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What Asexuality Contributes to the Same-Sex Marriage

Discussion

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Abstract

While same-sex marriage debates have captured public attention, it is but one component of a broader discussion regarding the role of marriage in a changing society. To inform this discussion, I draw on qualitative, Internet survey data from 102 self-identified asexual individuals. I find that asexual relationships are complicated and nuanced in ways that have implications for a GLBTQ political agenda, including same-sex marriage recognition. In addition, findings indicate that assumptions of sex and sexuality in relationships are problematic and that present language for describing relationships is limiting. Findings suggest a social justice agenda for marginalized sexualities should be broader in scope than same-sex marriage.

Keywords

asexuality; LGBTQ; same-sex marriage

Introduction

This paper's starting point assumes that in the United States same-sex marriage is necessary but not sufficient for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ)¹ equality. I begin by tracing how I came to this conclusion, drawing on academic and popular press writings. Next, I describe how an exploration of asexual identities can extend and deepen a social and political agenda for BQLGT equality. Using findings from a survey of 102 asexual identified individuals, I offer several possible implications that inform the same-sex marriage discussion as well as contribute to social service practices with sexual minorities.

The Cultural Significance of Marriage: Material and Symbolic

Marriage is undeniably an important cultural institution in the United States. Despite the changing meanings of marriage, the role of cohabitation in contemporary relationships, and the rates of divorce, the institution of marriage remains materially important, as it dictates material privileges, resources, and benefits (Alm, Dickert-Conlin, & Whittington, 1999; Chauncey, 2005; Coontz, 2000; Herek, 2006; LaSala, 2007). According to a 1996 report by the United States General Accounting Office, 1049 federal laws benefit marriage relationships in the United States (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1996). Associating federal and state level benefits with marriage has the (un)intended consequence of legitimizing and supporting some relationships, while rendering others less important and invisible.

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¹This acronym is often presented in this order; however, this ordering privileges some identities over others. In this paper I will utilize these letters in various orders as a means of challenging this privileging.

Marriage privileges are meant to reward and legitimize certain relationships and sexual behaviors and in so doing stigmatize and marginalize others. Limiting access to rights such as affordable health care to those who are married, and simultaneously penalizing those who do not restrict their sexuality in this way (for example, gay men, lesbians, and single heterosexuals) is a form of oppressive social control. (LaSala, 2007, p. 182)

Regardless of the intentionality behind the distribution of these benefits, it is clear that marriage is an inherently political institution.

A prime example of this in the U.S. is anti-miscegenation laws, which prohibited individuals of different racial backgrounds from marrying. These laws were struck down in the case of *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967-- only slightly more than 40 years ago. The Supreme Court's ruling indicated that the individual freedom to marry [who one loves] is a right guaranteed by the constitution. Advocates at that time argued that the right to marry the person you love is a protected civil right. Similar arguments are being made contemporarily regarding same-sex marriage.

The material significance of marriage is not its only importance, as marriage has symbolic relevance in people's lives that is not reducible to its materiality. In a recent symposium on "Marriage and its Future," Cherlin (2004) argues that, "although the practical importance of marriage has declined, its symbolic significance has remained high and may even have increased" (p. 848). Cherlin describes the symbolic importance of marriage as having, "evolved from a marker of conformity to a marker of prestige. Marriage is a status one builds up to, often by living with a partner beforehand, by attaining steady employment or starting a career" (p. 855). The symbolic status associated with marriage arises from the strongly held individual and cultural significance attributed to marriage, and remains distinct from associated material benefits.

Cherlin also implies that the institution of marriage has undergone historical transformations. In "*Marriage, A History*," Stephanie Coontz (2005) describes the many changes marriage has experienced, most noteworthy arguing that individuals now marry for love, a reason that would not have made sense at other historical junctures.

