

2015

## Queering Asexuality: Asexual-Inclusion in Queer Spaces

Dominique A. Canning  
dcanning@emich.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.emich.edu/mcnair>

---

### Recommended Citation

Canning, Dominique A. (2015) "Queering Asexuality: Asexual-Inclusion in Queer Spaces," *McNair Scholars Research Journal*: Vol. 8 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://commons.emich.edu/mcnair/vol8/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the McNair Scholars Program at DigitalCommons@EMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in McNair Scholars Research Journal by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@EMU. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@emich.edu](mailto:lib-ir@emich.edu).

# QUEERING ASEXUALITY: ASEXUAL-INCLUSION IN QUEER SPACES

*Dominique A. Canning*

*Dr. Eric Acton, Mentor*

## ABSTRACT

Discussions about emerging sexual identities are prevalent in today's society. As our recognition of the diversity of sexual identities grows, so does our need to define these identities and to better understand how they represent the human experience. One such identity is asexuality, which is defined by the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) as a "person who experiences no sexual attraction" ("Overview" n.d.). In this research, I will analyze the debate over whether asexual individuals should be considered "queer." This analysis will examine previous research that focuses on identity, discourse, and boundaries between identities. The goal of this research is to enrich our understanding of how people use language to make identity statements, and to negotiate and navigate boundaries between identities by answering the following questions: 1.) Why might boundaries exist between identities? 2.) How does discourse vary, based on a group's status within a conversation? 3.) Why is the conversation surrounding asexual inclusion important?

## INTRODUCTION

In 2001, David Jay created the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), a website that called attention to a newly recognized sexual identity called *asexuality* (Bogaert 2012: 38). An *asexual* person is defined by AVEN as "a person who

experiences no sexual attraction” (“Overview” n.d.); in contrast, the term *sexual* is used to describe a person who does experience sexual attraction (I will adopt AVEN’s terminology for the *asexual/sexual* distinction herein. Other sources, such as the Tumblr blog *Asexual Advice*, refer to people who experience sexual attraction as *allosexual* [“Glossary” n.d.]).

Because “queer spaces” are often identity specific—meaning that people who don’t identify as, or aren’t considered “queer” are denied entry—and because many queer spaces do not consider asexuality to be “queer,” there are few “real life,” safe spaces for asexual people to explore or discuss their identity. The lack of access to such spaces, caused by such identity boundaries, creates a need to explore the way discussions of identity can influence the very real lives of the people who use them. For example, the exclusion of asexuality in queer spaces leads to many asexual people feeling isolated, solely because they are unable to connect with other people who may share their experiences (Chasin 2013: 405). The creation of AVEN made it possible for a visible asexual community to exist (Bogaert 2012: 38; Ginoza et al. 2014: 1; Scherrer 2008). As that community developed, so did a discussion of where, exactly, asexuality fit into the wider lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community, and whether it fit there at all (Ginoza et al. 2014: 13).

These discussions about sexual identity and social boundaries are ideologically bound. As T. A. van Dijk puts it, “[t]he identity of groups is not only based on their structural properties, but also on their ideologies” (van Dijk 2006: 729), which he defines as “...the foundations of the social representations shared by a social group” (van Dijk 2006: 729). Van Dijk gives a reason for why there is such disagreement about which groups belong to which categories. Because the “social practices...and discourses of group members may be... controlled by group ideologies” (van Dijk 2006: 730), it is important to acknowledge the ideologies of a particular group in order to determine how that group may divide up social space and frame an argument, and how they might understand the arguments made by others (van Dijk 2006: 733-734). These

arguments make use of a number of different discursive tools, such as comparisons, generalizations, and polarization in order to persuade others into agreement (van Dijk 2006). These tools, as well as other research on discourse analysis, make it possible to analyze how the argument on whether or not asexuality can be considered a queer identity is being framed, as well as how such arguments affect the creation, preservation, or destruction of boundaries between *queer* and *asexual*.

This paper will address the discussions of whether asexuality can truly be considered *queer*, a term used "...to indicate a range of non-normative sexual practices and gender identifications beyond gay and lesbian" (Love 2014: 172). I will begin with a discussion of the history of *queer* as an identity and provide detailed definitions of several terms that are essential to this conversation. It should be noted, however, that the definitions I provide will be specific to this paper, as identities are intensely personal and may be defined differently by the people who use them. As an example, one respondent to a survey released by Kristin S. Scherrer explained their asexuality in the same way as AVEN: the respondent felt no sexual attraction; another respondent's definition, however, did not correspond with the AVEN definition: "I am sexually attracted to men, but have no desire or need to engage in sexual or even nonsexual activity...with them" (Scherrer 2008: 627). Even though their explanations of their identity differ, both respondents still identified as asexual.

