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“That Poor Child”: The Perceived Incompatibility of Asexuality and Parenting

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Abstract

Discrimination against queer parents has a well-documented history in the United States, particularly during the latter half of the twentieth century. Much of this discrimination stemmed from the belief that queer parents were unfit to raise children due to their sexuality, with the assertion that children were better off with heterosexual parents. Over time, people have become more accepting of queer parents, yet discrimination persists today. One group that continues to face bias is asexual parents, largely due to the pervasive system of compulsory sexuality. This concept assumes that everyone is sexual and dictates proper expressions of nonsexuality. However, asexual people are at odds with this concept because they do not experience sexual attraction like compulsory sexuality dictates. This paper explores the arguments used against queer parents from the 1970s to the 1990s, examining the rationale behind claims that they were unfit to raise children. It then draws parallels to how asexual parents are discussed today. The rhetoric used in the twentieth century to undermine queer parents mirrors the arguments rooted in compulsory sexuality that are now used to question the parenting abilities of asexual parents. I argue that the system of compulsory sexuality lays the foundation for the perception that asexuality and parenting are incompatible. Just as society has come to understand that queer peoples' parenting abilities are not determined by their sexuality, it is essential to recognize that asexual people are not inherently unfit to be parents.

Keywords: asexuality, compulsory sexuality, discrimination, parenting, queerness

In the ideal American life, getting married and having children tend to be prominent milestones. Today, much of the American population agrees that people do not have to be heterosexual to achieve this ideal; queer people can also follow this path. However, when asexuality is brought into this conversation, it often meets hesitation.

Asexuality is an understudied yet long-existent sexual orientation. Social scientist Anthony Bogaert's foundational 2004 national probability study in Great Britain suggests that about 1% of the population identifies as asexual.¹ This figure continues to be widely cited in discussions of asexuality's prevalence in society.² Although people have identified as asexual for a long time, the academic study of this sexuality has only gained momentum in the last five or ten years. The intersection of asexuality and parenting, in particular, remains largely unexplored, with only a handful of scholars addressing the topic in the last few years. There is a lack of mainstream knowledge about asexuality, as well as confusion when trying to place it the context of the United States' sex-obsessed society. This focus on sex can be described by the framework of compulsory sexuality. Compulsory sexuality and asexuality do not fit neatly together, and this is a cause for societal assumptions about asexuality. The culture of compulsory sexuality in the United States is the reason that people think that asexuality and parenthood are incompatible. While research on asexual parenting is scarce, studies on queer parenting more broadly provide valuable insights that can inform discussions about asexual individuals as parents.

For this paper, I will be defining an asexual person as someone who does not experience sexual attraction. This is a widely used definition of asexuality, although some people use variations of this definition.³ It is important to note that asexuality is defined by attraction, not action. Asexuality does not hinge on a person's sexual activity—it has to do with their lack of sexual attraction regardless whatever they may be doing sexually. It is also vital to understand that asexuality and celibacy are different. Asexuality is not a choice, the same as any other sexual orientation, whereas celibacy is a voluntary decision. Another term relevant to this discussion is “allosexual,” which describes individuals who experience sexual attraction, encompassing all sexual orientations that do not fall under the umbrella definition of asexuality.

To understand the challenges faced by asexual individuals, it is crucial to define compulsory sexuality. Much of the research on this concept has been conducted in the United States and has been examining American society. Therefore, the definitions from this research are applicable to this paper. Kristina Gupta defines compulsory sexuality as "the assumption that all people are sexual [as well as] the social norms and practices that both marginalize various forms of non-sexuality, such as a lack of sexual desire or behavior, and compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual

¹ Anthony F. Bogaert, "Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample," *The Journal of Sex Research* 41, no. 3 (2004): 282. doi.org/10.1080/00224490409552235.

² Elizabeth F. Emens, "Compulsory Sexuality," *Stanford Law Review* 66, no. 2 (2014): 312. www.jstor.org/stable/24246965.

