

What Asexuality Tells Us About Sexuality

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Brotto and Yule (2016) do a service to the research and clinical community interested in sexuality by providing a thoughtful and systematic review on how best to conceptualize asexuality. Their article adds to other recent reviews and theoretical papers on asexuality (e.g., Bogaert, 2006, 2015, 2016; Gressgård, 2013; Hinderliter, 2013). Brotto and Yule's review is important in a number of ways, including helping clinicians to think critically about whether or not the absence of sexual attraction should be diagnosed as a sexual disorder. However, my comments here are restricted to how Brotto and Yule's article has implications for another important issue: How conceptualizing asexuality helps to better understand—or least view differently—sexuality, an issue I have addressed elsewhere in my own work on asexuality (Bogaert, 2012a, 2015).

As an example, Brotto and Yule raise an interesting theoretical question on the nature of sexual orientation, that is, “Might asexuality represent another dimension on which orientation is based, such that subjective falls at one end (e.g., the individual with a sense of identity as a sexual agent) and non-subjective falls at the other end (e.g., the autochorissexual who experiences a complete identity-less sexuality).” Their speculation on the relevance of subjectivity to one's sexual orientation emerges out of findings that asexual people often do not have an identity (a “self”) that is connected to their fantasy/arousal during masturbation. As Brotto and Yule describe, Bogaert (2012a, b) noted

this identity-less sexuality and described it as “autochorissexualism.”

In this line of reasoning, Brotto and Yule also query how fantasy might function to elicit arousal in some asexual people: “...whether they [asexual people] are eliciting the fantasy simply as a means of focusing attention on an object for the purposes of becoming sexually aroused and having an orgasm (cf. Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes, & Erskine, 2010).” I think this point addresses a similar one raised about some asexual people in Bogaert (2012a): “It is as if their own identities—who they are as individuals—are not sexual (e.g., *they* are not attracted to anyone or anything), but their bodies, or more correctly, aspects of their mind related to sexual arousal but not fully connected to their identity may still need sexual stimulation for them to masturbate (and perhaps receive pleasure)” (p. 63).

How sexual attractions typically function vis-a-vis subjectivity is clearly a fascinating question and one that could have implications for how we conceptualize sexual orientation. Specifically, there may be a relatively automatic arousal mechanism that normally becomes connected to one's identity, making one seek out (or at least be receptive to) partners in a relatively agentic, goal-oriented manner. However, if that arousal becomes disconnected to one's identity (as in autochorissexualism), then the typical agentic, goal-oriented manner of seeking out (or being receptive to) partners becomes a nonissue. As a consequence, there is no “I” that is sexually connected to others, and therefore there is no need to seek out others (or be receptive to others) in a sexual way, even if one's body and related brain mechanisms have some level of automatic arousal to sexual stimuli that contains people. Thus, this recent research on autochorissexualism and asexuality raises an important question on how our identities are integral to sociosexual connections to others (see also Bogaert, 2015).

As two other but related examples, research on the conceptualization of asexuality reviewed by Brotto and Yule may

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serve to integrate ideas on how people form sexual and broader social connections to others—a constellation of social/sexual characteristics that may be particularly relevant to understanding some asexual people. First, asexual people may serve as an exemplar that sex/lust and love/romance are, at least partially, separable constructs and can be “de-coupled” in individuals (e.g., Diamond, 2003; Fisher, 2004), given that many asexual people evince romantic attraction without sexual/lustful attractions (Bogaert, 2004, 2012a, b, 2015).

Second, although many asexual people are romantic, it is also true that asexual people have elevated rates of *aromantic* inclinations (Siggy, 2014). This elevated rate of aromanticism, along with other evidence of atypical social connections among some asexual people (e.g., autism spectrum conditions; Ingudomnukul, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, & Knickmeyer, 2007), suggests that mechanisms underlying the development of sexual attractions to others can have additional, concomitant effects on socioemotional functioning, including romantic attachments to others. Moreover, these findings implicate specific neuropsychological and other underlying basic developmental mechanisms involved with sexual and, potentially more broadly, social attractions/connections to others. For example, there is evidence that certain sex-linked proteins (and/or sites in the brain where they are expressed) may be relevant to both autism and sexual orientation in men. Such sex-linked proteins (i.e., Y-linked proteins) have been argued to be relevant to men’s sexual orientation because of the fraternal birth order effect (FBO; e.g., Blanchard & Bogaert, 1996). The leading biological theory of this effect posits that, with each exposure to a male fetus, a mother becomes increasingly likely to develop an immune response to a male-specific factor (i.e., a Y-linked protein) relevant to fetal brain development, ultimately affecting the sexual orientation of later-born sons (Blanchard, 2004; Blanchard & Bogaert, 1996; Bogaert & Skorska, 2011). As reviewed by Brotto and Yule (2016), there is also an FBO effect in asexual men, suggesting a maternal immune response to a Y-linked protein may affect men’s sexual attractions beyond homosexual versus heterosexual orientations. Additionally, variants of sex-linked proteins are linked to autism (Ross, Tartaglia, Merry, Dalva, & Zinn, 2015), and autism has been suggested to be affected by a maternal immune response to an as yet unidentified fetal brain protein (Zimmerman et al., 2007). Thus, research on asexuality may serve to integrate ideas on how people form sexual and broader social connections to others, along with providing the specific biological mechanism(s) underlying these connections.

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