After providing definitions, I will discuss the importance of an identity-based vocabulary for the people using it, in addition to how that vocabulary can create boundaries within queer spaces, and how those boundaries can affect people. Finally, I will discuss the uses and relevance of applying discourse analysis to this research. Discourse analysis will be key in determining how discussions about identities are framed, how arguments are made, and how those arguments affect the inclusion of asexuals in queer spaces. The ultimate goal of this paper is to address the following questions concerning asexuality and its relation to queerness as the locus: 1) Why might boundaries exist between sexual identities;

2) How does discourse vary, based on a group's status within a conversation; and 3) Why is the conversation surrounding asexual inclusion important?

## I. Defining Terms

Because this research is based heavily on identity terms, I will first provide a definition of the terms used in this paper. I will also include a history of the identities, which will help explain why some terms are considered more problematic, or contested, than others. This section shows where understandings of certain terms overlap between queer and asexual communities, and where they do not. As stated above, many of these identities are defined differently by the people who use them. The definitions given in this paper are basic definitions provided both by scholars and others who are part of the asexual community, in order to frame the issue at hand.

### *Queer*

The definition of *queer* is one that has been highly debated. Many people have used—and continue to use—*queer* as a synonym for *gay* (Murphy 1995: 47), excluding anyone who does not identify as such, such as bisexual and asexual people. In their article “What Does the *Q* Mean?,” Levy and Johnson (2011) assert that part of the difficulty in studying queer identity is that people are hesitant to define the term but agree that “...queer ‘embraces the multi-dimensionality of human existence’” (2011: 131). Levy and Johnson, however, move away from the use of *queer* as a synonym for *gay*, and instead propose that it can be used to refer to any “non-normative sexuality” (Levy & Johnson 2011: 131), and can be “described as a critical standpoint for tearing apart dominant ways of knowing about sex, gender, and sexualities” (Willis 2007, qtd. in Levy & Johnson 2011: 131). Heather Love expands the definition of *queer* to include not only non-normative sexual identities, but non-normative gender identities, as well (Love 2014: 172).

In the book *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Michael Warner (1993) describes *queer* as a term that “gets a critical edge by defining itself against the

normal...” (Warner 1993: xxvi). This definition implies a certain level of political intent that is not always associated with other identities. Warner also states that *queer* was “initially generated in the context of terror...” (Warner 1993: xxvi). During the AIDS epidemic of the 1990s, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) changed its name to Queer Nation, marking the beginning of the reclamation of a term that had historically been used against LGBTQ people as a slur (Levy & Johnson 2011). For some people, particularly those who are older, *queer* is still an intensely derogatory term, mired in a history of violence (Levy & Johnson 2011: 136). There are many other people, however, who use queer as an identity that “...focuses on eliminating oppression by...disrupting and transforming society’s norms” (Levy & Johnson 2011: 130).

One event that is frequently cited when discussing queer identity is the Stonewall Riots in June of 1969 (Carter 2004: 1), a “series of violent protests and street demonstrations... centered around a gay bar in...Greenwich Village...[that] are widely credited with being the motivating force in the transformation of the gay political movement” (Carter 2004: 1). Today, many of the accomplishments of the June 1969 protests are attributed to the gay men who were present at the bar that night, but there were many witnesses who acknowledge that many of the people resisting the police were gender nonconforming or transgender people (Carter 2004: 261), or those who would most likely be considered “queer” today. The Stonewall Riots, along with the activism that arose during the AIDS epidemic, reinforce the definition of *queer* as a political identity that stands against “disciplining [and] normalizing social forces” (Seidman 1993: 133).

As a personal identity, *queer* still has a variety of definitions, with one of the simplest being a term that “has been adopted by many people with non-mainstream sexual or gender identities” (Barton 2009: 242). Of course, this is a standard definition of *queer*, if there ever was one. Many people who identify as *queer* do so to indicate belonging to a group “that’s as wide and inclusive as ‘gay’ once was” (Robinson 2009: 157). The inclusive group referenced by Robinson, however, was based on the assumption that those who belonged

have a non-normative *sexual* orientation. Misunderstandings of asexuality lead to people believing that asexuality is the absence of sexual orientation, rather than a lack of sexual attraction. There is also the matter of queer's politicized history. *Queer* is a term that was reclaimed at a time when LGBTQ people in the United States faced a significant amount of violence and oppression (Levy & Johnson 2011). The exclusion of asexual people could be taken to imply that they do not face oppression similar to that faced by other marginalized sexual identities. However, research done by Cara MacInnis and Gordon Hodson (2011) shows that this is not the case, as will be discussed, below.

