There are many things in life that challenge us and our understanding of society and life, asexuality is one of those things. I will attempt to explain this incredibly vague statement in this paper and will begin by using myself as an example. I like to think of myself as super progressive, the type of person who accepts everyone else, no matter what. The non-judgmental, do onto others, can’t we all just get along, well informed, person. Because of this I do quite a bit of self-congratulating and have to be careful not to sprain my wrist in my frequent attempts to pat myself on the back. About three years ago, however, I realized that some of that smugness was a bit misplaced. I was reading a magazine and I saw a mention of asexuality, and I was confused, wasn’t that when a single organism could reproduce? Why was it being discussed in an article about sexuality? I read on and realized that asexuality could have a different meaning, it could be someone who does not experience sexual desire. This definition did not bring out that progressive side I am so proud of, initially I dismissed this definition and the legitimacy of an asexual identity, I believed that all “normal” people felt sexual desire for someone, it did not matter who, as long as it was another person, and anyone who did not, had some kind of mental problem, or had experienced something sexually traumatic. Sadly, I am not the only one who has ever felt this way, there are a decent number of people who believe that asexuality either does not exist or pathologize it.

A good example of this can be seen in the 2011 documentary (A)sexual. The documentary opens with people being asked what they think asexuality is and giving their different interpretations, none of them which were correct. Clearly this was being used to illustrate a
point, but it is important to note that if any of these people were asked to identify what a hetero, homo, or bisexual were there would probably be little, if any, confusion. Another point worth noting is a comment made by Dan Savage, a popular sex columnist, he says that he believes that claiming an asexual identity is a “dodge” to avoid dealing with aspects of one’s sexuality that are troubling to them.

Why does society deny the existence and legitimacy of asexuality so vehemently? It is confusing because asexuals are not doing anything. “Unlike homosexuals or bisexuals, asexuals do not engage in taboo sexual activity, and thus their sexual lives may be considered a personal matter of little intergroup consequence” (MacInnis and Hodson, 2012, 726). In other contested lifestyles or orientations, homosexuality, bisexuality, polyamory, etc. there are actions that people are contesting, but in the case of asexuality there are no sexual actions to stand against. However, far from doing nothing, asexuals are actually pushing directly against almost every building block of our society. While there are many instances of the ways that asexuals have the potential to radically restructure our lives and perceptions, this paper will focus on one main ideal and institution used to implement a form of control of society. In order for a relationship to be legitimate, it must supposedly be sexual in nature, and it is only those sexual relationships that should be granted certain privileges I will begin by defining asexuality with a brief discussion of some of the ideas that currently surround asexuality, including attempts to discredit the validity of the orientation by medicalizing or pathologizing it. Then, this paper will explain what makes asexuality radical, the ways in which it skews the current ideas about relationships, sexual desire, and society.

Asexuality, at its core, basically means having no sexual attraction to anyone, and it is estimated that approximately 1% of the population identifies this way, found in a 2004 study by Anthony
Bogaert, and explained in his article, “Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample.” The general consensus from the majority of those who have written about asexuality is that it is a sexual orientation comparable to hetero, homo, or bisexuality (Bogaert, 2004; Melby, 2005; Decker, 2013; Gressgard, 2013; Emens, 2014). Basically, it is the essentialist belief that asexuals cannot help being asexual, it is an integral part of their being, “that asexuality is biologically determined and is not the result of social forces” (Yule et al, 2014, 300). Of course not everyone agrees with this assumption, some argue that the essentialist idea of asexuality helps perpetuate the current hierarchical structures in society, a viewpoint discussed in further detail later. Others see asexuality as a disorder, most commonly related to hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD), “characterized by a distressing absence of sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity, lasting for an extended period of time”(Yule et al, 2014, 299), and look for reasons to explain a person’s lack of desire. In their article, “Biological Markers of Asexuality: Handedness, Birth Order, and Finger Length Ratios in Self-Identified Asexual Men and Women, “ Yule, Brotto, and Gorzalka look for physical signifiers of asexuality, even Bogaert (2004) mentioned that factors such as late onset of menstruation or being short may help predict asexuality. While some of this may be true, looking for physical predictors of asexuality makes it seem like a disorder, instead of a legitimate orientation.

