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abstract: Building on theoretical discussions regarding the institution of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, this chapter demonstrates how language and heterosexual sex (that is, heterosex) are intimately intertwined. The chapter teases out the ways in which the norms of heterosexuality have changed over time yet also remained the same in several fundamental ways. The first section maps the broad discursive conditions that shape dominant norms of contemporary heterosexuality in Anglo-Western contexts. The second section demonstrates the cultural imperatives that govern the desires, norms, and acts of heterosex, outlining how they create specific modes of being and doing in everyday practice. Finally, the conclusion considers the possibility that recent global activism may lead to a revamping of gendered norms and their tired rigidity.

keywords: heterosexuality, heteronormativity, heterosex, cultural imperatives, gendered norms

A Critical Encyclopedia of Heterosex

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“Grab ‘em by the pussy”

—U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump, October 7, 2016.

Introduction

Some might see sex as the most “primal,” “basic,” or “animalistic” of acts; as pre-language. But that would be a naïve assessment of the domain. This chapter advances the bold claim that there is no sex, as we understand it, without language. Sex is saturated in language, whether language for sexual practices and acts, language for body parts, language for people, or language for identities. Slang, often considered as a low-register substitute for scientific language, bleeds outwards into society and is itself saturated with sex. In fact, the *slanguage* (Stenström 2000) of sex is also the slanguage of people, behaviors, and attitudes. Terms like *pussy*, *twat*, *dick*, *cock*, and *cunt* refer simultaneously to parts of the sexual body and to people and their behaviors, crossing a spectrum from mildly to deeply offensive (Braun and Kitzinger 2001). It is not just slang for genitalia that have spread into wider reference, as terms both for sexual acts (e.g., *fuck* or *shag*) and identities (e.g., *gay*) permeate the ways we refer to activities as well as characteristics of people (Pascoe 2007). But the enmeshment of sex in language goes deeper than just words, slang, or phrases. It infiltrates discourse, into the structuring of reality and possibility through the systems of meaning-making that shape social practice (Cameron 2005).

Instead of offering a literature review, we have chosen to engage critically with the topic of language, discourse, heterosexuality, and its associated sexual practices, through producing a critical encyclopedia of key discourses and tropes that shape sexual lives, sexual practices, and sexual selves. We focus in particular on how these discourses and tropes appear, collide, and unfold in contemporary times. The penetration (pun intended) of these systems into social life are deep, at times obvious, at times subtle, and also at times contradictory—

creating a fraught terrain for sex, sexuality, identity, and desire. Because competing discourses exist, the sexual subject can be constituted and situated in opposite or contradictory ways. The broader context for this encyclopedia is the well-established theorizing of heterosexuality as a social and political institution that governs many aspects of daily life (Farvid 2015). We push this work further theoretically by showcasing links between the “outside” (imperatives, discourse, norms) and the “inside” (feelings, thoughts, actions). We examine the ways that the “outside” gets “inside” and shapes subjectivity, affect, and action—that is, how ontologies of sex operate as imperatives to shape our thoughts, behaviors, and understandings of what is “natural” or “normal” and how we ought to behave, in ways that feel deeply unique and personal. Our chapter functions as a scholarly yet playful showcase, connecting enduring and emerging discourses that govern what is now often referred to as *heterosex*.

In the first section, we set the scene of the broader context of heterosexuality—the discourses that shape the possibilities for how we imagine and conceptualize sexuality in our lives, allowing for various material possibilities for human action (Seidman 2015). These discourses provide possibilities for conceptualizing the place and meaning of heterosexuality in the world, and for thinking of ourselves as sexual subjects (Foucault 1978). In the second section, we discuss in greater detail a series of *sexual imperatives* related to heterosexual activity in Anglo-Western contexts. These imperatives provide structures of meaning around what sex is, how to think about it, how to enact it, and how to feel about it. They provide the architecture for our *personal* desires, our affect, our actions, and our reflections and (re)interpretations of all of those. Neither of these psychological, affective, and material domains are separate from each other—the distinction is artificial. But the target of analysis shifts from the macro and sociocultural to the more micro and psychological, the *interpersonal* (between two or more people) and *intrapersonal* – or intrapsychic – (within the individual) sphere of doing and being.

