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### Amatonormativity, Aromanticism, and What Defines a Relationship

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Amatonormativity, Aromanticism, and What Defines a Relationship

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Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Dr. Garrett W. Nichols, Thesis Advisor

## Intro

Romance is seen in many aspects of western culture, from movies and tv, to songs and language, but beliefs about romance go beyond what is portrayed in the media. Portrayals of romance with the marriage plot in movies show the underlying belief that romance is a goal everyone is striving towards. This belief that all people are striving towards an exclusive, romantic coupling is called amatonormativity. Professor Elizabeth Brake coined the term amatonormativity and defines it as “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” (Brake 89). The term is similar to heteronormativity, but where heteronormativity assumes heterosexuality to be the norm, amatonormativity assumes romantic coupling to be the norm. Both require people who fall outside the projected ideal to explain themselves. Instead of accepting some people are gay or not into romantic relationships, these normative ideals make people who do not fit them seem strange and needing to fit the ideal in some way. Simple acts that would be a violation of amatonormativity could include dining alone by choice, cohabitating with a friend, or not searching for romance.

None of these acts should be looked down upon, yet amatonormative ideals make them seem strange and unwanted. Journalist Amy Gahran conducted a survey asking those in relationships that do not fit the exclusive, amorous ideal, their experiences of how people have responded to their relationships. The most common disadvantage reported in being in relationships that are not exclusive or amorous, was the judgement and discrimination they faced. Gahran goes on to say, “The active stigma against unconventional relationships surfaces

in a myriad of ways: being casually treated with suspicion, housing and child custody discrimination, alienation from family and community, and much more. Or having to explain your relationships more than other people” (Gahran 61). Believing people are striving towards or must be in an exclusive, romantic relationship eliminates the possibility that other relationship types exist. Such ideals alienate people simply for their relationships, yet it is the amatonormative viewpoint that should be challenged.

Not only are some people not striving towards the goal of marriage, but some people do not participate in romantic relationships. Aromantic people do not feel romantic attraction, some participate in relationships, some do not, but regardless they experience prejudice about their identities because of ideas about the importance of romance.

By itself romance is not harmful and can actually be beautiful. However, the glorification of it can lead to harmful mentalities that affect others. Mentalities such as putting romantic relationships above other relationship types and not recognizing the importance of other relationships in one’s life, such as family, platonic friendships, mentorship, and more. These relationships all have different roles to play in one’s network of relationships, whether it be caretaking, financial, domestic, or emotional bond. Yet despite their influence in people’s lives they can, and often do, take a back seat to romance.

Spouses have various privileges and benefits in marriage and healthcare that do not apply to any other relationship. It’s not a question of asking if spouses should get such benefits, it’s a matter of asking why these romantic relationships get certain privileges that other relationships do not.

The lack of equality in the way the law handles prioritizing romance is one matter, but another issue is how people who do not participate in romantic relationships are stereotyped.

Stereotypes of single people in the media portrayal as sad, lonely, or incomplete is a general view that can also have real world effects.

Stereotypes of people who do not participate in romantic relationships can be harmful to aromantic people whose identity is tied to not feeling romantic attraction. The way in which these stereotypes come about and how they negatively affect others is important to know so that they can be combated. In this thesis I argue that stereotypes of single people can negatively affect one in obtaining housing and work discrimination. People should not be treated differently in these regards because of their romantic status.

In addition to romance, looking at other relationship-based discrimination reveals how normative viewpoints can be changed. Same-sex relationships have faced discrimination in a number of ways, including being restricted of the right to marry and have the same benefits that a straight couple would have. Yet these restrictions are still prevalent in the system of marriage, and even though it has been expanded to include same-sex couples, such rights are not being afforded to non-romantic relationships. Adult care networks go beyond romantic partners, with family, friends, and more, and the importance of such relationships should be acknowledged by restructuring laws that were previously only granted to married couples, to the other important relationships that qualify. Aromantic people are queer people and their relationships should also be considered legitimate just as same-sex relationships were seen as legitimate under the recognition of them by law through marriage. A restructuring of the way relationships outside romance are viewed is needed so that people who do not participate in romantic relationships can be given equal rights by law.

