Popular understandings about polyamories and non-monogamies largely focus on sex and sexual intimacy. Yet, to what extent do these ideas need to necessarily accompany each other? What might a discussion of polyamory look like without a focus on sexual behaviors? An investigation of asexual identities reveals new possibilities for conceptualizing polyamories and non-monogamies. In this chapter I provide a brief description of the intersections of asexual identity and polyamory, an under-represented topic in academic literature. This chapter contributes to a burgeoning field of scholarship on polyamories through a description of how individuals with asexual identities inform understandings of polyamory and monogamy, opening up space to consider the intricacies of relationships.

Asexuality has been explored in academic scholarship along several dimensions, including as an identity (Jay, 2003; Prause and Graham, 2007; Scherrer, 2008), as a lack of desire for sexual behaviors (Bogaert, 2004; 2006), and within specialized populations, such as persons with disabilities (Milligan and Neufeldt, 2001) or lesbians (Rothblum and Brehony, 1993). Here, I focus my analysis on individuals with asexual identities, as individuals who are able to uniquely shed light on the construction of relationships where sex and/or sexual intimacy are generally explicitly absent. Elsewhere, I describe that, in addition to an asexual identity, another salient identity for asexual individuals may be a romantic or aromantic identity, which designates an interest (or lack thereof) in monogamous, intimate relationships (Scherrer, 2008). Other work extends this finding, showing that some asexual identified individuals describe current or idealized relationships that fit definitions of polyamorous relationships (Scherrer, in press). Here, I explore how taking on an identity that revolves around a lack of sexual desire matters for how individuals construct relationships.

To better understand asexual identities, I conducted an Internet survey with 102 self-identified asexual individuals. Participants were recruited from asexuality.org, a main Internet networking website for asexual identified individuals. The survey asked open ended questions about a variety of topics including demographics, asexual identity, and relationships. Data were analyzed using open and focused coding (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw,
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1995). (For more details of my methodology and sample, see Scherrer, 2008, and Scherrer, in press.) In this chapter, I primarily draw from the following questions: ‘What are the distinctions, in your mind, between intimate relationships, friendships and romantic partnerships?’; ‘In an ideal world, what would a relationship look like for you?’, and, ‘Would you describe yourself as interested in a monogamous, intimate relationship? Why or why not?’

RELATIONSHIPS WITHOUT SEX

The presence of sexual behaviors is often a defining characteristic of intimate relationships (Rothblum and Brehony, 1993). This characteristic can create challenges for asexual individuals, whose identity revolves around the irrelevance of sexual desire or attraction in their lives. Some participants describe the relevance of sexual behaviors as a distinguishing characteristic for types of relationships. One example of this is Lia, a 45-year-old white woman, who indicates that sexual intimacy is a key component in distinguishing between friendships and intimate or romantic relationships. She says:

Intimate relationships and romantic partnerships are the same thing to me, it means that you are willing to share in sexual activities to some degree, from kissing to intercourse. Friendships can be with either sex, with persons who share your interests in some way and will spend time with you.

These examples may indicate that, for an individual whose identity revolves around an absence of interest in sex, intimate or romantic relationships may feel unavailable.

While Lia and others see intimate and romantic relationships as similarly involving sexual behaviors, others distinguish intimate and romantic relationships. One example of this is Linda, an 18-year-old white woman, who states:

I’d say intimate relationships would involve sexual activity and kissing. It’s harder for me to define the difference between friends and romantic partners though. For me, a romantic relationship would be more physical and have more trust involved on my part than friendships ... I see friendships with more joking and chatting, and romantic relationships with all of that plus discussions and connections on a deeper level.

While Linda first describes how intimate relationships usually characteristically involve sexual behavior, she then makes space in her description for relationships that are ‘deeper’ than friendships, yet not necessarily involving sexual behaviors. In this way, Linda, and others, carefully create
space for emotionally deep, trusting relationships that do not depend on sexual behaviors.

In contrast to these participants, others describe the distinctions between relationships as more complicated. Charles, a 24-year-old white man, describes the distinctions between intimate relationships, friendships and romantic partnerships as, ‘Only a linguistic one. I think that they represent ways to divide relationships that are based on sexuality, but that aren’t necessarily that useful or accurate for asexual people.’ Similarly, Casey, a 24 year-old-white woman, states: ‘I think the standard friendship vs. romance is a spectrum, not a binary, and it can be difficult to pin any given relationship down.’ Charles and Casey both illustrate a common sentiment—that the distinctions between types of relationships can be challenging to categorize, particularly for asexual individuals whose relationships may be less likely to include sexual behaviors. Perhaps because the language of relationships is highly dependent on the presence or absence of sexual behaviors, certain types of relationships are less readily discursively ‘available’ to asexual individuals. This may require asexual individuals to rewrite language to more accurately describe their relationships, much as Ritchie and Barker (2006) describe for individuals in polyamorous communities.

MONOGAMY IN ASEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

For those participants who expressed an interest in romantic or intimate relationships, monogamy often figures centrally. For instance, Elena, a 24 year old white woman, said that, ‘I sometimes imagine an ‘ideal’ relationship. However, I don’t have to say much about it, except that it is heterosexual, monogamous, and I have a very sincere understanding partner.’ Similarly, Rose, a 20 year old white woman says, ‘I want to have a deep, monogamous relationship with a man, but don’t wish to engage in sexual activities with him or anyone else.’ The centrality of heterosexuality and monogamy for the relationships of many asexual individuals is further supported elsewhere (Scherrer, 2008; in press).

