

Questions? Feel free to reply to this padlet post!

Opening Questions

Take a moment to think about what you associate with each of these things (separately):

- sex
- love
- romance

Maybe an adjective jumps to mind; it holds some meaning for you; or you connect it with another experience or activity or certain types of relationship.

We invite you to revisit these associations after reading this poster.



Why Your Sex Positivity Needs to be Anti-Amatonormative

Aromantic Spectrum Awareness Week Feb 20-26

Vocabulary

Aromantic (aro): an orientation that describes little to no romantic attraction

Asexual (ace): an orientation that describes little to no sexual attraction

Aspec: a term for both aro and ace individuals and communities

Allosexual: someone who is not asexual

Alloromantic: someone who is not aromantic

Amatonormativity consists of:

"... the assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types."

- Elizabeth Brake, Minimizing Marriage (2012)

What are some other examples you can think of?

- The importance of people who are "just" friends is downplayed, setting a vicious self-reinforcing societal norm that friendships can't be as significant or emotionally close bonds
- Sociological research consistently shows that people become more **insular** when they get married: less likely to spend time with or help their friends, family, neighbours, or community, whether or not they have kids
- Intersects with **toxic masculinity** in that it takes away men's platonic options for social support and emotional intimacy, steering them harder toward romantic relationships, where their partners may find themselves acting as impromptu therapists
- Intertwines with **compulsory sexuality** in that people are expected to form romantic-sexual coupled relationships, and sex gets held up as a special expression of romantic love
- Society is structured and priced for married couples, financially driving people into monogamy
- The isolation of couple-centrism leaves people less able to organise for mutual aid or activism, without people to task share with, dependent on a romantic partner or nuclear family for support, and vulnerable to the parental lottery

Intersectionality Fails Without an Amatonormativity-Critical Lens

Yo yo yo, amatonormativity is the root cause of most sex negativity, and it is central to the ways in which **white supremacy** and **western cultural hegemony** attempt to control the sexuality of POC and ethnic minorities.

This poster aims to help people understand and counteract amatonormativity in order to more effectively fight racism in sexuality and help others become sex positive.

It also looks at ways people trying to practice positive sexuality can better support and affirm aromantic spectrum individuals, particularly **aromantic asexuals** – whose needs are often overlooked in these contexts and who are especially dehumanised by amatonormativity – and the compounding impacts regarding aromantics with additional LGBTQ+ identities.

What is Amatonormativity?

- A term coined by Elizabeth Brake referring to the disproportionate focus on romantic relationships above all else and the pervasive assumption that finding romantic love is a universal goal
- Romance is treated not only as essential to happiness and fulfillment in life but also as a magic bullet for unhappiness, essential life milestone, and biological inevitability
- Everyone is expected to partner, marry, raise children, and make the nuclear family unit their central life priority
- Couplehood, particularly marriage, is considered a status indicator of morality and maturity
- Other interpersonal bonds are devalued and deprioritised, weakening social support networks, eroding community efficacy, and raising the stakes of preserving couple status
- Society's only scripts for caring a lot about other people are immediate blood family and romantic relationships
- Systemically upheld by the institution of **marriage**, the 1100+ legal benefits it confers, and the billions spent by the government to promote it
- A foundation of **patriarchy**, **capitalism**, and **queerphobia**

- This discounts choice, effort, and personal accountability in relationships

- Aspec identities and experiences are invalidated and erased

- People are taught that we're not complete when single and that any relationship, even an unhappy or unhealthy one, is better than being "alone"

- This includes funding **abstinence-only sex "education"**

- Gatekeeps many rights related to medical care and estate planning

The **relationship escalator**, coined by Amy Gahran, describes the expected romantic relationship path: **inevitably progressing** up to the ultimate goal of lifelong exclusive commitment and a nuclear family.

• The importance and seriousness of relationships are judged by this hierarchy. Relationships that don't ascend all the rungs or that deescalate are labelled failures.

• Not escalating relationships is socially punished. Sex without romance is condemned as immoral and harmful, **dehumanising** aromantic people.