This restructuring of how romance is viewed is not only important for equal rights, it's important so that people are not stereotyped as incomplete for not having a romantic relationship.

Aromantic people face stereotypes of them being sad, immature, or coldhearted for not having romantic feelings, however the concept of romance is more complicated than the matter of if one is able to feel or obtain a romantic relationship. By taking out the romantic feelings towards each other this complicates the idea of relationships as a whole. Romance goes beyond the actions, it involves feelings, philosopher Carrie Jenkins explains the social role of romance:

Although love's function is important, that doesn't mean it's possible to count someone who just goes through the motions as being 'in love' - that is, if they do all the kissing, marriage, nuclear family formation, reproduction, and so on, while feeling nothing.

[R]omantic love is a kind of love. Its distinctive social role is what makes it romantic, not what makes it love. (53)

Romantic love is a specific type of love, and it goes beyond the actions of kissing or marriage. Some people do not feel romantic love or attraction, but that is not to say that they don't feel love at all. There are many ways to love, love between siblings, love between friends, and so on. Relationships encompass more than romance, yet because romance is so glorified this leaves aromantic people and their most important relationships seen as inferior. In this thesis, I argue that the glorification and role romance has taken on in western culture has enforced ideals that not only diminish the importance of other relationship types but reestablishes discrimination against those who do not conform to amatonormativity. Knowing how amatonormativity affects aromantic people and the general population is important in reversing laws in marriage and healthcare that privileges romantic couples and sets the precedent that romantic connections are the only valid form of love and caretaking.

## Portrayal of Romance

By comparing the portrayal of romantic relationships to non-romantic relationships in the media and common language we can see how contemporary western society idealizes exclusive, romantic relationships above other relationship types. Glorification of romance in the media happens in several ways, one of which being portraying marriage as the end goal and friendship as an unsatisfactory ending, both ideas enforce the prejudices against single people as unfulfilled. Portrayal of single people as sad, lonely, immature, and having no life outside of work are attitudes that can have serious consequences in job and housing discrimination. By more closely examining representation of relationships we can begin critiquing the ways in which romance is glorified in media and reverse perceptions of people who do not participate in romance outside of an amatonormative lense. Recognizing that some people are not striving towards a romantic relationship can help demystify the overreliance of romance in one's life to acknowledge the importance of other relationship types.

The idealization of romantic and sexual relationships can be seen in everyday life. Something as common as language can influence how relationships are viewed. Language both reflects and influences how one sees the world by looking more critically at language it becomes more obvious the ways in which romantic relationships are viewed. In contemporary English the phrase “in a relationship” is often assumed to mean romantic relationship. However, that assumption narrows the definition of what “relationship” means and makes it harder for other relationship types to be acknowledged when romance is the default. A relationship encompasses any connection two beings have, it could mean a friendship, a working relationship, a familial relationship, a team bond, a person can even have a relationship with their pet. Yet, by not considering these connections and immediately assuming “in a relationship” to be synonymous with “romantic relationship,” colloquial language has allowed a mindset which disregards other

relationship types. When “romantic relationship” is the default definition of relationship it causes other connections, such as familial or platonic, to be forgotten as relationships, giving romantic relationships precedence.

This disregard of the validity of other relationship types can be seen in the word “love” as well. Love can be equated with romantic love in many aspects of speech but it is also evident in such things as popular songs. In her book, *What Love Is: And What It Could Be*, Carrie Jenkins notes that, “often in songs and everywhere else, people say ‘love’ when they mean romantic love. That’s a convenient short-hand but notice how it also suggests romantic love is accorded a special place in our thinking” (Jenkins 4). People can have love for many things, family, friends, pets, even their favorite foods. Yet in many pop culture songs about love the audience is meant to assume romantic love unless explicitly told otherwise. Equating the concept of love with romantic love overshadows, and makes it easier not to recognize, other forms of love. Aromantic people do not experience romantic love and one of the stereotypes is that they do not love at all. This cold view of aromantic people is not only an unfair assumption but it shows how people equate love to romantic love forgetting about other kinds.