³ Megan Carroll, "Asexuality and Its Implications for LGBTQ-Parent Families," in *LGBTQ-Parent Families: Innovations in Research and Implications for Practice*, ed. Abbie E. Goldberg and Katherine R. Allen. 2nd ed. (Springer International Publishing, 2020), 4.

activity."⁴ In other words, this framework assumes that everyone is sexual and imposes specific expectations on how people should experience and express their sexuality.⁵ For asexual people, who do not experience sexual attraction, this framework imposes convoluted societal expectations, because compulsory sexuality also governs standards about not being sexual (not just how to be sexual).⁶ To better understand how this concept impacts asexual people, it is helpful to examine the history of compulsory sexuality in the United States.

The origins of compulsory sexuality can be traced back to the turn of the twentieth century. At this time, sexual desire came to be seen as favorable and innate, and mutual sexual satisfaction became considered essential for maintaining heterosexual marriages. Deviations from the societal norms of sexuality (including hypersexuality and nonsexuality) were stigmatized. The American public learned these ideas through marriage and sex manuals, solidifying the perceived importance of sexuality. In the 1970s "desire disorders" were identified, and in 1980, they were incorporated into the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), where they remain today.⁷

Compulsory sexuality is evident in contemporary media through its usage of sexuality to sell things. Mediums such as television, advertising, professional sports, and clothing utilize sexuality in this way.⁸ For instance, baby clothing with phrases such as "I love boobies (like my daddy)" or "Daddy came faster than Amazon Prime" introduce babies into conversations of sexuality. Similarly, children's and teens' clothing often incorporates sexual messaging or uses garment construction that emphasizes a part of the body deemed sexual by societal standards. Sexuality is even promoted by discussing its absence, with items such as sweatshirts saying "virginity rocks," which perpetuates norms by framing nonsexuality within a sexualized context. These examples highlight how compulsory sexuality shapes societal expectations for everyone. These norms are not first imposed upon adulthood—rather this begins earlier in life, bringing people into the system compulsory sexuality almost regardless of age. These early sites of sexualization shape the way children perceive the sexual identities and behaviors of themselves and others, which continues into adulthood.⁹ Examining these interactions underscores the pervasive influence of compulsory sexuality in American culture.

Compulsory sexuality is evident in the discrimination asexual people face. A 2012 study by Cara C. MacInnis and Gordon Hodson explored stigma against asexual people, revealing that:

⁴ Kristina Gupta, "Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept," *Signs* 41, no. 1 (Autumn 2015): 132. www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/681774.

⁵ It is helpful to leave the term "sexual" as broad as it is here because being sexual can encompass a wide variety of traits and activities.

⁶ For a thorough examination of interactions between asexuality and compulsory sexuality, see Margaret Rose McDowell, "Against Compulsory Sexuality: Asexual Figures of Resistance." (PhD Diss., Duke University, 2022), DukeSpace.

⁷ Gupta, "Compulsory Sexuality," 137.

⁸ Gupta, "Compulsory Sexuality," 139.

⁹ The statement that all people are sexual regardless of age is a very broad statement. For the purposes of this paper, the important idea is that children are included in ideas about sexuality, therefore strengthening the argument for the existence of a culture of compulsory sexuality in the United States. The nuanced relationship between children and sexuality is one that other scholars better examine, and I would recommend reading their research to understand this dynamic.