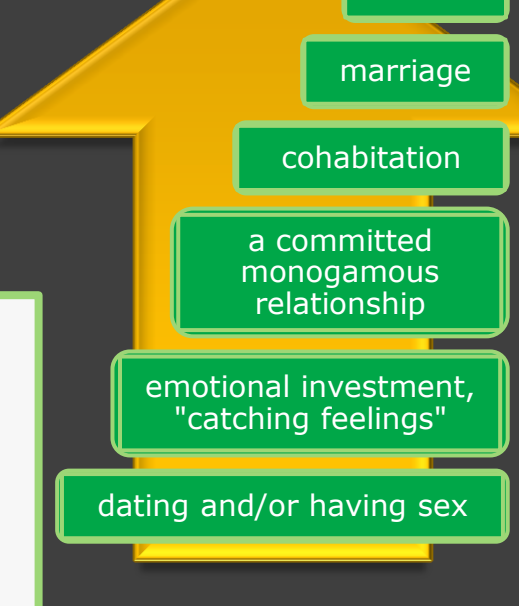
• Romantic attachment is not an inevitability of having sex. That misconception is amatonormative, and consent to sex is not consent to romance.

The Norm of Monogamy Originated in Property Law

- The belief that **monogamy** is a universal norm, a beautiful solemnisation of love, and a core part of human nature is **cultural hegemony** sustained and perpetuated by amatonormativity
- Monogamy was not a norm for most of human history
- This norm was created and imposed by agricultural patriarchal societies to **control women's sexuality** in order to ensure **patrilineal property inheritance**
- Before and outside of such societies, neither sexual exclusivity nor long-term/indefinite commitment were normative expectations of romantic relationships, and child raising responsibilities were typically shared across the community or extended kin
- Marriage was rebranded as an avenue of love and personal fulfillment so that the imposed norms could withstand women gaining legal personhood and rights, legalisation of no-fault divorce, free love, and other civil rights movements

- Marriage was then unrelated to romantic love; it was about families consolidating wealth and forming alliances, and women were exchanged as property
- Property marriage norms persist in the form of possessive and controlling behaviour in relationships
- This is also why people who aren't in (or pretending to be in) a relationship are more likely to experience sexual or romantic harassment
- These positive trends have still resulted in people worldwide are marrying less and later and divorcing more: nuclear families were only the majority of US households for about 15 years
- Today in the US, around half of adults are single, and around half of young adults do not even live with romantic partners
- A 2020 Pew survey found that 50% of single people are not interested in romantic relationships or even casual dating

The Relationship Escalator



Amatonormativity & White Supremacism

- Patriarchal societies treat women as reproductive tools, the construct of virginity as a form of currency, and children as extensions of their fathers' bloodlines
- Patriarchy has been a tool used by societies to increase birth rates and assign men control over their children for various purposes such as drafting armies or using child labour to support "corporate families"
- Western colonial heteropatriarchy is a tool meant to increase "white" birth rates specifically to protect white supremacy
- Marriage has been **selectively promoted or prohibited** for certain groups throughout history as a form of social control for enforcing white supremacy

Amatonormativity & Sex Negativity

- Amatonormativity is **fundamentally linked** with sex shaming, sex negativity, and rape culture because it pushes **monogamous romantic commitment**; engineers **artificial scarcity** around sex, affection, intimacy, care, and love; and directly supports **sexist stereotyping**.
- The idea of "The One" or someone to be our "Everything" creates a scarcity mindset by painting sex, romance, and dating as a zero-sum game and thus a power struggle.
 - Gender role stereotyping and **adversarial sexual beliefs** are integral components. People are wrongly taught that men and women have inherently different, incompatible desires, so they must exploit and emotionally manipulate each other to get sex and romance (respectively).

Gender role stereotypes include ideas and expectations such as that all women want is romance and all men want is sex, women are disproportionately responsible for domestic and emotional labour in a hetero relationship, women are naturally monogamous and sexually conservative, and women's sexuality only exists to be sexually available to a romantic partner

Adversarial sexual beliefs include the ideas and expectations that sex, romance, and dating are inherently exploitative; each person is trying to take advantage of the other; and people of other genders are incomprehensible

Sex shaming includes the ideas and expectations that sex outside of monogamous romantic relationships is deviant, being "too easy" is a bad thing, and women having sex with men is "giving up" something

All of these attitudes intrinsic to amatonormativity rationalise and support sexual violence