Other cultures have recognized various types of love and named them accordingly. In Greek culture there were seven different words for love, from love of one’s friends and family, to love of the universe and oneself (Burton). People know these other forms of love exist, but by not having separate words for them in the English language it is easy to forget about them in place of one overarching concept of romantic love. Romantic love has dominated the idea of love, and while it should certainly be recognized as an important relationship, it should not do so at the expense of other relationships being forgotten.

The narrowing of the idea of love to only encompass romance doesn't just make other types of love easily forgotten, it allows for them to be deemed lesser by comparison. If two people are out in public and wrongly assumed to be romantically involved, to clarify the relationship they might say something like we're "just friends." This is a common and accepted phrase that people instinctively say, yet the signifier "just" downplays the relationship. The clarification would still have the same effect if the person said, "we're friends," but by using this diminutive label it has the effect of devaluing the relationship instead of acknowledging the friendship as a meaningful connection. One would not say "we're just romantic partners." Such phrasing would be diminutive of the relationship, and would probably insult the partner. As one aromantic person explains their relationship, "people may assume I'm 'just friends' with someone when our relationship transcends 'just friends.' I recognize this is often because they've been conditioned to think a certain way about relationships, but it's still frustrating. There's nothing 'just' about friendship in the first place. With that someone I feel home" (Gahran 114). This frustration is understandable, because while this person knows the importance of their friendships, others continually diminish it. This mindset, which allows friendships to be devalued compared to romantic relationships, establishes a hierarchy of what relationship types are more important than others, when such hierarchy need not exist. Different types of love need not be ranked solely because of their label.

The ways in which romance is portrayed as the most important type of relationship is seen in more than just language; popular culture glorifies romance in a number of ways. In movies, a common trend is to pair off characters in romantic relationships, most often marriage, to prove they ended up happily ever after. Marriage signifies they are happy because marriage is viewed as the pinnacle of happiness, the point in which all people strive towards. The marriage

plot is common in Disney movies, but it's also in shows like *Sex and the City*, *Big Bang*, and *Friends*. Even a show whose title suggests it is about platonic relationships, *Friends*, relies on a marriage plot to prove that the characters ended up happily ever after. Monica and Chandler live their married life in the suburbs, Ross and Rachel get back together for good, despite their habitual on and off relationship; even Phoebe, a perpetual independent woman, settles down with a newcomer who was thrown in the story to give her a marriage ending. The only one in the group who is left single by the end of the show is Joey. Even then, his plot couldn't end there because that was far too sad of an ending for such a lovable character; he got his own spin off show. The spin off, however, failed for many reasons but mainly because he was without all the other lovable characters that made up the show, not only for their personalities, but for their friendships. The show was successful for their fun, quirky friendships, yet when the show had to end they couldn't be left in platonic limbo, as that wouldn't have been satisfying. However, this begs the question, why wouldn't it be a satisfying ending to know they all remained friends and perhaps never got married? Why did Joey have to leave in a spin off and lose his relationship with his friends just because they all partnered up? The character's endings are meant to be hopeful, yet the audience is left heartbroken over the loss of such beautiful friendships. Would the show have turned out different if society didn't idealize romance over other forms of relationships? It's impossible to say; however, it does go to show that while friendships can be portrayed as a meaningful part of someone's life, they are still viewed as less valuable than romantic relationships.

