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New Dimensions, New Directions: Asexualities and Aromanticism in the 21st Century

Megan Carroll[1] and Maya Wenzel[2]

Abstract

This article offers an overview of the state of the field for asexualities and aromanticism and suggests new directions for research. Our goal is to inspire feminist scholars of sexualities to incorporate asexualities and aromanticism into their own research and push the field forward. We begin by describing the development of asexual and aromantic concepts, with an eye toward the social and political context in which they emerged. We then turn our attention toward intersections between asexuality, aromanticism, and other social inequalities, including sexism, racism, and ableism. Next, we examine asexuality and aromanticism in relation to social institutions: medicine, labor, education, and families/relationships. Finally, we offer questions for scholars to consider regarding the relationship between asexuality, aromanticism, and broader LGBTQIA+ communities. We conclude by offering specific resources to support scholars of asexuality and aromanticism, including secondary quantitative data and mentorship communities.

Keywords

asexuality, aromanticism, compulsory sexuality, compulsory romance, amatonormativity, allonormativity

The field of asexualities and aromanticism research is packed with possibilities, even as it has grown exponentially in the last decade. As scholars focus more on asexualities and aromanticism, they untangle constructs of attraction, sex, desire, and romance that were once assumed to be linked. They identify social institutions and power systems that depend on sexual and/or romantic connections to distribute life-sustaining resources. These scholars deepen our understanding of colonialism, capitalism, racism, sexism, ableism, and other systems of oppression that intersect with sex and romance. They follow changes in identity movements, and they promote diversity and equity by pointing resources toward a minority group that has long been overlooked. The theoretical potential of asexualities and aromanticism research is not contained in ace/aro populations; instead, this is a field that can help us think more deeply about how the world around us is structured by sexuality and romance in ways that affect everyone.

In this paper, we describe new directions in asexualities and aromanticism. We offer an overview of current trends in the field and pose new questions for scholars to consider. Our hope is that this article can inspire new scholarship on asexualities or aromanticism and move the field forward in ways that integrate intersectional and decolonial approaches.

[1]California State University, San Bernardino, USA
[2]University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

Corresponding Author:
Megan Carroll, California State University, San Bernardino, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407, USA.
Email: megan.carroll@csusb.edu

Evolving Definitions

Asexuality has been alluded to in early sexology research as far back as Hirschfeld and Kinsey (Winer 2024a). Social scientists like Johnson (1977) and Storms (1980) built on their work by directly theorizing asexuality as an axis of sexual attraction and/or desire, whereas humanities scholars such as Tiffany (1992) began using asexuality as an analytic. By 2015, a substantial amount of research on asexuality became available in the humanities and social sciences, with the social sciences focusing more on populations that have adopted an asexual identity and the humanities, especially English Studies, analyzing texts with asexual resonances and thinking through an asexual lens. Research on aromanticism has lagged, though a zine by Yingchen and Yingtong (2020) and empirical work by Tessler (2023a) have contributed to a foundation upon which scholars are approaching dimensions of romance and romantic attraction.

Scholars who study asexuality or aromanticism as identity categories often find that their work is met with unfamiliarity or misunderstandings over definitions of asexuality and aromanticism, making it necessary to define each term at the outset of their work. Asexuality is most often treated as a sexual orientation in social sciences, referring to those who experience "little to no sexual attraction" to people of any gender (Carroll 2024a; Winer 2024a). Some asexual people prefer to describe their asexuality as a "lack of interest in sex," not necessarily in connection to attraction (Brown 2022; Catri 2021; Scherrer 2008). Demisexuality and graysexuality have also found some grounding in the literature as identities on the asexual spectrum that incorporate some forms of sexual attraction (Copulsky and Hammack 2023). Similar prefixes exist for those on the aromantic spectrum (e.g., grayromantic and demiromantic), but there is much room for growth in the literature regarding the nuances of aromanticism.