### ***Romantic Attraction***

It is only fairly recently that people have begun to self-identify a *romantic* orientation in addition to, or instead of, a *sexual* orientation (Bogaert 2012: 15). The asexual community has been adamant in its assertion that asexuality is not an absence of romantic attraction; in fact, there are many asexual people who wish to be (or are) in relationships based on romantic attraction. Bogaert says in *Understanding Asexuality* that “[The] distinction between romantic and sexual attraction may seem clear, but the two kinds of attraction are...also intricately related and they often overlap. ...If one defines asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction to others, one should also be aware that it is not necessarily defined as a lack of romantic attraction...” (Bogaert 2012: 12-13). This statement, of course, leads us to wonder what is meant by *romantic attraction* and *sexual attraction*, and presents a wave of new questions about attraction and what it means to be in a “valid” relationship. In most scholarly explanations of attraction, sexual and romantic attraction are considered to be one and the same, or at least codependent, in the sense that one is believed not to exist without the other. This makes it difficult to explain how sexual attraction is different from romantic attraction, and how a romantic *asexual* relationship is different from a romantic *sexual* relationship.

The confusion surrounding the difference between romantic and sexual attraction is a topic that is frequently addressed in the online asexual community, and many people

have offered personal explanations. For example, the WordPress blog *The Thinking Asexual* includes the following statement:

[Sexual attraction] involves having sexual thoughts about specific people or about the gender to which you're sexually attracted.... Common descriptions of romantic attraction include... thinking almost obsessively about the other person, an increased and acute sense of happiness because of that person or your relationship,...being very concerned about whether the other person returns romantic feelings, possessiveness, having big romantic fantasies involving yourself and the other person (*The Thinking Asexual* 2013).

The blogger goes on to remind the reader that “not everybody experiences romantic attraction the same way, so the above characteristics are only rough, possible guidelines” (*The Thinking Asexual* 2013).

The distinction between romantic and sexual attraction is important in this discussion, because some intersections of identity may have more access to queer spaces than others. A person who identifies as *biromantic asexual*, for example, may be more welcome in queer spaces than a person who identifies as *heteroromantic* or *aromantic*, based on which identities are considered “more queer” than others. My preliminary research suggests that there is greater conflict when hetero-identified people—those who are attracted, in some way, to a person of a different sex and/or gender—who fall under the asexual umbrella, self-identify as *queer*. It's tempting to assume that heteroromantic asexuals make up such a small part of the asexual community that this discussion is unnecessary, but in the 2014 AVEN Community Census, 22% of asexual respondents identified as heteroromantic (Ginoza, et al. 2014: 7).

A use of *queer* by the asexual and aromantic communities that is often debated is *queerplatonic*, which refers to a “nonromantic, emotionally intimate relationship” (*The Thinking*

*Asexual* 2014). The definition given by *The Thinking Asexual* also states that *queerplatonic* may be used by anybody, “regardless of their sexual and/or romantic orientations” (*The Thinking Asexual* 2014), which goes against traditional uses of *queer* as an identity term. While there are many people who would disagree with the idea that a hetero-identified person could use *queer* as an identity, an article by Amelia Tait for *Vice Magazine* explains that *queer* refers to “the ‘queering’ of traditional relationship boundaries” (Tait 2014). The use of *queer* in this way parallels the definition given by Heather Love in her article “Queer,” featured in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, as well as the definition presented by Michael Warner in his book *Fear of a Queer Planet*.

### ***Asexual/Aromantic Spectrum Identities***

Asexuality, as a self-applied sexual identity, first began to be recognized by the wider public after the creation of AVEN in 2001 (Ginoza et al. 2014: 1). The importance of recognizing asexuality as a self-applied identity is seen in the fifth edition of the *DSM*, which states, “If a lifelong lack of sexual desire is better explained by one’s self-identification as ‘asexual,’ then a diagnosis of female sexual interest/arousal disorder [or male hypoactive sexual desire disorder] is not made” (American Psychiatric Association 2013: 434, 443). The creation of AVEN made it possible for many asexual people to communicate their shared experiences for the first time. This contact led to the development of more terms, such as *demisexual* and *grey-asexual*, making up what is referred to as the “asexual spectrum” (*The Thinking Asexual* 2014). *Grey-asexuality* and *demisexuality* are described as identities that fall “somewhere on the spectrum between sexual and asexual” (Bogaert 2012: 85).