Idealizing romance is not only harmful to other meaningful relationships in one's life, it can also create unrealistic expectations about what romantic relationships can do. Contemporary western culture still views romance as a solution to loneliness, sadness, and caregiving; however,

the situation is not as simple as getting married, and thinking this way can even exemplify these issues. In a study done to report happiness between married people, singles, and divorced individuals the results were that “After two years of marriage happiness reverts back to baseline. Marriage does not have lasting effect but divorce does, happiness drops before divorce, gradually rebounds, but does not return to baseline” (Kislev 25). There is initial happiness that occurs during the honeymoon phase, but after that, married people are no happier than the unmarried. A survey conducted by social psychologist Bella DePaulo measured people’s happiness to see which group of people was happiest. The people who never married were reported to have only a .1 difference in their happiness compared to those who were married (DePaulo). Such a small difference does not prove that married people are happier than those who are single. As the survey continued, divorced individuals were among the least happy of all the groups, and since marriage can only end in either death, widowhood, or divorce, chances are marriage will do nothing for overall happiness. This is not to dissuade from marriage, rather to say that the amatonormative idea that one should strive towards marriage is not feasible for all people. Some people are happy not being married or participating in romantic relationships and the idea that single people are unhappy is not only incorrect, but it enforces the idea of aromantic people as pitiable, and sad, shaming them for their identity.

Enforcing the idea that marriage is an epitome of happiness isn’t just seen in the media with the marriage trope it is also ingrained in contemporary western culture to the point where it has affected governmental policies. There was a U.S. government push to encourage people in poverty to get married in order to reduce the need for government assistance:

The most recent of these was a \$1.5 billion grant to poor communities in the hope that increasing the number of marriages among the poor would allow public officials to claim

they had reduced public assistance claims. The reality is that the marriage itself does not lift the poor out of poverty; it just reduces the number of eligible recipients. (Ingraham 54)

Marriage is not a solution to poverty, and the flawed logic of this system shows how the mindset of romance as an easy fix for one's problems can lead to harmful policies. One person affected by this false solution voices their opinion, "I'm really insulted by it. Who is the government to tell us, because we poor, we need to get married? Marriage does not take you out of poverty. It really doesn't. You can be married and you still can't get a job. When you got to worry about how you're going to eat, live, and go to the bathroom, marriage is way down on the bottom of that list" (DePaulo 173). Marriage does not take one out of poverty. The proof that this policy was working was measured by the reduced amount of people who received aid. Yet reducing assistance based on marriage status assumes that someone is better off once they are married and does not actually solve the problem of poverty.

While the government was mainly preoccupied by the idea of marriage as a simple solution, part of the idea came from statistics that reflected married people were better off. What was left out of the statistics was the fact that the people who were better off were those in the middle or upper class. Marriage increases the earning potential of a married couple. For instance, married women in middle to upper class earn 37% more than single women (Ingraham 53). A similar statistic is that "married individuals earn approximately 26% more than singles in equivalent jobs" (Kislev 86). However, the factor that makes this higher earning possible for the middle and upper class is not the fact that being married means one is better off, but because employers tend to view married people more favorably than those who are single. The belief that marriage is a signifier that someone is more stable and reliable makes them better candidates for

promotions, despite having no findings to support the comparison that married people are better at these qualities. Instead of recognizing how this bias forms in the workplace with married people earning more than single people, the policy enacted to stop giving assistance to those who were married only served to enforce the idea that married people have better lives simply because they are married.

In a way, marriage does make life easier, but not in the way people like to think. By being married, a person does not have to face the kind of work and housing discrimination that single people do. As stated before, married people earn more than single people, but more than that, single people “are asked to cover colleagues, work overtime, travel more under the assumption they have the time to do so. Work extra hours for little to no reward” (Kislev 85). Single people are asked to do more because they are assumed to not have a life outside of work. If they do have an outside life, it is deemed less significant than a married person’s outside life. For example, DePaulo outlines a story of a single man who put in a request to go to a required meeting on a certain date. When the date got closer, his married co-worker asked to switch with him because their child had a soccer game that day. The single man also had set plans, and unlike the coworker he had made the request beforehand, yet he was viewed as unreasonable for not recognizing the importance of the coworker’s life. In this scenario, the married coworker could not see the importance of the single man’s life outside of work. Since his plans were with friends and not a domestic family, he was seen as unreasonable. This is only one of many stories of married coworkers' lives being prioritized over their single peers. More than not having their outside lives recognized, despite being asked to cover colleagues, work overtime, and travel more, single people still don’t get promoted as often as married people. As DePaulo blatantly puts it, “married men get paid more than single men” (215). There is an imbalance in the

expectations and treatment of single people and much of it comes from the glorification of romantic relationships. By only recognizing married people's outside lives as important and believing marriage to be a qualifier for one's reliability, those who are single face work discrimination.