By the end of the 1700s personal choice of partners had replaced arranged marriage as a social ideal, and individuals were encouraged to marry for love. For the first time in five thousand years, marriage came to be seen as a private relationship between two individuals rather than one link in a larger system of political and economic alliances. (Coontz, 2005, pp. 145-146)

This relatively new idea, that marriage is about love between individuals, has slowly transformed the institution of marriage. Contemporarily marriage has become a relationship status signifying love, shared intimacy, and sexuality. These remain defining characteristics in contemporary perspectives about the purpose of marriage.

Individuals in same-sex relationships are not immune (nor are their families and friends) from the desire to symbolically represent their love and commitment for each other through marriage. These material and symbolic advantages are not inherent to the institution of marriage, but rather, as I have argued are socially imbued. While civil rights arguments in favor of same-sex marriage often focus on the material aspects, the symbolic importance of marriage in people's lives cannot be overlooked. Not only should same-sex couples have access to the same material benefits and resources as their heterosexual counterparts, but they should also have access to the emotional and cultural meanings associated with marriage. Yet this is only *one* step in the move toward TLBQG equality.

Contentions over Same-Sex Marriage

The issue of same-sex marriage in the United States is often framed as a simple dichotomous debate, with a pro and a con side (Avery et al., 2007; Sullivan, 2004) as evidenced by popular opinion surveys that describe Americans' increasing polarization on the issue of same-sex marriage (Avery et al., 2007). Despite this widespread division along pro/con lines, arguments about same-sex marriage are quite varied (Ettelbrick, 1997; LaSala, 2007; Rausch, 2004; Stoddard, 1998; Sullivan, 2004; Wilson, 1996; Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003). For instance, consider same-sex marriage advocate Jonathan Rauch who argues that,

far from opening the door to all sorts of scary redefinitions of marriage, from polygamy to incest to who knows what, same-sex marriage is the surest way to shut that door. Far from decoupling marriage from its core mission, same-sex marriage clarifies and strengthens that mission. Far from hastening the social decline of marriage, same-sex marriage shores up the key values and commitments on which couples and families and society depend. Far from dividing and weakening communities, same-sex marriage, if properly implemented, can make the country both better unified and truer to its ideals. (Rauch, 2004, pp. 5-6)

Rauch's statement is telling, as he argues not only that same-sex marriage will extend civil rights to same-sex couples, but it will further embed the institution of marriage as a means of allocating rights, privileges and symbolic value.

Andrew Sullivan argues in favor same-sex marriage using a different strain of logic. He posits that homosexuals (*sic*) are largely stereotyped with a "homosexual lifestyle," where "emotional commitments are fleeting, promiscuous sex is common, disease is rampant, social ostracism is common, and standards of public decency, propriety and self-restraint are flaunted" (Sullivan, 2004, p. 149). His contentious argument is that the "homosexual lifestyle" is largely the product of being excluded from normative family life, and that the legal recognition of same-sex marriage would serve to domesticate and stabilize (and "normalize") same-sex relationships.

While structurally distinct, the arguments of Rauch and Sullivan both say that the legal recognition of same-sex marriage would strengthen the institution of marriage, "normalize" homosexual individuals, as well as shut the door to "scary redefinitions of marriage" (Rauch, 2004). In other words, these arguments support existing means of allocating material and symbolic benefits rather than disrupting this system, but would extend them to same-sex couples as well as opposite-sex ones.

Other sexuality scholars voice ambiguity or discomfort with the goal of same-sex marriage, arguing that marriage itself should be reevaluated. "We must not fool ourselves into believing that marriage will make it acceptable to be gay or lesbian. We will be liberated only when we are respected and accepted for our differences and the diversity we provide to this society. Marriage is not a path to that liberation" (Ettelbrick, 1997, p. 124). For Ettelbrick and others, it is limiting that marriage is presently the only pathway to material and symbolic recognition, as, "sexuality and relationships can be expressed in many forms, and it is unjust to privilege only a portion of them" (LaSala, 2007, p. 182).