As noted above, asexual people also often refer to their “romantic orientation,” defined by the blog *Asexual Advice* as “An individual’s pattern of romantic attraction... that determines which gender(s), if any, they are inclined to form romantic relationships with” (Asexual Advice, n.d.). The presence of romantic orientation introduces another spectrum: the *aromantic spectrum*, whose identities (*aromantic*, *demiromantic*, and *grey-aromantic*) are parallel to those on the *asexual spectrum* (*The Thinking Asexual*

2014). While one might expect a person's sexual orientation would align with his or her romantic orientation, only about 19% of asexual people who participated in the 2014 AVEN Community Census also identified themselves as *aromantic*, while 81% identified their romantic orientation as one that didn't match their sexual orientation (Ginoza et al. 2014: 7).

## II. THE ISSUES

### *The Issue of Identity*

In "Coming to an Asexual Identity," Scherrer (2008) cites Paula Rust, who asserts that, "[w]hile the production of identity is a social-psychological process, the consequences of identity are both social and political" (Rust, qtd. in Scherrer 2008: 622). In the article "Right On, Girlfriend," Douglas Crimp writes, "...If identity is relational, then perhaps we can begin to rethink identity politics as...identities formed through political identifications that constantly remake those identities" (Crimp 1993: 313). Similarly, Rust says, "Sexual identity is 'a description of the location of the self in relation to other individuals, groups, and institutions'" (Rust 1996, qtd. in Scherrer 2008: 637).

In LGBTQ people, says Rust, "Coming to an LGBTQ identity connects an individual to a social experience of that identity..." (Rust, qtd. in MacInnis & Hodson 2011: 622). But what does this mean for those asexual or aromantic people whose corresponding sexual or romantic identities are not considered *queer*? For example, previous research has found that "[m]ockery and humor...being used in ways that can derogate asexuals or those suspected of being asexual" (MacInnis & Hodson 2011: 726) lead to asexual people feeling "abnormal," or broken, as they try to figure out their identity (Bogaert 2012). Social boundaries, then, have real, personal consequences.

### *Boundaries*

In her article "Another Kind of 'Chilly Climate,'" Julie E. Hartman (2005) describes the exclusion felt by bisexual women within the "lesbian community," and the "us vs. them identity

politics” (Hartman 2005: 63) that occur as a result. Hartman’s research pulls from research done by Paula Rust in 1995 that found 65% of lesbians believed “bisexuals are more likely (than lesbians) to want to ‘pass’ for heterosexual..., and 79% believe bisexuals experience less prejudice than lesbians” (Rust, quoted in Hartman 2005: 64). This shows the conflict that exists between queer-identified people and the heterosexual norm, creating a debate on whether bisexual people are “queer enough” to be included, in this case, within lesbian spaces. A similar argument arises with asexuality.

In 2014, AVEN conducted “The AVEN Community Census,” which surveyed “major asexual communities” online (Ginoza et al. 2014). Of the asexual respondents, 17.9% felt that they were only welcome in the Queer/LGBTQ+ community because of another identity, such as their romantic orientation or gender identity, and 14.1% felt they were not welcome in the Queer/LGBTQ+ community for any reason (Ginoza et al. 2014: 13). It is also important to recognize that there are still a number of asexual people who do not wish to be associated with the Queer/LGBTQ+ community, or those who don’t believe asexuality should be “part of the LGBTQ+ Umbrella” at all (Ginoza et al. 2014: 13). Discussing the exclusion of bisexual women within lesbian spaces, Hartman (2005) explains that, after realizing they did not fit in with “‘THE’ LGBT community,” many bisexual women sought out their own spaces (Hartman 2005: 73). This is, of course, a possibility for asexual people, who already have their own communities separate from the wider LGBTQ community. Hartman also notes that, for these bisexual women, inclusion within the LGBT community was not as important to them as finding people with “other shared interests and shared ‘queerness’” (Hartman 2005: 74).

While the discussion of asexual inclusion is mainly centered on hetero-identified asexual/aromantic people, the legitimacy of the asexual experience is also called into question. For example, in *Understanding Asexuality*, Anthony Bogaert (2012) discusses a view held by sex columnist Dan Savage, who argues that it does not make sense for asexual people to “assert

their identity...within a public sphere” because they are not “engaging in potentially prohibited behavior...and do not need public acceptance...” (Bogaert 2012: 84). However, research done by Cara C. MacInnis and Gordon Hodson (2011) found that asexual people were viewed negatively by heterosexual people, as well as “other sexual minorities” (MacInnis & Hodson 2011), stating that anti-asexual bias was “repeatedly stronger than bias toward other sexual minorities. ... [Asexuals] are viewed as less human... [and] lacking in terms of human nature” (MacInnis & Hodson 2011: 739). Despite this research, it would be unlikely to hear someone deliberately express their dislike of asexuals within an LGBTQ space, which are meant to be “safe spaces.” Though the definition of “safe space” applies to any identity—including age, race, ethnicity, etc.—the section on gender identity and sexual orientation defines a safe space as “[a] place where anyone can...be fully self-expressed, without fear of being made to feel uncomfortable...on account of biological sex,...sexual orientation, gender identity or expression...” (*Advocates for Youth* n.d.). That being said, my preliminary research suggests that there are often comments and assumptions made that (perhaps unintentionally) exclude some people.