Heterosexuals expressed more stigma against asexuals than against other heterosexuals, homosexuals, or bisexuals; heterosexuals expressed more negative feelings toward asexuals, desired less contact with asexuals, and were less willing to hire or rent an apartment to an asexual person. In addition, heterosexuals dehumanized asexual individuals by describing them either as robotlike or animal-like.¹⁰

The dehumanization of asexual individuals exemplifies compulsory sexuality. Within this system, sexual attraction is assumed to be a fundamental aspect of being human. Utilizing this line of thinking, asexual people must not be people because they do not experience sexual attraction. This lack of sexual attraction does not fit into the social norms of desiring someone and wanting sex with them. MacInnis and Hodson's findings reveal that asexual people face distinctive prejudice that is even more pronounced than the bias directed toward other sexual minorities. While heterosexual people in the study expressed negative feelings toward queer people generally, they were significantly more hostile toward asexual people specifically. This suggests that prejudice against asexual people stems not from a deviation from heterosexuality but from a perceived lack of sexuality itself. The hostility reflects a reaction to asexuality's challenge to compulsory sexuality, rather than to heteronormativity.

Asexual people face prejudice in multiple areas of life due to their nonconformity to compulsory sexuality. MacInnis and Hodson's findings—that heterosexual people were less willing to hire or rent to asexual people and often dehumanized them—highlight how asexual people are othered. Asexual people seem so different that they are described in dehumanizing terms, such as “robotlike” or “animal-like,” reinforcing the perception that sexuality is essential to humanness.

The disconnect between asexuality and societal expectations leads to further social alienation. Many asexual people perceive asexuality as a foreign concept and often invalidate asexual experiences. For example, one asexual person, Queenie, remembers when she was 17 thinking it was odd how everyone was “dropping casual comments about the incredibly large amounts of passionate sex [she and her] boyfriend...were almost certainly having.” Queenie and her boyfriend were in fact not having sex, much to everyone's surprise and confusion. Queenie did not want to get her boyfriend in trouble because while he was over the age of consent, she was not. However, others felt that able to have sex with their partner outweighed risks because of these laws.¹¹ Queenie's attitude toward sex puzzled many in her life, and their reactions left her feeling confused and alone. Similarly, Laura, another asexual person, thought her “lack of sexual attraction and lack of interest in sex was just something strange about [her]” and it made her feel “alienated and alone.”¹² These experiences highlight how societal adherence to compulsory sexuality leaves asexual individuals feeling excluded and misunderstood.

Compulsory sexuality is also built into legal frameworks, particularly marriage laws. In some states, failure to consummate a marriage is grounds for voiding it. For immigration

¹⁰ Gupta, “Compulsory Sexuality,” 138.

¹¹ Queenie, “Compulsory Sexuality, or Why Dating and Being Asexual Can Be Very Confusing, Especially if People Keep Giving You Dumb Puberty Books,” *Concept Awesome*, July 2012, <https://queenieofaces.tumblr.com/post/25824651605/compulsory-sexuality-or-why-dating-and-being>.

¹² Laura, “Compulsory Sexuality,” *Notes of an Asexual Muslim*, July 2012, <https://ace-muslim.tumblr.com/post/25723245010/compulsory-sexuality>.

purposes, some types of marriages need to be consummated in order to be valid. Fraud is another reason a marriage can be voided, and "fraudulent intent 'not to consummate the marriage or not to have intercourse likely to produce progeny' can be" considered fraud.¹³ These legal stipulations disproportionately impact asexual people. While some asexual people do have sex, they often have a different relationship with it than allosexual people because they do not experience sexual attraction. For asexual people who do not engage in or enjoy sexual activity, these laws can jeopardize their marriages or place them in challenging situations because of their sexuality.

Even outside of legal requirements for consummation, asexual people are disproportionately affected by the benefits and privileges tied to marriage. Marriage offers significant legal and financial advantages, such as access to spousal health insurance, inheritance rights, and tax benefits. Bogaert's 2004 study found that "approximately twice as many sexuals as asexuals were married."¹⁴ Although asexual people comprise a small percentage of the population, this disparity is striking. Proportionally, far fewer asexual people are able to access the benefits of marriage than their allosexual counterparts. This gap reflects the influence of compulsory sexuality, because if asexual people were marrying in the same percentages as allosexual people they would also receive these privileges—but this is not the case. These examples, ranging from social discrimination to legal inequalities, demonstrate how compulsory sexuality permeates numerous facets of American society. The friction between asexuality and compulsory sexuality becomes even more complex when examining the topic of asexual parenting.

