Being Aromantic: How Society messes you up

My first experience with romance was at the age of 11. I’d finally made actual friends at school, and it just so happened that my best friend at the time was someone of the opposite agab, and as such my mother lost her mind. She started constantly asking me if I was “interested” in my freind, and no matter how many times I got aggravated at her for it or how many times I just kept telling her ‘no’, she wouldn’t stop asking and asking. Even after I got even more friends, and started talking about them to her, she still kept insisting that I *had* to have a crush on at least one of my friends.

It did eventually start getting to me, I started thinking that maybe I did need to have a crush on someone, and that maybe my lack of crushes meant something was wrong with me. A bit after that, I finally learned what a being gay meant, my mind immidiatly latched onto that as an explanation for why I didn’t have a crush on any of my freinds. Regardless of the fact that I did have at least one freind who fit the bill of being someone a gay me could have a crush on, and that I didn’t have a crush on, but at the time it had been so ingrained into my mind that people had to have crushes that I fabricated multiple ones within just that year.

Me, being a child with no social skills and no real care for how others saw me started introducing myself as gay, and started telling my freinds that I was gay. In the place I was at the time, this had the effect of immediately stopping anyone else from inquiring about any potential romantic interests. Because everyone was quick to point out that they totally aren’t homophobes, while then turning around and literally never talking to a gay person about anything related to their being gay.

It did come back to hurt me, when I got caught in the trap of “you totally like this/want this because you’re gay” sexual molestation and assult, and getting away from that person took me half a decade, but besides that, nothing bad ever really came of being thought of as gay. Eventually, especially after the first year or two of being molested by someone who was saying I should like it because I was gay, it dawned on me that I may not, in fact, be gay,

Througout a large chunk of my later education, after everyone thought I was gay and stopped talking to me about anything even remotly romantic, I didn’t think about it. Which, now, with the perspective of hindsight, probably was an indication that I wasn’t actually gay, given I didn’t have a single gay crush or thought that wasn’t entierly forced upon me by my own self-rationalizing mind. It wasn’t until 10th grade, at the age of 15 or so when I actually started to think about it again. My best freind at the time had just introduced me to the concept of being asexual, and I’d latched on to that and ran with it. I finally had a way to explain why I wasn’t sexually attracted to other people, and why anything even vaguely sexual caused me lots of discomfort, besides the years of molestation, of course. Still way too early to open up about that to anyone ever.

The asexual community introduced me to the concept of romantic identities, as i’m sure is a thread that’s common through a lot of people who few up and were introduced to these terms around the same time I was. Also like many others, I started my journey by finding AVEN, and subsequently undiscovering AVEN. Eventually finding my way to a discord community for asexual people, my first introduction to the concept of romantic orientations happened when the introduction template that people filled out to get pronoun roles on the server included a feild for romantic orientation. Not that I suddenly jumped into being aromantic the way I jumped into being asexual, quite the opposite in fact.

For the first few months in that community, I went from saying I was homoromantic, to panromantic when I figured out I’m nonbinary instead of being cis. I just wasn’t having romantic attraction to anyone, but given the years of socialization and amatonormativity growing up, I could not let go of the idea that I *had* to be able to feel romantic attraction to *someone*, so I eventually broke down and started thinking of myself as demiromantic. Not to say that someone who says they’re demiromantic is just stuck in the same way I was, being demiromantic is totally valid by itself, but it wasn’t truly right for me. Eventually, after more than a year thinking about it and constantly being around aromantic people who made it very clear that someone doesn’t *have* to have romantic attractions, I admitted to myself that I just wasn't going to experience romantic attraction, and that’s okay.

Evidently no one else in my life, besides those in my aro/ace discord server, got that picture, really. I learned about queerplatonic relationships and realized that it was totally what I wanted with my best friend. So I waited like four months before finally working up the courage to ask, because I was scared I’d just be laughed at or something along those lines because ‘obviously *normal* people don’t need these special words for being best friends’. Tumblr’s at the time rampant arophobia didn’t really help much with that fear, but I got lucky and my bestie just kind of rolled with it and said “oh hey you’re right this is totally what we are”, but lots of people don’t get that. Lots of people throughout our partnership have explicitly stated that they think we’re a good romantic couple, even after being told we’re not romantically involved in anyway.

Quite a large number of the people I've talked to on the subject recount getting blank stares or being told “isn’t that just being best friends”, and that sucks. Being told by others that my own relationships are worth less just because they aren’t romantic is sucky, hurtful, and makes people scared to open up about their own experiences, and scared to reach out. Amatonormativity, the concept that monogamous romantic relationships are good and correct and that it’s what everyone should strive for, is horrid in multiple ways, and this is decidedly one of them. I shouldn’t have to validate my entire existence as a human person who doesn’t feel romantic feelings to others just to not get harassed by people.

