

Lecture held by Stevi Jackson, Centre for Women's Studies, University of York, UK, at the international conference 'Heteronormativity – a Fruitful Concept?' in Trondheim, June 2nd – 4th, 2005. Please contact author for citations: sfj3@york.ac.uk

THE SOCIAL COMPLEXITY OF HETERONORMATIVITY:

GENDER, SEXUALITY & HETEROSEXUALITY

Abstract

This paper will track the emergence of the concept of heteronormativity from feminist and queer critiques of heterosexuality and consider its utility for sociological analysis. I will argue that the utility of the concept is that it can potentially alert us to the ways in which the taken-for-granted heterosexual norm is woven through the social fabric of our lives at a number of levels, from the institutional to the everyday, but not in inconsistent ways as sometimes with contradictory effects. Moreover, understanding heteronormativity also requires attention to the intersections between heterosexuality and gender - intersections which themselves complex. If the complexity of heteronormativity is under-appreciated there are dangers of positing it either as a norm that can be easily unsettled or as so entrenched as to be unassailable.

The concept of heteronormativity potentially alerts us to the ways in which the taken-for-granted heterosexual norm is woven through the social fabric of our lives at a number of levels, from the institutional to the everyday. Understanding how heteronormativity works, however, requires attention to the intersections between heterosexuality and gender, and of both to sexuality in general – intersections which are themselves complex. These intersections do not operate in a consistent or unidirectional way, but with differing effects at different levels of the social. It is this complexity I wish to begin to tease apart in this paper. I believe that if the complexity of heteronormativity is underappreciated we risk seeing it as an easily destabilized norm or as something so entrenched as to be unassailable.

According to Steven Seidman: 'Analysts of heterosexuality as an institution have ... focused exclusively on its role in regulating homosexuality' and that 'the impact of

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regimes of normative heterosexuality on heterosexuality has largely been ignored' (2005: 40). This statement might come as a surprise to some of us – those who have been analysing how normative heterosexuality affects the lives of heterosexuals for the past decade or more – including myself and the other plenary speaker today, Lynne Segal (see also Wilkinson & Kitzinger; Richardson; Ingraham). It also seems to erase the work of earlier feminists who not only analysed heterosexuality in terms of the policing of lesbianism, but also as constraining heterosexual women and reinforcing gender hierarchy. Whatever happened to Charlotte Brunch, Adrienne Rich Monique Wittig?

... heterosexuality upholds the home, housework, the family as both a personal and economic unit. (Charlotte Brunch 1975).

Heterosexuality has been organized and maintained through the female wage scale, the enforcement of middle-class women's 'leisure', the withholding of education from women...and much else. ...the institution of heterosexuality, with its doubled workload for women and its sexual divisions of labour ... [is] the most idealized of economic relations. (Adrienne Rich 1980)

The category of sex is the product of a heterosexual society in which men appropriate for themselves the reproduction and production of women and also their persons by means of...the marriage contract. (Monique Wittig 1982)

To be fair to Seidman he does acknowledge the contribution of feminism elsewhere in the same paper. It is clear that the theorists he has in mind, those focusing exclusively on the regulation of homosexuality, are queer theorists. It is the case that queer, while it seeks to trouble heterosexuality, to interrogate the binaries of gay/straight and man/woman, focuses primarily on its normative status and how it depends upon its excluded 'other' in order to secure its boundaries (Fuss 1991; Sedgwick 1991). Queer and feminism converge insofar as both question the inevitability and naturalness of heterosexuality and both, to some extent at least, link the binary divide of gender with that between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Beyond this they differ in emphasis. Queer theorists seek to unsettle heteronormativity, but are relatively unconcerned with

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what goes on *within* heterosexual relations. Feminists, because they are concerned with the ways in which heterosexuality depends upon and guarantees gender division, are far more interested in the institutionalization and everyday practice of heterosexual relations.

In the feminist tradition, Rich's concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality' could be seen as a forerunner of 'heteronormativity'; I would like to preserve what I see as the most important legacy of the former concept: that institutionalised, normative heterosexuality serves both to keep most the population within its boundaries while marginalizing and sanctioning those who escape its bounds, thus impacting not only on the homosexual 'other' but also on heterosexuals. The term 'heteronormativity' has not always captured this double-sided social regulation, nor the hierarchical ordering of different heterosexualities to which Seidman draws attention. Thus the concept of heteronormativity either needs extending or, my preferred option, to be thought in conjunction with what it is that is subject to regulation on both sides of the normatively prescribed boundaries of heterosexuality: both sexuality and gender.

