

Defining Intimacy on the Spectrum of Sexuality

Chloe Thierstein

1531783

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Dr. Frank Trovato

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As many of us know, intimacy is a necessary part of family and partner relationships. However, as our understanding of the spectrum of sexuality increases, so does the incompleteness of our understanding of intimacy. Intimacy is thought to be a form of love as described by William J. Goode's (1959) understanding of love in that it is “a strong emotional attachment, a cathexis, between adolescents or adults of opposite sexes, with at least the components of sex desire and tenderness” (p. 41). This leads us to the assumption that intimacy in partner relationships must infer sexual relations between partners. The purpose of my discussion is to broaden the idea of intimacy by discussing previous literature conducted on homosexual, transgender, and asexual individuals which referenced their ideas surrounding what intimacy means to them. This will develop an understanding of how these individuals view intimacy in contrast with popular heteronormative relationship ideals. Through this work, I will demonstrate how that it is becoming increasingly apparent that what constitutes as “intimate” varies greatly from each relationship and thus, there must be more work done to fully understand how these new varieties of relationships develop and succeed.

First, I will briefly discuss the historical context of intimacy in relationships, and how current trends are moving in modernity. Next, I will define the main sexual identities of interest that are present in our post-modern society to lay the groundwork for my discussion. I will then discuss the general importance and relevance of intimacy for queer allosexual groups and how they define intimacy in their own relationships as evidenced by current literature. I will follow this with a similar look into queer asexual groups. From these discussions I will point out the sociocultural and psychological or personality differences between definitions of intimacy in each group. Finally, I will conclude with a brief discussion on how we can broaden our

understanding of intimacy to be more inclusive of LGBTQ2SA+ relationships and offer implications for future research.

Historical Context and Modern Trends

Edward Shorter's (1975) book, "The Making of the Modern Family", offers important insight into our understanding of intimacy in the historical context and how it has developed through modernity. He argues that in the past, there was more pressure put onto the passing down of lineage and wealth resulting in higher scrutiny facing young people seeking marriage (Shorter, 1975, p. 48). These unions were strictly controlled through community involvement in the personal lives of each resident (Shorter, 1975, p. 48) with high rates of prosecution for, mainly women, who were seen to be promiscuous (Shorter, 1975, p.51). Shorter argued that marriage in earlier centuries was often affectionless and seen more as a transaction rather than based on any emotions (Shorter, 1975, p. 55). For women this meant that they were required to submit to their husbands (Shorter, 1975, p. 59) and their worth was generally found in reproduction and how the community perceived their work (Shorter, 1975, p.75). Intimacy during this period was largely discouraged due to communal surveillance of the household (Shorter, 1975, p. 53). However, as we have moved through the first sex revolution of the 18th century, where power shifted from the community towards peers and their feelings (Shorter, 1975, p. 79-80), we saw a shift towards young people following their feelings. By the 20th century the second sex revolution had taken hold and an influx of sentiment resulted in placing affection and compatibility at the top of the list for partnerships (Shorter, 1975, p. 148). This marked the distinct "dividing line between private and public spheres" as communities no longer had control over the relationships of the young (Shorter, 1975, p.53). As we can see today, community stability is no longer the primary guiding force and is replaced by "individual self-

realization" (Shorter, 1975, p. 19). It matters less the continuation of the family and instead focuses on romantic love and sexual gratification (Shorter, 1975, p. 19). This has shifted when thinking about LGBTQ2SA+ communities, some of which do not value romantic or sexual gratification at all.

Defining Sexual Identities

Sexual identity remains a complex and evolving subject of interest to relationship demographers. While all should be researched carefully, this paper will focus on a few that are key to my discussion. An important term to point out is allosexual which describes people who do experience sexual attraction (Mollet, 2020, p. 189). There are many sexual identities that are allosexual in nature. The first that is pertinent to understand are heterosexual relationships. These relationships take place between a man and a woman and follow traditional expectations of who partakes in relationships. The next two sexual identities that are important to this discussion are, homosexual relationships. These relationships occur between two men or two women, respectively. Another important sexual identity is that of transgender people. Transgender people are those who identify as a different gender than that assigned at birth. These individuals may enter different relationship styles based on how they identify themselves, but experience intimacy in very diverse ways. The last relationship style that is essential to my discussion are asexual relationships. Asexual people generally do not experience any sexual desire, and some may identify as aromantic in which they do not experience romantic desire. Each of these sexual identities are important to understand as they play major roles in current literature on the topic of intimacy.

Intimacy in Allosexual Queer Relationships

There are many social, cultural, and psychological or personal reasons that impact an individual's relationship with intimacy. They may face many factors that determine whether they engage in certain intimate behaviour based on their gender identity and sexual orientation. Although each relationship is different, literature as shown that there are trends in how certain queer allosexual relationships view intimacy.

