

## Shedding light on asexuality

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Asexual marchers at World Pride Parade Toronto 2014. Stanford lecturer Karli Cerankowski's work has helped make asexuality studies a recognizable academic discipline.

When confronted with the notion of asexuality, most people are baffled by the idea of a life devoid of sexual attraction.

But that's rapidly changing, in society and in academia, thanks in part to

Stanford scholar Karli Cerankowski. A lecturer in Stanford's Program in Writing and Rhetoric, Cerankowski's research and activism has made strides toward designating asexuality as an academic discipline.

Cerankowski, who received her PhD from Stanford's Program in Modern Thought and Literature last year, emphasizes social discourse and de-pathologization of [sexual orientation](#).

In her dissertation about the ways asexuality is misunderstood in American culture, Cerankowski traced "the history of the creation of sexual categories" through an extensive study of text and media from pop culture as well as historical works, including collections of sexology texts in the Stanford University Libraries.

Cerankowski says that "society has normalized certain levels of sexual desire while pathologizing others. In a sense, it's the social model that's broken, not asexuals."

Although sex and sexuality are centralized, prized aspects of our culture, Cerankowski says that "if we recognize the diversity of human sexuality, then we can understand that there are some people who just don't experience [sexual attraction](#) or have a lower sex drive or have less sex, and that doesn't mean there is something wrong with them."

Cerankowski and her co-editor, Megan Milks, recently published *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, the first collection of essays on asexuality – and the second book ever to be written on the topic.

*Asexualities* is academic in its approach, and contributors from a variety of disciplines pursue the subject through scientific, sexological, psychoanalytical and political models.

Science takes a back seat to the human experience in the introduction of the book, where Cerankowski and Milks each share personal anecdotes. Cerankowski details her own perplexing identity journey, spanning her identification as celibate to her establishment in the queer community. She recounts later finding some resonance upon exploring the small world of asexuality, but realizing that current definitions needed to be complicated and the parameters loosened.

Cerankowski's own research reveals that people are capable of obtaining just as much contentment from other areas of life, and complete gratification in life doesn't necessarily include sexual gratification.

"We sort of prioritize sexual pleasure and sexual fulfillment in our lives, but we can think about the other ways that people experience intense pleasure, like when listening to music," Cerankowski says.

Cerankowski's studies of asexuality found their home under the expansive umbrella of queer and sexuality studies, which she says assists in the acceptance of asexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation.

In 2010, Cerankowski and literary scholar Megan Milks speculated on the creation of "asexuality studies" as an academic field in an article they co-authored for *Feminist Studies*. And now, just five years later, Cerankowski says asexuality studies is becoming more recognizable as an academic field of study.

"We argued in our article, and I still argue, that approaching the study of asexuality from a queer and feminist perspective can be an enriching endeavor," Cerankowski says. "Not only can we use those theoretical and methodological tools to understand and theorize asexuality, but asexuality can also shift those frameworks and get us to think about queerness and sexuality in new and exciting ways."

## A vast spectrum of sexuality

A reasonably imaginative mind might consider that since the prefix "a-" means "not," that asexual must mean "not sexual" and that an asexual person is entirely uninterested in sex and love in any capacity.

But as Cerankowski points out, the pluralization of the term in her book's title is no accident, as it aspires to encompass the intricacies involved in the vast spectrum of asexuality, to be compatible with the "more commonly understood model of fluid and multiple sexualities."

Cerankowski cites an independent film, *Snow Cake*, in which the autistic female protagonist falls somewhere on the complex spectrum of asexuality. The title of the film arises from the intense enjoyment she experiences while eating handfuls of snow. When her friend describes to her the sensation of orgasm, she says something along the lines of, "That sounds like an inferior version of what I feel like when I eat snow!"

As Cerankowski has found, studying and thinking about asexuality brings up broader implications of what pleasure means to the human species.

In one scenario, an asexual person might be married, living with a partner and having regular intercourse. This person might be a romantic asexual, meaning someone who experiences strong, intimate and romantic feelings for another person but engages in sexual behavior only for procreative purposes or as a means of experiencing intimacy.

Another scenario might involve an a-romantic asexual, who is completely uninterested in romantic attachment or sexual encounters altogether, but finds satisfaction in other arenas of life. To debunk a common myth about sexuality, this a-romantic, asexual person is not necessarily any less fulfilled than a person with romantic and sexual

drive.

## **The next frontier**

Cerankowski's work raises the question: Why is now the ideal time for recognition of the asexual community and of asexuality as an orientation? Cerankowski points to the recent evolution of asexuality acceptance as the next natural step in equal rights.

In addition to publishing the groundbreaking *Asexualities*, Cerankowski has been a member of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) for four years, and has witnessed growth in the community of scholars working on asexuality. The spike in the topic's visibility within the NWSA is largely due to the emergence of the Asexuality Studies Interest Group, pioneered by Cerankowski and her colleagues.

However, much as homosexuality was once consistently pathologized by the public, the asexual community faces similar contention.

In Cerankowski's words, "There's a whole history we're building upon with feminist movements, with queer movements and LGBT politics that have really established a ground on which people can think about sexuality in different ways. Asexuality seems like the next frontier for that reframing of sexuality."

Cerankowski points to the countless forums, blogs and YouTube channels that provide platforms for open discussion of the topic.

While Cerankowski's research has done much to shed light on [asexuality](#), she says there's still much more to be understood: "What I imagine being the next step for my research would be to look through some of those medical and sexological histories and trace a kind of genealogy."

**More information:** The book is available online:  
[www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415714426/](http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415714426/)

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