With this in mind, this paper re-examines the intersections between gender, sexuality in general and heterosexuality in particular. Any analysis of these linkages, however, will depend upon how we define gender, sexuality and heterosexuality and the sense in which we understand them as socially constructed. What I am suggesting is that sexuality, gender and heterosexuality intersect in complex, variable ways that at different levels of the social – and these intersections are also, of course, subject to historical changes along with cultural and contextual variability. Hence before I go any further some conceptual clarification is needed to explain first, how I am using the terms gender, sexuality and heterosexuality and then what I mean by different levels of the social.

Gender, sexuality, heterosexuality

Gender – a fundamental social division yet the social categories it produces are not homogenous

Sexuality – a sphere of social life; all that pertains to the erotic; more than the hetero-homo binary; fluidity

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Heterosexuality – institutionalized as the privileged, normative form of sexuality but variable as it is lived; more than just a sexual (erotic) relation

Part of the problem we have in thinking through the connections between gender, sexuality in general and heterosexuality in particular is that we do not all mean the same thing by these terms and are often talking about different objects at different levels of analysis. The language we use is imprecise, slippery and its meaning shifts with context. For example, the term 'heterosexuality' can denote a mode of erotic attraction or an institution involving a wider social relations between women and men. 'Sexuality' itself is sometimes understood primarily in terms of the hetero/homo binary, or the straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual identities deriving from it, while others take it to encompass a fuller range of desires, practices and identities. 'Gender' can mean the division or distinction between women or men, whether this is seen as primarily a bodily difference or a social hierarchy, but also refers to the content of gender categories, conventionally defined as femininity or masculinity. I tend to opt for the broader senses of these terms.¹ I use the term gender to cover both the division itself and the social, subjective and embodied differences that give it everyday substance. Gender division itself – along with and the categories it produces – is absolutely fundamental to thinking of gender as soocially. I define gender as a hierarchical social division between women and men embedded in both social institutions and social practices. Gender is thus part of the social order, but this is not all it is. It is also a cultural distinction, largely taken for granted, but given meaning and lived out by embodied individuals who 'do gender' in their daily lives, constantly producing and reproducing it through habitual, everyday interaction (Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987).² There is another curious feature of gender, of course: the binary division of gender is a persistent and resilient feature of social and cultural life, incredibly difficult to shift, yet it co-exists with a considerable degree of variation and latitude regarding lived masculinities and femininities, even increasing tolerance (slight, but discernible) towards those who cross the divide. As

¹ I do so because to narrow them down risks losing sight of significant portions of social life – although keeping them broad causes other problems, in that a great deal of sociocultural complexity is thereby collapsed into a single concept.

² 'Doing gender' in the sense I mean it here owes less to Bulter's (1990; 1993) notion of performance and performativity than to the ethnomethodological and interactionist traditions (Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1976; Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987).

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Delphy (1993) suggests, that one of the defining features of gender is the co-existence of variability in its content with the intractability of gender categories themselves.

Given that I see gender as an entirely social and cultural phenomenon, the recognition and classification of so-called biological 'sex differences' are themselves social acts (Kessler and McKenna 1978; Delphy 1993). If gender is used to denote all aspects of the distinction and division between women and men (and boys and girls) then some of the ambiguities of the term 'sex' can be avoided. 'Sex' can then be reserved to denote carnal or erotic acts, with 'sexuality' as a broader term referring to all erotically significant aspects of social life and social being. Sexuality is not, therefore, reducible to the heterosexual/homosexual binary – although this is an important aspect of its social organization – but of the multitude of desires and practices that exist across that divide.

I am thus making an analytical distinction between sex and sexuality on the one hand and gender on the other. While some make the case for the irreducibility of the former to the latter in order to create a space for the theorisation of sexuality *per se* (Rubin 1984; Sedgwick 1991), I do so in order more effectively to theorise their interrelationship. Without an analytical distinction between them, we cannot effectively explore the ways in which they intersect; if we conflate them, we are in danger of deciding the form of their interrelationship in advance. Yet, while analytically separable, gender and sexuality are empirically interconnected (Gagnon and Simon 1974). If we ignore the empirical linkage between them there is a danger of abstracting sexuality from the social. Sexual practices, desires and identities are embedded within complex webs of non-sexual social relations (Gagnon 2004), most, if not all, of which are gendered.

It is here that one of the biggest difficulties confronts us: sexuality and gender may be interrelated but they are rather different and not directly comparable social phenomena (cf Sedgwick 1991: 29). Sexuality and gender differ because the former is a sphere or realm of social life while the latter is a fundamental social division. In the broad sense in which I am using the term sexuality it encompasses all erotically significant aspects of life – for example, desires, practices, relationships and identities. The concept of 'sexuality' thus refers to a rather fluid field since what is sexual in the

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sense of erotic is not fixed but depends on what is defined as such. What makes an act, a desire or a relationship sexual are the meanings invested in it (see Gagnon and Simon 1974). These meanings are contextual and variable and hence sexuality has no clear definitional boundaries – what is sexual to one person in one context may not be to someone else or somewhere else.