Change and Persistence: Heterosexuality Writ Large

The sociocultural landscape we occupy profoundly shapes possibilities for how sexuality is understood and practiced in intricate, complex, and contradictory ways. Here, we briefly outline well-known as well as emerging discourses that set the backdrop for what constitutes heterosexuality and heterosex in Anglo-Western contexts.

We are currently experiencing a specific mode of digitized, commodified and sexualized culture within the West. This context is characterized by ubiquitous cultural portrayals of sex and sexuality alongside people’s apparent willingness to talk about sex and perform or display their sexuality in explicit ways (Attwood 2009). What makes this era of sexualization different from previous eras is the *public* mediation of *private* intimacies. Theorized as *mediated intimacies* (Barker, Gill, and Harvey 2018) in which “different kinds of intimate relationality are constructed in different media sites” (Gill 2009: 346), the public mediation of sex has become easily accessible to a wide audience as points of reference regarding how to structure, interpret, and enact one’s daily life. Here we see a recursive process of construction: dominant discourses produced through (digital) media interact, feed in, and feed back to the more local discourses and practices produced at the personal level and in the every day (see also Jones, this volume).

Through this process of *mediatization* (Couldry and Hepp 2016), we see an increasing intersection of media and technologies with daily life that is shaping notions of intimacy and selfhood associated with the digital age (Jamieson 2013). We are experiencing a “triple revolution” (Wellman and Rainie 2013), in which social networking sites, the internet, and smartphones are rapidly changing the ways we connect with others socially (Chayko 2014). What is considered public and private has become increasingly blurred in a new hybridity, so much so that the online and the offline are no longer easily dividable (Brubaker, Ananny, and Crawford 2016). Take our opening quote, for example. The excerpt is taken from a very private (but recorded) conversation between Donald Trump and a journalist that went very public. Today, digital media brings the private into the public (and vice versa) in unprecedented ways and with unexpected outcomes (see also Thurlow, this volume). In this context, technology and sex also intersect, leading to *technologically mediated intimacies* (Farvid and Aisher 2016). Technology and sexuality are intimately connected as a co-constructing loop; technology cannot be separated from the discursive and material production of bodies, sexuality, and indeed sexual practice(s) (e.g., Maines 1999). We see the technological shaping of “sexy” bodies through genital cosmetic surgical procedures (Braun 2017), the removal of body hair (Li and Braun 2017), and the shaping of sexual discourse and practice through technologies as diverse as mobile dating applications (Hobbs, Owen, and Gerber 2017), sexuopharmaceuticals (Croissant 2006), “sexbots” (Gurley 2015), and even “tests” for identifying drinks that have been spiked with date rape drugs (Molloy 2014).

Technology itself is not a discourse-free domain. Technology and discourse coexist and co-inform, colliding and reshaping each other again with embodied practice(s)—such as condom use (Braun 2013). To be sexual now involves navigating a world where the virtual is as real as the material. The arrival and development of the internet from the 1990s ushered in a very distinctive era of technologically mediated intimacies, variously discussed by scholars as *technosexuality* (Gordo-López and Cleminson 2004) or *sexnology* (Weiss and Schneider 2015). Computer-based online dating (Finkel et al. 2012) and cybersex forums (Farvid 2016) have recently given way to location-aware dating or hook-up apps via smartphone technology (Hobbs et al. 2017). The digital era has captured preexisting sexual practices and ideas, evolved them, and allowed for new discourses and practices to flourish. What counts as “reality” itself is increasingly destabilized by the amalgamation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Augmented Reality (AR), and Virtual Reality (VR) technology in the domain of dating, sex and pornography (Else et al. 2019, Gottschalk 2010; Lomanowska and Guitton 2016).

Another distinctive feature of the contemporary context is the mainstreaming of pornography (Tibbals 2014; see also Padgett, this volume). This occurs at the levels of both production and consumption, meaning that hetero/sexuality cannot easily be disentangled from the pornographic (we are bracketing here varieties of counter-normative pornography, including “feminist” and “alt” porn). Traditionally situated as a male activity, pornography in contemporary discourse and practice occupies the position as both “for men” and “for everyone,” with women explicitly targeted as valid consumers (Ciclitira 2004). Certain sexual desires, practices, and embodiments are often conceptualized (socioculturally, and in some scholarship) as a unidirectional relationship—for instance from viewing pornography into individual practices—be it anal intercourse (Stein et al. 2012), pubic hair removal (Riddell, Varto, and Hodgson 2010), or genital cosmetic surgery (Braun 2010). Setting aside questions of material practice, pornography is now a key player in the discursive space of (hetero)sexuality, coexisting alongside a strong, and sometimes justified (Owens et al. 2012), sociocultural anxiety about the influence of pornography on (young people’s) sexuality

(Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor 2007). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic saw an accelerated fusing of social media and online sex work (i.e., “camming” – see Henry and Farvid, 2017) with platforms such as OnlyFans skyrocketing, but in complicated and uneven ways (Jones 2020; Shehadi and Partington 2020). Here we also see a shift from “free” and generalized content to pay-walled and “exclusive” content, made to the specific instructions of the consumer/clients (Farvid, forthcoming).

In the contemporary context, there continues to be a hidden but powerful enticement to heterosexuality, a *compulsory heterosexuality* (Rich 1980) with its own prevailing norms. The concept of *heteronormativity* developed by critical gender and sexuality theorists refers to the normalization of heterosexuality as an institution and as a relational and sexual practice within daily life (Warner 1991)—a “suite of cultural, legal, and institutional practices that maintain normative assumptions that there are: only two genders, that gender reflects biological sex and that only sexual attraction between these ‘opposite’ genders is natural or acceptable” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009: 441).

Despite the “de-marginalization” of non-heterosexual sexualities, alongside greater legal equality and social inclusion for such individuals in many liberal Western democracies (Cameron and Berkowitz 2016), heterosexuality remains positioned as the normative, foundational sexual identity in myriad ways (see Farvid, forthcoming). The term *heteronormativity* captures an invisible process, a cultural hegemony that reproduces the straight/gay binary and positions gay as heterosexuality’s subordinate, at the same time as it institutionalizes heterosexuality as the taken-for-granted norm (Hubbard 2008). This norm shapes mundane everyday practices (Farvid 2015) as much as it structures social beliefs, organizations, policies, and institutional practices (Hubbard 2008), regulating those within *and* outside of it (Jackson 2006). This regulation is demonstrated by, for example, non-heterosexual couples’ desires for (and enactment of) highly heteronormative practices such as dyadic cohabitation, lifelong monogamy, and other forms of relational respectability (Warner 1991) that are typical of heterosexuality’s *charmed circle* (Rubin 1984). More recently, the specific designation of *cisheteronormativity* (e.g. Chevrette & Eguchi, 2020) explicitly names societal normalization of binarized sex and gender models, alerting us to the specific (and racialized) marginalization gender-non conforming individuals face (Farvid et al., 2021).

A norm theorized as *mononormativity* (Pieper and Bauer 2005, cited in Barker and Langdrige 2010) captures the sociocultural emphasis placed on (heterosexual) dyadic lifelong coupledness as the ideal. Lifelong romantic heterosexual unions are depicted as “natural” and “produced in society as ‘essential’ and ‘morally correct’, promising relationship success, stability and life happiness” (Farvid and Braun 2013: 361). That the demise of such unions is commonly referred to as a “failed relationship” (Kim 2014) evokes the ideal that a relationship should last *until death do us part*. Mononormativity also includes the requirement to be monogamous in ways that privilege (romantic) “love” relationships over other types of relationships, such as friendships (Jackson and Scott 2004a), with one’s singular sexual partner expected to be a relational priority. Exclusivity to one person disallows alternative, non-dyadic, sexualities and intimacies that might enable an “unbounded plurality” in relationships to flourish (Finn 2012). Although alternative relationship formations, such as polyamorous and ethically non-monogamous relationships, are becoming more visible, they are not without their own gendered inequities or structural limitations (Barker and Langdrige, 2010; Moors 2017). Some scholars have proposed that these limitations may lead to “radical refusals” in which women willingly and knowingly choose

asexuality—the absence of sexual attraction or engagement to anyone—as part of anarchist feminist sexual politics (Fahs 2010, 2014; see also Bucholtz and Hall, this volume).

Wendy Hollway's (1989) highly influential poststructuralist work identifies three salient discourses around heterosex that produce different subject positions for women and men: (1) a *male sexual drive discourse* that constitutes men as inherently (or biologically) sex-focused and driven, and, once aroused, as requiring gratification via coitus/orgasm; (2) a *have/hold discourse* that situates sex within a monogamous marriage-type relationship—the woman is sexually passive, but effectively “gives” sex to her male partner so that her (true) relational and domestic desires can be fulfilled; and (3) a *permissive discourse* that situates both men and women as desiring sexual agents in which “anything goes, as long as no one gets hurt” (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips 2003: 238). Within this discourse, heterosex is positioned as inherently good and as a right for men *and* women to enjoy.