The terms used for the social forces marginalizing asexual and aromantic people have also evolved. "Compulsory sexuality" has become widely adopted among asexuality scholars to describe the assumption that all human beings are sexual or that sex is intrinsic to human nature (Brown 2022; Gupta 2015; Przybylo 2022). Compulsory sexuality is infused with the sexism, ableism, and racism that drive eugenicist ideologies, contributing to the desexualization of disabled people, perceived hypersexuality of Black men and women, and forced birth imposed on white women (Gupta 2015; Owen 2014). "Compulsory romance" is sometimes used to describe the system that renders romantic connections mandatory, and "amatonormativity," coined by Brake (2012), describes the monogamous, long-term, sexual, and romantic relationships to which people are expected to aspire, constraining aromantic people's options (Tessler 2023a). The terms "allosexual" and "alloromantic" have also emerged from ace/aro communities to describe people who are not on the asexual or aromantic spectrums, and the companion term "allonormativity" refers to societal assumptions that everyone is allosexual and alloromantic.

At the same time that definitions of asexuality and aromanticism have provided grounding for social scientists, they have also provoked critiques for reinforcing white, Western, and allonormative hierarchies. The most common definitions of asexuality that circulate in asexual communities and social science literature originate from online forums of the late 1990s and the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). The framing of asexuality as a sexual orientation in these spaces was developed in reference to white and western perspectives of sexuality, which were then treated as universal by social scientists (Owen 2014). Chen (2024) has written about how the visibility of western concepts of asexuality has imperialist consequences, forcing cultures to adopt asexual terminology to access resources, even though the concept does not quite translate across cultural and racialized constructions of sexuality. Chasin (2024) has also written about the inadequacies of "sexual orientation" itself, arguing that, instead of using an allonormative lens to label the directions of attractions, we should consider the kind of connections that are meaningful to people. Community thinkers have similarly critiqued the origins and utility of the "split attraction model" and "romantic orientation," referring to the conceptual differentiation between asexuality and aromanticism (Winer 2024b).

Despite these limitations, nailing down the definition of asexuality has been a theme across much of the literature. Future research should consider the contexts in which meanings around asexuality are constructed and how a shared vocabulary of identities and relationships has been helpful for some people on the asexual and/or aromantic spectrum and limiting to others. For example, the terminology of ace/aro spectrums has flourished online to include terms that are seldom documented in academic literature, such as fraysexual (i.e., exclusively feeling

sexual attraction toward strangers), quoiromantic (i.e., a sense of confusion over the distinctions between romantic and platonic attraction), cupiosexual (i.e., wanting to participate in sexual relationships but not experiencing sexual attraction), and aceflux (i.e., one's place on the asexual spectrum fluctuates). Relationalities within ace/aro communities include labels like squish (i.e., a platonic crush), zucchini (i.e., a queerplatonic partner), and quasiplatonic relationships (i.e., intense emotional relationships, similar to queerplatonic relationships). A vocabulary of attractions has also developed that differentiates sexual attraction from romantic attraction, aesthetic attraction, sensual attraction, and more (Carroll 2024a; Winer 2024b). Documenting shared meanings around asexuality and aromanticism can advance scholarly frameworks of sexuality and relationships, especially when the specific contexts in which these meanings develop and their impact on sexual minorities globally are centered.

The absence of a shared vocabulary of asexuality with the general public has also inhibited the study of asexuality and aromanticism. Methodological innovations remain necessary to better understand and serve asexual and aromantic populations. Testing and implementing inclusive survey designs that ask about sexual and romantic attraction separately, for example, would help capture a more accurate portrait of asexual and aromantic populations in western quantitative research (Carroll 2025; Winer 2024b). More community-engaged research would also be a welcome addition to the social science literature, given how theorizing on asexualities and aromanticism has developed outside academia and community thought-leaders have remained engaged in scholarly conversations (Coyote 2022).