It could be objected that gender is a matter of social definition too – and so, in a sense, it is. As social division, however, it is also a ubiquitous feature of social life. Gender is often taken by queer theorists, as it is by Sedgwick to define 'the space of differences between men and women', with these categories understood as co-constructed and relational. And so they are. Understood more sociologically as categories produced by social division, however, they are more: they are hierarchical categories associated with inequalities of labour and resources; they pervade all aspects of sociality, locating men and women differently in virtually all spheres of life. Social divisions are not always binary, and not always sharply defined, but these are particular feature of gender, dividing members of society into two discrete categories. Many aspects of gender may be more fluid and variable, less definable, but the division itself has a certain incorrigible facticity that is difficult to elude.

Precisely because gender pervades all aspects of social life, sexuality is no exception. Thus while, as Sedgwick claims, we cannot map sexuality directly onto gender, we can and should explore the variety of ways in which sexual desires, activities and relationships are gendered. In so doing, however, the distinction between sexuality as a sphere of social life and gender as a social division should be kept in mind. If we compare sexuality and gender with work and social class perhaps this will be clearer. Work is a sphere of life and not in itself a social division, yet its social organisation gives rise to class, which is a social division. Sexuality is a sphere of life, which need not necessarily be associated with social division, but as currently socially ordered, it is associated with both gender and the social division between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

What is more comparable with gender in this sense, then, is the binary divide and social division between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Thus we produce greater

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conceptual congruence with gender by pluralizing sexuality – speaking of 'sexualities' rather than 'sexuality'. This move, however, is not usually made with that intent, but rather with the aim of recognising diversity in sexual identities and practices within as well as between heterosexuality and homosexuality (see, e.g. Plummer 1985). Moreover, while it might offer us a set of categories relatable to gender categories it produces other problems. In the first place it directs attention away from the broader scope of sexuality (singular) as a field of study and sphere of life and limits explorations of the gender-sexuality linkage to the ways in which gender is related to sexual 'identities'. Secondly, and importantly, if heterosexuality becomes conceived as simply one of a number of sexualities, albeit a hegemonic one, this might prevent us from seeing that heterosexuality in its institutionalized form entails more than sexuality.

Heterosexuality is a key site of intersection between gender and sexuality, and one that reveals the interconnections between sexual and non-sexual aspects of social life. As an institution heterosexuality is, by definition, a gender relationship, governing relations between women and men, ordering not only sexual life but also domestic and extra-domestic divisions of labour and resources. As I have noted elsewhere (Jackson 1999a), it entails who washes the sheets and whose wage pays for them as well as what goes on between them. Thus heterosexuality is not precisely coterminous with heterosexual sexuality, even though it serves to marginalize other sexualities as abnormal and deviant. Indeed compulsory heterosexuality is so effective precisely because of its institutionalisation as more than merely a sexual relation. Yet it is not a monolithic entity: it is both sexual and asexual, publicly institutionalised yet often experienced as private and intimate, maintained through everyday practices yet so taken for granted that it appears unremarkable. Thus while heterosexuality is thoroughly gendered, conceptualising how it is gendered as a complex of institution, ideology, practice and experience is far from straightforward.

So where does all this leave us? If, as I have argued, sexuality as a field of enquiry and a sphere of social life entails more than the homo-hetero binary, then it is crucial to retain a means of analysing the ways in which all facets of sexuality and all sexualities may be gendered. Since all aspects of social life, sexual and non-sexual,

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are also gendered, then we need to be able to think about how this gendering process is related to heterosexuality without deciding the issue in advance. If heterosexuality as an institution entails more than specifically sexual relations, we should consider whether the term should be confined to the actualities of social relations between heterosexual couples (in and out of marital and monogamous relations) or should be extended to cover wider aspects of social life (c.f. Ingraham 1996). The ways in which we define gender, sexuality and heterosexuality thus have implications for the ways in which we theorise their intersections and the comparative weight given to each. Before considering these further, however, there is another source of potential disagreement and confusion in play here that requires further exploration: differences in the ways in which the social or cultural construction of gender and sexuality are understood.

'Social constructionism' is a rather clumsy term, perhaps because there is no single perspective laying claim to it, but rather a cluster of differing approaches deriving from varied theoretical roots.³ These focus on different aspects of gender and sexuality informed by differing conceptualisations of social processes – hence there are differences in both what is seen as socially constituted and how that social constitution is envisaged, in both the object of analysis and the appropriate methodology brought to bear on it. Gender, sexuality and heterosexuality are constituted at a number of different levels of the social. If we are to understand the complexity of their interconnections a certain degree of theoretical eclecticism is necessary, drawing on the diverse insights that competing perspectives have to offer. The social is multi-layered and multi-faceted process and requires attention to a number of levels of social analysis.

