



CHALLENGING AMATONORMATIVITY

A Beginner's Guide

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Definitions

Below you can find useful definitions to keep in mind as you complete the guide.

- Alloromantic: someone who experiences romantic attraction
- Aromantic: someone who generally experiences little to no romantic attraction
- Asexual: someone who generally experiences little to no sexual attraction
- Compulsory sexuality: the assumption that all people are sexual; social norms that compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity
- Heteronormativity: the belief that heterosexuality is the default, preferred, or normal mode of sexual orientation
- Homonormativity: the idea of “assimilating” homosexuality into heteronormative standards (e.g., “mainstream gays” or “respectable queer”)
- Polyamory: the capability or desire to be in a relationship with more than one person at once
- Queerplatonic relationship: a committed relationship that is not romantic but goes beyond the cultural norms of friendship
- Singlism: the stigmatizing of adults who are single

WHAT IS AMATONORMATIVITY?

Amatonormativity is the “the assumption 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. The assumption that valuable relationships must be marital or amorous devalues friendships and other caring relationships.”

- Elizabeth Brake, *Minimizing Marriage* (2012)

Amatonormativity can look like...

Cultural/Personal

- Assuming that everyone desires a romantic (monogamous) relationship
- Minimizing the importance of non-romantic relationships
- Viewing relationships in a hierarchical manner with romantic relationships being the most important
- Assuming that any sort of emotionally and physically close relationship must be romantic
- Automatically expecting that commitments to romantic partners should be prioritized
- Viewing “singledom” as something to be pitied or remedied
- Believing that people need to find “the one” to be truly happy (and that there is only “the one”)

Amatonormativity can look like...

Cultural/Personal

- The expectation that relationships should be monogamous and exclusive
- The assumption that all of one's needs must be met by one (romantic) partner
- Considering having more than one partner or loving more than one person as cheating
- Care (e.g., long-term, domestic, intimate) and cohabitation being exclusive to romantic couples
- Viewing the nuclear family as the "right" way to be a family
- Considering romantic love to be the only legitimate form of love, therefore placing it as the normative category (i.e., the word love is often automatically assumed to have romantic connotations and all language around love, relationships, intimacy are co-opted by romance)

Amatonormativity can look like...

Structural/Institutional

- Spouses receive privileges and benefits that are not legally available for other relationships, such as healthcare coverage
- Lack of marriage equality in which one is only able to marry one person
- Child custody and adoption laws disadvantaging or prohibiting parenting by unmarried (single) persons, platonic co-parenting, or parenting with more than one partner
- Not being able to afford housing on a single-earner wage
- Housing laws that prohibit multiple adults (who especially are not in a partnership) living together or sharing a home together
- Domestic partnerships being legally considered as an entity formed by two persons

Amatonormativity can look like...

Structural/Institutional

- Hospital visitation rights being limited to partners or spouses or immediate family
- Immigration laws that allow a person to bring only their spouse or partner and children (or other legally recognized family) into the country
- Families being legally recognized primarily through blood ties and marriage
- Romantic partners being exempt from travel bans (“sweetheart visas”)
- Spousal hire practices in academia
- Lack of recognition/resources for domestic abuse not involving romantic partners or blood relatives

How is this Harmful?

Amatonormativity is especially harmful to anyone who does not engage in normative romantic relationships or does not experience or engage with “love” in a normative (Western) sense. Aromantic, asexual, polyamorous/non-monogamous folks as well as neurodivergent and disabled folks and BIPOC* are often the most vulnerable to and marginalized by amatonormative expectations, remarks, and practices. However, amatonormativity affects everyone, including monogamous alloromantics.

Below is a (non-exhaustive) list of potential ways in which amatonormativity can be harmful.

Content warning: mentions of abuse and toxic relationship dynamics, sex, and harassment

- It upholds heteronormativity, homonormativity, and compulsory sexuality, marginalizing anyone who falls out of those norms.
- It enables singlism, the stereotyping and discrimination against people who are single. For example, single adults often have to pay more for services and products, such as car insurance or housing, and their free time is deemed less valuable, especially in the workplace (i.e., they are more likely to be asked to work weekends or holidays).
- It relegates care to partnerships. Care then becomes exclusive to partnerships, often denying unpartnered/single people basic needs. This can force people, especially aromantics, into partnering with someone, whether romantic or not (such as a queerplatonic partnership) out of necessity and survival rather than desire.

How is this Harmful?

