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Pedagogy, Community, and Praxis Commentary

Hopelessly AroAce: An Exploration in the Margins

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Abstract

Individuals identifying as aromantic asexual face challenges living in predominantly heteronormative societies. This essay explains the challenges encountered living in India, a society known for its unique cultural and social structures. The authors use the oral history story-telling technique to understand the lived experiences of being an asexual aromantic. An analysis of the oral history highlights four key themes: liberation from structures, solidarity in the community, the perils of Amato normativity, and awareness of self. The authors call for increased access to mental health support systems in schools and beyond.

Keywords: asexuality, gender identity, LGBTQIA+, acceptance

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Introduction

Imagine we are all on a journey, a steep, mountainous ascent with its temporal milestones. These milestones are entrenched in normative structures that elbow us into closets and force conformities without our consent. The protracted struggle for liberation lies amid this struggle and an uphill journey.

This struggle is enhanced for some people, especially sexual minorities, asexual-neurodivergent, and others in the spectrum of the queer community (Borgogna et al., 2019). Although the landmark verdict decriminalizing homosexuality in India in 2018 led to the protection of the rights of the LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning, Asexual) community, the quality of their lives has not improved in a significant manner. Many challenges persist concerning basic human rights, such as housing (Chandran, 2014), accessing public spaces in India (Gupta, 2022), and abandoning homes due to lack of acceptance by family members (Gupta, 2017). This leads to significant mental, emotional, and physical trauma to living in the Indian society as an openly LGBTQIA+ person (Gaur et al., 2023). The journey of asexuals is an arduous one due to the accompanying loneliness, a sense of inadequacy, feelings of isolation and shame, and other mental health risks (McInroy et al., 2022). The inheritance of loneliness by people who identify on the asexuality-aromantic spectrum seems to stem from the constriction of sexual and romantic norms that are laid down by the structures of society. For example, the prospective bride or groom search by the family begins when one turns twenty-five, often without the individual's full consent to be married. This often places the ace perspective (the ability only to experience non-traditional forms of love) as an outsider, even within larger queer spaces (Simon et al., 2022). Thus, the burden of these collective narratives invisibilizes many voices to the point of exclusion, even within marginalized spaces.

International laws enacted for the protection of gender minorities include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1948, which advocates for the protection of individuals against discrimination, the International Covenant on Civil

and Political Rights (1976) that defends dignity, self-determination and the freedom of association with others, and finally, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) that promotes equality amongst all and protects individuals from cruel, inhuman treatment or punishment. In 2023, the United Nations Human Rights Council appointed Graeme Reid as the UN independent expert for protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual and gender identity to conduct independent investigations into the protection of the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community (United Nations, 2023). On a national scale, the Transgender Persons Act (2019) defends certain fundamental rights of the community in India.

According to the Pride 2021 Global Survey Report, 17% of the Indian population is not heterosexual (Gaur et al., 2023). Despite the large numbers of the gender minority population in recent times, there is a lack of literature about asexual people within gender and sexuality studies in academia, and the few scholarly studies that exist often center Eurocentric, white experiences only (Abreu et al., 2022; Chakrabarty, 2023). Many subgroups of the LGBTQIA+ community have inadequate representation in research (McInroy et al., 2022; Simon et al., 2022; Wandrekar & Nigudkar, 2020). Thus, we need a space that brings language, expressions, and narratives about asexual individuals that augment awareness and fairness in the conversations of romance and attraction. This narrative aims to bridge this gap in the literature by exemplifying the lived experience and reality of an asexually identifying individual from the cultural context of the Indian subcontinent.

To bring focus within the vastness of the gender and sexual identity spectrum, we used oral history as a method to highlight a story submerged within dominant narratives. Oral history pivots the stage from the powerful and the privileged and directs it toward people whose stories deserve attention (Cliff & Claire, 2018). The narratives below offer the unique positionality of both authors, followed by an interview analysis, and closes with some reflections.

Positionality

Agharsh (they/them) and Shruti (she/her) have been childhood friends and have known each other for 26 years. Shruti has seen Agharsh find their identity and has accompanied them on this journey through support across distances. This shared personal bond influenced the comfort levels and rapport through the dialogue, enabling deep conversations. While Shruti assumes the researcher's position as a doctoral student in the United States, Agharsh faces the duality of the researcher and narrator, who primarily reflects on their lived experiences in India. This oral history and conversation rests upon mutual feelings of trust, respect, and a deep sense of gratitude.