In my recent work I have been thinking in terms of four intersecting levels or facets of the social (Jackson 1999b; 2000; 2001): the structural, at which gender is constructed as a hierarchical social division and heterosexuality institutionalized, for example, by marriage, the law and the state; the level of meaning, encompassing the discursive

³ These include Marxism, phenomenological and interactionist sociology, poststructuralism and postmodernism, all of which have been engaged with and developed by feminist, lesbian, gay and queer theorists. For an earlier discussion of how these perspectives have informed feminist debates on heterosexuality see Jackson 1996b.

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construction of gender and sexuality and the meanings negotiated in everyday social interaction; the level of routine, everyday social practices through which gender and sexuality are constantly constituted and reconstituted within localized contexts and relationships; and finally, at the level of subjectivity through which we experience desires and emotions and make sense of ourselves as embodied gendered and sexual beings. It is this framework that informs what follows.

I am not, however, proposing a total theory of social construction wherein all these levels are welded together as a seamless whole. Such an endeavour could only lead to reductionism. What I seek to demonstrate is that although these levels of the social are interrelated they can also produce disjunctions, since the intersections between gender, sexuality and heterosexuality operate differently at these different levels. Moreover, it is difficult, if not impossible, to focus on all these levels at once. We do, however, need to be aware that when we concentrate on one facet of the social we have only a partial view of a multi-faceted process.

Where, in this, do we locate heteronormativity? The concept rests upon the idea of the 'normative' and norms are generally understood as concerned with meaning, with values, beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions that guide human action. Yet the concept is often used as if it were almost synonymous with institutionalised heterosexuality. Is it the same thing or does it refer to the assumptions that sustain the institution? Similarly we can talk of heteronormative practices – are we here talking about the practices themselves or the assumptions underpinning them and which they reinforce? Perhaps this doesn't matter since all human conduct is meaningful and therefore the institution and practice of heterosexuality require their normativity to survive – an example of the ways in which levels of the social intersect and interact.

Rethinking the intersections

We need then to think about how heteronormativity polices both heterosexual and homosexual lives, how it is implicated in the regulation of sexuality and gender and

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how heterosexuality, gender and heterosexuality intersect at the different levels of the social I have outlined. Given limitations of space, I can offer here only a bare and exploratory outline of how such an analysis might proceed. The purpose of my approach is to highlight the complexity of the picture that emerges when different facts and levels of the social are taken into account. The ways in which the intersections between gender sexuality and heterosexuality are manifested vary within and between levels, are not always unidirectional and the linkages are stronger at some points than at others. Plus these levels of the social are not hermetically sealed from each other, influences constantly flow between them.

Structure/institutionalization

The impact of social structures in shaping our gendered and sexual being is frequently ignored – Ingraham's analysis of heterosexuality being one of the few notable exceptions. The concept of social structure is now out of favour with those who envisage the social in terms of fluidity and mobility (Urry 2000; Adkins 2002). Yet it should be evident that certain social patterns persist. Gender division has not gone away despite changes in the ways that gender is lived (Walby 1997); heterosexuality remains effectively normative despite the increased visibility of alternative sexualities (Jackson and Scott 2004); it remains enshrined in social policy (Carabine 1996) despite the rights granted to non-heterosexual couples. Yet institutionalized heterosexuality is not static – it appears able to adapt to social change – notably gay citizenship rights. As a number of commentators have noted this is achieved by redrawing the boundaries separating the good from the bad homosexual, the good homosexual from the dangerous queer (Smith; Seidman) – but by judging the good citizen against the benchmark of the ideal heterosexual. In the process, as Steven Seidman points out, normative heterosexuality 'not only establishes a heterosexual/homosexual hierarchy but also creates hierarchies among heterosexualities', resulting in 'hegemonic and subordinate forms of heterosexuality' (2005: 40). The current hegemonic form no longer necessarily requires marriage but nonetheless enshrines monogamous coupledness as the ideal (more in workshop paper with Sue Scott).

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Here we have one of the strongest connections within the web of gender, sexuality and heterosexuality: institutionalised heterosexuality is by definition gendered and the heterosexual contract is a powerful mechanism whereby gender hierarchy is guaranteed. Manifested not only in families and couples but in, for e.g., gendered labour markets and pay differentials. As Chrys Ingraham (1996) points out gender relations are relations between women and men – hence her notion of heterogender. However, I think it wise, even in this context, to keep gender and heterosexuality analytically distinct, not only to facilitate further exploration of the ways in they sustain each other but also because this specific linkage cannot be assumed to have a determining effect on all other points of connection at all other levels of the social. For example, we cannot deduce from it the ways in which any one heterosexual couple negotiate gendered and sexual practices in their daily lives.