Intersecting Inequalities

Specific intersections with asexualities have gained attention in the social science literature, and future scholarship needs to remain attentive to how inequalities of race, class, gender, ability, and more shape asexual and aromantic experiences. Class has been especially muted within asexualities research, and very little research has examined how inequalities of any kind intersect with aromantic identities. The theoretical potential of intersectional research on asexualities and aromanticism is high because both identity categories exist within a context of capitalism, racism, ableism, sexism, and other systems of oppression and can reveal nuances of these power systems that research on allosexual and alloromantic populations might overlook.

Gender has been a prominent theme in the existing body of research on asexualities. The relatively high proportions of trans and nonbinary people in asexual communities have inspired research about the unraveling of gender in asexual contexts (Chasin 2011; Cuthbert 2019). Winer (2023) found that about a third of their 77 interview respondents felt "detached" from gender altogether, meaning that gender seemed irrelevant or uncomfortable to them, even if they publicly identified with a gender category. Low proportions of men in asexual and aromantic communities have also inspired research on masculinity (Przybylo 2014; Tessler and Winer 2023). Questions remain about how femininity is constructed in relation to asexuality and aromanticism, and additional perspectives on gender diversity within aromantic or asexual communities, particularly perspectives from trans and nonbinary aces/aros, would help us better understand the relationship between gender, sexuality, and power.

Research on race and ethnicity within asexualities and aromanticism has been growing in recent years. Demand remains high for research that interrogates the racialization of asexuality and the relationship between race, compulsory sexuality, and intimacies. Scholarship from the humanities has theorized a Black Ace politics in resistance to capitalism, racism, and compulsory sexuality (Smith 2020) and used asexuality as an analytic for abolitionist thought (Owen 2024). Miles (2019), writing from a sociological perspective has theorized a Conscious Black Asexuality that celebrates Black queerness and intimacy while also resisting white supremacy and compulsory sexuality. Kenney (2024) has also written about asexual resonances within Asian North American intimacies, and journalist Chen (2020) has described racial tension within asexual spaces and how aces of various racial/ethnic backgrounds have responded to desexualization and hypersexualization. Empirical research that centers racially and/or ethnically minoritized voices within asexual or aromantic communities remains rare overall. It is critical that future research examines not only how racism operates within ace/aro identity communities but also how the racialization of sexuality shapes asexual and aromantic lived experiences.

Related to inequalities of race/ethnicity, very little social science scholarship has explicitly acknowledged global inequalities related to asexuality or aromanticism. Chen (2024) offers a critique of asexual identity discourses as rooted in Western frameworks of sexuality and white logics of respectability, arguing that global asexual solidarity requires us to de-emphasize a confining definition

of asexual identity and instead focus on global resonances of nonsexuality. Emerging work has explored Chinese (Wong and Guo 2020; Zheng and Su 2018) and Japanese (Hiramori and Kamano 2025) asexualities, but more cross-national research, research on Indigenous aces, and asexualities in the Global South would represent welcome contributions to the field.

Transnational feminist research on immigration and the state can also help us better understand how asexualities are constructed and affect people's journeys across different legal and cultural contexts (Drabent and Wenzel 2025; Wenzel 2023). Drabent and Wenzel (2025:4) note that "the current invisibility, invalidation, and pathologization of asexuality creates a reliance on the nation-state to recognize, validate, and protect asexuality." Due to the lack of explicit legislative protections for asexuality (e.g., asexuality being left out of conversion therapy bans) as well as the absence of discriminatory laws actively mentioning asexuality, asexuality is often illegible as a valid sexual identity to the nation-state. Few countries have nondiscrimination legislation specifically protecting asexuality, nor do they have legislation identifying asexuality as an identity to be protected. The state, therefore, fails to recognize and protect asexual people from discrimination and harm, which has resulted in the refusal to extend asylum to people who identify as asexual. For example, one person seeking asylum in the United States due to conversion therapy, forced marriage, and fear of corrective and marital sexual violence was told by New York lawyers that asexuality was not grounds for asylum (Benoit 2023). Another person tried to appeal their rejected case for the exception for LGBTI applicants in "safe countries of origin," but, according to the European Database of Asylum Law (EDAL 2018:1):

> The [Dutch] Council of State ruled that asexuality cannot be included in the exception for LGBTI applicants. It took into account the fact that, unlike homosexuality, asexuality is not punishable in Algeria, and that available sources do not show that asexual people face discrimination, violence or oppression there.