The discrimination doesn't end there; the idea that single people are less reliable and stable than married people affects decisions when it comes to housing as well. In a study of how landlords perceive potential tenants, landlords were given three options, all identical in their resumes except for their relationship statuses: "When presented with three prospective pairs of renters of different statuses real estate agents 61% said they would rent to the married couple, 24% to cohabitating couples, only 15% said they were willing to rent to two friends" (Kislev 87). The landlords were three times more likely to favor the married couple than the cohabitating couple, and when asked their reasoning, the landlords said the married couple seemed more stable. Even if marriage wasn't a factor of stability, the cohabitating couple scored better than the two friends. Romance is seen as a stronger bond than friendship, and people without such a bond are less likely to receive housing. This type of housing discrimination is perfectly legal; despite clear prejudices against unmarried people the law does not recognize the validity of this struggle. Once again, the idealization of romance has left society blind to the ways in which some people are prioritized over others.

By not questioning the ways in which romance is viewed, these prejudices are allowed to continue with ongoing consequences. If these ideologies are to be reversed in contemporary western culture they must first be recognized as harmful. Media, government policies, and stereotypes about single people affect their jobs, ability to find housing, and general life as being perceived as pitiable compared to married people. The stereotypes of single people as sad,

unstable, and unreliable must be reversed in such simple things as the way relationships are spoken about in language if these ideas are to be combatted. Amatonormativity should be combatted not only because of how it affects single and aromantic people, but because of the way it affects how western culture views relationships that are not romantic.

### Dismissal of Other

Western culture continually dismisses relationships that do not fit the heteronormative viewpoint. Whether it be same-sex relationships or non-romantic relationships, normative viewpoints prioritize some relationships over others. This prioritization of certain relationships is shown in laws which dictate who counts as family and who does not. When it comes to the benefits in marriage and healthcare, important relationships like siblings, grandparents, caretaking friends, and more, are not granted the same rights. The law dictates what relationships are deemed important, rather than the people in the relationships deciding what suits their needs. The restriction of benefits based on relationship type aids the nuclear family structure and prohibits those who do not subscribe to that structure from equal treatment. Those who do not subscribe to the amatonormative vision of relationships face discrimination and laws that are against their favor, similar to the ways in which queer people have faced discrimination.

In a survey of people who do not fit the amatonormative ideal of exclusive, amorous relationships, participants reported the ways in which they were affected by such discrimination.

Many people who took my survey reported facing discrimination, loss or invalidation when others learn about their unconventional relationships. Their jobs, housing, or the custody of their children have been put at risk. Sometimes their social status drops or their ethics or character are questioned. Their relationships sometimes become the subject

of heightened scrutiny and invasive, inappropriate questions - or ignored entirely, as if they don't count or are shameful. Simply living in fear of these potential outcomes can be immensely stressful. (Gahran 15)

Those who do not subscribe to the exclusive, amorous ideal face discrimination, as judgement about how they approach relationships opens the potential for others to doubt their ethics.

This kind of discrimination has parallels with the discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ people. Losing jobs, housing, children, and facing scrutiny when it comes to one's character are all things queer people have faced simply for being queer, because their romantic relationships do not fit the heteronormative expectations. This type of discrimination happens to same-sex couples, but it also happens to relationships that do not fit the exclusive, amorous ideal. Queer people have much to face with misunderstanding from society, but it does not just end with the acceptance of same-sex couples. As queer theorist Michael Warner states, "There are almost as many kinds of relationships as there are people in combination... queers have an astonishing range of intimacies. Most have no labels. Most receive no public recognition" (116). There is a power in the way queer politics makes people redefine previous ways of looking at the world, yet they often do not receive any public recognition. This "astonishing range of intimacies" that oftentimes do not have labels include relationships that do not fit the amatonormative ideal of exclusive and amorous. These relationships face discrimination and the lack of recognition as legitimate can lead to exclusionary laws.