It is worth noting that making something a disorder, or labeling something as “abnormal” is nothing new to the medical community. Steven Seidman discusses this point in The Social Construction of Sexuality, pointing out that, in the case of homosexuality, the medical community was a main contributor in pathologizing the gay community. He explains, “The Judeo-Christian religion may label homosexuality sinful, but it was science and medicine that classified homosexuality as a disease and as a symptom of an abnormal
sick personality. While the church may exile the sinner from the religious community, scientific medicine exiles the homosexual from the respectable circles of society” (147). This is an important point, because society tends to believe that religion is responsible for dragging society backwards, while the medical community is plunging forward. If the medical community is labeling something as a disorder that can be incredibly problematic, one of the problems is that it helps set the national agenda, and as Jyoti Puri points out in “Sexuality, State, and Nation,” “Nationalism’s greatest impact on matters of sexuality is by defining what is normal and abnormal, what is respectable and what is deviant” (319). Society, and all the structures contained within, like religion and the medical community, creates expectations and a narrative about what is acceptable, and has done so with regard to sexual desire. Jacinthe Flore discusses how this functions in the case of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, a manual produced by the American Psychiatric Association, that names and lists symptoms of mental disorders, and its diagnosis of HSDD, and how this fits in with setting a certain social criteria. She states, “The DSM is an institutionalized enterprise to gain an epistemological ruling, and impose a (supposedly universal) (psycho)sociocultural control over sexuality, whilst ensuring that hegemonic discourses on healthy bodies and minds are disseminated”(154). This is an example of different institutions setting criteria for what is considered healthy, normal, and right. These ideas have become so ingrained in the fabric of our society that anything that pushes against them becomes deviant.

This deviancy is what makes asexuality radical, because it pushes against much more than one aspect of society. The first example of this is that asexuality challenges our ideas about what constitutes an intimate relationship. People tend to grant privilege and legitimacy to sexual relationships in current society. Elizabeth Emens discusses this fact in her article, “Compulsory Sexuality,” and she points out
that, "Asexuals divide themselves into the subtypes of romantic and aromatic. Some asexuals feel romantic attractions, fall in love, and pursue romantic relationships" (321). Asexuals form romantic, and by their definition, intimate relationships, but because they many times choose not to have sex this can be problematic in society. Because, "This axis of identity raises the question of what distinguishes romance from sex, on one hand, or from friendship, on the other" (Emens, 2014, 321). Elisabeth Scheff expounds on this point when discussing non-sexual relationships in polyamorous arrangements, stating, "A central component of polyaffectivity is removing sexuality as the hallmark of 'real' intimacy. If sexuality can be shared among more than two people, and emotional intimacy can outlast or supersede sexual intimacy, then nonsexual relationships can take on the degree of importance usually reserved for sexual or mated relationships" (279). When sex is taken out of the equation it disrupts the way people view relationships, the clear demarcation line in society between whether a relationship is intimate is whether or not the people in question are having sex. What makes this belief particularly thought provoking is that the majority of a couple's time, whether they are active sexually or not, is spent not engaged in sexual activity. In his book, Understanding Asexuality, Bogaert points out that, "the vast majority of our lives, even during periods when our lives are extremely sexualized, is not spent engaging in sex...in any given day, much more time is spent eating, watching TV, grooming, or sleeping than having sex. Indeed, sex does not even rate as an identifiable category when activities of the day are tallied" (2012, 2). If the majority of our life is spent not having sex, why do we believe that sex is so important to intimacy? Why do we believe that sex is more important in a couple's relationship than laughter, communication, or emotional support? Some of it has to do with the human need to categorize, and drawing the line with sex makes the job easier. But the medical community has influenced this
as well. Seidman explains how the medical community has placed great importance on sex as the conduit to intimacy in marriage, and how this has affected ideas around intimacy, stating, “If the giving and receiving of sexual pleasure is a way to express love, mutual sexual satisfaction can become the glue cementing the marital bond. In other words, if love is sexualized, the pursuit of mutual sexual pleasure becomes an expression of intimate solidarity” (154). By placing such an importance on sexual activity in intimacy the medical community, and society in general, are placing asexuality in a position of deviance, because their idea of intimacy does not conform to current ideals and expectations.