Amatonormativity is part of rape culture

Marriage as a tool of social control, historically and contemporarily

| Imposition | Promotion | Discouragement | Prohibition |
|--|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colonisation and cultural genocide of indigenous peoples, coercing assimilation into white settler cisheterosexist norms and forcibly removing children from their extended families • Legal marriage mandated for black people under tenant sharecropping regimes and to receive many federal or church services • Criminalisation of sex and/or cohabitation outside of marriage | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of scrutiny on international marriage "brokers" or marriage trafficking to import "mail order brides" (often Asian women) for privileged white men • Legal discrimination against children born outside of marriage • TANF (welfare block grant) funding of marriage promotion, prevention of "out-of-wedlock" pregnancies (but not of unintended pregnancies), and sex-negative curricula, instead of income assistance • Midnight raids on single black women receiving welfare to exclude them from benefits if they were sexually active and/or cohabiting with a man • 1855 Naturalisation Act allowed foreign-born white women to naturalise through marriage and granted citizenship to children of US men with foreign-born women • 1922 Cable Act repealed marital expatriation for non-Asians only | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusion of disabled people from receiving benefits if they get married or are suspected of "holding out as married" • 1855 Naturalisation Act excluded foreign-born women from naturalisation through marriage if they were racially barred from immigration (barriers not all lifted until 1952) and refused citizenship to children of US women with foreign-born men • 1907 Expatriation Act stripped citizenship from US women who married foreign-born men, permanently expelling them from the country if they were racially barred from naturalisation • 1922 Cable Act further made foreign-born women ineligible to citizenship if their husbands were Asian American | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laws against interracial marriage (not overturned in all states until 1967) • The Page Act of 1875 (first US law restricting immigration based on race) effectively barring all Chinese women and girls from entering the country to prevent Chinese families from settling • Kinship ties and bodily autonomy of black people not recognised under slavery and colonial codes |

Romantic Harassment

- Amatonormativity encourages toxic behaviour, emotional manipulation, and romantic harassment while discouraging open communication
- Since women are taught and expected to "play hard to get," men are simultaneously taught that persistent pursuit of a romantic interest is not only acceptable but expected to "win" someone over
- Society doesn't have a concept of **romantic harassment** – it's commonly considered desirable behaviour instead of unacceptable, to the point that recipients of this inappropriate and reprehensible behaviour are **villified** if they don't "give the person a chance"
- The glorification of love and romance, as if they are unassailably sacrosanct and wholesome, gets used to erase harms often committed in their name, for example: domestic abuse, spousal and intimate partner violence, marriage trafficking, romantic harassment, stalking, and so-called "crimes of passion"
- The majority of violence against women is committed by current or former husbands or romantic partners, and the majority of murders of women are committed by intimate partners or family members
- **No one is ever entitled to a relationship** or having their romantic feelings reciprocated, just like no one is ever entitled to sex
- Consent requires the freedom to say "no" (or "yes") **without fear of repercussion(s)**

Intersections of Marginalisation

Amatonormativity is western cultural hegemony that **falsely universalises** patriarchal and white supremacist ideals. These norms regarding sex intersect with and compound negative identity stereotypes, which can complicate one's identification.

People with marginalised identities are often **denied agency** over their romantic and sexual behaviour and orientations. Many ethnicities are **hypersexualised** – objectified; assumed to be always sexually interested, available, and aggressive – or **desexualised** – denied the possibility of sexuality; viewed as undesirable, incapable of desire, and unable to understand sex.

Expectations and stereotypes of binary gender roles also intersect, and trans and nonbinary people may face different stereotypes of their perceived gender as well as their actual gender identity. Being trans or nonbinary is often wrongly viewed as a sexual fetish in itself, and trans people in particular are often stereotyped as predatory.

Pathologisation

Amatonormative and racial stereotypes are frequently enshrined in medical and psychological doctrine. This invalidates aspects and exclude them from getting proper care. Disinterest in sex, romance, monogamy, and/or commitment are viewed as medical and mental health issues (such as personality disorder symptoms). People may attribute aspec identity to a health problem, neurodivergence, or disability, or vice versa.

- While the DSM-5 carved out an exception for asexuality, it still reinforces compulsory sexuality, amatonormativity, and gendered stereotypes. For example, it asserts that men have "significantly higher" sexual desire than women and that East Asian people have less sexual desire than people in western cultures.
- Men's sexual desire is considered disordered if they do not desire sex, but women aren't assumed to desire sex naturally. Instead, their sexual desire is considered disordered if they are not receptive to having sex within their committed romantic relationship.
- The entire sexual dysfunction section assumes the context of a committed romantic relationship. Some criteria are only evaluated in relation to socio-normative expectations of a romantic-sexual relationship, thereby conflating sex therapy with couple's therapy.