Same-sex marriage advocates recognized the rights denied to them compared to their opposite-sex counterparts, yet there was a dismissal of same-sex marriage as legitimate. Though that fight was won by advocates that pointed out the discriminatory nature of the law, the privileges afforded through marriage that were denied to same-sex couples are still being denied

to others. The fight for marriage equality was more than just the fight to be married, it was a fight against the institution of marriage offering privilege to certain couples. The privileges that come with marriage are numerous, and since most cannot be obtained any other way, married couples are allowed benefits that others are refused. While the law changed to recognize same-sex relationships, there still isn't marriage equality so long as romantic relationships are valued above all other relationship types.

Through the justice system, the U.S. has accepted same-sex marriage as legitimate, but the arguments for such relationships can be applied to other relationships that do not fit the heteronormative ideal that deserve similar recognition. In overturning an act that defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman the court reasoned that, “[DOMAs] unusual deviation from the tradition of recognizing and accepting state definitions of marriage operates to deprive same-sex couples of the benefits and responsibilities that come with federal recognition of their marriages” (Supreme Court of the United States 3). Here the court admits that by denying people the right to marry they are denying them certain benefits and responsibilities granted to married couples. The court overturned the act and allowed the same-sex couple the benefits of marriage.

However, what the court does not ask is why these rights are only afforded to married couples, and what makes marriage more substantial and deserving of these rights than any other relationship type. Humans exist in a network of relationships consisting of all types, platonic, familial, and more, yet it is only romantic relationships that are recognized and given certain rights. If the law is going to admit that marriage can be used as a tool to deprive people of certain benefits and responsibilities, then it should recognize that there are more relationships than just romantic that are being deprived.

The fight for marriage equality is not just about allowing same-sex marriages, but about changing the ideas of marriage so that the discriminatory practices against same-sex couples does not happen to others. As Richard Berquist argues, the broadening of the definition of marriage to include same-sex people is still discriminatory because it disregards other relationship types. If the definition of marriage can be changed to include same-sex couples why can't the definition be changed to include relationships that are not romantic? The author asks readers to, "Imagine two dear friends of the same sex, or a brother and sister who live together. Although their relationships would not involve sex, they might find it advantageous to enjoy the legal and economic privileges of marriage. Why would their claim for these benefits be any less reasonable than the claims of homosexual couples?" (Berquist). Berquist is essentially asking why non-romantic relationships are any less legitimate than romantic same-sex couples. If changing the idea of marriage, why not also recognize other important relationship types beyond romantic?

Queer culture has recognized the importance of non-romantic relationships long before same-sex marriage was legalized. Melissa Harris-Perry outlines how the LGBTQ+ community has viewed relationships:

For decades, LGBTQ communities have generated new forms of family built on foundations of shared commitments, collective responsibilities, non conjugal love and parental devotion not predicated on shared genetics. Shut out of social-normative options for making families, they queered the very idea of family. It would be tragic to allow marriage equality to destroy or marginalize the pioneering work of queer families who have taught us that family is more complicated and more fulfilling than traditional models of marriage can ever capture. (Harris-Perry)

Families and close bonds that have been built outside of genetics or romance should not be forgotten, and it will take more than the legalization of same-sex marriage for them to be recognized by law. Queer people, and in fact most other people, will continue to form close bonds and family not based on genetics, and for those relationships to be seen as equal through law it is not enough to introduce other romantic relationships as legitimate. For there to be true equality with marriage benefits, there has to be a restructuring of what type of relationship is legitimate not based on romantic connection.