Research on asexual parenting is sparse. Significant research has explored gay and lesbian parenting, and some has examined other types of queer parenting (such as bisexual parenting). There is less research examining asexual parenting, and research studying the intersection of asexuality and parenting is even more scarce. Megan Carroll devotes only one page to asexual parenting in her book chapter "Asexuality and Its Implications for LGBTQ-Parent Families."¹⁵ However, some studies do include asexual parents, and additional insights come from blog posts, podcasts, and online forums where asexual people share their experiences. Given the limited academic research, these sources currently provide much of the available information on asexual parenting. However, research on queer parenting more broadly offers valuable insights and frameworks that can be applied to asexual parenting.

There are some important preliminary facts to know about asexual parenting. Carroll reports that "one study found that 34% of asexual men and 21% of asexual women had children, and similar proportions were married or cohabitating with a partner."¹⁶ These statistics provide an approximate number of how many asexual people are parents. Asexual people become parents in diverse ways, including through sex with a partner, adoption, surrogacy, and assisted reproductive technologies.¹⁷ Likewise, their parenting arrangements

¹³ Emens, "Compulsory Sexuality," 350-351.

¹⁴ Emens, "Compulsory Sexuality," 352.

¹⁵ Carroll, "Asexuality and Implications," 15-16.

¹⁶ Carroll, "Asexuality and Implications," 15.

¹⁷ The Ace and Aro Advocacy Project, "Ace Week 2021—Aces and Parenting," *The Ace and Aro Advocacy Project*, October 29, 2021, <https://taaap.org/2021/10/29/ace-week-21-aces-parenting/>; Asexualitic, "Any Asexuals Want

vary. Some are married, some are co-parenting, and some are single parents.¹⁸ This spectrum of experiences highlights that asexual people parent in ways just as varied as allosexual people, challenging societal assumptions about familial structures.

Given the scarcity of research on asexual parenting, examining trends in queer parenting more broadly helps contextualize societal attitudes toward asexual parents. Historically, two main debates have shaped perceptions of queer parenting: whether a parent's queerness is inherently harmful to their child, and whether any parenting arrangement besides a heterosexual mother and father has detrimental consequences on a child's development. To begin this investigation, we will look back to the 1970s.

The American Psychological Association's (APA) 1973 decision to declassify homosexuality as a mental illness marked both a turning point in societal attitudes toward queer parents and an increase of custody cases involving queer parents.¹⁹ These cases were frequent throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and usually either involved parents who recently separated or divorced because of one's queerness or who wanted to change custody rights after one of the parents recently disclosed their queerness.²⁰ With these cases, courts sought to determine whether a child would be harmed by having a queer parent. However, at the time, no research or evidence existed to guide judicial decisions.²¹ In response, researchers across disciplines—psychologists, anthropologists, United States-based researchers, and internationally-based researchers—began studying the impact of gay and lesbian parenting on children.²² Many heterosexual parents claimed that "children raised by lesbian mothers or gay fathers would grow up to be homosexual themselves."²³ If the evidence and circumstances of a particular case indicated this might happen, judges often ruled against queer parents in an attempt to shield children from what was seen as undesirable queerness.²⁴ If evidence less clearly showcased a child being queer as an adult, judges were less certain of how a queer parent would impact their child. As research emerged, it "uniformly demonstrated that children raised by gay and lesbian parents were not more likely to become homosexual than children raised by heterosexual parents."²⁵ This evidence undermined the claim that queer parenting was inherently harmful. While these findings were a step forward for queer parents, they were framed within the assumption that heterosexuality was the ideal outcome. Courts often deemed queer parents acceptable only if they raised their children to be heterosexual. If a parent was perceived to foster an environment that might encourage queerness, courts ruled

Children?" *Asexualitic.com*, March-November 2017, <https://www.asexualitic.com/forums/topic/any-asexuals-want-children/>.