Within the permissive discourse, heterosex is framed as a fun activity—allowing for, or even mandating, sex as recreational and casual. *Hooking up* and *casual sex* are umbrella terms that describe myriad sexual interactions outside romantic, committed longer-term relationships, such as (anonymous) one-night stands, friends with benefits, “fuck buddies,” and “booty calls” (Farvid 2014; Farvid and Braun 2013, 2014, 2017). The discourse frames casual sex as fun and of benefit to all involved, yet its meanings are complex, contradictory, and multifaceted, comprising experiential as well as material diversity (Farvid and Braun 2017). Moreover, there is often “little that is casual or emotionally uninvolved about casual sex” (Paul and Hayes 2002: 656)—the idea of sexual frivolity or fun is *just as much a construction* as any other idea about heterosex.

Despite recent claims of gender equality with respect to sexual permissiveness, sexual discourse remains saturated with gendered “rules,” and the navigation of sexual identity and practice remains a gendered endeavor. In what has been termed a *sexual double standard* (Crawford and Popp 2003), the sexual desires, practices, and identities of women and men are constructed differently and thus often judged differently, even when involving the same sexual behavior. Negative judgements tend to be leveled at women's practices; positive or no judgements may be applied to men (e.g., more sexual partners lowers a woman's social status, but elevates a man's). Women's sexual practices are often judged in relation to a discourse of sexual promiscuity, in which sexual behaviors are viewed as transgressing what is deemed socially or morally acceptable socio-sexual conduct (Reay 2014). Women's location within a permissive discourse is bounded by negative constructions of women's sexuality as “wrong” or “too much.” Exemplified in everyday uses of the term *slut* (or similar terms: *skank*, *slag*, or *ho*; Ringrose and Renold 2012), women are identified through moral judgments around “too much” or the “wrong kind” of sexual activity. The man-who-has-lots-of-sex has generally been positively labeled a *stud*. More negative terms such as *player*, *fuck boy*, and *man-whore* (all with slightly different meanings) have recently entered the sexual lexicon to refer to men whose sexual value is somewhat dubious, but these terms do not (yet) carry the broader societal negative valence of the term *slut*. Indeed, the persistence of ideas around “the slut” in the gendered discourse of heterosexuality suggests an ongoing and profound societal discomfort with a free and open sexuality for women (Farvid, Braun, and Rowney 2017).

Having set the scene for how heterosexuality is situated in the sociocultural landscape, we now turn to the heterosexual norms and imperatives that govern the “act” of sex and influence how sexual contact is constructed, understood, and enacted.

Imperatives

Coexisting with broader discourses around heterosexuality are more particular discourses around how heterosex should unfold in everyday practice. These can be understood as ontological stories in that they speak to the nature and doing of heterosex—to what heterosex is and how it should be done. We theorize these discourses as productive of subjectivities, desires, and practices, terming them *imperatives* to capture their coercive possibilities, whether subtle or overt.

Sex as Natural

A popular idea within Anglo-Western cultures is that sexual knowledge and sexual practice come “naturally” to those engaging in sex with each other (Tiefer 2004). There is an expectation that two individuals should be able to come together and effortlessly create a satisfying sexual event, even if for the first time (Farvid and Braun 2006). At the same time, however, sex is also positioned as laborious and as requiring hard work to maintain excitement, pleasure, and novelty (Gill 2009). Exciting sex is typically relayed as the ideal, and sexual familiarity as ultimately leading to monotony in sex (Farvid and Braun 2017). In particular, sex in long-term committed relationships is often talked about as boring and in need of “spicing up” (Tunariu and Reavey 2007: 816). Sex is thus natural but requires work; it is exciting but risks becoming dull. Above all, it requires mediation and maintenance—a form of labor often associated with femininity (Cacchioni 2007).