Structural constraints do, however, impinge on everyday life, enabling and/or constraining our patterns of existence. In this respect we should think about the ways in which sexual (erotic) practices, identities and desires are enmeshed with non-sexual aspects of social structure. For example, attention has been drawn to the ways in which a normatively heterosexual society accommodates queer practices as lifestyle choices within commodity capitalism (Evans 1993; Hennessy 2000) and to the ways in which heterosexual sex is also commodified as style (Jackson and Scott 1997). The structural enabling of sexual lifestyle choices is certainly not equally available to all (Hennessy 2000), but is facilitated or inhibited by class, ethnicity and gender. Forms of cultural capital may also mediate access to particular sexual spaces and as well as affecting perceptions of sexual conduct. For example, working class women who are too obviously sexual are more likely to provoke public distaste, even disgust, than middle class women with independent lifestyles (Skeggs 2003). The cultural capitals available to us also provide resources for making sense of our sexual lives and for fashioning sexual selves (Skeggs 2004), which may in turn impact upon other facets of social construction, on meanings, practices, and subjectively constructed identities.

Meaning

In talking about gender and institutionalised heterosexuality the issue of meaning is already creeping in. Structural and institutional patterns give rise to and are sustained

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by forms of understanding whereby they appear natural or inevitable. So here the level of meaning shades into the structural/institutional while elsewhere it shades into everyday practice as part of the world-taken-for-granted. Where questions of sexual and gendered meanings are concerned there are a variety of complex intersections to be teased out. At the level of society and culture as a whole, gender and sexuality are constituted as objects of discourse and through the specific discourses in circulation at any historical moment; these discourses serve to distinguish male from female, to define what is sexual, to differentiate the 'perverse' from the 'normal' and masculinity from femininity (c.f. Foucault 1979). Here there is room for, and evidence of, fluidity and change – yet this exists alongside the persistent naturalizing of gender and sexuality. Meaning is also deployed within, and emergent from, the routine, everyday social interaction through which each of us makes sense of our own and others' gendered and sexual lives. Here we can see the how certain of the discourses available within our culture become hegemonic, informing the 'natural attitude' (Kessler and McKenna 1978) whereby most of the population, most of the time, takes it for granted the existence of 'men' and 'women' as given categories of people who 'naturally' form sexual liaisons with members of the 'opposite' gender. This everyday meaning-making is ignored by many theorists. In urging that the everyday be taken into account I am not appealing to 'common sense' (pace Hemmings 2005), but suggesting that we interrogate commonsense by making the familiar strange. The everyday 'doing of gender' in the sense of attributing it to others, entails a variety of cultural competences and complex interpretational processes, as ethnomethodologists point out (West and Zimmerman 1987). Garfinkel enumerated 7 taken for granted assumptions mobilised by each one of us in attributing gender. The point is we don't notice this because it is so automatic that it is assumed that we are simply recognizing a natural fact. Through the everyday mobilisation of particular sets of meanings gender and normative heterosexuality are constantly reaffirmed, but it is also here that their meanings can be unsettled or renegotiated – although we need to be aware of how easily such challenges can be neutralized and accommodated back into the 'natural attitude'.

At the level of meaning we can see how gender and sexuality constantly intersect, where the construction of gender difference is bound up with the assumption of

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gender complementarity, the idea that women and men are 'made for each other' (part of the modern construction of heterosexuality – Katz). Hence the boundaries of gender division and normative heterosexuality are mutually reinforced. However, as Kessler and McKenna (1978) suggest, the attribution of gender is the primary one, at least at the level of everyday interaction. That is to say, we 'do' gender first: we recognize someone as male or female before we make any assumptions about heterosexuality or homosexuality: we cannot logically do otherwise. Moreover, the homosexual/heterosexual distinction depends upon socially meaningful gender categories, on being able to see two men or two women as 'the same' and a man and a woman as 'different'. (This an example of the everyday mobilisation of meaning since this 'seeing' requires a particular selection and interpretation of many potential differences in order to see that between men and women as the significant difference)

The homo/hetero binary, however, by no means exhausts the gendered meanings of sexuality. The idea, still widely prevalent, that men and women are naturally different extends to their supposed sexual desires and proclivities – producing all the stereotypes with which we are so familiar. Even though these are changing, it is the degree of difference and the forms of difference that are changing – not the idea that there *is* a difference. Meanwhile, self-help manuals for heterosexual couples continue to promote the idea that male and female sexuality are naturally different and we must learn to live with it (see, for example, Gray 1996). Interestingly ideas about difference can serve to justify heterosexual desire *and* homosexual or lesbian attraction – eschewing heterosex does not entail de-gendering sex, but negotiating different ways of eroticising gender.