¹⁸ The Ace and Aro Advocacy Project, "Ace Week 2021—Aces and Parenting."; Asexualitic, "Any Other Single Parents Out There?" *Asexualitic.com*, September-November 2016, <https://www.asexualitic.com/forums/topic/any-other-single-parents-out-there/>.

¹⁹ Marie-Amélie George, "The Custody Crucible: The Development of Scientific Authority About Gay and Lesbian Parents," *Law and History Review* 34, no. 2 (May 2016): 489-490. www.jstor.org/stable/24771457.

²⁰ George, "The Custody Crucible," 493-494.

²¹ George, "The Custody Crucible," 507.

²² George, "The Custody Crucible," 510-515.

²³ George, "The Custody Crucible," 507.

²⁴ George, "The Custody Crucible," 501.

²⁵ George, "The Custody Crucible," 507.

against them.²⁶ This reinforced the broader societal belief that homosexuality, while tolerable in certain contexts, remained undesirable—particularly in children.²⁷

In the 1990s, researchers examining family home life concluded that queer parents provided a worse home environment for children than heterosexual parents. However, these studies primarily focused on homes with single mothers or without fathers, correlating these dynamics with the environments queer parents were creating. Later research challenged these conclusions, asserting that factors other than sexuality impacted child outcomes in these studies and that sexuality itself was not the cause of these results.²⁸ French researchers Bertrand Geay, Pierig Humeau, and Emilie Spruyt examined these topics in the 2010s through longitudinal studies and a review of prior research, and arrived at a similar conclusion. From their research, they concluded that "rather than family structure, parents' gender or sexual orientation, available research indicates that parenting stress, parenting approaches and the nature of the couple relationship weigh more on child outcomes."²⁹ Similarly, Gary G. Gates noted that many children of queer parents "have experienced the breakup of their different-sex parents, resulting in more instability in their lives."³⁰ While correlations exist between queer parenting and certain familial situations, there is no causation linking queerness itself to worse outcomes for children. Instead, instability in the home, often present in queer families due to societal and systemic factors, is a more significant influence.

Another central debate in queer parenting research concerns whether the absence of a mother or father negatively impacts child development. In 1999, Louise B. Silverstein and Carl F. Auerbach published "Deconstructing the Essential Father" in *American Psychologist*. They argued that evidence did not "support the conclusion that fathers are essential to child well-being and that heterosexual marriage is the social context in which responsible fathering is most likely to occur."³¹ Silverstein and Auerbach argued that defining mothering and fathering as inherently biologically distinct roles is essentialist, and their research showed that parental arrangements outside of heterosexual marriage can be positive environments for children.³² These assertions sparked intense backlash, with many insisting that children need both a mother and a father.³³ More than a decade later, Timothy J. Biblarz and Judith Stacey revisited this debate, reviewing numerous studies on the topic. They concluded that the claim that "children need both a mother and father presumes that mothering and fathering involve[s]

²⁶ George, "The Custody Crucible," 502.

²⁷ George, "The Custody Crucible," 516.

²⁸ George, "The Custody Crucible," 524-525.

²⁹ Bertrand Geay, Pierig Humeau, Emilie Spruyt, "Same Sex Parents Facing Parenting Standards. First Results from Three Longitudinal Studies," *International Social Science Journal* 70, no. 235-236 (2020): 99. doi.org/10.1111/issj.12243.

³⁰ Gary J. Gates, "Marriage and Family: LGBT Individuals and Same-Sex Couples," *The Future of Children* 25, no. 2 (2015): 74-75. www.jstor.org/stable/43581973.

³¹ Louise B Silverstein and Carl F Auerbach, "Deconstructing the Essential Father," *The American Psychologist* 54, no. 6 (1999): 398. doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.54.6.397.

³² Silverstein Auerbach, "Deconstructing the Essential Father," 397.