The nature of queer politics is to bring about change and a redefinition of normative viewpoints. As Cathy J. Cohen puts it, “In queer politics sexual expression is something that always entails the possibility of change, movement, redefinition, and subversive performance— from year to year, from partner to partner, from day to day, even from act to act” (439). Ideas of relationships and sexuality are constantly changing; they have changed the definition of marriage to include same-sex couples and they can express other options of how relationships can work.

Beyond redefining what a relationship is based on sex or gender, queer politics has the power to redefine what a relationship means beyond romanticism. Platonic relationships are just as important as romantic ones and aromantic people are proving that by them being some of the most important relationships in their lives. Queer politics can not only recognize its power in redefining normative viewpoints, but it can expand its definitions to include people of different identities and relationship dynamics. Cohen continues, “It is my contention that queer activists who evoke a single-oppression framework misrepresent the distribution of power within and outside of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities, and therefore limit the comprehensive and transformational character of queer politics” (441). People within the LGBTQ+ community face oppression in a variety of ways, and it would be limiting of the power

of queer politics to not recognize the ways in which varying identities experience this oppression in similar and different ways. The redefinition of marriage to include same-sex couples is a step in the right direction in expanding the normative view of marriage, but it does not help the dismissal aromantic people face. Both same-sex couples and aromantic people face dismissal of their relationships as legitimate, one being disregarded based on sex, the other being disregarded based on relationship type. Queer politics has the power to change the definition of marriage to include same-sex couples, but it is not done in changing the views of marriage when it comes to idealizing romanticism.

The rights afforded to marriages would be beneficial to other relationship types, and the fact they are not granted to these relationships prove that they are not seen as legitimate in the eyes of the law. Spouses are given many rights when it comes to the healthcare of their significant other: they are allowed visiting rights, they can be put on each other's insurance, and they are allowed to take leave off work when caretaking for their sick spouse. The Family Member Leave Act (FMLA) allows paid leave off of work to take care of a sick family member, yet how they define family is restrictive. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, family included in the act are, spouse, child, or parent. Persons such as siblings, grandparents, cousins, or even a caretaking friend are not considered family (U.S. Department of Labor). By this law, spouses take precedence over siblings, grandparents, and caretaking friends. The definition of family in this law only relates to the nuclear family, defining everyone else as non-family.

The law promotes the idea that one needs a nuclear family in order to be taken care of and discourages other caretaking relationships by not giving them equal benefits. If someone, be it a sibling or a friend, decides to take on someone else's caretaking why should the law make it harder for them by not allowing paid leave? Should it not be the goal to encourage taking care of

each other unrelated to the degree of genetic or romantic connection. The nuclear family mold hardly encompasses all caring relationships, and for the caretaking siblings and friends, why shouldn't their efforts be considered equally legitimate as spouses? A person who never married and never has kids would only have their parents be eligible to take care of them. The person who does not have a nuclear family is automatically restricted in who can be recognized as their caretaker. People themselves define the nature of their relationships, not the law, and people should not be denied caretaking benefits because their relationships are not considered "family" in the eyes of the law.

Insurance works similarly where only immediate family can be put on one's insurance. Yet this definition is even more restrictive, one's parents are not included, nor can a child beyond the age of twenty-six be on their parents' insurance. That only leaves one option, the spouse, to be the sole person who can indefinitely, excluding divorce, reap the benefits of being on someone else's insurance. The romantic relationship in this instance is the only relationship type that is considered legitimate. A person who never married and never has kids cannot give any important relationship the same benefits that a married couple can. The law restricts benefits to any other type of caretaking besides a married coupling. It refuses to acknowledge platonic caretaking as legitimate, and even makes it so close family members cannot receive the same benefits as a spouse. The nuclear family mold is not reflective of relationships as a whole and the importance of caretaking does not rely on whether or not there is romance.

Marriage and healthcare do not acknowledge adult care networks and relationships outside of romantic do not get the same benefits as a married couple. There is unequal treatment and favoritism towards certain relationships by law, yet what's more harmful than that is few are aware of the problem. To begin dismantling this issue it must first be seen as a problem.

