

Asexuality: The Unseen Identity

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Relationships are hard. Shelby, a subject of Anthony Padilla's video on asexuality, knew this but did not yet understand how much harder relationships would be for her. Shelby disclosed to Padilla during an interview that she was a virgin when she met her first boyfriend. Apparently, her boyfriend knew. That does not mean that he liked it. He began manipulating Shelby, telling her there was something wrong with her because she did not want to have sex. Shelby thought she was broken. He said she was being dramatic and that she should just get it over with. It did not matter what she thought. Thankfully, Shelby left the relationship before she was coerced into anything and began looking for an explanation as to why she did not want to have sex. Then she found out about asexuality (12).

The Basics of Asexuality

Asexuality is equally as complex as it is simple. A very basic way to phrase it would be like this: take the way a straight man feels about another man or how a straight woman feels about another woman. This is how asexual people feel towards everyone, regardless of gender. The finer details are much more complicated, but I have found that this is an excellent way to describe asexuality to people first learning about it. There are two factors that make asexuality complicated: romantic attraction/orientation and the asexuality spectrum.

Romantic Orientation

Romantic attraction is defined as "the desire for intimate and emotional relationships" (14) (in this case, intimate does not mean sexual). Romantic attraction has been described as feeling safe to express your emotions to someone, feeling safe to be vulnerable with them (3). For many people, their sexual and romantic orientations match. Other people have adopted the Split Attraction Model where their sexual orientation is separate from their romantic orientation. The Split Attraction Model is not exclusive to asexual people; however, asexuals find it necessary to describe both their sexual and romantic orientation (13). It appears that for every sexual orientation, there is a romantic orientation. For example, biromantic is a romantic attraction to two genders. Other examples are homoromantic, heteroromantic, panromantic, and aromantic (13).

Asexuality Spectrum

The asexuality spectrum, or Ace Umbrella, is also complicated. The Ace Umbrella covers many different types and degrees of asexuality (15). There are three most common subsections of asexuality: demisexual, gray asexual, and asexual (15). The simplest of the three is asexual, which means that one is not sexually

attracted to people. Demisexual is similar to asexual in that demisexuals are not sexually attracted to people until a deep emotional connection is formed (16). Gray asexuals, on the other hand, experience sexual attraction very irregularly, sometimes with years in between occurrences (16). It is also worth mentioning that some asexuals are willing to have sex in order to please or become closer to their partners, and these individuals are referred to as sex-favorable. Others are unwilling to have sex or are disturbed by it, and are referred to as sex-repulsed (12).

Misconceptions About Asexuality

A large problem that asexual people have to deal with is the massive number of assumptions and myths that many people believe are true. Not only do people believe these misconceptions, but some also use them against asexual people to discredit and ignore their sexuality.

“Asexuality is the same as celibacy.”

“Asexuality is a choice.”

Two major misconceptions are that asexuals are celibate and that asexuality is a choice (2). This is equivalent to saying being straight or gay is a decision someone makes. The misconception that asexuality is a choice belittles those who identify on the asexuality spectrum. Another common misconception is that asexuals cannot fall in love (2). This misconception is a result of people confusing or failing to understand the difference between romantic orientation and sexual orientation. Lastly, one of the most damaging and harmful misconceptions about asexuality is that asexual people are simply confused and inexperienced and that they will change their minds once they've had sexual experiences (2). Not only does this viewpoint dismiss asexuality, but it also perpetuates rape culture and corrective rape (10).

Misconceptions aside, there is even more active and voluntary discrimination against those who identify on the asexual spectrum. Many people do not see asexual people as humans because people believe that sexual desire is a fundamental part of human nature (10). Due to this, asexuals face the same discrimination as others in the LGBTQ+ community. That includes bias in multiple settings, verbal and physical abuse, and corrective rape (8).

Looking at Discrimination

One would assume that, since asexuals are not pursuing a sexual relationship, they wouldn't face some of the discrimination that other more visible members of the LGBTQ+ community face. In actuality, asexual people are judged, insulted, and, in some cases, assaulted because of their sexual identity. Heartbreakingly, a marriage can legally be terminated if a perfectly happy and loving couple does not have sex (8). And, as surprising as it seems, couples in which one or both partners are asexual can be denied adoption rights even if they are not a same-sex couple (8). Asexuals can also be denied housing and jobs because of their sexual orientation, much like the rest of the LGBTQ+ community. The asexual community is also subject to mockery for their sexual identity (8).

Discrimination: The Medical Community

All of this is heartwrenching, but there are still worse forms of discrimination that asexuals face. Discrimination by health care professionals is not uncommon. Many professionals believe that asexuality is a mental disorder or a symptom of an illness, mental or physical (9). Others have been prescribed corrective therapies, such as hormone supplements, and instructed “to have sex until [they] like it” (9). Actions like these have caused many members of the asexual community to severely distrust the medical community (9).