One identity group that is often either omitted from or vilified within discussions of same-sex marriage, are polyamorous individuals. Polyamory is "a form of relationship where it is possible, valid and worthwhile to maintain (usually long-term) intimate and sexual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously" (Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006 p. 515). Research on polyamorous relationships argues that the structure of marriage does not accommodate polyamorous identities (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). While polyamorous individuals are one sexual minority group that has been already identified as elided from

contemporary marriage structures, it remains to be seen how the institution may similarly marginalize (or privilege) other sexualities.

Learning from Other Sexual Minorities: Asexuality

The widespread adoption of same-sex marriage is critical for the just allocation of rights and privileges to members of marginalized sexualities. However, same-sex marriage is not, and should not be, the only goal of the QTLGB agenda (Ettelbrick, 1997; LaSala, 2007). The experiences of asexual individuals can shed light on this issue. Asexuality is generally understood to be based on a lack of sexual attraction or desire (Bogaert, 2004; Jay, 2003; Prause & Graham, 2007; Scherrer, 2008). While this identity is relatively new, there is some research about asexuality in particular subpopulations such as lesbians (Rothblum & Brehony, 1993), persons with disabilities (Milligan & Neufeldt, 2001), and older individuals (Deacon, Minichiello, & Plummer, 1995). Research also exists regarding asexuality and mental health (Bogaert, 2006; Prause & Graham, 2007), the development of asexual identities (Prause & Graham, 2007; Scherrer, 2008), and asexual relationships (Scherrer, in press).

Elsewhere I have described how individuals come to asexual identities (Scherrer, 2008). Among the conclusions relevant to the current paper is that exploring asexual identities reveals alternative ways of understanding sexualities, specifically, that identities may also be constructed based on interests in romantic relationships. The current paper informs academic knowledge about asexuality and contributes to the literature about same-sex marriage as well as BLQTG politics more broadly.

Methods

In this study, I conducted an Internet survey utilizing surveymonkey.com. While survey methods such as these are often quantitative, in this survey all questions were open-ended. I chose this methodology, first, as qualitative methods are often useful in a relatively unexplored area (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), as asexuality is and second, as qualitative methods are useful for building or extending theory beyond a given population (Buroway, 1991). I employed qualitative *Internet* survey methodologies as this community is largely Internet based (Jay, 2003). Internet methods also offer participants some privacy, which can be important when dealing with vulnerable populations, such as sexual minority communities (Mustanski, 2001). Participant confidentiality was assured by collecting largely non-identifying information about participants and by utilizing surveymonkey.com's technologies for recording and storing information securely. This study received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Michigan.

To recruit participants I posted announcements in several message areas on the website asexuality.org, also known as the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network website (AVEN). This survey was open from January 3, 2007 to April 30, 2007. While there are other websites that focus on asexual identified individuals, most of them host web-links to AVEN making this site central to the Internet-based asexual identity community. Survey topics ranged from basic demographic information, questions about asexual identity, the importance of asexuality in relationships, and overlaps between asexuality and health and mental health experiences. In this paper, I have concentrated my analyses on the questions about the connections between asexuality and relationships in order to inform scholarship concerning same-sex marriage.

Data Analysis

To code and analyze these data, I used open and focused coding methods (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). This method, which draws heavily on the sociological concept of "grounded

theory,” prioritizes, “developing rather than verifying analytic propositions” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 143). During the open coding process relevant themes emerged, such as relationship status, monogamy, and language used to describe relationships; the data were then further analyzed in detail using these themes. Across these codes, I then looked for subcategories. The main themes are included here. I also searched for disconfirming evidence amongst the data and these are included as well.

Sample

While 160 participants followed the survey link, 2 selected out immediately. An additional 48 indicated interest, but responded to no questions possibly due to survey length. The responses of 8 individuals were unusable due to age requirements. A total of 102 participants are included in this analysis (see Scherrer [2008] for further description of the sample). Of these, 1 identified as Latino, 1 identified as Native American, 3 identified as Asian or Asian American, 9 identified as multi-racial, 84 identified as white or Caucasian and 4 were not easily categorized based on the information they provided. Eighteen identified as male, 75 identified as female, 2 identified as transgender, and another 7 of these were not easily categorized based on the information provided. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 66, with the average age of the respondents at 27.4, and the median at 21.