Being an aromantic asexual

We approached the analysis of oral history intending to highlight important topics about being an aromantic asexual. A series of conversations while reviewing the interview led to the emergence of four themes, namely, (1) liberation from societal structures, (2) solidarity in community support, (3) Amato normativity,[1] and (4) the need for awareness. The analysis is written in the first-person narrative, depicting Agharsh's emotions behind their lived experiences. The article's structure from here onwards uses quotes from the interview and academic citations and weaves in Agharsh's voice. The narrative below quotes excerpts from the oral history interview under each theme to guide the readers through their journey of self-discovery and strength. The analysis findings also connect with expert voices who have conducted similar studies in the scholarly realm.

Liberation from societal structures

The heteronormative cultural setup within Indian society served as a barrier to the recognition of non-dominant gendered individuals and reflects a deeply embedded cultural practice of stigmatization and homophobia (Gaur et al., 2023). Particularly, within the school system, I experienced

[1] Amato normativity, a term coined by Elizabeth Brake assumes that all human beings are meant to pursue love or romance in the form of long-lasting relationships (Brake, 2011).

name-calling, bullying, and verbal abuse as a student. An underlying need to fit in made it "very hard to have open conversations."

This set-up of the societal structure inevitably caused a privilege of heteronormative individuals over other minority-gendered individuals (Gupta, 2017). According to Chakrabarty (2023), asexual people face double invisibility - both from the people who consider heteronormativity as the norm and also from the queer community, many of those who value compulsory sexuality.[2] As a result, loneliness is a constant feeling, as I felt like society "discounted people like me who identified as asexual."

This perceived privilege of both the heteronormative and queer community is a double-edged sword. It forces people who may not want to enter a heteronormative relationship to remain in sexual relationships that are considered "normal" according to the standards of the dominant society. For example, often, parents themselves force their children into relationships or marriages so that they are partnered or coupled, and women have a place in society only when they are partnered with a man. These forced activities perpetuate a culture of hegemony that reproduces asymmetrical power favoring heteronormative individuals (Freire, 2007).

This dominant cultural narrative creates a fear amongst the asexual community to express themselves and speak out freely due to the fear of rejection, physical assault, and bullying (Gaur et al., 2023). "When I was in school, the culture thrived on queerphobia. I experienced a lot of name-calling and bullying, which left me isolated with feelings of rejection. Despite my parents being empathetic, I think there was complete ignorance from the school authorities, and it was hard to navigate these surroundings as a child."

Solidarity in community support

There is a constant need for spaces and people where asexuals are in complete control of their actions and feel fully empowered. On the contrary, my conversations with family members often involve "questions that breach

[2] Compulsory sexuality is an extension of the theory of compulsory heterosexuality by Adrienne Rich in 1980 which refers to norms and practices that persuade women to participate in heterosexual activities.

personal boundaries." Within Indian society, when a man or a woman is between the ages of 25 and 30, parents must begin their search for a prospective bride or groom. Youth in India face many challenges conversing with their parents or support system while disclosing their identity (Tripathi & Talwar, 2022). Especially for those people with non-dominant gender identities, there is a constant battle with one's needs, parental expectations, and the tangible pressure created by society.

According to Snapp et al. (2015), support from the community, family, and friends positively affects the self-esteem and confidence of gender minority youth. My definition of community changed once I began to find new ones that supported my struggles. I connected to like-minded people experiencing similar struggles through a professional therapist. This experience was "comforting, very therapeutic as it showed solidarity, which meant having something in common."

These informal spaces within an urban city like Bengaluru have created opportunities for growing relationships. According to Chakrabarty (2023) and Gupta (2017), connections within the aromantic asexual community serve as an antidote to the loneliness that these individuals experience due to the nature of their personal journeys. "My exploration started with therapy. My wonderful therapist gave me a lot of direction as a queer and gave me a lot of access to very, very useful resources which have become a huge part of my life today." These friendships are long-lasting as each has developed purely based on vulnerabilities. "I am building a circle of my queer friends; these connections have made my life so much easier. It has made me feel validated and cared for. These kinds of connections and building this space have really helped me a lot."

According to Gaztambide-Fernández (2012), "transitive solidarity" is an action always directed towards others, defined by such relationships, and based on acts of self-love. This act of existing in transitive solidarity started with one person and expanded to knowing many people virtually and in person. "I think that it is so important because our friendships are from our most vulnerable spaces, which is our whole queer journey. These friendships cemented so quickly, and they offered me an immense amount of support."

