

Demisexuality as a Contested Sexuality

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As members of an explicitly sex-focused society, we find ourselves exposed to societal norms and traditional ideas of sexual orientation and attraction from a very young age. It is only over the last several decades that we have come to view human sexual orientation and/or gender identities for what they truly are – concepts that do not necessarily exist within a preconceived binary, black-and-white system, but instead as a part of a vast, expansive spectrum where each individual person falls at different coordinates. Despite these developments, asexuality and all of the terms falling under this identity umbrella remain some of the most misunderstood and arguably most contested of the LGBTQ+ terms and identities, and rightly so: in such a sex-driven culture, how is it really possible for us to believe there are people among us who feel no sexual attraction at all, or only in specific circumstances?

Knowing the meaning and history behind the term “asexuality” is instrumental to truly comprehending the demisexual identity and any associated vocabulary. Asexuality is generally defined as “not experiencing sexual attraction” amongst those who reportedly “self-identify” as asexual (Carrigan, 2013). Unlike other sexual identities, it is important to distinguish between those who “self-identify” and those who are medically characterized as asexual, such as “older persons, [...] individuals with physical disabilities or severe mental illness” (Carrigan, 2013). Because of the term’s history with medical conditions, today researchers must take into account the “issue of how asexuality should be conceptualized and operationalized” because it “remains contested” (Carrigan, 2013).

To develop a greater understanding of asexuality and demisexuality, you must first examine the components behind attraction. While many take time to question their sexual attractions, many do not take the time to think about their romantic attraction as a separate entity, often due to the societal assumption that an individual is heterosexual and not deviant. It can be easy to see this separation while examining the ways in which you feel or anticipate the outcome of different human interactions. A simulated exemplification of romantic attraction is that of Marva and Robert. Robert and Marva have been married for 61 years. Despite the time that has passed, they both fondly remember their first date.

"I was very nervous," Robert said. "She looked so beautiful in her long, blue dress." "I also remember that day very well," Marva said. "You picked me up in your family's car."

But when the couple went out that night, it had just rained and the ground was slick.

"And I extended my arm to you for the first time," Robert said.

"Yes, I was touched by that," Marva said.

"But you also seemed nervous, and I wanted to make you more comfortable," Robert replied.

Stories like this – and of our own romantic encounters – typically evoke feelings of love, family, and nostalgia. But had this story gone a different direction, with Robert picking Marva up in the car and fogging up the windows, it may have evoked feelings of tension, sexual anticipation, or even lust. Given the way romance plots normally transpire for romance movies, we can find overwhelming cultural evidence to support the idea that sex, sexual desire, and romantic love are all so closely associated with one another that it might seem almost impossible for us to separate them. This narrative does not leave room for the inclusion of people who are incapable of having sexual desires for people they don't yet love – this is what makes physical attraction a primary attraction and emotional attraction a secondary attraction. The reverse is true – while you may love everyone in your life, you also do not have sexual desires for all of them.

In a study led by Gian Gonzaga, young monogamous couples were asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding their feelings towards their current partner. Following this questionnaire, couples were asked to sit across from each other in a room and take part in several exchanges: current problems in their relationship, a discussion about previous relationships, teasing, and the recalling of their first date. When analyzing the couples and the body language exhibited in their interactions, Gonzaga found that there were different sets of bodily gestures associated with romantic love (recalling of a first date) and sexual desire (teasing). The study found that participants experiencing romantic love were more likely to "smile, nod their head, gesticulate, and lean toward their partner" (Munster, 2008). Consequently, Gonzaga's study also found a different set of gestures associated with sexual desire, which included "lip biting, lip licking, sucking, touching [their] own lips, and protruding the tongue" (Munster, 2008). Understanding the physical manifestations of the difference between sexual attraction and romantic attraction is crucial in developing an argument for why romance and sex are not one in the same and would be better viewed separately. Furthering this discussion can only benefit demisexuals and the

seemingly contestable nature surrounding their identities.

With a regard to romantic and sexual attraction as two separate phenomenon, we are given the space to open up the parameters of our existing, gendered attractions to create room for the possibility of a more specific identity through the use of more romantic-attraction specific labels such as heteroromantic, biromantic, homoromantic, and panromantic, as well as the addition of more sexual-attraction specific labels: such as asexual, demisexual, and gray-ace. By expanding our existing framework to include these labels, we can begin to understand a move forward in the "reality of individuals having multiple configurations along numerous parameters versus one monolithic 'sexual orientation'" (Chivers, 2016).