In this sample 22 participants described themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer, another 28 described themselves as heterosexual, while the remainder did not indicate a gendered object-choice associated with their asexual identity. This sample is also geographically diverse with 52 participants from the United States, 11 from England, 10 from Canada, 6 from Australia, 4 from Germany, 2 from Turkey and 1 participant each from France, Israel, Moldova, Russia, Scotland, Hungary, Sweden, Italy, New Zealand, European Union, with the remaining 7 giving responses that were challenging to categorize. The sample was heavily student identified (50), with the remaining participants reporting a diverse array of occupations including housewife, cashier, media designer, engineer, and teacher, to list a few. No questions were asked regarding income level.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that must be taken into account. First, while I am describing asexual identities, this sample was limited to those asexual individuals who are active on the Internet. Studies of Internet use show that these individuals are more likely to be female, young, well-educated, and from an urban area (Ekman, 2006; Ross et al., 2005). Second, this sample also relied heavily on those who are very invested in their asexual identity as they both located the survey on a message boards and donated their time to commenting. Third, neither random sampling nor recording a non-response rate was possible. Fourth, it was impossible to clarify responses, leaving some of the comments unintelligible. Additionally, while this paper theorizes about the connections to same-sex marriage, these data were not collected with this topic in mind, and therefore the respondents did not directly discuss same-sex marriage. Lastly, it is unclear how these arguments might extend to other groups (lesbians, heterosexuals, sexual, etc.). While I will theorize in this paper about how asexual relationships may be relevant to BTGQL politics, these theories should be cautiously applied to individuals with other marginalized sexual identities.

Results and Discussion

I begin by describing asexual individuals' characterizations of their relationships, whether they are currently single, coupled or actively rethinking relationships. I will then describe how the case of asexuality makes explicit an oft overlooked assumption about sexual behaviors in

intimate relationships. Lastly, this research makes apparent the paucity of language that is culturally available to describe relationships outside of heterosexual marriage.

Asexuality in Relationships

To determine relationship status amongst asexual individuals, I asked participants, “What is your current relationship status?” Seventy-eight of the asexual identified individuals in this sample described themselves as single, “happily single,” or “single and loving it,” while 17 described themselves as in a relationship either by reporting that they were “married” or that they had a boy/girlfriend. Another 7 participants had relationship statuses that, as they pointed out, were difficult to categorize. One example of this is Casey, a 21 year old white transgender participant: “This is a difficult question to answer because I’m not sure what your definition of a relationship is. I feel that there are many different types of relationships, and that they overlap and interact with each other. I would say that I am in more than one relationship at the moment.”

Singlehood—Most of the accounts of those who identified as single seemed purposefully positive, perhaps to contrast a stereotype of “singlehood” as a negative status (Darrington, Piercy, & Niehuis, 2005; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). For some, a “single” status was ideal in their imagined possibilities for relationships. For instance, when asked what an ideal relationship would look like, Lola, a 32 year old white woman, said “I don’t seek a single special relationship.” For Karl, an 18 year old white male, “I’m not sure really. I don’t think I want to be in a relationship, though if I [was] forced I would probably want someone with similar interests.” As Karl indicates, being in a relationship is not important, and so far from his imagination that his number one priority is as vague as having “similar interests.” As these excerpts indicate, some “single” asexual identified individuals strongly prefer singlehood to coupledness.

Coupledness—All of the participants who said that they were currently in a relationship describe their ideal relationships as dyadic, monogamous partnerships. One example of this is Mark, a 36 year old multi-racial male. His relationship ideal is, “A soul-mate and best friend who I/we [*sic*] can hold each other and be close. Someone I can depend on and grow old together and experience and learn life together.” Similarly, Nannette, a 26 year old white woman, “An ideal relationship would be where I could feel intimately bonded with a man. We would do things together, share life together, and talk together. We could cuddle, and laugh and show some physical affection (holding hands, closed mouth kissing) and then leave it at that.” As this participant illustrates, an ideal relationship encompasses being intimately bonded with one other person—in this case with a person of the opposite sex.