Hartman gives a number of examples about the subversive ways exclusion was experienced by her bisexual participants. One woman is quoted as saying, “I haven’t found...any hostility towards bisexuals, but I guess people don’t really think about it” (Hartman 2005: 69). With asexuality, exclusion may also be caused by a lack of knowledge about the identity in general. Scherrer writes, “The lack of visibility and awareness of asexuality is a barrier to its inclusion in other sexuality-based political action groups” (Scherrer 2008: 636). It is possible that asexuality goes unmentioned in queer spaces, not because of any overt bias, but because “people don’t really think about it” (Hartman 2005: 69). In her article “Speaking as a Heterosexual,” Celia Kitzinger explores the ways that heterosexual people unintentionally reassert their heterosexuality within day-to-day conversations. According to the Kitzinger, heterosexual people “are not actively ‘doing

being heterosexual' or 'flaunting' their heterosexuality—but are simply getting on with the business of their lives, treating their own and others' heterosexuality as entirely unremarkable, ordinary, [or] taken-for-granted..." (Kitzinger 2005: 187). Similarly, sexual people may not intentionally reassert their sexuality, but may alienate asexual people within queer spaces by taking for granted others' sexual identity.

Kristin S. Scherrer's (2008) work supports the fact that asexuality is in many cases invisible. In her article "Coming to an Asexual Identity," Scherrer points out that "sexual essentialism, [or] the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions...is a widespread assumption of modern society" (Scherrer 2008: 629). For many queer people, identity is based in the "struggle for sexual...freedom" (Love 2014: 172), and the struggle to be able to "assert their identity... within a public sphere" (Bogaert 2012: 84). Scherrer points out, however, that asexual identity often "revolves around the *lack* of sexuality" (Scherrer 2008: 630); asexual people thus "reject a wildly held cultural ideology of sexuality as biologically based and ubiquitous" (Scherrer 2008: 632). According to Scherrer, "[t]he construction of asexual identities problematizes the boundaries between the sexual and the non-sexual...by redefining traditionally 'sexual' behaviors as non-sexual..." (Scherrer 2008: 629). Much as the bisexual women's experiences in Hartman's study showed how bisexuality challenged the boundaries between queer and not-queer; many of the respondents to Scherrer's survey also challenged typical "understandings of sexuality" (Scherrer 2008: 632).

### ***The Threat of Inclusion***

In his article "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct?," Joshua Gamson writes: "Queerness spotlights a dilemma shared by other identity movements....Queer as an identity category often restates tensions between sameness and difference in a different language" (Gamson 1995: 391, 396). These tensions arise, among other places, in the discussion surrounding the inclusion of asexuality in queer spaces. Because asexuality is different, it

has the potential to threaten queerness. Gamson, whose research focused on responses to bisexual and transgender groups using the word *queer*, writes:

These ‘border skirmishes’ over membership conditions and group boundaries... reflect the growing power of transgender and bisexual organizing. ...The debates make concrete the anxiety queerness can provoke. ...An inclusive queerness threatens to turn identity into nonsense, messing with the idea that identities...are fixed, natural... and therefore solid political ground (Gamson 1995: 399).

The debate surrounding the inclusion of asexuality shows that this is a community that is gaining ground within discussions about sexuality. Because asexuality is defined as the absence of sexual attraction, and often described as the absence of sexual desire, it could be considered threatening to a political movement that has been fighting for the right to be sexual in its own way. The assumption that asexuality is synonymous with celibacy is also threatening. Celibacy refers to the *choice* not to have sex, even if sexual attraction is present. Those who confuse asexuality with celibacy may reinforce the idea that sexual orientation can be controlled or chosen, which is an idea the queer community has fought to eradicate.

### III. DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Barbara Johnstone explains discourse as “actual instances of communicative action in the medium of language...” (Johnstone 2008: 2). Discourse analysis, to Johnstone, is more than the study of “language as an abstract system,” but is instead the study of “...what happens when people draw on the knowledge they have about language,...based on their memories of things they have said, heard, seen, or written before to...exchange information....” (Johnstone 2008: 3). Discourse analysis can be used to “shed light on how meaning can be created via the arrangement...of

information...or via the details of how a conversationalist takes up and responds to what has just been said. Discourse analysis sheds light on how speakers indicate their semantic intentions, and how hearers interpret what they hear..." (Johnstone 2008: 6).