Sex as Private

The imperative to keep our sexual activity *private* is enshrined in decency laws that criminalize both nudity and sexual acts in public (Weeks 2018). This discourse of privacy leads to the understanding of sex education as a fraught act, making sex a difficult topic of discussion for parents and children (Jaccard, Dittus, and Gordon 2000) as well as couples (La France, 2020). When sex is viewed as natural, “talking about sex” becomes antithetical to the “doing” of sex. Sex is thus positioned as a highly noncommunicative activity (Roberts et al. 1995). Relatedly, nonprivate sex occupies a complex positioning as taboo yet potentially titillating: mundane sexual practices enacted in public space are reconstructed as exciting (Farvid and Braun 2017). The practice of *dogging*—sexual encounters in cars in urban-fringe public spaces, often in front of onlookers (see Bell 2006)—provides an example of the contradictory positioning of sex as both private and public, as personal yet also exhibitionist and voyeuristic.

The Sexual Imperative

The sexualization trend discussed earlier has paralleled “pro-sex” societal attitudes and social pressure not only to be sexual but also to be sexual in very specific ways (Farvid and Braun 2006). For example, not having had sex for a significant period of time (whether a month, three months, or a year) is often depicted in popular culture as highly problematic (e.g., in

music, movies, sitcoms, standup comedy). Sexless relationships are positioned as sad and unsatisfying (Johnson 2016), and intimacy is often conflated with sexual contact (McFadden 2016). Indeed, the coveted “pure relationship” (Giddens 1992) must involve a satisfying sex life, unbounded emotional intimacy and connection, and mutual support and understanding, as well as the capacity to seamlessly integrate busy working lives, child rearing, and domestic duties (Johnson 2016). Among the daily challenges of contemporary life, the action of having sex is a salient cultural imperative (Carpenter and DeLamater 2012). De-prioritizing sex thus becomes a troubled act, creating further difficulty for those who are not sexually oriented or identify as asexual (Vares 2018).

The Attraction Imperative

The notion that sexual desire or sexual attraction should eventually culminate in sex, even if one is not interested in a relationship, has been termed the *attraction imperative* (Farvid and Braun 2013). The excerpt below, taken from an article posted on Yahoo Australia, nicely demonstrates this enticement:

Let me set the scene for you. It's Friday night and you're out on the town. You're catching up with friends and after a couple of drinks, you feel suitably relaxed. You look across the bar and spot a handsome specimen. You buy a drink and strike up a conversation. On closer inspection, your target is still hot stuff but once they reveal they work in IT, they have a pet ferret or a passion for Delta Goodrem, you realise they're just not relationship material. Instead of walking away and letting the physical attraction go to waste, why not enjoy their company without the expectation of it leading to something more? And this is just one likely scenario when casual sex would be the best option for all involved

(as cited in Farvid and Braun 2013: 368).

What is striking in this passage is the notion that one should not waste attraction (Farvid and Braun 2013). If attraction cannot end in a date, a romantic relationship, or ultimately love, then it should at least culminate in “casual sex.” Here, pro-sex cultural attitudes and the sexual imperative collide with an attraction imperative to produce a context in which sex becomes the preferred option.

The Risk of Sex Addiction

The imperative to have sex is keenly matched with an imperative not to have *too* much sex. Having too much sex can render an individual an addict or nymphomaniac (Groneman 2001). As a uniquely contemporary phenomenon, sexual addiction is a very difficult term to define (Reay, Attwood, and Gooder 2013). First coming into circulation in the 1980s, the phrase tends to refer to some form of compulsive sexual behavior, such as a repeated and uncontrollable need for sexual contact. Barry Reay and colleagues (2013) argue that sex addiction has become a convenient term to describe disapproved forms of sexual activity in contemporary contexts. These may include (excessive) porn consumption (Taylor, 2019), excessive masturbation or masturbation in inappropriate contexts, buying sex from sex workers or frequenting strip clubs, or having sex with multiple partners or strangers (Weiss and Schneider 2015). Yet movies such as *Shame* (2011) and *Nymphomaniac* Vols. I and II (2013) also present sex addiction as fascinating, even if illicit and dangerous. The sex addict is often constructed as someone who is doing sex wrong or for the wrong reasons. As a pathologized subject position, the “sex addict” is also a victim of the addiction and thus in part exonerated from the acts they engage in (for example, the case of famous golfer Tiger Woods and his serial infidelity, see Callahan 2013). In this way, elements of sexual

morality—good and bad types of sex—continue to shape how we understand and engage in sex.