- People are made to feel broken for not wanting or having a romantic relationship. This can also pressure people, whether aromantic or alloromantic, into entering romantic relationships.
- Polyamorous people have to hide that they have more than one partner, or are forced to choose a primary partner, especially when it comes to legal matters, such as designating healthcare benefits, marriage, etc.
- Nonpartnering, unpartnered, and single people are often left with feelings of uncertainty and despair when thinking about the future. They may be concerned over the logistics of living without a partner, or are afraid of being abandoned and left alone as their friends get married or enter romantic relationships.
- Aromantic people or those who do not want to engage in romantic relationships may end up being isolated, feeling unappreciated, or left with unfulfilling relationships because people do not want to invest in non-romantic relationships.
- People who prefer non-romantic or casual sexual relationships and encounters are sex-shamed. People who prefer having multiple sex partners are also sex-shamed.
- People will remain in toxic or abusive relationships because they think being single is worse than being in a bad relationship. It can also keep people in abusive relationships if they are financially or otherwise dependent on their partner.

How is this Harmful?

- It can lead to over-dependent or toxic relationships. Amatonormativity gives the idea that people in a romantic relationship shouldn't and can't have their needs met outside of the relationship. This can create a situation of "artificial scarcity of intimacy, while also preventing people from seeking intimacy through other avenues, including through friendships, while directly devaluing non-romantic forms of intimacy." (17)
- Over-dependency and toxic relationships can also pertain to friendships. Aromantics and nonamorous or nonpartnering asexuals may feel that they are at the mercy of their alloromantic or partnered friends (e.g., feeling that they need to sacrifice their sense of self in order to perform normative friendship and receive what scraps of care that they can).
- Amatonormativity enables abuse and rape culture. Jealousy and possessiveness are viewed as normal expressions of romantic love. Romantic love is placed above the consent of others, allowing for boundaries to be crossed. People may feel pressured into unwanted sexual or romantic situations.
- Commitments are framed as a contract, which is a static and often coercive agreement that ensures access to certain resources, services etc.. by limiting what people can do in the future.

How is this Harmful?

- Cultures in which non-monogamy is freely practiced are viewed as “backwards” or “uncivilized.” This prevents certain folks within largely amatonormative societies from freely engaging in their cultural practices, such as plural marriage that was a part of some Indigenous cultures. In a similar vein, extended family and kin structures are also viewed as “uncivilized” in an amatonormative (couple-centric, nuclear family) view. Furthermore, this is legally enforced in the sense that it is not possible to marry more than one person, and polygamy is also considered a breach of “good moral character” and can invalidate someone’s eligibility for citizenship through naturalization in the US.
- People who a) engage in non-monogamy/polyamory and/or b) don’t want to get married or have romantic partnerships are considered immature, damaged, and/or selfish: “they are afraid of commitment” or “cannot handle proper relationships” (read: monogamous relationships).
- Polyamorous relationships are overly sexualized and polyamorous people are viewed as “slutty” or promiscuous because they might engage in non-exclusive sexual relationships. Simply talking about polyamorous relationships can then be construed as a sexual topic. For example, this can at times lead to job loss if polyamorous folks talk about their relationships at work.

How is this Harmful?

- People can lose housing or be prevented from finding housing because housing may be restricted to families related by blood or marriage. This can unfairly target polyamorous people as well as aromantic and/or asexual people who may want to live with friends.
- With compulsory sexuality tied into amatonormativity, romantic relationships that are not sexual are viewed as lesser or “fake” romantic relationships. This harms asexual folks in romantic relationships or anyone else who may not want to engage in sexual activity in their romantic relationship by delegitimizing their relationships.
- Those who don't experience romantic love or attraction (or love of any kind) are dehumanized, villainized, and/or pathologized.
- Folks with disabilities may lose their disability welfare benefits if they get married or even if they live with someone else, romantic or not, and the government deems this as being married. This also prevents them from receiving benefits that are often reserved for marriage.
- Because romance is deemed as good and desired, it enables romantic harassment, such as persistent romantic pursuit despite not giving consent or turning someone down.

*The manners in which amatonormativity affects neurodivergent folks, folks with disabilities, and BIPOC will be expanded upon in Part 2- Digging Deeper.

Challenging Your Amatonormativity

“Comfort and transformation do not live in the same house.”

Now that you have learned about amatonormativity, you can complete a couple of short exercises to help apply what you have learned and to actively challenge the amatonormative standards and ideals that you hold. Before moving on, make sure to take a moment to read the narratives listed under **Sources and Narratives** to further learn how people experience amatonormativity and how they are harmed by it.

Take your time to reflect and complete the exercises. You might have to revisit certain exercises as you further digest the information.

Disclaimer: Challenging your amatonormativity does not mean that you have to stop engaging in (monogamous) romantic relationships.