What is communicated in discourse is largely social. Johnstone writes, "Anyone who wants to understand human beings has to understand discourse... . Discourse [analysis helps] answer questions about social relations, such as dominance and oppression...[and] is useful in the study of personal identity and social identification" (Johnstone 2006: 7). In my research, I will use discourse analysis to show how asexuals, as a group, are addressed, named, and categorized within discussions of the relationship between *asexuality* and *queerness*. In addition, I will analyze the features of the arguments presented in these discussions. Both will shed light on who is considered to be part of an identity and who is not, as well as showing who is "like us," and who is not. This section will present previous discourse analysis research on the creation or reinforcement of boundaries, as well as identifying some tools that are used by opposing groups to show one group as more "favorable" than another.

### ***The Discourse of Otherness***

In *The Language and Politics of Exclusion*, Stephen Harold Riggins presents methodologies used by critical discourse analysts to explore the way groups are marginalized through discourse. Riggins explains the use and development of the "external Other" as an identity within discussions of discourse. *Other*, in this case, refers to "all people... [perceived] as mildly or radically different [from the majority]" (Riggins 1997: 3). Compared to terms like *deviant* and *outsider*, says Riggins, "*Other* would appear to be a more suitable term [than *deviant*]...because of its vagueness" (Riggins 1997: 4). According to Riggins, "Outsiders...tend to perceive Others as a homogenous category... By contrast, the Self tends to make finer distinctions among its own members..." (Riggins 1997: 5).

Though much of Riggins' work is based on majority vs. minority *othering*, he does discuss "Others of a minority," or those who are *othered* within an already marginalized group (Riggins

1997: 6). On this topic, he says, “[t]he discourses of identity articulated by majority populations are likely to be univocal and monologic.... By comparison, the discourses of identity articulated by members of subordinate minorities tend to be contradictory, complex, and ironic. ... [It] is characteristic of minority discourse that it often is not clear who is Self and who is Other” (Riggins 1997:6); however, “...the perception of difference is influenced by economic and political motives” (Riggins 1997: 9).

These ideas can be applied to the discourse surrounding the inclusion of asexuality as a queer identity, if one considers asexual people to be the “others within a minority.” While people with non-normative gender, sexual, and romantic identities are assumed to be *queer* by those in the dominant (heteronormative and/or sexual) society, the separation of identities among queer people themselves influences the way identity is discussed and determined. Not only that, but discussions by and about the asexual minority must also be seen in contrast to the—until recently—unnamed *sexual* majority, which, being a majority, has, as Riggins states, the advantage of being seen as “apolitical.” In contrast, discussions concerning minority groups often characterize them as being “odd or irrational, [which] is a powerful strategy of exclusion used by a dominant majority that sees itself as normal and rational” (Riggins 1997: 17). My preliminary research suggests that the same is true for asexual people.

### ***Ideology and Discourse***

In “Politics, Ideology, and Discourse,” T. A. van Dijk discusses how ideologies affect the way people form arguments, and vice versa, particularly in the realm of politics (van Dijk 2006). According to van Dijk, “The identity of groups is not only based on their structural properties, but also on their ideology” (van Dijk 2006: 729), which in turn “...control[s] the individual discourses and other social practices of group members” (van Dijk 2006: 730). Using a debate in the British House of Commons on immigration as an example, van Dijk shows how language is manipulated in order to express a group’s ideologies. For example, when groups are presented in an argument, things considered favorable will be associated with the group of the person speaking, and unfavorable

traits will be associated with the opposing group (van Dijk 2006: 734). Van Dijk enumerates a number of additional rhetorical strategies used by MPs in the British House of Commons to show the (dis)favorability of a group, including disclaimers, positive self-presentation, generalizations, implication, polarization, and victimization. With these features, even unfavorable examples can be manipulated enough to bring favorability to the speaker's group (van Dijk 2006: 735).

Van Dijk writes, "...Ideologies often have a polarized structure, reflecting competing or conflicting group membership and categorization in ingroups and outgroups...and if [the contents of discourse] are polarized, it is likely that discourse will...show various types of polarization" (van Dijk 2006: 734). It is necessary to highlight the way groups position themselves in relation to opposing groups, especially because much of the discussion of asexual/aromantic inclusion in the queer community is extremely polarized. In the context of this discussion, this could mean positioning asexuality with the *cisgender* heterosexual norm, or the idea that being *cisgender* (or having a gender identity that "matches" a person's assigned sex at birth) and heterosexual is "normal," with anything else being "abnormal." My research to date suggests that this norm, as well as its corresponding assumptions, is often considered the force opposed to queer identity, in order to show that asexuals are, in fact, *not* a legitimate queer identity.