³³ Timothy J. Biblarz and Judith Stacey, "How Does the Gender of Parents Matter?," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 72, no. 1 (2010): 3. www.jstor.org/stable/27752550.

gender-exclusive capabilities" and is an idea unsupported by evidence.³⁴ Biblarz and Stacey found that most studies did not isolate gender as a distinct variable, focusing instead on other factors like the number of parents, the marital status of parents, or biological relationships. Like Gates, Biblarz and Stacey found that scholars were misinterpreting data when saying that children need both a mother and father, because their research was not set up to measure this specific factor.³⁵ Biblarz and Stacey asserted that the absence of a mother or father, by itself, does not harm a child's development. Instead, it is other factors that are commonly present in queer families that are to blame for any worse parenting outcomes on an aggregate statistical level. Despite this research, the belief that children require both a mother and father remains deeply ingrained. Silverstein and Auerbach's work caused an uproar in 1999, and Biblarz and Stacey expressed concerns about provoking similar controversy with their 2010 article.³⁶ However, their findings challenged long-held essentialist perspectives, concluding that "no research supports the widely held conviction that the gender of parents matters for child well-being" exists.³⁷

These questions of whether queer parents are harmful to their children and whether the absence of a heterosexual mother and father is detrimental to a child's development have been extensively researched over the past fifty years (and are to an extent, still being researched today). Since asexual parenting falls under the umbrella of queer parenting, much of this research can inform our understanding of asexual parents. However, asexual parenting also presents unique challenges and misconceptions that are distinct from other forms of queer parenting.

One common misconception is that a parent's asexuality harms their children by exposing them to "incorrect" ideas about sexuality. Mik, an asexual parent, refutes this notion by asserting that, "as with any queer parent, [asexual people] aren't going to be bad parents because of [their] queerness."³⁸ Early research on queer parenting already established that sexuality does not determine parenting quality, yet societal biases persist. Asexual parents like Mik emphasize that their sexual orientation does not inherently impact their ability to raise children. Many asexual parents face societal pressure rooted in the framework of compulsory sexuality—the assumption that everyone desires a relationship and sexual activity. For instance, Ryder, a single asexual parent, shares the challenges of being a single parent while resisting societal assumptions that they are searching for a partner. Ryder expresses that they want support, because being a single parent can be difficult, but they do not desire a relationship of any kind.³⁹ Many other asexual single parents relate to Ryder—they love their children but do

³⁴ Biblarz and Stacey, "How Does the Gender of Parents Matter?," 4. The argument that mothering and fathering has some gender-exclusive facets is a much more complex discussion than I will delve into in this paper. This also begins to get into the topic of compulsory heterosexuality. While I will not get into either in this paper, there are many scholars in the last few decades who have looked extensively at research studies and drawn conclusions from them about how the gender of parents affects their parenting. For a start, see Gates, "Marriage and Family"; Biblarz and Stacey, "Gender of Parents"; Geay, Humeau, Spruyt, "Same Sex Parents."

³⁵ Biblarz and Stacey, "How Does the Gender of Parents Matter?," 5.

³⁶ Biblarz and Stacey, "How Does the Gender of Parents Matter?," 3.

³⁷ Biblarz and Stacey, "How Does the Gender of Parents Matter?," 17.

³⁸ The Ace and Aro Advocacy Project, "Aces and Parenting."

³⁹ The Ace and Aro Advocacy Project, "Aces and Parenting."

not desire to be in a relationship.⁴⁰ As another example, a Reddit user described how her asexual mother faced familial pressure to pursue a relationship, partly so she could engage in sexual activity.⁴¹ These experiences highlight the pervasive belief that sexual relationships are necessary for fulfillment and parenting success, a perspective that clashes with the lived realities of many asexual parents.