The community exposed me to various types of people who experience asexuality in different ways. I understood that asexuality is a spectrum; each feeling comes with its own set of challenges and experiences that led them on this journey. “Another way I cope with societal pressure is through reading. It has been a huge coping mechanism in addition to building a circle of queer friends.” I believe this has helped me overcome feelings of pathologization, social isolation, and relationship conflict that asexuals often face in their lives (K. Gupta, 2017).

The perils of Amato normativity

Previously, we discussed the heteronormative structures that promote a particular way of life in Indian society. I realize between “the kind of love deemed normal and my perceptions.” As an aromatic asexual, I do not experience the “traditional” love that is mandated by society. My definition of love involves gestures that convey concern and care and non-hierarchical, equitable companionship with mutual respect. Actions that one would consider as part of the routine, such as going alone to a movie or inviting a friend to an event, are viewed differently by society. This is where “possibilities became a distant dream.” In dating, there is a definite pattern or structure to approach dating, which makes it difficult to break for people on the asexuality spectrum. Individuals who identify as asexual need to communicate more and convey their personal boundaries to disrupt normativity (Gupta, 2017). As a result, asexuals develop a tendency for LGBTQ-phobia while navigating the gender minority spectrum (McInroy et al., 2022). “Larger LGBTQIA+ spaces can be very triggering and unkind as there is severe misinformation filled with marginalization and suppression. It is still a space that is not very ace-aware. So, it is a challenge for an ace person to make meaningful connections within the queer community because asexuality is a minority within a minority. There is a lack of connection for ace people in queer spaces, and connection forms the base of a relationship.” As I consider myself as aromatic and asexual, finding a date or trying to partner with an individual is extremely hard as there is a need for

either romance or sex. This increases my feelings of perpetual loneliness and abandonment.

Awareness begins with oneself

Walking down memory lane, I vividly remember how I felt as a child – helpless and alone. "As a child, I was gender fluid, but I did not have the language or the vocabulary to articulate it all." When I came across labels, it served me in a positive way to normalize my feelings about myself and those around me. Labels have helped me communicate with peers, convey my true identity to my parents, and for my own education. "As a child, it was a very transgender experience where I was assigned male at birth, but I did aspire to be or identify as a woman. And then, there was a phase where I did identify with my given biological gender. For the last many years, I've been identifying as an a-gendered person. I stumbled upon these labels only about 2-3 years ago. I now understand that gender and sexual orientation can be very different parts. They don't have to coincide so as far necessarily always as my ace-aro[3] identity was concerned." Using labels for self-learning increased my awareness. I developed a sense of "transformative agency" (Bajaj, 2018), a collective sense of self that elevates one's critical consciousness and makes way for individual change.

Schooling was my biggest struggle as queer-phobic culture was prevalent among peers and teachers. "There were many moments that confused me, befuddled me, and made me feel like I was a very broken person or emotionally unavailable." Furthermore, a complete lack of awareness and misinformation on how to support a child going through a queer experience caused trauma and repressed emotions (Borgogna et al., 2019; Mayo, 2022). "There was this deeply bound insecurity of 'What if I'm not accepted because I was trying to fit in?' I was trying to conform with a bunch of cis-het[4] kids.

[3] An abbreviation of asexual aromantic.

[4] The term cishet (pronounced sis-het) refers to a gender identity as well as a sexual identity. This two-part identity means that a person is both cisgender and heterosexual. A cishet person identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth, and they choose romantic partners of the opposite sex.

At that age, with the rising anxiety, being blindsided by the school authorities, or the lack of psychological help added to the existing troubles." The presence of school health professionals or counselors could have addressed the adverse impact on mental health by creating emotionally supportive spaces in homes and schools (Patwa et al., 2019).

Reflections

Reliving a historical experience, this essay aims to stand as a testament to the trauma experienced by gender minority individuals in India during their schooling and beyond. This essay also highlights the evidence gap at the intersection of school psychology and gender identity in India (Patwa et al., 2019). There is a need for streamlined counseling and therapy options for students who are trying to navigate a queer experience in educational systems. It is clear from the interview that a lack of access to mental health services in schools increases feelings of isolation and shame. In addition, fostering more community spaces (nonformal and informal) will illuminate a feeling of solidarity and nurture the rights and dignity of gender minorities. This can move us towards more holistic ways of living, especially for those living on the margins.

For those who are privileged to be on the other side, we must view the half-lives of asexually identifying individuals through their own lenses. We close with a poem written by Agharsh:

I wish the largesse of a well-lived life,

being green, being an aromantic ace,

I lust for acceptance from myself and the world,

I am green and purple on this spinning color wheel,

the opposite of red.

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