A few of those who were not currently coupled described ideal relationships that looked like popular conceptions of dyadic, monogamous relationships. For instance, as Raquel, a 26 year old white woman describes, “An ideal asexual relationship would involve a person of the opposite gender who had committed to being in a long-term, intimate, monogamous relationship where we are physically affectionate (though not engaging in sex) and can share all aspects of our lives. That person would be willing to be supportive [presumably of her asexuality].” Similarly, Sondra, a 21 year old white woman, although she is currently single, when asked about her ideal relationship, she said that it, “would be closer than friends, but neither of us would desire sex. I don’t mind physical contact, in fact I would enjoy the hand holding, hugging, cuddling, etc.” Another example is Kisha, a 20 year old white woman. Her ideal relationship is “pretty much the same as a *regular* heterosexual relationship, but no sex. I would like to marry if I can find my asexual match” (*emphasis added*). These examples indicate that many of these ideal relationships are explicitly in comparison to the *normalness* associated with heterosexuality.

Rethinking Relationships—While all of the “coupled” asexual individuals in this sample described themselves as desiring dyadic monogamous relationships—the kind supported by marriage, this was not the only type of relationship that was described. Both “single” individuals and those with relationship statuses that were “not easily categorized” into one of these two dimensions, were likely to describe relationships that are similar to definitions of polyamorous relationships. Consider one participant, Eliza, a 21 year old white female, “I’m in a number of varied relationships, some very intimate, some not as intimate. I don’t identify as being either ‘single’ or ‘taken’.” As Eliza points out, relationship status is highly contingent on what counts as a relationship. Since conceptions of (intimate) relationships generally involve sex or sexual intimacy, arriving at the definition of a “relationship” may be particularly difficult for asexual individuals. This issue is explored in more depth elsewhere (Scherrer, in press).

Not only do those who are “not easily categorized” describe current or ideal relationships that defy popular conceptions of relationships, but so do “single” individuals. One instance of this is illustrated by Mona, a 30 year old white woman, who describes her ideal relationship as, “an intimate friendship, not necessarily monogamous, relationship with someone I feel very connected with. We would meet a few times a week but live apart.” Similarly, Kendall, a 30 year old white woman, described her relationship ideal as, “A group relationship with two men and maybe another woman, and a separate relationship with a woman.” Both Mona and Kendall’s reflections are examples of how participants are actively rethinking the possibilities for constructing relationships beyond the traditional dyad.

Conflation of Sex and Intimacy

Active re-thinking of relationships could occur because sex and sexual intimacy are not the defining characteristic of relationships for some asexual identified individuals. This idea is exemplified by Keli, a 44 year old white woman who describes herself as single. She says that when she talks about relationships, “it’s inevitable that I need to stress it’s non-sexual because they get that ‘confused puppydog head-tilt-to-the-side’ look when they think of a relationship without sex. Usually it’s just not worth the effort [to explain].” As Keli’s statement illustrates, in her experience it is difficult for others to understand “a relationship without sex” perhaps because of their perceived interrelatedness of sex and intimacy.

As Rothblum and Brehony (1993) describe, “when a relationships lacks the presence of sex, it becomes difficult to define its components” (p. 6). In other words, sex has been used as the standard that delineates romantic relationships from friendship and defines these relationships as importantly different. Linda, an 18 year old white woman, says that her ideal relationship would be, “closer than friends, but neither of us would desire sex.” Later she says, “It’s hard for me to define the difference between friends and romantic partners.” As both Linda and Keli’s words exemplify, it can be challenging for individuals whose sexual identity explicitly revolves around a lack of sexual desire or attraction to define and categorize their relationships without the presence of, or desire for, sex. Yet, asexual identified individuals are not the only individuals who have important relationships that do not involve sex. Relationships that involve sex do not automatically occupy a privileged position in one’s life. This distinction between sex and intimacy is critical for the discussion about marriage, which often assumes the primacy of sex-based intimacy in a marriage relationship.