Challenging Your Amatonormativity

Exercise 2

Recognizing amatonormativity at the structural and institutional level is also important in challenging amatonormativity as this is perpetuated in our laws and policies, which can greatly impact daily life as well as the needs and resources available to people.

Structural amatonormativity refers to policies, practices, and broader norms that perpetuate amatonormativity and allows privileges associated with alloromanticism and monogamy (especially marriage).

Institutional amatonormativity refers to amatonormativity that takes place within governmental and social institutions and the unfair distribution of resources that benefits alloromanticism and monogamy.

Take a moment to look up laws, regulations, and policies surrounding housing, marriage, adoption, healthcare, immigration, etc... and see if you can recognize amatonormativity structurally and institutionally (e.g., "Sweetheart Clause" during the pandemic or the Family and Medical Leave Act in the US). You can use the examples listed under **Structural/Institutional** in the **Amatonormativity can look like...** section as a starting point.

Challenging Your Amatonormativity

Exercise 3

Now that you've taken a moment to recognize how amatonormativity is present in your everyday life and in the institutions around you, take a moment to reflect on how you view and treat your relationships. How has amatonormativity affected your relationships? You can use the following prompts to start, but feel free to explore other topics:

- If you engage in romance and romantic relationships, do you/would you prioritize a romantic relationship? Does romance matter (a lot) to you? If so, why?
- When you think of concepts such as commitment and planning the future in a relationship, do you consider these to be exclusive to a romantic relationship?
- When you think of a "significant" relationship, what sort of relationship do you think of? What do you think makes a relationship significant?
- Do you take the time to "define the relationship" or seriously discuss your non-romantic relationships?
- Have you ever put a friendship on the backburner because you were in a romantic relationship? If you have or have had a romantic partner, have you ever viewed your partner's friendships as "overly close" and as a threat to your romantic relationship?
- Do you take time to celebrate and appreciate the non-romantic relationships in your life?
- Have you ever felt afraid to be single or felt it necessary to be in a romantic relationship to be secure? Why do you think that is?

Challenging Your Amatonormativity

Exercise 4

Think about the narratives around relationships as well as how institutions prohibit relationship diversity due to amatonormativity. In the columns below, pick a topic or topics and try to compare what that would look like in an amatonormative lens and in a relationship diverse lens. Examples: housing, various forms of intimacy, healthcare plans, or child-rearing.

Amatonormative Lens	Relationship Diversity Lens
Family: A family consists of two adults who are married or in a long-term romantic relationship and their children.	Family: A family can take many shapes and forms. It can consist of a polycule and their children, a group of friends, a romantic couple and a friend, and so on...

Sources and Narratives

Source/Piece Title and Website Name

1. Amatonormativity (Elizabeth Brake)
2. Amatonormativity 101 (greed-the-dorkalicious)
3. Amatonormativity 101 (AUREA)
4. All about amatonormativity (Rewriting the Rules)
5. What is Amatonormativity? (aroace-avenue)
6. 5 Ways Amatonormativity Sets Harmful Relationship Norms For Us All (Everyday Feminism)
7. 5 dangers of amatonormativity (beloved-not-broken)
8. Singlism: How Serious Is It, Really? (Psychology Today)
9. The Isolation of Amatonormativity* (too-spicy-and-too-queer)
10. Romantic Love is Killing Us* (The Body is Not An Apology)
11. I'm tired of some allo people saying* (graces-of-luck)
12. Being aromantic and asexual and having poor mental health (oneshortdamnfuse)
13. Aromantic Fears (includes some narratives that touch on issues related to amatonormativity)* (AUREA)
14. I May be Your Fun Extracurricular, but You Are my Basic Human Need* (Confessions of an (A)romantic)
15. How Much of Yourself Are You Willing to Sacrifice?* (Confessions of an (A)romantic)
16. Amatonormativity: The One True Love Complex (Medium)
17. On "Monogamy" (rotten-zucchini)
18. Polyphobia (Psychology Today)
19. Couple-Centricity, Polyamory, and Colonialism (Critical Polyamorist)
20. I Am Not Voldemort: An Essay on Love and Amatonormativity* (Aro Worlds)
21. Amatonormativity and Relationship Anarchy (TAAAP)
22. Romance Is A Myth Webinar (Dean Spade)

*Narrative (or contains a narrative)- there may be some overlap between informative source and personal narrative.

Credits

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Thank you!

Thank you for completing this guide and workbook. Hopefully you have learned something new and taken away a few things. If you'd like to continue your journey on challenging amatonormativity, feel free to check out Part 2- Digging Deeper.