The Asexual Perspective:

Intimacy Without the Intimate

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ABSTRACT: Human relations and experiences are limited when dominant social orders are enforced through state intervention, heteronormative practices and assumptions, and ideologies that rest on the understanding that there is a right way to have sex. In this paper, I will rework queer theory frameworks and discourse to include asexual perspectives that challenge heteronormativity and state institutions of relations. I challenge the idea that relationships cannot be intimate without sex. Heteronormative ideologies around sex are considered, including what would happen if sex and physical intimacy were less prominent in creating relations. This is achieved by incorporating an asexual perspective as a key concept in queer theory. I will conclude by considering queer literature surrounding dominant ideologies and critiques of singledom, sexual reproductivity, and kin-making. The introduction of an asexual perspective to queer theory frameworks can expand critiques of heteronormativity to consider the purpose of sexual intimacy in relations.

KEYWORDS: Asexuality, heteronormativity, Queer Theory, relations, sex

Introduction

An absence or decline in sex is one of the first signs that a relationship is doomed. We can consider grocery store magazines, internet forums, or couples therapists and realize that the maintenance of a long-term living relationship relies on the upkeep and adaptation of sex over time (Mark and Lasslo 2018, 3). The conclusion is clear: find new ways to fuck or find a new (better) relationship. The acceptance of sex as necessary for healthy, long-term (often straight and preferably monogamous) relationships results from cultural, social, and political discourse on what sex and relations can and ought to be. Sex remains present in the experience of relating with others, oneself, and the world. While queer theory troubles and questions narratives that maintain dominant ideologies of heteronormativity, monogamy, and aspirational life, it fails to question the dominance of sex-centred narratives. Exploring the possibility of implementing an asexual perspective in queer theory frameworks and critiques allows us to confound why sex is so central to queer collectives, movements, and theory. Reworking queer theory frameworks and discourse to include readings of asexuality and asexual perspectives can challenge heteronormativity and state institutions of relations that prioritize sexual intimacy in queer and heterosexual relationships.

I begin the work of establishing an asexual perspective within queer theory by engaging with known queer theorists and their critiques of heteronormativity. Through examining Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper's work of asexual archiving of queer theory and queer history, I begin to answer what asexuality as a framework and perspective can contribute to the existing literature in queer theory. Asexuality and queerness function together as a specific failure to maintain dominant norms and discourse. Michael Cobb's work in queer theory establishes "singledom" as a chosen orientation and queer resistance to heteronormativity. His creation of a lonely figure is inherently queer but questionably asexual. The political potential of rejecting the dominant role of sex in relationships moves beyond the examination of a queerly asexual perspective, similarly to Lee Edelman's subversion of an ideal future. Edelman's political potential of disregarding heteronormative assumptions of reproduction and relationship forming lends itself well to exploring the subversion of disregarding sex-dominant norms. Expanding the analysis of compulsory heteronormative practices such as marriage and family, asexual perspectives can offer an image of the future that Kim TallBear sees as radically queer. TallBear's Indigenous-based perspective critiques dominant relationship structures and norms to question and resist settler-colonial relationship norms becoming so invasive and dominant. The work and concepts proposed by these queer scholars remain relevant and important critiques of heteronormativity. Applying an asexual perspective to key concepts in queer theory can only strengthen critiques of heteronormativity.

Asexuality is not confined to an individual's identity or orientation and can function as a perspective that questions the centrality and innate inclusion of sex in relations and culture. Shifting the focus of asexuality as a label or orientation towards a perspective maintains space for individuals' experiences with asexuality while providing opportunities for a more encompassing critique of the sex-dominated discourse.

Asexual Perspective: Defined

Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper use the work of queer scholars, such as Michael Cobbs, to question the discourse of intimacy, sexuality, queerness, and relations. They examine asexuality as an identity and resonance that can "enrich and expand queer possibilities" (Przybylo and Cooper 2014, 311). Asexuality, beyond the identity label of not experiencing sexual attraction or desiring sexual intimacy with other people, can be used to question what it is about queerness and relations that are so prominent in sexual ideologies. Przybylo and Cooper ask what can happen when asexuality is more present in our sociocultural understandings of queerness and sexuality? By applying an asexual framework or perspective to issues such as singledom, marriage, and the formation of adult relationships we can resist heteronormative assumptions of centering sex in relationships and kinmaking. What happens when asexuality moves from an identity to a framework that can shape and influence queer theory? They propose that "only through reading asexually can we expand and newly trouble queer understandings of intimacy, polyamory, partnership, kinship, and singleness and also trace asexuality in unexpected, and perhaps even undesirable, locations" (Przybylo and Cooper 2014, 304). Reading established queer literature and discourse with asexual perspectives troubles the dominant discourse that centers sex in political, social, and cultural connections.