As these findings indicate, some of the participants describe themselves as either interested in, or already involved in, marriages or marriage-like relationships. However, as they describe, sex and sexual behaviors, are not considered the defining characteristic of those relationships. This is contrary to how the broader public characterizes the unique aspects of intimate relationships. “For nearly everyone who has ever thought about it, marriage is deeply and inextricably connected to sex” (Blankenhorn, 2007, p. 92). Sex is constructed as a necessary

condition for marriage. Nevertheless, these participants' relationships challenge this so-called necessary linkage between sex and marriage or marriage-like relationships and invite us to deconstruct dominant definitions of intimate relationships.

Similar to troubling the relationship between marriage and sex, asexuality also reveals complexities associated with popular conceptions of polyamory. As previously discussed, participants described themselves as explicitly disinterested in "traditional" models of relationships. For these participants, ideal relationships were more likely to include what may be characterized as polyamorous relationships, including varied levels of intimacy with multiple individuals. Yet unlike some other polyamorous relationships (Haritaworn et al., 2006), the relationships described by asexual individuals in this sample were explicitly non-sexual in nature defying popular conceptions of polyamory as importantly connected to sexual behavior (Haritaworn et al., 2006).

In several ways, the case of asexuality argues for an uncoupling of sex or sexual behaviors and intimate relationships. Rather than sex being the defining characteristic of the relationship, participants describe other aspects such as mutual acknowledgment, trust, intellectual engagement, reliability, and support as central and defining aspects of intimate relationships. Data from this study also challenge traditional models of intimate relationships, arguing that intimacy does not only occur in dyads.

The Language of Relationships: Limitations and Possibilities

The third major finding of this study concerns the limitations of language to describe the range of possible relationships. This theme arose early in the survey when I asked, "What is your current relationship status?" As previously described, several participants expressed frustration with this question as they felt as though their relationships did not fit easily into socially defined relationship categories. These participants said that their relationships were not recognized and validated, despite the fact that their relationships met many of the qualities traditionally delineated as "intimate."

Several participants describe themselves as pushed to find new ways of thinking about themselves in relation to others. For instance, when asked "what other language do you use to describe 'relationships'?" Sondra, a 21 year old white woman, said that,

This question is frustrating-- or rather, I find frustrating the fact that for the most part, we don't HAVE another language to describe 'relationships.' The best I can do to keep things clear in my own mind is to avoid certain phrases. My two least favorite are 'single' (again, because it privileges a false binary) and 'just friends'-- as though friendship were necessarily inferior to romantic/sexual intimacy.

As Sondra's narrative points out, not only are the possibilities for available language based around this binary of friendship or romantic/sexual, but she had trouble identifying words to describe relationships that did not revolve around sexual/romantic intimacy. Others such as Nannette echoed this saying, "I don't have any other language to describe [my relationships]."

Some participants offer ideas for how to rethink relationships. One particularly articulate example of this is Charles, a 24 year old white male. He said that his ideal relationship would be, "A big, complicated, constantly changing community with a very clear language for negotiating intimacy commitment and a lot of people who weren't afraid to do that." As Charles says, clear language is useful for negotiating relationships. Later in the survey he describes some potential criteria for rethinking relationships.

I like to talk about what relationships involve, rather than trying to classify them. How much time I get to spend with someone is a big thing for me, I pay a lot of attention

to whether the relationship involves affection and to the role that we play in one another's lives and the extent to which we commit to continue playing that role.

In this quotation, Charles says that time spent with someone, levels of affection and commitment might be alternative factors to account for in relationships (as opposed to using sexual intimacy as the defining characteristic).

Charles is not alone in his rethinking of ways of categorizing, and talking about, relationships. Participants describe many possibilities for talking about relationships including "platonic friendships," "significant other," "complex," "special," "romantic friendship," "companion," "romantic partnerships," and "friendships with various levels." Individuals also point to multiple aspects of relationships such as time spent together, living situations, or degree of emotional or physical intimacy, as other factors that could be important for describing intimate relationships. These descriptors all share an interest in rethinking and rewriting the language that is available to describe relationships.