Thus, more research on the intersections of asexuality, the state, and immigration are needed and must be explored to understand these issues better and create the social change needed to protect asexual asylum seekers.

Disability and neurodivergence are other areas of research within asexualities studies that have established some foundational insights but have much room for growth. Disabled people are often desexualized, and asexuality is often pathologized and/or perceived as a disability. Discourses in both communities, therefore, have a tendency to distance themselves from each other, even though 12% of asexual-spectrum respondents in a 2016 survey considered themselves to be "disabled," 41% considered themselves "mentally ill," and 28% identified as "neurodivergent" (Bauer et al. 2018; Cuthbert 2017; Gupta 2024). Intersections of aromanticism and disability remain absent from the academic literature, yet additional insights into disabled asexual and aromantic experiences, especially neurodivergent aces/aros, represent necessary contributions to theories of disability, neurodivergence, and sexuality. For example, preliminary psychological research has been examining whether there is a "link" between autism and asexuality, so critical approaches that incorporate crip theory and the perspectives of neurodivergent aces/aros themselves would be an important and timely intervention (Attanasio et al. 2022; Martino 2017).

Institutional Contexts

Research is needed on how asexual and aromantic people are situated within a variety of social institutions. Asexuality has a history, both present and past, of being pathologized in Western medical contexts (Scherrer 2008). Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD) was added to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) in 1987, defined as "persistently or recurrently deficient or absent sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity" that is associated with "distress or interpersonal difficulty" (Brotto 2010:222). Consequently, some people's asexuality has been pathologized and diagnosed as a "sexual disorder." Due to the advocacy work from the AVEN Task Force in partnership with psychologists, an exception for those who self-identify as asexual was added to the DSM-V under HSDD diagnostic criteria in 2013 (Hinderliter 2015), but issues of pathologization, medicalization, and the dismissal of asexuality in medical settings persist (MacNeela and Murphy 2014; Puhl 2016). For example, evidence from the United Kingdom suggests that asexual people are offered and subjected to conversion therapy at higher rates compared to other queer identities

(Government Equalities Office 2018; Jowett et al. 2021).

Advocacy work has continued in medicine by seeking to establish a set of "best practices" for clinical approaches to asexually identified patients (Jones, Hayter, and Jomeen 2017; Schneckenburger, Tam, and Ross 2023), which have been supplemented by community recommendations aimed at clinical professionals (Resources for Ace Survivors n.d.). To further locate compulsory sexuality in medicine, we need more research that incorporates interviews with asexual people about their experiences in clinical settings, including OBGYN and mental health settings, as well as research that challenges gendered and sexual assumptions of health more broadly. Spurgas (2024), for example, has written about clinical approaches toward "low female desire" and its attempts to restore heteropatriarchal systems by stimulating sexual response. In doing so, Spurgas's (2024) work demonstrates how one can use asexuality studies to build theory and critique institutional power, even in spaces where few self-identify as asexual.

Labor and work are another dimension of social life in which asexual and aromantic people are embedded, yet we have very little empirical evidence about their experience. Survey data has shown that a few asexual people are out to their co-workers, but very few studies have used qualitative methods to examine asexual or aromantic workplace experiences (Ace Community Survey Team 2024; Pagliaccio 2024). How do asexual and aromantic people navigate conversations about sex and romance in a work environment? How do their unique approaches to family and relationships impact how employers perceive them? Sex work is an especially lively area of scholarship but one in which asexual people are significantly underrepresented. Asexual sex workers are likely to offer important insights into liberation, exploitation, and sexuality, strengthening the theoretical contributions of labor scholarship.