When we begin to understand sexual attraction as part of a configuration along numerous parameters, we in turn begin to understand sexuality as a more inclusionary spectrum with room for many different experiences and identities, such as: sexual, asexual, demisexual, "those romantic asexuals who experience romantic attraction but not sexual attraction and those aromantics who experience neither romantic nor sexual attraction, [...] those who may enjoy sexual acts without experiencing sexual attraction, those who are entirely indifferent to sex and those who are actively repulsed by it" in addition to anyone else who may actively fall into the gray-area of asexuality (Carrigan, 2013). It is in this sense then, that the definition of asexuality being "not experiencing sexual attraction" might be best thought of as an 'umbrella' covering a spectrum of orientations and identities," rather than of two solitary, oppositional, monolithic, binary categories: sexual and asexual (Carrigan, 2013). It is also worth noting that failure to understand asexuality as an umbrella term risks "conceptualizing asexuality as a simple absence" which can forego the possibility of understanding the "complex ways in which this 'lack' is negotiated in everyday life" as well as contribute to the further erasure of identities such as demisexuality (Carrigan, 2013).

Urban Dictionary defines demisexuality as "the sexual orientation of a person 'who does not experience primary attraction, the physical or sexual attraction, but does experience secondary attraction, deep emotional attraction'" (Williams, 2016). In most internet articles about the term, it is defined as the need to have formed a strong, emotional bond in order to experience sexual attraction to the person. In other words, "The typical person is going to meet someone and there is usually some degree of physical attraction we form within seconds. [With demisexuality], there is no physical pull at all" (Bahadur, 2017). The history of the term traces back to the internet, specifically an AVEN forum from

around February 2006 (McGowan, 2015).

Because of the separation between the romantic and sexual attractions, being demisexual has absolutely no bearing on “the genders or orientations of the people you are attracted to” (Bahadur, 2017). Allow me to use myself as an example: As a child, I grew up going through the motions of life but not really realizing that anything was different about me. Entering high school, I began to notice a heavier focus on sex by those around me and I struggled to conform. I entered into a relationship with a boy from class and spent the next seven years trying to understand why I felt as though I had closer relationships with female friends, why any kind of sexual situation made me experience a base level of discomfort, and why, when put in a position to choose “who I’d rather” by my sorority sisters, I quickly picked who I knew would be the least contested despite having no personal attraction to any of my “options.” I felt different from everyone else, in a way that I was unable to comprehend. I eventually realized that I was gay, and then eventually heard about demisexuality online and came to identify as homoromantic demisexual – meaning that I prefer people of my same sex (women) and I only experience sexual attraction selectively with women who I have formed a deep, emotional bond with.

Despite this being my own personal experience, it could have just as easily been selected as an extract from the many stories I gathered from interview respondents who participated in a study I conducted in the spring of 2018, simply because of its typicality and patterns. Take my first respondent – a male by the name of Eli. Eli identifies as mainly a biromantic demisexual. Originally, Eli came out as a lesbian/bisexual before realizing his transgender identity. A lot of difficult and traumatic experiences followed, causing him to eventually (through the use of queer friends and online resources) realize his confusion with sexual attraction was due to a demisexual identity. Rather than realizing his demisexuality identity in his teens, he was only able to really sense a general queerness until around age 21/22. As a side effect of this, he says,

Really early on I felt this obligation to have crushes. In order to fit in, I would try to determine who I thought was attractive. As a kid with a fairly high sex drive I often mistook general sexual feelings as specific attraction. When I would end up finding someone I had genuine feelings for they were often not conventionally attractive. I would get made fun of for this at times. To top that off my crushes were also frequently queer in nature.

Eli also reports that the process of figuring out his demisexual identity in addition to his general queerness left an impact on his mental health, as a result of relationships entered prior to understanding his identity and the distress that would come from developing feelings for friends he had previously established an emotional connection with.

My second respondent, Elizabeth, identifies as both pansexual and demisexual. They first realized they were demisexual around age 20, when talking with a friend about hook-up culture. While their friend actively sought out sex with men, Elizabeth found themselves confused by their friend’s ability to have sex with men she may not have known or had feelings for. Elizabeth continued to say that although they have attempted to have sexual partners, the struggle to feel sexual attraction at the same rate as a sexual-identifying person has been a struggle. While this hasn’t negatively-impacted their mental health, Elizabeth reports that “it really deterred me from having sex with regrettable people (in [my] eyes anyway). Sometimes I felt awful, like I was rejecting them, but not in a bad way. This is just how I feel but they didn’t.”