While this interest in rethinking relationships is shared by most of these participants, not all participants expressed an interest in, and need for, alternative language to describe their relationships. Lucy, a 25 year old white female, responded that she is "not too worried about labeling everything specifically." Similarly, Delia, a 22 year old white female says that, "I don't use special language." For these participants, in contrast with the majority, finding alternative language is not especially troubling or important for their ability to communicate their relationships with others. These exceptions do not detract from the need for alternative language, but rather highlight that there is variation in how individuals are troubled by of the lack of available language.

Researchers and others tend to implicitly compare all relationships to heterosexual marriage as a "gold standard" (see Stacey and Biblarz [2001] for a discussion of how this has happened in research about lesbian and gay parenting). While theorizing about heterosexuality, Ingraham (2002) noted that, "All people are required to situate themselves in relation to marriage or heterosexuality, including those who regardless of sexual (or asexual) affiliation do not consider themselves 'single', heterosexual" (p. 160). However, the relationships of asexual individuals draw attention to the problems with this standard. As these findings illustrate, sex and sexual behaviors are not the only factors to consider when describing relationships. Various types of intimacy, gender, time spent together, and shared interests are examples of other important variables to consider.

These findings mirror ones about polyamorous relationships. Ritchie and Barker (2006) found that, "The dominant ways of understanding relationships do not allow for relationships between more than two people or for more than one important relationship at a time. The conventional language of relationships is the language of coupledness" (p. 591). As Ritchie and Barker describe, having apt language to accurately describe your relationship *and having that language recognized by others* is important. For asexual individuals, not only is language limited to relationships in dyadic couples, but it is also limited to describing intimate relationships in sexual terms. These limitations of language close off the ways we envision relationship possibilities.

Implications

These findings have important implications for same-sex marriage, as well as for social service practice and policy. In this section, I discuss how these findings contribute to the same-sex marriage discussion, and very briefly describe social service practice and research implications.

Relevance to the Same-Sex Marriage Discussion

Asexual identities and relationships make explicit the limitations of same-sex marriage. Same-sex marriage re-privileges certain types of sexualities—those involving dyadic relationships, monogamous relationships, and sexual behaviors. Rubin (1984) argued there are a variety of cultural hierarchies regarding sexualities and sexual behaviors, creating a “charmed circle” of those sexualities that are more culturally valued. She posits that redrawing the lines of the circle to validate some sexualities, necessarily dismisses others. “Most homosexuality is still on the bad side of the line. But if it is coupled and monogamous, the society is beginning to recognize that it includes the full range of human interaction” (Rubin, 1984, p. 283). The same-sex marriage movement is a reflection of these changing sexual mores; however, this movement does little to challenge extant hierarchies.

These hierarchies privilege some relationships over others. In this sample, asexual individuals were most likely to identify their relationship status as ‘single.’ Same-sex marriage recognition does nothing to improve the material and symbolic recognition of those individuals (asexual or otherwise) who do not desire intimate relationships, such as marriage. As an example, recall Mona, the participant who described her ideal relationship as “intimate,” “not necessarily monogamous” and “living apart.” It is unlikely that someone like Mona would find same sex-marriage useful for validating her relationships.

Findings also indicate that marriage might not feel applicable to participants, in part, since sex is not generally involved in their relationships, and, in part, since relationships are challenging to describe given available language. As discussed earlier, many participants used alternative language to characterize their relationships, such as “platonic friendships,” “companion,” or “romantic partnerships.” These participants generally shied away from traditional language, like marriage, husband or spouse, to find words that more accurately captured their experiences. Again, same-sex marriage would do little to make the symbolic and material benefits of marriage available to these individuals, and it is reasonable to assume that they would not see marriage—same-sex or opposite sex—inclusive of their identities.