Educational settings have been the focus of a few empirical studies on asexuality. Yang (2021) examined how asexual people navigate sex talk among their adolescent peers in school settings, and Mollet (2023) has written about asexual college students' identity management strategies. In addition to more research on ace/aro students' experiences, research examining educational curricula could make sense of how compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity are communicated to students from an early age and help us design more inclusive sex-ed curricula.

Families, Relationships, and Sex

Families are an institution with obvious implications for asexual and aromantic positionalities, yet very little empirical research has explored family relationships for ace/aro people. Because romantic and sexual connections are normatively associated with family formation, more work is needed to understand how asexual and aromantic people form families and access resources related to caregiving, housing, and financial assistance (Tessler 2023a). What kinds of relationships do they prioritize and structure their lives around? How might asexual and aromantic perspectives contribute to scholarly conversations about "queer time" to problematize a normative life course that revolves around marriage and children (Beynon-Jones and Cummings 2025)?

Asexual communities have developed a vocabulary of intimacy in resistance to compulsory sexuality, compulsory romance, and amatonormativity. The concept of a "queerplatonic relationship," for example, has the potential to illuminate the boundaries society has around romantic and platonic intimacy (Sennkestra 2019; Tessler 2023a). Other creative concepts such as "squish" (a platonic crush) and "zucchini" (a queerplatonic partner), circulate within asexual spaces but rarely appear in academic literature. Because we live in a society that prioritizes romantic and sexual relationships, analyzing how some asexual and aromantic people embrace singlehood and platonic relationships can move us toward a liberationist framework of intimacy (Hall and Knox 2022; Tessler 2023b).

Research on asexual and aromantic people's relationship practices can also serve as a challenge to mononormativity and the conceptual boundaries around platonic and romantic intimacy. Copulsky (2016, 2019) has created foundational work on polyamory and asexuality, supported in part by community theorists and surveys, pointing toward an overlap of polyamorous and asexual identities and ambivalence toward monogamy among aces. As Copulsky (2019:203) explains, "sometimes. . .not having the clear demarcation line of sex or sexual exclusivity makes it more difficult to find a boundary between a friendship and a relationship, for researchers and individuals alike." Given the close relationship between monogamy and amatonormativity, research on relationship practices is vital to unraveling power systems that impact asexual and aromantic people.

Asexual and aromantic parenting is another necessary addition to the empirical literature. Some research has found that asexual people have less interest in parenting than their peers (Hall and Knox 2022) and have children at lower rates (Greaves et al. 2017). We could better understand the desire, frequency, and practices associated with ace/aro parenting with additional qualitative data. Doing so would put asexuality and aromanticism in conversation with a wider literature about queer parenting, adding compulsory sexuality, compulsory romance, and amatonormativity to the litany of legal and social barriers that queer people face when they parent (Carroll 2020).

Empirical work on asexual and aromantic experiences of sex and dating could also help us better understand how compulsory sexuality and compulsory romance structure intimate interactions. Despite the misconception that asexuality is synonymous with celibacy, asexuality, and aromanticism each contain a wide spectrum of attitudes and practices toward sex and romance. Research has found that asexual people experience dismissal and coercion in dating contexts (Vares 2018), and some asexual people experience corrective sexual violence in which perpetrators claim to "fix" or "cure" someone's asexuality (Doan-Minh 2019; Parent and Ferriter 2018). More work is needed to understand negotiations between asexual and aromantic people and their partners, including joyful and supportive partner relationships, to refine the theory on consent and challenge narratives of compulsory sexuality embedded in models of "healthy" relationships.