My third respondent, a student by the name of Alex, identifies using queer, demisexual, bisexual, and omnisexual to describe themselves. They first heard the term “demisexual” around age 21, when describing their experiences with sexual attraction to someone. Because of their experiences, they reported feeling out of place plenty of times growing up. Alex reports that “being demi is frustrating because it makes trying to engage with people romantically frustrating, especially with the whole ‘friends don’t date friends rule’ when I only really am attracted to people I’ve gotten to know as friends first.”

My fifth respondent, Aly, offers her experiences as a panromantic demisexual. She reports describing her sexuality as “weird” in middle school. At the time, she considered other potential labels but felt disassociated from them because of her lack of sexual attraction to any specific gender or gender identity. She describes “waiting and waiting” for her sexual attraction to manifest as she watched in others, but the attraction she expected to feel didn’t exist until she began dating her best friend and now current partner of 9 years. While she remembers having many crushes on people, her crushes took more of a “I admire this person and wish I could be more like them” shape as opposed to “I want to be with this person in a relationship.” Finding a word that feels like an accurate enough descriptor has been important for Aly, and has prevented her from coming out to people. She, like many others, felt very out of place growing up. Despite having very sex-positive views, she has struggled to feel comfortable engaging in sexual situations. She reports having first heard of the term demisexual from a client.

Unlike the previous respondents, Aly reports that her demisexuality has put some strain on her relationship in the past. Because she and her partner, Mike, had gotten together young, he had been one of her only sexual experiences. Because of this, Aly reported feeling as though she was missing out on a normal, integral experience of growing up because she watched people around her having multiple sexual encounters with different people. Despite not feeling comfortable exploring in this way, she became upset and angry with herself for denying herself this experience. Without the language to explain her sexual attraction experiences, Aly and Mike would break up. While single, Aly couldn't bring herself to have sex with other people. Eventually this led her to realize that she was different from her friends who she had been comparing herself to.

In terms of mental health, Aly feels as though it is incredibly difficult for her to separate specifics from her generalized depression and anxiety and queer identity. She does note that the one previous affect of her demisexuality was an unhealthy amount of dedication to her partner, mostly due to a lack of understanding of her sexuality. Because something about the emotional bond of their relationship triggered a sexual response for Aly, she felt more pressure for the relationship to work out because of societal pressures to be "normal." Unlike many of my respondents, Aly's position in a long-term relationship with a cissexual, heterosexual male makes her question her place in the queer community because her relationship is socially and culturally intelligible as straight.

My last respondent, Kara, identifies as a straight demisexual. Presumably in part with her heterosexual identity, Kara has never felt the need to have an official coming out. She remarks that "if it's relevant to the conversation, [she'll] explain it" otherwise it is something that only matters with potential partners. Despite this being her sexual identity, she still signifies that many people in her life get it confused with simply having modest values. While realizing at a young age she was different in terms of sexual attraction, she didn't discover a term associated with her experience until she was in her 20s. This has caused her to feel out of place, remarking that "sexual relationships are something everyone has and wants, while it's not a big deal for me."

Within all of my respondents, I was able to trace a number of patterns and commonalities that assist in making the case that demisexuality is a contested sexuality. I would like to begin by arguing that a lack of intelligibility experienced by all participants due to their sexual identity further contributes to their feelings of isolation and deviancy in our society. The lack of intelligibility manifests itself with the simple idea that romantic and sexual identities themselves are not something that are immediately and visibly

identifiable. In other words, people are generally not able to look at you and pinpoint your exact sexual configuration. While the use of stereotypes can sometimes assist in recognizing a general queerness, asexuality and demisexuality are not inherently visible due to more dominant thinking processes audibly and consistently expressed in regard to society's obsession with the sexual side of the binary. The feelings of isolation and brokenness exhibited by my respondents as well as my own personal experience are byproducts of these more dominant thinking processes, and can have a negative effect on the health and well-being of those with some of the most contested sexual identities.

While this negative effect is both a valid and predictable byproduct of living within a society that only recognizes one side of the binary, it is important to note that it is often the fault of institutionalized ideology and not malicious individuals who make these contested individuals feel out of place. This can be seen by the misconceptions that demisexuals regularly come into contact with and are expected to clarify to the people around them, such as:

- "It can often be misinterpreted as an admirable choice surrounding modesty rather than an innate orientation" (Johnson, 2017).
- "Being demisexual doesn't mean you don't like sex" (Bahadur, 2017).
- "you haven't met the right person yet" (Carrigan, 2013)
- "maybe you're just a late bloomer?" (Carrigan, 2013).
- "were you abused as a child?" (Carrigan, 2013).
- "is there something wrong with your hormones?" (Carrigan, 2013)

This institutionalized ideology is then not only the source of exclusionary emotional care work within the individuals themselves, but also labored, emotional care work required by demisexual individuals to respond to these misconceptions and challenge the misconstrued ideologies running rampant in society.