Everyday meaning in interaction and practice

Commonsense meanings of gender and sexuality reflexively order and are ordered by our quotidian routines. They are thus continually produced and reproduced at the third level of the social, that of everyday interaction and practices. Interaction essential to practice, to our ability to negotiate everyday life and fit ourselves into ongoing practical activity. An example, doing of heterosexuality through talk – maintaining the heterosexual presumption (Kitzinger).

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Here too gender, sexuality and heterosexuality interconnect, but in complex and variable ways not easily reducible to simple causal connections. In their daily lives women are frequently identified and evaluated in terms of their sexual availability to men and their presumed 'place' within heterosexual relationships as wives and mothers – this is evident in everything from interaction on the street to the sexualization of women's labour (Adkins 1995) and men's resistance to equal opportunities policies (Cockburn 1993). Hence gendered assumptions here seem to be informed by heterosexual ones. But this does not apply in the same way to men. The sexualization and heterosexualization of women is a means by which men habitually establish women as 'other' and themselves as simply the norm. Where manliness is specifically called for it can be demonstrated in relation to heterosexuality and a gay man may find his claims to masculinity imperilled by his sexuality. Yet this is only one among many means of validating masculinity. A man can be a man by virtue of physical or mental prowess, courage, leadership abilities and so on (Connell 1995;2000), whereas womanliness is almost always equated with (hetero)sexual attractiveness and (heterosexual) domesticity. Here then there is a marked asymmetry whereby women's gender is more tightly bound to and defined by sexuality than that heterosexual men. Men whose masculinity is in doubt may share the fate of women: gay men are susceptible to being defined by, reduced to, their sexuality and an 'effeminate' man may well find his sexuality in question. When thinking specifically about how heterosexual sex confirms femininity and masculinity, gender asymmetry reappears in a different form. As Janet Holland and her colleagues found in investigating the experience of first heterosexual sex, having sex may make a boy a man, but it does not make a girl a woman (Holland et al. 1996). What confirms masculinity is being (hetero)sexually *active*; what confirms femininity is being sexually *attractive* to men. As a result young women's desires remain more constrained than those of young men (Holland et al. 1998; Tolman 2002).

These asymmetries may be everyday reflections of the gender inequality that has historically been fundamental to institutionalized heterosexuality. Since heterosexuality entails not only sexuality, but also non-sexual gendered practices, this will be evident in its everyday enactment. Each heterosexual couple 'does' heterosexuality as much through divisions of labour and distributions of household

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resources as through specifically sexual and reproductive practices. And here, of course, they are also doing gender since, despite the late modern emphasis on togetherness and equity in hetero-relations, the evidence suggests that it is still women who do most of the domestic work necessary to keep the household running and most of the emotional labour necessary to maintain the relationship itself (Van Every 1996). It is in the everyday negotiation of housework and relationship work that the existing heterosexual and gendered order can either be reconfirmed or resisted – as well as in the more specifically sexual aspects of the couple relationship.

This raises the question of how we come to be the embodied gendered and sexual individuals who enact these practices, but who nonetheless have the capacity to renegotiate gender divisions and resist dominant constructions of sexuality.

Self/subjectivity

For the last two decades most feminist and critical theory has spoken of 'subjectivity' rather than 'the self'. The human subject has been conceptualized as decentred and/or fractured whether as a product of (psychoanalytically understood) splits and losses or as a result of her positioning within the ebb and flow of competing discourses. Such accounts challenge humanist, modernist, ideas of an essential unitary self, drawing our attention to the contradictions of subjectivity. On the other hand, the recent resurgence in theorising the self has emphasized the process of 'self making' (Skeggs 2004) or the self as 'project' (Giddens 1991; 1992). This self is seen as historically specific, a product of increasing individualism over the last few centuries, something consciously, reflexively fashioned as a coherent life. Self and subjectivity thus emerge as rather different objects of study – and can be represented as co-existing with each other, a consciously constructed self papering over the cracks of a fragmented subjectivity lurking beneath its carefully crafted surface.

My own approach, based on the concept of the social self, initially developed by G.H. Mead (1934) and underpinning the account of the social construction of sexuality later produced by Gagnon and Simon (1974), encapsulates much of what is usually termed subjectivity, and thus bridges the divide between a self-consciously fabricated self and a less coherent, more fluid self. The self is not a fixed structure but is always 'in

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process' by virtue of its constant reflexivity and hence is neither unitary nor fixed (though not as decentred and fragmentary as the postmodern subject). On the other hand it does not necessarily entail the heightened individualistic self-consciousness and coherence of the late modern reflexive project of the self. Rather Mead's notion of reflexivity entails what it is to be social, to participate in the social. His reflexivity is the basis for the self to function socially at all and for process and change within the self and need not imply a high degree of self awareness – merely that sufficient to interact with others. This is, though, the basis for other layers of reflexivity that can, under specific historical conditions, accrete to it.