As feminist and sexualities studies turn their attention increasingly toward joy, sexual pleasure, and the politics of fucking, researchers must incorporate asexual perspectives to avoid reinforcing compulsory sexuality and universalizing interest in sex (Carroll 2024b; Jones 2019, 2025; Robinson 2025; Shuster and Westbrook 2024). Although prioritizing consent has always been critical to the mission of sex-positivity, asexual perspectives have often been left out of the sex-positive imagination in ways that ultimately undermine its mission (Winer 2025). A modicum of research has explored asexual people's relationships to kink and BDSM (Bondage and Discipline/Dominance and Submission/Sadism and Masochism) practices (Sloan 2015; Winter-Gray and Hayfield 2019; Zamboni and Madero 2018). Additional research on asexual people's negotiations within sexual relationships and/or kink/BDSM can help establish models of consent within sexualized contexts. Equally important, however, is empirical attention toward asexual people who are repulsed by sex and/or celibate, who can also teach us about consent and compulsory sexuality from their unique vantage point in a sexualized world.

Community Connections

Future research should also consider the relationship between asexual and aromantic identities, movements, and broader feminist and LGBTQIA+ discourses and spaces. Asexuality and bisexuality have a shared history that continues to shape asexual identity pathways (Winer et al. 2024), Western lesbian histories resonate with modern-day discourses and practices associated with asexuality (Przybylo 2019), and feminist scholars have begun to theorize the queerness contained within asexuality (Drabent and Wenzel 2025; Winer Forthcoming). Yet asexual people often feel ignored or in tension with LGBTQIA+ communities (Mollet and Lackman 2018; Winer 2024a). Ethnographies of queer spaces rarely mention asexual or aromantic participants, but studies of how and when asexual and aromantic people engage in queer public life could locate and challenge compulsory sexuality and compulsory romance within LGBTQIA+ communities.

Questions about sex-repulsed asexual people and their access to (often sexualized) LGBTQIA+ spaces are especially timely, given community conversations around kink, sexual shame, and stigma. These conversations often speak to conflicting access needs between sex-repulsed and sex-favorable people in the LGBTQIA+ community, in which the former may be seeking reprieve from sexualization, and the latter are seeking a reprieve from sexual shame. Research should further explore this tension, how it shapes identity, and how it impacts coalition building among LGBTQIA+ community members.

Research that explores community engagement among asexual and aromantic people could also illuminate necessary support systems. How many people on the asexual and aromantic spectrums have access to in-person interactions with other aces and aros? How many have friends that share their identity category? Does access to the community impact asexual and aromantic people's quality of life? Does it influence their approach to compulsory sexuality and its related pressures? Answers to these questions can aid organizations committed to facilitating social connection and supporting LGBTQIA+ people's well-being.

Resources

For those who are interested in pursuing research on asexualities or aromanticism, some existing resources could help jumpstart their research. The Ace Community Survey is a volunteer-run, non-academic data collection effort that has been circulated in online asexual communities annually since 2014. Researchers can request access to their data for secondary analysis at https://acecommunitysurvey.org/. The Aro Census is a similar, non-academic project that launched its first survey in 2020: https://www.aromanticism.org/aro-census. Scholars who are in need of bibliographic resources may find the online Asexuality and Aromanticism Bibliography helpful: https://acearobiblio.com/.

Mentorship with specific expertise in asexualities or aromanticism can also be difficult for scholars to find. The National Women's Studies Association has an Asexuality Studies Interest Group for scholars of asexualities and aromanticism to network and share insights. The Ace/Aro Scholar Support Network also began in 2020 and currently exists as a discord server for scholars who study asexualities or aromanticism in academic settings. As of 2025, scholars interested in the NWSA interest group can email the current chair, Maya Wenzel, and access to the AASSN discord server can be obtained by emailing its founder, Megan Carroll, with a short description of their research interests.

ORCID iDs

Megan Carroll https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3817-6573
Maya Wenzel https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9893-241X

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