I assert that the main reason that removing sexuality from relationships, and redefining what relationship structures can look like, is considered so deviant is that it challenges one of, if not the main structure, our society revolves around, marriage. In current culture marriage is used for so many purposes, it grants legitimacy to relationships, it provides tax breaks, provides access to health care, people structure our lives and institutions around marriage. In general it is considered a good thing, something we should all be striving towards. In her book Bi: Notes for a Bisexual Revolution, Shiri Eisner discusses this push towards marriage, stating, “From legal privileges through romantic comedies and dating shows to wedding ceremonies and social treatment, almost every piece of dominant culture relating to relationships and love is pushing us in this one direction” (295). There is a natural assumption that everyone should want to be married, and should be moving towards it at all times, it is one of the major privileges sought within the mainstream LGBT movement (Eisner, 2013). Beyond this, mainstream culture and institutions try to assure that society continues to seek this from of relationship. Seidman discusses how the medical profession has become involved in this, stating, “The moral and social pressure to organize intimate life around
marriage, the belief that only marriage confers legitimacy on intimate relationships, is today in doubt. Once again, the doctors are in the thick of the battle. In the main they have sided with the promarriage camp” (160). He goes on to explain that they have done this by placing fear in sex outside of marriage, making marriage the right place for intimacy, as they define it. Of course, this fear the medical community is trying to instill does not work as well on asexuals, many of whom are choosing not to have sex, so they can be free from this fear mongering. This allows them a freedom from control that could be considered if not dangerous, at least mildly threatening.

The question still remains as to why the push towards marriage remains so strong, and why choosing to define intimate and important relationships outside the realm of marriage remains so radical and deviant. The answer would seem to lie in the amount of control the institution of marriage allows for. Shiri Eisner explains some of the controls that are a part of the institution of marriage, stating that, “Marriage, as an institution, is and has been a tool of patriarchy, capitalism, and government for about as long as it has existed. It is and has been used to control women, divide and consolidate money and resources, and strengthen the power of states over their subjects. All in all, for most of history and until today it has been one of the most dangerous institutions created by society” (292). This places marriage in the position of policing the residents of the state. Puri supports this idea, pointing out that the, “ideals or customs of dominant groups are endorsed as national ideals, and are socially and legally enforced” (319). In the United States it is enforced through the benefits that are given to those who choose marriage, relationship legitimacy, tax breaks, access to health care and overall privilege, and all of this is based around the idea of people being involved in sexual relationships. Asexuals push against that, “and may therefore be prime candidates to support the movement to abandon marriage as a legal institution
or to replace it with any number of alternatives explicitly organized around a principle other than conjugality” (Emens, 2014, 352). By pushing against this asexuals are upsetting an institution that has been used to exert control and shape relationships in society, placing asexuality in a place of extreme deviancy. This deviancy creates some of the backlash that we see in culture, to discredit asexuals, their lived experiences, and their choices in who they identify as their primary important relationships. In the article, “Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential,” CJ Deluzio Chasin, discusses the denigration that many asexuals face from society regarding themselves and their relationships, stating, “We live in a world that is often hostile to asexual people and that devalues and often refuses to recognize asexual peoples’ primary relationships” (411). Perhaps this devaluing is done in an effort to control asexuals, and cease some of the potential asexuality has to allow people to escape some of the controlling aspects of culture.