Intimacy in homosexual allosexual relationships can form in different ways. In Umberson et al.'s (2015) article, "Intimacy and Emotion Work in Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Relationships", they interview couples in homosexual and heterosexual relationships to determine how intimacy impacts different types of relationships and which gender is responsible for each form of intimacy. They found that women tend to do more emotion work, or romantic intimacy, regardless of if they are in heterosexual or homosexual relationships (Umberson et al., 2015, p. 533). They also found that men in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships are less likely to participate in this form of intimacy, preferring instead to have their partner work through their emotions on their own (Umberson et al., 2015, p. 533). Importantly from this study, the researchers noted that lesbian partners placed more importance on sex in their relationships to emphasize that they are in a committed romantic partnership rather than a friendship (Umberson et al., 2015, p. 553). In contrast, men in gay relationships place less value on sex, instead noting how emotion connections are more important to their relationship's success (Umberson et al., 2015, p. 551). Their findings help develop our understanding on how intimacy plays a role in homosexual relationships as it varies from both gay and lesbian allosexual relationships.

Current literature also describes sociocultural elements, such as stigma, that play a significant role in these types of relationships. As David Frost (2011) points out, those in homosexual relationships must employ strategies when looking at intimacy and stigma towards

their relationships. He noted that there are several narratives from these individuals regarding how stigma impacts them, ranging from an intense response to not being bothered by it at all (Frost, 2011, p. 4). This can cause some individuals to hide their relationships from others for fear of repercussions (Frost, 2011, p. 2). Meaning that popular negative stereotypes regarding their sexual identities plays a key role in how they interact with their partners emotionally and physically as well as the success of their relationships (Frost, 2011, p. 5). In one instance in his study a participant spoke about how her partners mother was not respectful of their relationship, due to their sexual identity, which resulted in the failure of the couple (Frost, 2011, p. 5). This theme of stigma is likely present in other LGBTQ2SA+ relationships as they deviate from social norms. Resulting in the need for a more intricate navigation of their relationships and intimacy.

In relationships where one or both partners is transgender, there is an increased complexity to intimacy. In Siboni et al.'s (2021) article, "We faced every change together. Couple's intimacy and sexuality experiences from the perspectives of transgender and non-binary individuals' partners", they look at the positives and challenges faced by transgender people and their partners regarding both forms of intimacy. The positives that transgender people and their partners experience come mainly from romantic, or emotional, intimacy. This study points out that those relationships that maintain open communication, build trust and respect, while being accepting of the gender identity of the transgender partner increases the success of relationships (Siboni et al., 2021, p. 18). On the negative side of intimacy experienced by these couples, people who identify as transgender often experience body dysphoria, although it may not impact the way the that they carry out sexual acts (Siboni et al., 2021, p. 3). The researchers of this study noted that there has been less interest in gender-affirming surgeries although this is more popular with those who identify as non-binary (Siboni et al., 2021, p.3). Importantly they

point out that these individuals can use strategies to avoid body dysmorphia such as avoidance of certain sexual activities, sexual activity in general, using prosthetics, turning the lights off, etc. (Siboni et al., 2021, p. 3-4). These strategies work to divert negative thoughts and feelings in this type of relationship (Siboni et al., 2021, p.4). Their findings demonstrate differences and challenges regarding intimacy in transgender relationships that are not present in other allosexual relationship types without pathologizing transgender people and relationships.

These articles demonstrate the sociocultural, psychological, and personal effects that their sexual identity and orientation have on the intimacy these groups experience in their allosexual relationships. There is a distinct complexity to how they approach intimacy that is not based solely on their partnership, but that also incorporates outside sources such as public perception which is generally not as present in heterosexual allosexual relationships.

Intimacy in Asexual Queer Relationships

Intimacy in asexual queer relationships can take on many forms due to the diverse nature of the asexual spectrum as there are those who experience no sexual attraction, some sexual attraction, those who require deep emotional connections before being sexually attracted, and some that point out differences in desire for sexual and romantic intimacy (Mollet, 2020, p. 190). These individuals do not fit nicely into our general notion of intimacy as their experiences vary significantly from allosexual queer and heterosexual people.