At least once a week I talk to other aromantics going through the same struggles I went through in the past, being rejected from potential close relationships or having people assume they are somehow lesser because of the way they are. And the worst part of it, is that no matter how many alloromantic people I talk to about this subject, most of them just simply laugh me off the stage or call me cold or unloving. I’m as far from unloving as one can get, but they don’t care to get to know me because they see me as this weird person who doesn’t get crushes, or they think something’s *wrong* with me, or something else equally absurd. And then I also had to deal with my own partner not really understanding what our relationship meant, especially to me. They didn’t, and still don’t, tell me when they form other committed relationships, or anything of the sort, because what we have together doesn’t read as “a committed relationship” like a romantic one.

I’ve ended up finding out about their romantic partners from other people, on a few occasions even the said romantic partner in question, without them even seeming to care to tell me. That hurts, it makes me feel like my feelings and commitment and attachment are somehow lesser, because our relationship isn’t treated with the same level of respect as a romantic one, not only by others but by my own partner as well. And like, I fully understand *why* they do this, *why* they see it this way, because I only have to look into my own past, and the extremely amatonormative upbringing and environment I grew up under, to see exactly why my feelings don’t matter as much.

Even if people don’t mean to, are genuinely knowledgeable about aromantic things and think it’s totally valid, the way people are raised by society sculpts people to see romantic relationships as the end all be all of committed relationships. That’s not even getting into how hard society (American society, I'm definitely coming from an American perspective and I shouldn’t be taken to be talking about any other culture/society) pushes the idea that romance has to include sex, and anyone who can’t sexually provide for their partner is lame and lacking and less of a person. You also get the perplexing situation where people totally can and will provide for their partner sexually, but can’t do the whole romantic thing, and they get shamed for that almost as much as the sex thing.

Aromantics can't win, asexuals can’t win, aromantic asexuals get shafted many times more than being one or the other, and the only people who win are functioning alloromantics/allosexuals. The spell checker I'm using to write this piece itself won’t even let me type these words, amatonormative, alloromantic, allosexual, without throwing lots of “this word doesn’t exist” and “did you mean?” squiggly red lines all over the place, because people don’t think they exist, society doesn’t think we matter. We should strive to be a more tolerant society, and part of that is accepting that amatonormativity, and all the things it entails, just aren’t worth keeping around anymore.

I don’t mean that monogamy should be dropped entirely, or that romantic relationships shouldn’t be held to a high regard, that’d just be making even more problems without solving anything. Our society should instead strive to be more understanding that not everyone wants or needs romance in their lives. Not only does this help aromantics not feel like stains upon the human species as a whole, but it also helps those who just aren’t ready for the emotional connection that romantic relationships entail to not be pressured into relationships that are more than likely just going to mess them up even more.

I love me a romance story just as much as the next person, but only when the romance is between people who work as friends and actually both agree that they are ready and willing to make that emotional connection. Nothing is more horrible than reading a story about something working through something, and then having them just *magically* fall for some suave or charming person without actually going over their issues. Often with the consequences conveniently left out of the story because they don’t find into the amatonormative narrative society puts out. And why does the person even need a romantic relationship anyway? The cynic in my says because that’s what our society forces onto people, and any story that doesn't contain it is lesser for it.

Continuing from my original point, amatonormativity also upholds monogamy as the epitome of committed relationships, which just isn’t true for a large number of people. At current, these people, the polyamorous people and the non-monogomous people and the people who practice relationship anarchy, are all ridiculed as “easy” or “less emotionally attached”, and their relationships are looked down upon as lesser. Notice how this is exactly how I described feeling about my own queerplatonic relationship? If I wasn’t socialized to view monolithic romantic relationships as the be all end all of commitment, and if my partner wasn’t socialized in the same system as that, then we both would have been better about that type of stuff from the beginning.

Monogamy is how the majority of people go about their emotionally committed relationships, and that’s fine. I’m not going to definitively say that if we weren’t socialized to view them as the best then less people would choose them, but I am going to say that I personally believe that would be the case. That’s not a bad thing. People see it as a bad thing, but that’s mainly because they’ve been taught it was a bad thing by those teachings. No one should be made to feel lesser about their emotions and how they connect to people, and how they choose to express and label those connections, and that’s literally what this socialization is doing.

Society should stop forcing monogamous monolithic romantic (and sexual) relationships down everyone’s throat as the best relationship style, it’s an outdated concept that doesn’t hold up in the modern world, and actively discourages people from being themselves. Other relationships, and other relational models, are just as valid as the monolithic one, and no one should be shamed for choosing to live by *any* of those models, even if they ultimately do decide that monogamous sexual romance is right for them. Amatonormativity, and all of it’s stupid stipulations on what people “should” do in regards to their relationships, ultimently hurts everyone, and it should be punted out the door as fast as can reasonably be done with a massive societal construct that is nebulously defined/understood at best.