identity to others, etc. with much more freedom (799). As a result of the study, MacNeela and Murphy concluded that it was common for participants who identified as asexual and either a man or a woman⁸ to have "critically questioned traditional expectations, drawing on or distancing from one or both genders" (806). For example, one participant who identified as a woman and was around the age of 20 stated, "So I call myself a girl with boylike traits" (806). Thus, self-identified asexuals can aid the LGBTQ+ community by causing people to critically think about traditional gender norms and how this intersects with sexual orientation, age, class, and race. In addition to challenging society's views on gender, asexuality can benefit the LGBTQ+ community in other ways. In

⁸ In MacNeela and Murphy's article, "Freedom, Invisibility, and Community: A Qualitative Study of Self-Identification with Asexuality," some participants identified as "male" or "female" for their gender. Because terms like "male" or "female" refer back to one's biological sex instead of one's gender identity, the terms "man" or "woman" will be used instead for reference to one's gender identity. Again, this is because terms used for one's biological sex need to be separated from terms referencing one's gender identity.

Mosbergen's article, "Asexual Community Leaders Look Toward the Future," the author discusses what the future potentially entails for asexuals. A PhD student who has studied asexuality for 5 years at the University of Warwick, Mark Carrigan, expresses that understanding asexuality can provide cultural change and acceptance similar to the way the LGBTQ+ community has. For example, one way to demonstrate this acceptance is by altering the way researchers study sexual orientations as a whole, allowing for them to "look at all people, categorize all people, in a way that wasn't there before," as stated by Anthony Bogaert, the author of *Understanding Asexuality* and a professor at Brock University (qtd. in Mosbergen, "Asexual Community..."). Finally, as expressed by Absolon and Doré in "Asexuality and LGBT: The Case for Inclusion," asexuals will have the ability to "challenge the prevailing heteronormative presumptions" and erase homophobia, a goal which is similar to those of the LGBTQ+ community (4). To conclude, inclusion of asexuality in the LGBTQ+ community will not only bring comfort and feelings of acceptance to asexuals, but understanding what asexuality is will also alter the way society views sexual identities, traditional gender norms, and presumptions surrounding people's sexual orientations.

Solutions to including asexuality into the LGBTQ+ group involve a couple of methods. At the current moment, the solution to this issue is to provide awareness to people on how asexuals can benefit the LGBTQ+ community and how asexuals share a plethora of similarities with other sexual orientations. Moreover, because asexuals suffer from similar issues that LGBTQ+ members face, it can be demonstrated to others that asexuals also desire to join the community in order to "fight all forms of prejudice and misinformation," according to Absolon and Doré (6). Absolon and Doré also emphasize the importance of understanding that asexuality,

while different from other sexual orientations, is still a valid sexual orientation that deserves to feel accepted in the community (4). Because of this, using online sources to spread such awareness can lead to people accepting asexuals into the LGBTQ+ community. Online sources, after all, are the reason self-identified asexuals have discovered their sexual orientation, for AVEN is one of the few sources that explains the asexual spectrum. Thus, it would make sense to use online sources in order to share information on asexuality and how it can benefit LGBTQ+ members. Through spreading awareness on how asexuality can provide benefits from being included within the LGBTQ+ community, self-identified asexuals can finally receive support and acceptance from other people who have also fought to gain validation and exist in a world that denies them as people.

Altogether, the inclusion of self-identified asexuals in the LGBTQ+ group will not only benefit asexuals but everyone else as well. Through deconstructing and analyzing society's views on sexual orientation, gender norms, and what constitutes a valid relationship, asexuality will allow for more acceptance and understanding of other sexual and gender identities, along with allowing people to critically reflect on how asexuality intersects with other aspects of life. With these newfound explorations, people can find a better understanding of themselves, thus perhaps finding themselves to feel happier and much more accepted in a society that is determined to categorize everything.

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