Despite monogamy’s relatively prominent role as an idealized relationship component, monogamy is also often described as challenging. One example of this is Sarah, a 22-year-old white woman, who describes herself as interested in a monogamous intimate relationship, ‘as long as it was nonsexual.’ She later explains that this question was challenging to answer because, ‘I only understand the word ‘monogamous’ in a sexual way.’ Similarly, Alex, a 19-year-old white man, states that he is not interested in a monogamous intimate relationship. ‘I can have several intimate relationships without it ever being considered cheating, and if it were monogamous, then it would restrict my friendships with other people.’ In other words, while Alex and Sarah have different perspectives on the desirability of monogamy for their own relationships, they both indicate that
monogamy is virtually unintelligible outside of its relationship to sexual behavior. Perhaps as with romantic and intimate relationships, the concept of monogamy is so imbued with sexuality and sexual behaviors that it may be a challenging term for individuals who are not interested sexual aspects of relationships to wield.

ASEXUAL NON-MONOGAMIES

While monogamy is important for some participants, others describe their romantic or relational interests as polyamorous or non-monogamous. These non-monogamous asexual individuals represent forms of polyamorous relationships that are—as of yet—unexplored in academic literature. When asked about his ideal relationship, Charles, a 24-year-old white man said, ‘I'm definitely interested in an intimate relationship. Though, I'd say I’m much more polyamorous.’ Edward, a 21-year-old white man, similarly describes polyamory as his ideal relationship form.

I am interested in more intimate relationships than most people seek out. This could be monogamous or a group relationship (a single relationship with multiple people who are all devoted to each other rather than multiple relationships where people are devoted to each other on an individual basis). I would ideally like a relationship where all participants were completely owned by the relationship as a whole.

While Edward does not use the term ‘polyamory’ to describe his ideal relationship, his interests in multiple people who are devoted to each other closely mirrors definitions of polyamory (Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse, 2006).

Not all participants who describe themselves as open to a polyamorous relationship describe it as ideal. For instance, Casey, says,

I don’t know how feasible monogamy would be for me, given that I'm asexual and most other people aren’t, but I’ve got a preference for it. I'm willing to try a polyamorous or otherwise consensually non-monogamous relationship, but monogamy seems like it would feel more secure to me.

As she alludes to here, Casey says that a monogamous relationship with someone who values her disinterest in sexual behavior is somewhat unlikely and, therefore, she is willing to explore polyamorous relationships as another option. Casey’s narrative supports the idea that monogamy is imbued with assumptions of sexuality. In this case, the linguistic association between monogamy and sexuality makes polyamorous and non-monogamous relationships a more viable option.
While many individuals describe polyamorous relationships, the descriptions of these relationships varied considerably. Katia, a 22-year-old white woman, describes her ideal relationship as, ‘An intimate friendship, not necessarily monogamous, relationship with someone I feel very connected with. We would meet a few times a week but live apart.’ For Katia, an intimate relationship would not necessarily be monogamous, nor would it necessitate sharing a residence. This is different than Jessica, a 21-year-old white woman, who describes her ideal relationship as an,

asexual polyamous household; basically, lots of roommates I could cuddle with and have close mutual relationships with. I particularly like the idea of a small group of friends or lovers who are all devoted to each other, in a closed poly relationship.

Similarly, Rita, a 28-year-old white woman, describes another perspective on an ideal relationship.

I desire a socially monogamous, intimate relationship. I don’t care about the sex, but if my partner wants me to have sex I would need him to be sexually monogamous. But if he wants to go elsewhere and forgo sex with me altogether that is fine, too. Better, actually. I would be open to a polyamorous relationship but I have never tried it and am skeptical.

As Rita indicates here, she is interested in a ‘socially monogamous, intimate relationship’ that may or may not involve sex. Rita also implies that she is amenable to maintaining an intimate relationship while her partner finds alternative sexual releases. While varying widely in configuration, Katia, Jessica and Rita all provide some initial conceptions of asexual, polyamorous relationships that future research should explore in more detail.

CONCLUSION

Taken together these themes indicate that scholarship on polyamory and non-monogamy may be enriched by considering individuals with asexual identities, as well as individuals not interested in sex or sexual behaviors. First, these data indicate that concepts, such as monogamy, are socially imbued with sexual connotations. Interestingly, the sexually-laden connotations of monogamy may have opened the door for some to consider polyamorous relationship structures. Additionally, this chapter invites further conversation as to what the many forms of monogamy might look like, particularly outside of sexual monogamy.

This chapter also describes how language for relationships is limited for asexual individuals, as well as those who do not engage in sexual behaviors. For several participants, binary relationship categories, such as ‘single’
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and 'taken,' or 'friendship' and 'intimate,' felt false. Rather, as Casey described earlier, there is a 'spectrum of relationships' that are not captured by contemporary categories. Similar to those in polyamorous communities (Ritchie and Barker, 2006) asexual individuals are actively restructuring and rewriting their relationships, opening up possibilities for reimagining all of our lives.

Finally, these data illuminate that there are many forms of polyamorous relationships. While the diversity of polyamorous relationships are well established (Klesse, 2006a; Sheff, 2005), the few studies of polyamory that have been conducted thus far have expended relatively little attention to those relationships that do not explicitly involve sex. This attention to sexual polyamorous relationships unintentionally reinscribes the idea that polyamories are primarily about sexual behavior. Future studies might usefully include an investigation of individuals in polyamorous relationships who do not engage in sexual behaviors.

NOTES

1. While popular understandings of polyamory are largely centered on sexual behaviors, academic and activist discourses have largely focused on love, creating a conscious distinction between sex and love in polyamorous relationships (see Klesse, 2006a, for a more nuanced discussion of the consequences of these discourses).