## Does it Really Matter?

The amatonormative belief that romance is the most important relationship in one's life leads to the idea that for a relationship to be legitimate it must include romantic attraction. However, romantic relationships are not the only kind of relationships that exist. Familial, platonic, and close bonds that have no definition, are all important relationships to be considered and the legitimacy of a relationship should not be based on type. For people who do not experience romantic attraction their most important relationships are invalidated by the media and law which do not give them the same rights as their romantic counterparts. Relationships are fluid and while the queer community may point out how relationships can differ from normative ideals, it is more than same-sex relationships that are affected. Whether or not someone has sexual or romantic relationships in their life, it is likely that they will have familial and platonic relationships and those relationships should be respected just as romantic relationships are.

Refusing to recognize the importance of relationships outside the amatonormative ideal makes such relationships easier to disregard. The disregard of relationships that are not romantic can be seen in how marriage and healthcare favor spouses over family or other adult care networks. By not acknowledging the benefits and privileges that married couples receive the system will not be reversed for those whose care networks do not include romance. For the people who are taken care of by friends, or live with siblings, or commit to each other in other areas of financial or domestic capabilities, those relationships do not get the same benefits as a spouse. This unequal distribution of rights is determined by whether or not the relationship is romantic and romance should not be a factor in who is afforded certain privileges.

By denying the rights of married couples to other relationship types and with healthcare limiting the definition of family to mean nuclear family, such networks of family and friends outside this image are not given the same treatment because the relationship does not involve romance. It is the people within the relationship that should define the importance and purpose in their lives. In *Minimizing Marriage*, Brake proposes a restructuring of the legal benefits that come along with marriage to be selective, applied to, and agreed upon by the individuals in the relationship. By creating a form and legal system that makes it obvious as to what each party is agreeing to, this will allow certain benefits to apply to the people in one's network that are not romantic. A restructuring of the legal system to acknowledge non-romantic relationships would allow for people who meet certain needs to receive the benefits that apply. According to Brake, "Minimal marriage would allow a person to exchange all the marital rights reciprocally with one other person or distribute them through her adult care network. It thus supports the variety of relationships excluded by amatonormative marriage law: friendships, urban tribes, overlapping networks, and polyamory" (161). Rights afforded to caretaking spouses should apply to caretaking siblings, and healthcare insurance should recognize that the nuclear family is not the only way people have families. The law has a long way to go to catch up with recognizing the diversity of care networks that exist, but the least that can be done is recognize that they exist and the ways in which such ideals are harmful. Allowing rights that were previously only afforded through marriage to others would not only encourage the diversity of relationships outside romance but also let people consider the ways in which romance is prioritized over other relationship types. As it stands, marriage and laws which prioritize romantic relationships, do not offer people who are not in a romantic relationship equal treatment, and that should be changed.

Beyond individual relationships, people who do not participate in romantic relationships are affected by negative stereotypes in ways they might not realize. Amatonormativity and stereotypes of single people are not as widely known or discussed as stereotypes of women or people of color. When asked about whether or not they faced discrimination, “30% of singles and 23% of coupled people thought single people were stigmatized/ discriminated versus 100% of gay males, 90% of obese individuals, 86% of black people, and 72% of women acknowledged their group was discriminated against” (Kislev 90). The ideas of amatonormativity are internalized to the point where a person can accept stereotypes and unequal treatment as normal. For some single people it is a temporary status, but for aromantic people amatonormativity affects them throughout their life. These issues should not be ignored and there is much to be done in bringing awareness to this unequal treatment if it is ever to be reversed.

Since everyone has connections outside of romance, be it familial, platonic, mentorship, or any other close bond, redefining how romance is viewed is important in supporting the significance they have in one’s life. Romance should not be so glorified that it is the only definition of love that our language can comprehend. Love of family, love of friends, and all other types of love are not lesser and should not be treated as such. The adult care networks that exist outside of romance should not be treated as less important compared to a romantic couple that receives benefits that other relationships are restricted from. Beyond such relationships, the people who choose not to, or in fact cannot feel romantic love should not be treated as any different.

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