It is in this idea of control that asexuality has the potential to become the most radical identity. For example, asexuality pushes back against the assumption that everyone is innately sexual. This may seem like a small thing, but it is not. It is a well-used cliché to say that we live in a sexualized culture, everyone knows it, and will admit it if asked. But most people would probably relate this sexualization to television shows or magazine covers; and while it is certainly true that pop culture and the media are full of sexual content and innuendo, it goes much deeper than that, the very foundations of our culture revolve around the ideas that everyone is sexual, consider the fact that bathrooms are segregated by sex because there is an assumption that sexual desire is going to cause an issue if men and women are allowed to use the same bathroom (Emens, 2014), and the fact that asexuals are stating that this is not true is revolutionary. As Agata Pacho states in the article, “Establishing Asexual Identity: The Essential, the
Imaginary, and the Collective;” “the absence of sexual desire could be seen as a form of resistance to social and cultural expectations” (16). Emens states that, “However precisely it happened, asexual identity has emerged as a striking challenge to a prominent religion of contemporary U.S. society-sexuality. Asexuality self-elaboration therefore offers a fascinating lens through which to view our legal system’s relationship to sex” (346). She goes on to explain the different ways in which the legal system is tied to the idea that everyone possess a desire for sex. Once again using the example of marriage, Emens points out that, “Legal marriage confers numerous benefits and responsibilities, some of them unique to marriage and some merely obtained efficiently through marriage. As a general rule, marriages are valid even without sexual consummation. But in several ways, legal marriage effectively requires consummation for its fullest ratification. For instance, in some states, nonconsummation of a marriage is a ground for voiding the marriage” (350). So, not only is marriage used as an avenue for controlling people by attaching privileges to the institution, it sometimes requires a sexual relationship for it to be considered valid, attaching privilege to sexuality. Asexuals are pushing back against that desire to control, and in doing so are challenging all the ideals that shape our culture. At its essence asexuality is pushing back against the idea that people must be sexual, that everyone who is “normal” experiences sexual attraction. Ela Przbylo discusses the ways in which asexuality challenges society’s ideas about the omnipresence of sexuality in the article, “Crisis and safety: The Asexual in Sexusociety,” she states, “Asexuality, as a marginal space that positions itself ‘outside’ of sexuality, is an impeding threat on sexuality. It reveals the phantasm of the sexual project, unveiling the ‘natural’ to be an imitation” (451). It makes society step back at examine assumptions about the innate longings and desires. In doing this it resists controlling factors that affect everyone.
Despite asexuality’s potential to disrupt current social stratification it is becoming more widely talked about and understood. This is understandable, the fact that approximately 1% of the population self-identify as asexual makes its emergence unavoidable, that is quite a few people who identify as something that society tends to disbelieve even exists. That being said however, classifying it as just another sexual orientation may take away from its revolutionary potential. The current ideology places asexuality as an innate orientation, something that asexuals cannot help (Bogaert, 2004; Melby, 2005; Decker, 2013; Gressgard, 2013; Emens, 2014), or even something that is biologically determined (Bogaert, 2004; Yule et al, 2014), but, “This perspective allows being sexual to retain its unchallenged superiority even while awareness of asexuality spreads” (Chasin, 2013, 418). It allows asexuality to be acknowledged, without challenging any of the ideals or structures that are currently in place. It ignores the fact that “Asexuality is importantly shaped by its position on the outside of a sexual society. This interplay has implications both for our understanding of the identity and experience of asexuality, and for our understanding of the contours of the broader culture” (Emens, 2014, 324). The thing that makes asexuality radical and different is that it is apart from the “norm” of sexual desire, and that it has the potential to make people question privileges and structures that are unseen and taken for granted. Asexuality has the ability to change the way we view society and the social structures that control and inhibit behavior, that, “asexuality has potential as an anarchic force, deconstructing key social institutions while simultaneously rejecting the pro-reproductive, pro-family, pro-patriarchy state priorities”(Fahs, 2010, 458). But it can only fulfill this purpose if people stop grouping it in with all other sexual orientations, as just something that people cannot help, and something that we accept but understand is not as “good” as the dominant sexual orientation, and really see what it could mean.
when culture is not tied up in the privilege of sexual relationships. To truly understand, that in current culture, it is not saying yes that is transgressive, it is summoning the courage to say no.
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