Despite not experiencing sexual attraction themselves, asexual parents recognize that their children may (or may not). For example, one asexual parent of allosexual teenagers sought advice on Reddit about discussing sexual desire with their children. The responses, from both allosexual and asexual people, were overwhelmingly supportive, showing that asexual parents can create open and healthy environments for conversations about sexuality. The positive responses also revealed that people supported an asexual parent discussing sexuality with their child.⁴² While both of these are positive, this situation evokes parallels to early queer parenting studies, in which queer parents were deemed acceptable only if they raised heterosexual children. Similarly, societal acceptance of asexual parents may depend on their ability to produce allosexual children, reinforcing the idea that asexuality is undesirable and that all people should conform to sexual norms.

On the other hand, not all asexual parents have children who desire sex. One asexual parent had the opposite situation—their "oldest child had a gag reaction when learning what sex was." The parent reassured their child that it is ok to not want sex—not that her reaction was irrational or that she would change her mind someday.⁴³ This supportive response stands in contrast to compulsory sexuality, which would demand the child's eventual alignment with sexual norms and the parent's insistence on this. By affirming their child's feelings, the parent demonstrated traits, such as empathy and supportiveness, that are widely considered desirable in parents. The fact that this type of response is not societally favored in this situation is because compulsory sexuality does not sanction it.

For the last example of asexual parenting interacting with compulsory sexuality, we will examine the case of David Jay. Jay is an asexual man and a parent. He is also a prominent advocate for the asexual community and the founder of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN).⁴⁴ Jay always knew he wanted children but did not want to be in a sexual or romantic relationship with a co-parent. He eventually found two friends who wanted to co-parent with him, and all three discussed how parenting would work among them.⁴⁵ Their parenting arrangement reflects a broader trend toward more diverse family structures. Three-parent families are becoming more frequent and variant in form, including co-parents, stepparents, and polyamorous parents.⁴⁶ There are multiple published pieces on Jay's familial

⁴⁰ Asexualitic, "Other Single Parents".

⁴¹ Reddit. "Are you an asexual parent? Or do you have asexual parents?" *Reddit*, April 17, 2022.

https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/u5ymgh/are_you_an_asexual_parent_or_do_you_have_asexual.

⁴² Reddit, "Teen Parenting Advice for Ace Parent," *Reddit*, February 2022,

https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/sw8dar/teen_parenting_advice_for_ace_parent/.

⁴³ Reddit. "Are you an asexual parent? Or do you have asexual parents?" *Reddit*, April 17, 2022.

⁴⁴ Angela Chen, "The Rise of the 3-Parent Family," *The Atlantic*, September 22, 2020,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/09/how-build-three-parent-family-david-jay/616421/>.

⁴⁵ Sarah Costello and Kayla Kaszyca, "Ep 168: Asexual Parenting feat. David Jay," *Sounds Fake But Okay*, January 31, 2021, <https://www.soundsfakepod.com/transcripts/asexual-parenting>.

⁴⁶ Chen, "3-Parent Family."

relationships: an article on *Fox News* from January 2019, an article on *The Atlantic* from September 2020, and an episode from the podcast *Sounds Fake But Okay* from January 2021.⁴⁷ All three take either factual or positive approaches to discussing Jay's parenting situation, and they do not bring up ideas of compulsory sexuality.

However, the comments on the *Fox News* article reveal significant skepticism and concern, with many commenters expressing doubts about the potential impact of this family structure on Jay's child. One commenter wrote, "How can this arrangement not have an affect [sic] on this little girl? How are they going to explain this to her when she gets older and starts asking questions? I foresee lots of trips to a counselor and/or psychiatrist. Poor child. Absolute nonsense!"⁴⁸ This comment highlights a belief that the nontraditional arrangement will confuse the child and be detrimental to her development. The commenter assumes that exposure to a family structure outside the bounds of compulsory sexuality will lead to psychological difficulties. Another commenter questioned Jay's asexuality itself, writing: "He needs to see an endocrinologist. It could be a single hormonal issue. I didn't see where it said he had consulted a doctor. This is not normal."⁴⁹ This reflects the facet of compulsory sexuality that assumes all people are innately sexual. The commenter dismisses asexuality as a legitimate orientation and instead frames it as a medical problem requiring intervention. Other commenters voiced concerns for the child, stating: "Poor child does not have a chance," and "This is wrong in so many ways. Here we are seeing the mind games that will make this kid a basket case."⁵⁰ These comments suggest that the family's structure—and particularly the challenging of compulsory sexuality and heterosexuality through their parenting arrangement—will negatively impact the child's development. The assumption here is that a lack of role models of partnered, heterosexual sexuality and family will leave her unprepared to navigate a society that largely adheres to these norms—and expects her to do so as well.⁵¹ The intensity of these reactions underscores how deeply compulsory sexuality is embedded in American culture.