Examples of romantic harassment:

- objectification
- rejected propositions or gestures
- disingenuous attempts to befriend someone in order to "win" them over
- thinking that performing certain actions entitles one to reciprocation
- trying to pressure someone into saying "yes"
- **persisting or lashing out after being told "no"**

Aromantic Inclusion and Equity in Sex Positivity

Without deconstructing amatonormativity, the sex positivity will fail to uplift aromantics.

Aromantic (aro for short) is a romantic orientation referring to people who experience **little to no romantic attraction and/or desire to form romantic relationships**.

Aromanticism is a **spectrum** representing a diversity of experiences and identities. Here are just a few common aromantic spectrum identities:

- **Greyromantic** refers to people who experience romantic attraction only rarely, weakly, inconsistently, under limited circumstances, or in another way significantly different from alloromantics. It's a whole identity in itself and also used as an umbrella term for the "grey area" between the ends of the aromantic spectrum.
- **Demiromantic** refers to people who only, but not necessarily, experience romantic attraction after first forming a close emotional bond.
- **Quoiromantic** (also called **wfromantic** and **platonioromantic**) refers to people who are unable to clearly distinguish between romantic and platonic attraction or bonds.

Aromantic people may or may not experience sexual attraction. They can have **any sexual orientation**, or they might use only their aromantic identity to describe themselves and not identify with a sexual orientation. Aros can be romance repulsed, averse, neutral, or favourable, and those feelings might vary depending on the situation.

Amatonormativity also contributes to the marginalisation, stigma, and disenfranchisement of sex workers

Patriarchal societies want to steer women into marriage instead where their sexual, domestic, and reproductive labour is privatised and unpaid; they will be legally bound to men; and they will raise children privately as a couple. At the same time, the restriction and control of women's sexuality disproportionate to men's under patriarchy is no small part of the reason sex work exists.

Include Aromantics!

- Give aromanticism equal parity with other orientations – it is an umbrella in itself; it does not fall under other identity umbrellas
- Explicitly include aros in discussions of queer topics, diversity, and inclusion
- Aromanticism is not included when you exclusively refer to "sexual orientation" – just say "orientation" instead
- Marriage rights do not make us equal
- Use the aromantic flag in pride signage, and if you have the greysexual or demisexual flags in a broader pride set (as you totally should!), you need to include the greyromantic and demiromantic flags, too, not just the aro flag
- Depedestalise romantic relationships and celebrate other interpersonal bonds as well as singlehood; there are many ways to fill social needs, and coupling up is not a superior or essential form of interpersonal relating
- Sex positivity means positivity for people having **lots, some, or no sex, with any orientation, with or without romance**
- We are already whole; not having a relationship doesn't leave a hole to be filled
- Don't assume ascending the relationship escalator is the default, and don't pressure anyone to enter relationships or "give so-and-so a chance"
- Don't pathologise people for not experiencing or expressing love as you expect them to (ex: saying they're "heartless," "sociopathic," "just afraid of commitment," or "avoidant attachment style") - it's arophobic *and* ableist
- Orientation is never something to be "fixed" - do not equate recovery with becoming comfortable with sex or romance, and do not assume that is a desired or healthy recovery goal for someone to work toward, either

View Sex as an Activity!

Activities aren't inherently reserved for or restricted to particular relationship types!

Sex may hold personal meaning to an individual, but it's not inherently special or fundamentally any different from going to the movies, playing sports, working out, cooking with others, and so on.

Active and ongoing **consent** is required from all participants involved – this should be considered the norm for all activities!

In addition, what people consider "sex" may vary from one person to another, and that subjectivity should be accepted and embraced!

Trust is required based on individual comfort levels: what individual people need in order to be comfortable having sex with someone can be very different from person to person, and that's okay! It's also okay if someone never wants to have sex! Celebrate diversity!

Nonsexual example: If you like boxing and you were to try to spar with someone without their consent, it'd be assault. Other activities are simply impossible to do with another person without their active, willing participation.

Nonsexual example: Some people consider bowling or chess sports, and others do not. Similarly, some people may consider masturbation, oral sex, or heavy petting sex while others do not.

- Nonsexual examples:
- If you play sports with someone, you trust them to follow the rules and not try to harm you.
 - If you lift weights at the gym with someone, you might be trusting them to be your spotter and not let you hurt yourself with bad form.
 - If you cook with someone, you're trusting them with a chef's knife, not to start a fire, and trusting you have to be comfortable letting them into your home, and maybe you have to be comfortable letting them into your home or going to their home alone.



From left to right: the aromantic, greyromantic, and demiromantic flags



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