Such a perspective allows us to think of subjectivity as a product of socially located biographies in which our past and present lives are in dialogue; it is not only the past that shapes the present, but the present significantly re-shapes the past in the sense that we are constantly reconstructing our memories, our sense of who and what we are in relation to the sense we make of the present. The cultural resources we draw on in the process of making sense of ourselves are of course historically specific, enabling us to understand the ways in which particular modes of self-construction and self-narration, along with particular forms of reflexivity, become available at different historical moments in specific social locations (Plummer 1995; Whisman 1996).

How might we apply this to gender and sexuality? Here gender attribution is crucial in that the moment we are born we are ascribed a gender (Kessler and McKenna 1978). While heterosexual assumptions may play a part here, as is evident with those born intersexed, it is the difference itself that seems to matter here (see Kessler 1998). It is this difference, one of the first social categories a child learns, that forms the foundation for the ways in which we locate ourselves within a gendered sexual order and make sense of ourselves as embodied, gendered and sexual beings.

While the self is premised upon differentiation between self and others, in contrast to psychoanalysis, the other is not conceptualized as oppositional to the self (see Stanley and Wise 1993), but as relational in the sense that self-hood is forged and mobilized through being able to locate oneself within the social world of others. Moreover, while others are gendered, they do not need to occupy specific places in an oedipal

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drama. There is, therefore, no need to assume, as psychoanalysis does that the *processes* of self-formation differ for boys and girls – simply that they acquire differently gendered selves through participating in gendered social interaction. Thus gendered self-hood emerges as variable – there is no single way of being a little boy or a little girl. Gender difference itself, however, remains significant – a child cannot locate herself in a gendered social order without a sense of herself as gendered, without being able to make sense of self and others as embodied, gendered beings. Moreover, the gendered others in most children's experience order their lives in terms of heterosexual relations – thus the gendered social order a child learns to navigate is for most, a heterosexually ordered one.

From this perspective, a gendered sense of self precedes awareness ourselves as specifically sexual (see Gagnon and Simon 1974; Jackson 1999).⁴ Be aware here that I have argued that nothing is sexual in itself – a child does not begin to become sexual until she has some access to sexual discourses/scripts through which to construct a sense of herself as sexual. This now happens much earlier than it once did, though considerable effort still put into concealing sex from children.

Obviously we 'do not become sexual all at once' (Gagnon and Simon 1974: 27). Children are not only developing gendered selves, but also assimilating much from their social environment that is of potential sexual relevance. It is only the specifically erotic component of sexual scripts that adults attempt to conceal from children: other aspects of adult maps of sexuality impinge on children's self-understanding.⁵ The sense children's make of their own bodies, for example, is ordered by meanings deriving from adult sexual scripts and their conventions of modesty, decorum and morality. Crucially children acquire a great deal of commonsense knowledge about the institution and practice of heterosexuality – about heterosexual love and marriage, about families, mothers and fathers – way before they are aware of the sexual

⁴ I am not suggesting that children are intrinsically asexual (or intrinsically sexual either). Rather, the distribution of sexual knowledge within our society and the definition of children as asexual innocents means that their access to crucial elements of adult sexual knowledge is restricted. While children now become sexually knowing earlier than in the recent past, the pattern remains and shapes the ways in which children become sexual and also contributes to the social construction of childhood (see Jackson and Scott 2000, 2004 for further elaboration of these ideas).

⁵ In my early work I referred to this as 'protosexual learning' (see Jackson 1978, partially reprinted in Jackson 1999).

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activities these entail. Thus while gendered self-hood precedes specifically sexual selfhood, children begin to locate themselves in a heterosexually ordered, heteronormative world from early in their lives. This becomes 'everyday knowledge' available for reconceptualisation, as sexually significant once children become sexually aware. Heteronormativity's effects are heightened because the way children generally learn about sex is through a reproductive focus so that sex is defined for them, initially, as procreative heterosexual sex (abstinence education as extreme example)