The belief that asexuality and parenting are incompatible is deeply rooted in compulsory sexuality. This system has been entrenched in American culture for over a century. The idea that all people are sexual is false; the existence of asexual people disproves this. The narrow types of approved nonsexual behavior tend to clash with asexual people's lived experiences. These cultural restrictions on how to be a parent and how to be asexual limit support, understanding, and resources for asexual parents. We need to examine our views regarding compulsory sexuality and reevaluate our assumptions about other peoples' sexualities, widening them to allow people to express their sexuality without judgement and accusations.

⁴⁷ *Sounds Fake But Okay* is a podcast hosted by two women, one asexual and one demisexual (which is a sexual orientation on the asexual spectrum) and they discuss sexuality, relationships, and love.

⁴⁸ Isolde Walters, "Asexual Man Invited to Raise Married Friends' Daughter as a Co-Parent," *Fox News*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/lifestyle/asexual-man-invited-to-raise-married-friends-daughter-as-a-co-parent>.

⁴⁹ Walters, "Asexual Man Invited to Raise Married Friends' Daughter as a Co-Parent."

⁵⁰ Walters, "Asexual Man Invited to Raise Married Friends' Daughter as a Co-Parent."

⁵¹ This parental relationship also challenges compulsory heterosexuality because it is not two people—a man and woman—parenting together, but instead three people. However, because I have not significantly addressed compulsory heterosexuality in this paper, I will not elaborate further on this challenge here.

While I did not discuss gender, race, and disability in relation to asexuality in this paper, I recognize that they impact perceptions of asexual people.⁵² Women face stigmatization regardless of their sexual activity—labeled negatively whether they have sex or not.⁵³ Fewer men identify as asexual than women, likely because of the immense societal pressure men feel to have sex.⁵⁴ Asexual people of color face compounded challenges due to their intersecting identities. Some are hypersexualized or fetishized, while others are deemed undesiring or undesirable.⁵⁵ People with disabilities are frequently—and incorrectly—believed to not desire sex because of their disabilities.⁵⁶ All of these identities intersect in crucial ways with asexuality and compulsory sexuality. While there is some research on all of these, further research is needed to fully understand the impact of these intersecting identities.

Further research is needed on asexual parenting. Much of the research on asexuality focuses on relationships and intimacy; less focuses on family. While there is some asexuality research that touches on parenting, very little delves into connecting the two. More knowledge about asexual parenting will increase our understanding of familial relationships and societal forces.

American society perceives asexuality and parenting to be incompatible because of compulsory sexuality. This concept not only marginalizes asexual people but also enforces rigid expectations on allosexual people, dictating how they should express their sexuality. To create a more inclusive society, we must move beyond compulsory sexuality, embracing a world in which individuals are free to define and express their sexuality on their own terms. By doing so, we can foster a culture of understanding and acceptance that allows everyone to thrive.

⁵² For an overview of ways in which all of these identities interact with asexuality, see Carroll, "Asexuality and Implications," 13-15.

⁵³ Angela Chen, *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals about Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (Beacon Press, 2020), 50.

⁵⁴ Chen, *Ace*, 38, 68.; Carroll, "Asexuality and Implications," 13.

⁵⁵ Chen, *Ace*, 72, 77.

⁵⁶ Chen, *Ace*, 85.

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