### ***Boundaries to Discourse***

In an article written for the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, Richard Buttny focuses on the following question: "What are students' discursive constructions of separateness, boundaries, and difference?" (Buttny 1999: 251). Buttny writes,

Intergroup relations theory claims that the greater the perceived dissimilarity, the greater the subjective intergroup distance. ...Out-group members may be perceived as 'too different' to motivate one to communicate with them. ...Minority

group members with a strong sense of group solidarity and dependence will perceive communication boundaries [between themselves and others] as stronger (Buttny 1999: 248).

Not only does the creation of these boundaries prevent the in-group (in this case, the queer community) from communicating with the out-group (the asexual/aromantic communities), but it also affects the way discourse takes place. Buttny's research, though focusing on racial self-segregation, can be applied to the separation that exists between asexual/aromantic people and the sexual queer community.

Buttny found that the students in both the majority and minority groups were able to justify the boundaries that existed. Some of those justifications were based in social identity, with respondents saying that separation appealed not only to difference, "but to commonalities, citing the norm that people socialize with those they have more in common..." while others saw separation as being "problematic...but...understandable" (Buttny 1999: 263). Buttny's research also highlighted the use of separation as a way to preserve an identity. The use of separation as a way to preserve an identity was "...not an issue for Whites, who have 'the privilege'...of being the dominant group" (Buttny 1999: 263). This need to preserve identity could be part of the reason why 8.9% of asexual people stated that they do not wish to be part of the "Queer/LGBTQ+" community, and 6.9% believed asexuality should *not* be under the "LGBTQ+ Umbrella" (Ginoza et al. 2014: 13).

## CONCLUSION

### *Future Research*

While this paper addresses *why* the conversation surrounding asexual inclusion in queer spaces is important, little has been said about *where* the conversation is taking place, and who is involved. There is a need for further research to be done on this topic, looking particularly at the discussions of asexual inclusion that are occurring online. Online spaces are

popular for discussions of asexuality, partially because of the existence of AVEN, one of the major focal points of the asexual/aromantic communities (Scherrer 2008). According to the 2014 AVEN Community Census results, when asked where they first participated in an asexual community, 94% of respondents said that the first community they participated in was online (Ginoza et al. 2014:10). In addition, Vikki Fraser (2010) has shown that the Internet is a popular—and relatively safe—space for LGBTQ youth in general to explore their identities. In her article “Queer Closets and Rainbow Hyperlinks,” Fraser describes the way LGBTQ youth use the Internet as a kind of “closet,” or a space where “... queer young people are able to act in safety and privacy without the stigma associated with the experience of queerness” (Fraser 2010: 31). Kristin S. Scherrer’s research applies this directly to asexuality when she writes, “[s]imilar to LGBTQ sexualities, the privacy provided by the Internet is beneficial to the formation of asexual identities” (Scherrer 2008: 624). The use of queer youth websites as a space to learn about queerness makes them a prime place to explore this issue. Further research on the discussions of *asexuality* as it relates to *queerness* must include discussions that are occurring online, given the tremendous importance of these spaces in the shaping and understanding of these identities.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

The creation of AVEN in 2001 created awareness about the asexual community (Bogaert 2012: 38), and this awareness brought with it a complicated discussion concerned with determining if and where asexuality and aromanticism fit within the wider LGBTQ community. Such discussion calls for an examination of the relation between asexual people and sexual members of the LGBTQ community, and how people use language to draw, redraw, and erase boundaries between them.

The discussions surrounding asexuality are numerous, diverse, and polarized. In order to understand them, it is important to understand the context that surrounds them. This paper addresses a number of issues involved in these discussions, including the historical significance of the word *queer*, and how the many

understandings of asexuality and queerness affect who is allowed to belong to which groups. I have also presented previous research on the experiences of bisexual people within queer spaces as a possible parallel to the experiences of asexual people, as well as a review of research done by Scherrer (2008), Bogaert (2012), and AVEN (2014), that focuses specifically on the experiences of asexual people online and among queer-identified people.

In addition to developing an overview of the social landscape in which discussions of asexuality take place, I provide an examination of discourse analytic research on argumentation, identity, othering, and boundaries. In particular, I discuss van Dijk's (2006) research on the effect of a group's ideology on discourse, and different tactics used to present one group as more favorable. Buttny (1999) discussed how discourse on a college campus contributed to social segregation between different racial groups. Through student interviews, he concluded that, though some boundaries were created on the basis of difference or similarity, they were also used as a way to preserve identity (Buttny 1999: 263).