Once children do begin to fit the pieces together, to construct a provisional picture of the sexual world (provisional because this construction will always be subject to change) their sense making is governed by their gendered self, their embodied gendered being. This affects not only new knowledge and experience, but also retrospective reinterpretation as they begin, in Gagnon and Simon's terms, to bring that past into greater congruity with their present understandings of themselves and their social world. It is for this reason that, for example, adult gay men and lesbians are able to tell a story of self in which they 'always knew' they were lesbian or gay or that they always were but only later came to 'realize' that this was the case – often on the basis of feeling 'different' as children and, particularly, feeling they weren't quite normally (normatively) gendered. These accounts are not, as Vera Whisman says, simply reflections of their experience but are 'told to fit those experiences into a coherent, conventionalized story' (Whisman 1996: 181). Of course those who grow up to be heterosexual may also have felt themselves 'different' as children – but would not tell the same story. Heterosexuals are not called upon to account for their sexuality. They therefore do not feel it necessary to construct narratives explaining 'how I became a heterosexual' or 'how I knew I was heterosexual'; it is simply taken for granted. Since heterosexuality is the privileged norm, interrogating it is not integral to heterosexuals' emergent sexual selfhood.

Gender, however, remains central to young heterosexuals' sense of themselves as socially competent sexual actors and, conversely, heterosexual sexual competence helps validate their sense of gendered self-hood. This is particularly important as young people struggle to leave the dependent status of childhood behind and make claims to autonomy and adulthood, since sexual and social maturity are gendered –

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and asymmetrical (as already noted re sexual practices) Young heterosexual women's sexual and gendered self-hood, however, is becoming more complex as they negotiate contradictory expectations. Their horizons are no longer limited to heterosexual domesticity, yet they still inhabit in a highly heterosexualized social and cultural world where success in sexual relationships matters in terms of social esteem and self-worth. Here new sexual scripts are on offer, replacing the older goals of romance and marriage with aspirations towards sexual autonomy and experimentation. Magazines marketed to young women positively exhort them to take control of their own sexual pleasure, to 'discover' the potential of their bodies, to become proficient in new sexual skills. Yet this is still within heteronormative limits (from compulsory heterosexuality to compulsive heterosexuality?) Yet the double standard of morality, although considerably eroded, has not disappeared. The contemporary sexual landscape would seem to require a high degree of self-reflexivity and indeed self-surveillance from young women as they attempt to avoid the pitfalls of deficiency (not being sexual enough) and excess (being too sexual). As a result young women's ability to manage a sexual project of the self, remain more constrained and more problematic than those of young men even when they stay within the bounds of normative heterosexuality (Holland et al. 1998; Tolman 2002).

Gendered, sexual selves continue to be reflexively renegotiated or reconfirmed throughout our lives and how they continue to interconnect as we go about our daily lives within a gendered, heterosexually ordered social world.

Conclusion

Heteronormative assumptions interconnect with the privileging of heterosexuality through institutionalisation of heterosexuality and also shape the doing of heterosexuality and being and becoming heterosexual – as well as shaping the doing and being of alternative sexualities. In exploring the complexity of sexuality and gender, how we define our field of enquiry matters a great deal. In particular, I have argued that we cannot regard gender, sexuality and heterosexuality as phenomena of the same order, mapping easily on to each other. In particular, we cannot afford to

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reduce sexuality to the heterosexuality-homosexuality axis, or any other means of classifying sexualities, or reduce heterosexuality to sexuality alone, to one form of sexuality among others. On my definitions, some patterns or directions of intersection emerge.

I am suggesting then, that we take as the defining feature of gender the fact of gender division itself as a social division and cultural distinction – although it can and does encompass more than this. As a social division, and a very fundamental one, gender infuses all spheres of social life. Sexuality is a sphere of social life, like any other (such as work, for example) and like any other it overlaps and interconnects with other areas of the social (including work) and like any other it is thoroughly gendered. One of the ways in which it is gendered is through the heterosexual/homosexual binary and here it reacts back on gender, reinforcing gender divisions. But sexuality is gendered in a host of other ways and here the connections in each direction are more variable and difficult to map.

Heterosexuality presents a very different case, since it is pivotal to both gender and sexuality. It is impossible to conceive of an aspect of heterosexuality that is not gendered since it is defined by gender difference. Conversely, gender is ordered in terms of heterosexuality. Thus the connections between heterosexuality and gender are much tighter and much more reciprocal than the links between gender and sexuality – precisely because it is not only sexual, because there are aspects of institutionalized heterosexuality that are not sexual. This is key to how heteronormativity works. Yet its sexual aspects are also important in defining what establishes and constitutes a viable heterosexual couple and the expectations obligations that flow from this. It is in relation to the specifically sexual that other sexualities are defined as perverse or marginal and also, as queer theorists maintain, that the homosexual other in turn confirms heterosexuality's normative status (Fuss 1991).

There is clearly a great deal more work to be done in exploring these connections further and, since the connections I have drawn derive from particular definitions of the field they are contestable precisely at that point. Any alternative definitions of

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gender, sexuality and heterosexuality would yield rather different maps of their intersections.

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