This identity-related confusion is experienced most commonly by family and friends, who "often find such identities flat-out strange and assume that it's all some kind of post-adolescent phase or that something is seriously wrong" (McGowan, 2015) and wrongly accuse demisexuality as being "a stop on the way to homosexuality or maybe the result of trauma or a hormone imbalance" (McGowan, 2015). This care work is not normally needed between sexual individuals and further explains any pre-existing feelings of isolation found within demisexual individuals compared to sexual people.

To make matters worse, identity-related misconceptions are also experienced by

many LGBTQ+ individuals as well, visible through movements to remove asexuality and all related identities from the community “based on the supposition that asexual people do not experience oppression” (Mosbergen, 2013). Other demi and ace activists believe that some LGBTQ+ individuals don’t agree with including asexuals in the LGBT alphabet soup because “asexuality is not seen as a kind of sexuality but rather a lack thereof” (Mosbergen, 2013). These attitudes, yet again, further explain feelings of isolation found within demisexual individuals. This leaves people like Aly, one aforementioned interviewee, further struggling to feel “at home” in the queer community because of the additional assumption that she doesn’t belong in the queer community because of the controversy and adverse reactions to the “straight-passing” nature of her relationship.

While early inquiries into the nature of asexuality thought to view them as unflicated to the “negative stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination that other minorities face,” there is “now evidence that asexual people face prejudices and biases to the same degree and often more so than other sexual minorities” (McClave, 2013). The evidence collected to support this claim exhibited three main findings: “heterosexuals viewed asexual people more negatively, as less human, and as a less valuable contact partner compared to heterosexual people and other sexual minorities” (McClave, 2013).

Furthermore, the institutionalization of American society’s ideology has also carried over to forms of medicalization and thus has had an adverse effect on all contested sexualities. This is especially the case for asexuality and all of the asexual spectrum identities. In addition to the discrimination faced by friends, family, and LGBTQ+ community members, demisexuality may also fall subject to discrimination by the medical field. Because of the fact that there may be “a number of independent developmental pathways, perhaps both biological and psychosocial, leading to asexuality,” a significant split between the people who are classified as medically asexual versus those who self-identify as asexual has been created, with the non-medicalized category being brushed off as illegitimate due to the “the tendency of many to explain away asexuality as a function of some prior trauma or physical ailment upon encountering it” (Carrigan, 2013). This is very similar to the transphobic treatment that trans individuals may experience when they are considering any kind of physical, medical transition (Bettcher, 2014).

The aforementioned split between asexual classifications has prevented any kind of mass statistical study on demisexuality, causing holes and prevention of further academic research. As long as there is “an issue of what counts as asexual (self-identified, medical) it [will be] challenging to say how many people are asexual” (Carrigan, 2013). While it

is estimated that around 1% of the population identifies somewhere under the asexual umbrella, “social desirability bias” may play a role in the results of over/under reporting of sexual attractions (Carrigan, 2013). While asexuality and demisexuality are becoming more widely recognized as ‘normal,’ “depending on an individual’s circumstances and values it could be seen as undesirable to report either sexual attraction or its absence” if the person in question would rather not be associated with any kind of deviancy (Carrigan, 2013).

Not all hope is lost, however, as many people have suggested that “asexuality studies has conceptual and methodological ramifications for the study of sexuality more broadly” (Carrigan, 2013). By examining sexuality through a new lens, we may begin to understand sexuality in the same way that homosexuality offers new methods and approaches to understanding heterosexuality. In this way, identities such as demisexuality may help us to make more open comparisons to understand sexuality as a whole. As Carrigan concludes in his article, “asexuality studies offers a novel and productive framework through which to analyse human sexuality, rethink long standing assumptions relating to it and to study the diverse array of social and cultural phenomena which encompass it in a variety of ways.” Despite the many ways demisexuality is currently contested in our society – from the misconceptions at home and in LGBTQ+ affirming communities, the medical field, and through the invisibility of their minority identities, there is a potential for a greater future understanding of the sexual attraction spectrum as a whole through the understanding of these socially deviant identities.

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