Bringing together a combination of research from discourse analysts and queer studies scholars alike, this paper sets the stage for an in-depth examination of the discourse surrounding the complex relationship between asexuality and queerness. Research along these lines will not only shed light on the nature of this relationship and how it is shaped and negotiated but promises to deliver insight into what it means to be queer.

## References

- American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5®). Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013. Ebook Library. Web. 15 Apr. 2015.
- Asexual Advice. n.d. Glossary. *Asexual Advice*. Tumblr. Online: <http://asexualadvice.tumblr.com/glossary>.
- Barton, Robert L. If you think your child may be bisexual. *Getting bi: Voices of bisexuals around the world*, 2nd ed., ed. By Robyn Ochs & Sarah E. Rowley, 242. Boston, MA: Bisexual Resource Center. Print.
- Bogaert, Anthony F. 2012. Forging an (a)sexual identity. *Understanding asexuality*, 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. 83-94. Print.
- Bogaert, Anthony F. 2012. History. *Understanding asexuality*, 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. 38. Print.

- Carter, David. 2010. *Stonewall: The riots that sparked a revolution*, 2nd ed. 1, 261. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press. Print.
- Chasin, CJ DeLuzio. 2013. Reconsidering asexuality and its radical potential. *Feminist Studies* 39.2: 405.
- Crimp, Douglas. 1993. Right on, girlfriend. *Fear of a queer planet: Queer politics and social theory*, 1st ed., ed. Michael Warner, 300-320. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. Print.
- Fraser, Vikki. 2010. Queer closets and rainbow hyperlinks: The construction and constraint of queer subjectivities online. *Sexuality research and social policy* 7.1: 30-36.
- Gamson, Joshua. 1995. Must identity movements self-destruct? A queer dilemma. *Social problems* 42.3: 391-399.
- Ginoza, Mary Kame, Tristan Miller, et al. 2014. The 2014 AVEN community census: Preliminary findings. 1-19. Web.
- Hartman, Julie E. 2005. Another kind of "chilly climate": The effects of lesbian separatism on bisexual women's identity and community. *Journal of bisexuality*. 5.4: 63-76. Print.
- Johnstone, Barbara. 2008. Introduction. *Discourse Analysis*, 2nd ed. 3-7. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing. Print.
- Levy, Denise L. and Corey W. Johnson. 2011. What does the q mean? Including queer voices in qualitative research. *Qualitative social work*. 11.2: 130-140. Print.
- Love, Heather. 2014. Queer. *Transgender studies quarterly*. 1.1: 172-176. Print.
- MacInnis, Cara C. and Gordon Hodson. 2012. Intergroup bias toward "group x": Evidence of prejudice, dehumanization, avoidance, and discrimination against asexuals. *Group processes & intergroup relations*. 15.6: 725-743. Print.
- Murphy, M. Lynne. 1995. The elusive bisexual: Social categorization and lexico-semantic change. *Queerly phrased*, 1st ed., ed. By Anna Livia & Kira Hall, 35-57. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Riggins, Stephen Harold. 1997. The rhetoric of othering. *The language and politics of exclusion: Others in discourse*, 1st ed. By Stephen Harold Riggins, 2-17. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Robinson, Tom. 2009. Bisexual community. *Getting bi: Voices of bisexuals around the world*, 2nd ed., ed. By Robyn Ochs & Sarah E. Rowley, 156-157. Boston, MA: Bisexual Resource Center. Print.
- Scherrer, Kristin S. 2008. Coming to an asexual identity: Negotiating identity, negotiating desire. *Sexualities*. 11.5: 621-641. Print.
- Seidman, Steven. 1993. Identity and politics in a "postmodern" gay culture: Some historical and conceptual notes. *Fear of a queer planet: Queer politics and social theory*, 1st ed., ed. Michael Warner, 133. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. Print.
- Tait, Amelia. 2014. Aromantics just want to be your friend. *Vice.com*. Vice.com. Web.
- The Thinking Asexual. 2013. Cross orientation sexuality overview. *The Thinking Asexual*. Wordpress.com. Web. The Thinking Asexual. 2014. Identity, attraction, relationship terms. *The Thinking Asexual*. Wordpress.com. Web.
- Van Dijk, T.A. 2006. Politics, ideology, and discourse. *Politics of teaching*. 728-740. Print.
- Warner, Michael. 1993. Introduction. *Fear of a queer planet: Queer politics and social theory*, 1st ed., ed. Michael Warner, vii-xxxi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. Print.