Asexual Perspective: Finding Space in Queer Theory

Michael Cobbs grapples with the imperative nature of considering sex and physical intimacy in human relations. Cobbs starts to explore how sex can get in the way of understanding inherently queer existence but fails to create space for the purposeful absence of sex. The "sexlessness is attached to the singleness" (Cobb 2007, 208) and the status of single has much more to do with being lonely than being without sex. His attempts to leave sex behind in his understanding of loneliness and the queer experiences of singledom fall short of erasing sex from singledom. The single lonely figure could be asexual, or they could be misconstrued as lonely. Cobb's focus on the divides between single and coupled connections fails to account for the radical rejection of sex. For him, sexlessness refers only to the unattached single and lonely figure. An asexual perspective would complicate his single lonely figures to include coupled sexless people in intimate and emotional relationships.

Cobbs expresses interest in exploring different figures of singlehood. The Widow, the Anti-Social, the Priest, the Masturbator, and the Celibate. An asexual perspective could create a new figure to explore in understanding queer loneliness but deciding whether to distinguish between the Celibate and the Asexual becomes difficult. For queer theory perspectives of asexuality and loneliness, the Celibate and the Asexual can serve similar roles. They both dismiss sexual and physical intimacy as the foundation for human connection. The physical alone does not have to reflect the emotional alone that Cobb describes in Ardent's envisioning of

the crowd. The Celibate can resist the social, political, and cultural demands to be physically attached or connected to others. However, Cobbs resists the reading of celibacy being linked to the single life. He requests avoiding the concept that a single life must result in masturbation or celibacy. In attempts to avoid situating sex as central to being single or in a couple, sexual acts remain central in the forced absence. To assume the Celibate can function as a political and cultural game-changer would require an asexual perspective. The Celibate can mobilize to resist social expectations of engaging, wanting, or thinking about sex to queerly asexualize their existence. The Celibate, read from an asexual perspective, could challenge heteronormative assumptions without falling into emotional loneliness.

Even as Cobbs attempts to abandon sex, his arguments about loneliness remain rooted in the physical. The "press[ing]...together in order to eliminate the space between " (Cobb 2007, 216) only serves to highlight the emotional distance between the members of the crowd and increases loneliness. Including an asexual perspective in Cobb's queer work on the lonely single could decenter sex and complicate loneliness. Embracing the radical position of wanting to be single and choosing perceived loneliness removes pressures to constantly seek out companionship based on sexual or romantic connections. To be sexless is loneliness viewed as so undesirable by most as they unknowingly uphold sex-dominated heteronormative standards through relationship formations, human connections, and ideologies. Sex is so centred in imaginings of intimate adult relationships that it seems inconceivable and lonely to be without sex. An asexual perspective could explore the queerness of being physically alone or sexless while avoiding emotional or intimate isolation.

Cobb concludes his examination of the single on a comforting note of finally achieving sleep to escape the need for sex and the inescapable alone-in-a-crowd feeling. Cobb uses sleep post-coitus as an example of how being alone in rest or sleep after such intimate coupling can be comforting. There is no feeling of isolation attached to the lonely nature of sleep, it is not similar to being alone in a crowded room or unconnected to dominant society while surrounded by people. Sleep is a loneliness of rest and a possible connection to self. Asexual and queer perspectives can find rest in relations without needing to first complete "enough sex" (Cobb 2007, 218). The human connection of relating to a person and finding ways to love a person without needing to engage in the closing of the distance between bodies is queer. The comfort of distance from pressure to connecting sexually or romantically with one person (or any) challenges heteronormative standards and sex-centred narratives.

An asexual perspective never moves from single to coupledom, the marriage form is never achieved, and the child is never created. The future abruptly stops with those who do not engage in sexual intercourse as a method of connection or reproduction. Removing sex from queer theory to expand the asexual perspective troubles key touchpoints in queer theory and gay and lesbian politics. Sex for reproduction becomes necessary to reproduce the social order and maintain life. Heterosexual married couples must come together to continue life, regardless of political affiliations. The state can encourage couplings that provide a child who will best fit the dominant social order (white, able-bodied, middle class), and the Child can become the ideal political citizen through ideologically focused upbringings. Lee Edelman's examination of the politicization of the Child and the demonization of queer citizens is rooted in politics influenced by compulsory heteronormativity and other systems of power. The Child and the argument for their future frame all political decisions regardless of partisan opinions. The Child shapes the political logic that compels citizens and politicians into rational debates around life and preservation. Maintaining a "responsible" social order of preferring life to death becomes central to any political movement. It is hard to manifest a collective queer "fuck[ing] of the social order and the Child" (Edelman 2004, 29) when sexual relations for reproduction and pleasure are removed from relation-making. The political, cultural, and social battle for the future Child renders any mode of relating beyond heteronormative structures useless and remains present in an asexual queer perspective. However, including an asexual rejection of sex as the basis of happy and fulfilling relationships makes it easier to withdraw queer "allegiance, however compulsory, from a reality based on the Ponzi