Asexual people experience intimacy very differently from those outside of these groups and must struggle with their sexual identity to walk a fine line between relationship and friendship with their partners. Dawson et al.'s (2016) article, "Negotiating the boundaries of intimacy: the personal lives of asexual people", uses interviews with those who identify themselves on the asexual spectrum to develop an understanding of the types of intimacy

experiences by asexual queer people. Many of the participants in their study referenced an acute awareness or negotiation around intimacy in their relationships, both those of friendship and relationship (Dawson et al., 2016, p.356). Some even stated that their friends offered emotional intimacy as well as physical intimacy as there was no pressure for sexual repercussions (Dawson et al., 2016, p. 355). Those who did find themselves in relationships often had to choose between avoiding sexual acts to appear “normal” to their partner or participate in sexual activities for what one participant described as “the good of the relationship” (Dawson et al., 2016, p. 357-358). This indicates that for asexual people, there are pressures put onto them within their relationships to behave in allosexual manners and they must choose to meet and negotiate the boundaries that they are willing to reach with their partners. Although their data demonstrated that asexual people were able to live intimate lives with their partners depending on where they fall on the spectrum and how much of their sexual identity they can put to the side for their non-asexual partner (Dawson et al., 2016, p.354).

As referenced above, an individual who identifies as asexual may still engage in sexual behaviour. This is emphasized in Van Houdenhove et al.’s (2015) article, “Stories About Asexuality: A Qualitative Study on Asexual Women”, speaks on how women that identify as asexual may still be sexually active. Many of the women interviewed who had engaged in sexual activity cited being curious as the motivation for their first sexual encounter (Van Houdenove et al., 2015, p. 276). They also point out that it can be the result of pressure from their partner (Van Houdenove et al., 2015, p.276). An interesting point made in this article is from one participant who tells the researchers that “[s]he did not know how a relationship without a sexual component would differ from a friendship” (Van Houdenove et al., 2015, p. 273). This point brings into focus the sociocultural component that faces asexual queer individuals as they are often faced

with shame and/or guilt from being open about their sexual identity (Van Houdenoever et al., 2015, p.263). Similar sentiments are reproduced in Mollet's (2020) article, "I Have a Lot of Feelings, Just None in the Genitalia Region", where she looks at college students who identify on the asexual spectrum. Her research points out the marginalization that these students faced by their peers, counsellors, and therapists (Mollet, 2020, p. 194). Mollet claims this is due to us living in a "sexusociety" meaning a society of sexual normativity so that topics of sex and engaging in sexual activity is prominent and those who do not participate are shunned (Mollet, 2020, p. 196).

These articles present necessary qualitative research on the ever-evolving spectrum of asexuality. They also help to develop an understanding of how asexual queer people interpret emotional and physical intimacy in their relationships. While also pointing out the sacrifices made for their partner to maintain a healthy relationship. This differs from popular thought on how asexual individuals conduct themselves in their relationships.

Implications for Future Research and Conclusion

There are many points for further research that should be considered on this topic. While conducting my research, many of the articles lacked a diverse sample size and demographic. They mainly focused on white middle class and often women to conduct their research. Further research should remedy this by focusing on gathering a sample of gender, racial, and age diverse individuals for future research. This will help grow the generalizability of research on the topic of intimacy. Furthering this point on diversity, more studies on other sexual identities and relationship types should be considered. These could include non-binary individuals, two-spirited individuals, polyamorous relationships, etc. By looking at more non-heteronormative communities, social demographers will be able to get a better sense of how intimacy plays a role

in more types of relationships. As more people come out into LGBTQ2SA+ communities we would be able to see trends of intimacy in conjunction with other demographics such as birthrates and marriages. In addition to this, more research should be conducted on individuals who identify on the asexual spectrum with a focus on how social expectations of sexual desire influence their emotional and psychological well-being in their relationships. This is important as there is not a lot of literature currently on this topic, which due to the diverse spectrum of asexual people, could be leaving a large portion of the population under researched and unaccounted for. It will also help to grow awareness surrounding asexuality and all it encompasses to help develop popular discourse around the topic to help individuals feel confident in their sexual identity.

To conclude, I have compounded many articles that discuss the diversity of intimacy in homosexual, transgender, and asexual relationships. Through my review of these articles, I have shown that intimacy is an incredibly diverse factor in relationships that causes individuals to make choices regarding their sexual identity to either engage or not engage in certain forms of intimacy. I have also pointed out some of the sociocultural and psychological or personality differences regarding intimacy in each group. From these discussions, we can see that intimacy is a dynamic and increasingly complex topic of discussion for social demographers. We are no longer able to infer sexual relationships between partners and must contend with a growing spectrum of sexualities that are developing in post-modernity. It is also important to note the great individuality of each relationship when conducting research as it makes it increasingly difficult to make generalization of the LGBTQ2SA+ communities. While at this time, it is not possible to redefine intimacy as there are still too many variables that must be researched, the intricacy of evolving our understanding of intimacy in relationships, like those discussed, can help with the broadening of assumptions made about intimacy in our society today.

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