Verbal and Sexual Abuse

Possibly the most harmful forms of discrimination towards asexual people are corrective rape and/or the verbal and sexual harassment and assault. Julie Decker was subjected to this fate by a friend of hers. In her statement to HuffPost, she disclosed that her friend knew that she identified as asexual. Even so, he licked her face and said, “I just want to help you” (10). Decker went on to receive comments to her storylike “I could turn you sexual, just give me

an hour,” and “you are autistic, you are broken” (6). She has even received rape and death threats such as; “Man, I want this chick to get raped,” “Please die of AIDS. Thanks,” “I’mma rape this bitch one day and show her the joys of orgasm,” “Just kill yourself, please... in a very painful way,” and “asexuals are just people who haven’t been raped hard or often enough” (6). These anonymous comments send a powerful message about what is valued in terms of sex and sexuality.

“I could turn you sexual, just give me an hour.”

I would like to note that I wrote this with no intention of belittling or comparing any group or individual’s hardship. This was written with the intent to bring awareness to the hardships and discrimination that asexual people face every day.



How Can We Help?

This is not a matter of whether asexuality is an orientation or a psychological condition because several studies have declared that asexuality is a legitimate sexual orientation (7). This is about the issues that asexuals face, both inside and outside the LGBTQ+ community. Solutions to many of these issues are complex and are not immediately effective. However, we must strive to fix these problems and make headway towards acceptance and allow asexuals to feel safe and comfortable with their identity.

Visibility

Some of the most important and helpful actions that many are already taking are raising awareness and mak-

ing the asexual community visible. Such efforts make it so people outside the community not only learn about asexuality, but also understand it. However, telling people is not enough. They must be taught and encouraged to be allies (4). If people were to learn more about this sexual orientation, support asexual people themselves, and help spread the word and advocate, it would help erase the misconceptions about asexuality. Activism could also help to shift society’s opinion about the community to a more accepting standpoint(11). One group working on an initiative to improve conceptions of asexuality is the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). AVEN was created to foster public acceptance and help the asexual community grow. Since its founding in 2001, they have organized numerous outreach events and conferences to inform people about asexuality and facilitate understanding(1).

There are numerous flags that represent all of the various orientations on the Asexual Spectrum. There is an Asexual flag, a Demisexual flag, a gray-asexual flag, as well as many others. Romantic orientations are often represented by a heart that is the color of the flag that corresponds with one’s romantic orientation.

The Medical Community

We also need to alter the education that medical professionals receive to include an understanding of asexuality (9). In truth, medical students are taught very little about gender and sexual minorities. Furthermore, there is very little research on asexuality overall (9). Yes, there are several studies surrounding the psychology of asexuals (7), but in the grand scheme of things, there is not much research about asexuality(9). Asexual aromantic medical student Anna Goshua has stated that “Gaps in education and research are compromising the medical care that asexual people receive. They are deterring us from being honest with our providers or from accessing medical services entirely” (9). If medical practitioners knew more about asexuality, they would be better equipped to help their patients, and their asexual patients would be more likely to trust them.

“It is most effective before you’ve had sexual intercourse.”



Verbal and Sexual Abuse

The issue of corrective rape is the most difficult of the aforementioned issues to resolve. However, I am going to focus on corrective rape and not rape as a whole. This issue extends to the entire LGBTQ+ community, and unfortunately it cannot be resolved in its entirety. Some people believe that sexual orientation is affected by one's environment and not biological factors. As a result, they think that they can change someone's sexual orientation, and in their mind they can "fix" it. This is seldom the case (5). So, if more people are educated about asexuality and how it is a matter of biology, the rate of corrective rape would theoretically decrease. The rate of corrective rape can also be reduced by spreading awareness about the issue itself and advocating for survivors. The same goes for verbal abuse. The more information is commonplace, the less verbal ammunition will be available. We should also discourage people from engaging in verbal abuse. However, matters of violence will likely always exist, and a perfect solution will not.

Review

Asexuality is a broad and complicated sexual orientation. From misconceptions, discrimination, and even sexual assault, those who identify as asexual face complex problems. The solutions to these problems take a lot of work and time. However, words have power, and that power can be used for good. The more that people both within and outside of the asexual community use that power, the less prevalent these problems will be. Fewer people will have to run away from relationships

like Shelby's. Fewer doctors will unknowingly discriminate against asexual patients as Anna's doctor did. Fewer asexuals will be threatened with rape and death as Julie has been. The more we use the power of words, the more the asexual community can come out of the shadows and live their lives just like everyone else.



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