scheme of reproductive futurism" (Edelman 2004, 4). Asexuality can serve as a challenge for reproductive futurism and the assumed heteronormative relationship. Reproductive futurism relies on the domain ideological limits on considering a future. The future must be secured through the reproduction of citizens who then ensure the reproduction of the dominant ideologies of social and cultural orders. Rejecting the ideology that relationships are built upon sex can mean rejecting relationships built on the future of the Child and the institutions of heteronormativity that place the future above the present. The disruption of reproductive futurism is not only in the lack of sex but also in the expansion of relationships beyond sex. Relations that can be classified into "husband/wife/spouse" roles can achieve the state's goals of the institution and norm reproduction alongside literal life reproduction. Connecting across family, friends, and kin challenges the future of the Child raised in a white, middle-class nuclear family.

Compulsory heterosexuality and biological reproduction often do not happen simultaneously in queer relationships. The state's political agenda to reproduce the social order through Edelman's Child thus directly opposes queer existence. For the sake of the future, it is against the state's interests to encourage queer and asexual existences and perspectives. The settler-state imposes a national agenda of heteronormativity, marriage, and reproduction values. At the heart of Kim TallBear's examination of the influences of settler-states are the imposed notions of "normal" that apply to sexuality, relations, and kin-making practices. TallBear proposes that intimacy, family, and relations are inherently tied to the state and institutions. The state strives to create the heteronormative assumption that all human beings must thrive in a monogamous heterosexual marriage where the purpose is to uphold oppressive institutions, own property, and create more white, heterosexual babies: this desire of the state is deeply harmful. TallBear enters discussions of discourse and ideology tied to marriage, state institutions, and heteronormativity through the act of "making love" as both physical and emotional connections between people. As Cobb ponders on the single person in a marriage-oriented world, TallBear offers radical Indigenous perspectives on how marriage works outside of settler-colonialism. Marriage remains important to political and cultural life, but what does a marriage become without sex or family? Applying an asexual perspective to TallBear's work challenging settler-colonialism and heteronormativity enriches the opportunities of making kin outside of marriage laws and institution-sanctioned relationships.

When rethinking what relations can look like outside of marriage, the centering of sex, and reproduction (familial values), an asexual perspective is beneficial. Making meaningful connections to humans beyond the crowd, a spouse or causal hookup, or family members can be achieved without physical or sexual intimacy. Queerifying kinmaking can entail (or) include more than same-sex relationships, polyamory, or communal living. I want to think beyond TallBear's kin network as familial (born and chosen) and read kin as an asexual approach to relationship building. Imagining a way of being together, without physically being together, a way of making love, without the sexual act of lovemaking, always uses an asexual perspective of leaving sex behind. The absence of physical intimacy and bodily closeness does not have to negate relation-making and kin connection.

Asexual Perspective: Applied

I want to develop and engage with an asexual perspective. I want to challenge queer theorists by asking why sex and physical intimacy are centralized in all relationships that exist outside the taboo. Why is it that sex has been framed as the dominant connection between adults? How does relating to people look without sex? Removing sex from intimate relationships in dominant discourse means enforcing professional boundaries, respecting age differences, or following religious faith. Purposefully leaving sex behind to most people means that you are choosing loneliness. I want to challenge the idea that without sex, relationships cannot be intimate. I can imagine a future where coupledom, marriage, and the Child are not the required formula for love. I must challenge the celibate loner, the unwedded spinster, and demonized death-queer because I have to find ways to see myself in queer literature. The disinterest of examining queer existence not centred around or framed against sex is a disservice to queer existence. Asexuality is an identity orientation that can continue to highlight disinterest in sex. Asexuality as a perspective does not require the aversion or disinterest in sexual and physical intimacy to be the defining trait. The asexual perspective can function alongside queerness to question what relationships can gain or become when formed on the foundations of other forms of intimacy and human connections. An asexual perspective can be applied to examine situations where long-term couples are feeling pressured to "spice up" their sex life, when adults struggle to make intimate and emotional friendships due to fears of "leading people on," or when life partners make decisions together without ever connecting sexually. Human relations and experiences are limited when dominant social orders are enforced through state intervention, heteronormative practices and assumptions, and ideologies that rest on the understanding that there is a right way to have sex. The solution does not become "just do not have sex" but to think and consider; what would happen if sex and physical intimacy were less prominent in creating relations?

Conclusion

The asexual perspective does not have to be limited to asking where and why sex is found in relationships between people, cultures, and institutions. There is political potential to form groups beyond sexual identity or orientation to reject the inherent nature of sex in popular discourses. Resisting heteronormative and neoliberal assumptions of singleness, futures, and marriage becomes more nuanced when we label the role of sexual intimacy and physical relations as central to upholding these systems of power. Shifting thinking away from what sex can look like and the many different forms sex can take and create relations to step toward a queerly asexual ideology where sex and physical intimacy connections are not the focus, roots into the foundational reasons for queer theory.

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