Also, the findings instruct policy practitioners to consider how policies may be crafted that remove hierarchical relationships between sexual minority individuals, rather than reinforce them. Policy makers should ask, how can policies be inclusive to those who are disinterested in forming dyadic intimate relationships? Or, how can policy support intimate, non-sexual relationships? Same-sex marriage’s singular focus on lesbian and gay dyadic, committed couples re-marginalizes the experiences of other sexual minorities, such as asexual, polyamorous, or aromantic individuals. How can relationship recognition policy be inclusive of multiple types of relationships?

Policy practitioners should also consider how assumptions of sex-based intimacy play into policy work. For instance, the policy issue of same-sex marriage is largely based on the idea that, except for gender, same-sex relationships are *the same* as heterosexual relationships. Yet, as these participants have illustrated, traditional models of relationships presume sex and sexual intimacy. How would the present marriage discussion differ if non-sexual intimate relationships were taken as central to the dialogue? Why is sex-based intimacy privileged over other forms of intimate relationships? How can other aspects of relationships be elevated as equally important in describing and defining one’s self in relation to others?

In order to create policy that is inclusive of multiple types of relationships, whether that be through gender, romantic interest, sexual content, or the myriad other ways that relationships are formed, policy practitioners and others need to be interested in the limitations of language for describing relationships. To move in this direction, our language will need to change. We need to redefine existing terms, making them more inclusive of all asexual-identified people

and others and their relationships. We also need to start developing new terminology that does not prioritize dyadic, committed relationships involving sex and sexual intimacy.

Practice and Research

While the focus of this special issue is same-sex marriage, a few practice implications are offered from this data. Practitioners engaged in direct service practice should work to consciously uncouple sex and sexual behaviors with intimacy. When learning about the many relationships of a particular client, a practitioner may evaluate these relationships for their importance in the client's life without necessarily privileging sexual relationships. It might be helpful for practitioners to ask questions such as, "What does intimacy look like for you?", "What would an ideal relationship look like for you?", or "Describe how sex does or does not play a role in your relationships." Practitioners should not only be sensitive to the relationship between sex and intimacy in relationships, but they should also be aware that individuals may be actively crafting new language to more accurately describe their relationships to others. Social work practitioners should be open and responsive to this new terminology, aid their clients in finding applicable language whenever possible and enable their clients to think about their relationships in new ways. This allows for language to be more inclusive, not only for asexual individuals, but to an array of sexual identities and relationship typologies.

Likewise, macro practitioners and researchers should not assume that romantic intimacy and sexual intimacy go hand in hand. Rather, relationships should be explored in more detail, not only amongst asexual identified individuals, but amongst a variety of sexual identities.

Future research is needed, such as examining the connectedness between marriage relationships and expectations of sexual intimacy. To what extent does a marriage imply sex or sexual behaviors? And, how do these expectations of sexual behavior impact people's experiences of marriage? Social work research should also attend to issues of language for relationships by exploring how individuals are describing their relationships, what this terminology means to people, and what these new types of relationships might mean for policy. When asking about relationship status, social work researchers may find that the simple categories, single *or* coupled, may not be nuanced enough to capture the lived complexity of relationships.

Conclusion

The legal recognition of same-sex marriage would allow same-sex couples access to the rights and privileges associated with marriage; however, it will do little to create space for asexual persons and other alternate relationship configurations unless rights and benefits are extended beyond the intimate couple. In other words, a whole-hearted embrace of the institution of marriage cannot be the only means of procuring social and material benefits for those who are emotionally and/or materially important. Just as mainstream feminism has had to recognize that its goals were primarily meeting the needs of white middle class heterosexual women, the QTBLG movement must similarly recognize that same-sex marriage primarily benefits a similarly privileged minority in a broader group of marginalized sexual identities. As social workers and social justice advocates, we must pro-actively craft a LQBGT agenda that is not only inclusive of persons of color, transgender individuals, working class BLTQG individuals, asexual and polyamorous (to name a few) identities, but takes these needs as central to a broader TQBLG agenda.

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Biography

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