Sex as Special

Heterosex is often constructed as something “special”:

[S]omehow existing outside and apart from everyday life. It is susceptible to being seen either as uniquely exciting, raising us above everyday sociality or as uniquely dangerous, ending civilization (as we know it) and threatening to reduce us to barbarism

(Jackson and Scott 2004b: 242).

Sex has been depicted as having much power and force, as threatening as well as tantalizing. It is associated with spontaneity, passion, and subversion (Jackson and Scott 2004b), as well as depravity (Bryant and Schofield 2007), and is thus not usually equated with other everyday practices (Jackson and Scott 2004b). For this reason, relationships that include sex are rarely viewed as ordinary; they are more likely to be viewed as exclusive, committed, and romantic. Yet people nevertheless engage in sex recreationally and for pleasure, as in the context of casual sex discussed earlier.

In previous work, we have suggested that casual forms of sex are typically seen as inferior to sex involving emotional intimacy and commitment. Our study of online casual sex advice (Farvid and Braun 2013) extends the sex/gender hierarchy identified by Gayle Rubin (1984) to include a hierarchy of respectability (Warner 1991) in relation to sexual relationships, from most ideal to least ideal:

[A]t the pinnacle, monogamous relationships with “The One”; monogamous relationships; dating in search of “The One”; long-term casual sex relationships (e.g., friends with benefits, fuck buddies); a one-night stand; and finally, at the bottom, a booty call. “Booty calls” (a call or text late in the evening or in the early hours of the morning, purely for the purpose of meeting for sex) were depicted as the least desirable form of (casual) sex

(Farvid and Braun 2013: 370).

What is notable in the hierarchy is that relationships involving greater emotional commitment are higher in status. The same physical act is constituted differently and elevated in value or worth if it involves emotional intimacy. In this way, moral codes surrounding respectability operate subtly to shape sexual choices and sexual judgments.

Sex as Consensual

Ideally, sex ought to involve mutual desire and mutual consent. However, to say that a large percentage of heterosexual women engage in unwanted sex or sexual acts is both to state the unthinkable and to state the obvious (Gavey 2019). Although rape and sexual assault are socially and culturally positioned as completely reprehensible, the normative scripts accompanying heterosexuality create a sociocultural context in which rape and sexual coercion are easily “explained away” (see Ehrlich, this volume). For instance, normative heterosexuality posits that men are naturally sex-needy while women are coy or even sex-resistant. In order to maintain a respectable moral character, women must play hard to get or refuse sex altogether (Gordon 2002). Women are traditionally positioned as exchanging sex for love, intimacy, or commitment and as setting limits on the progression of sexual contact (Gavey, McPhillips, and Doherty 2001). These age-old norms produce the conditions for a

cultural scaffolding of rape (Gavey 2019) and further situate the victim as responsible for protecting herself from acts of sexual violence (Frazier and Falmagne 2014). Indeed, scholars have voiced widespread concern regarding the existence of a pervasive “rape culture” that arises from such norms. Recently, however, these norms have been openly and publicly challenged via the resurgence of popular feminism in the global #MeToo movement (Farvid 2018), perhaps signaling that society may be undergoing a shift in this respect (see also Debenport, this volume), but not without controversy regarding racial and class inequities in being included in the discussion (Onwuachi-Willig 2018).

The Coital Imperative

Heterosex has for some time been seen as highly social and scripted (Gagnon and Simon 1999). One such aspect is the relentlessly linear progression of modern heterosex, in which intimate contact begins with kissing, leads to “foreplay” and then intercourse, and finally culminates in orgasm (Opperman et al. 2014). One of the central governing discourses of heterosex is the coital imperative (McPhillips, Braun, and Gavey 2001). This discourse limits “real sex” to penis-in-vagina intercourse and deems other sexual practices (e.g., oral sex, sexual touching) as “foreplay” or acts preceding the main event of intercourse. For example, in an earlier article (Farvid and Braun 2014), we discuss the following data excerpt in which sex advice directed at male readers positions penetration as the default and desired sexual act:

Foreplay is important even if it may be the last time you ever see her (depending on how good it is, of course). Even if all you want to do is penetrate her into oblivion, remember that this is your chance to be creative and make her delve into kinky aspects of herself that she never knew existed

(David Strovny, Be Prepared for A One-Night Stand, *au.askmen.com*, 2008—as cited in Farvid and Braun 2014).

Here, foreplay is discussed as an activity relevant to women and not men, viewed here as interested only in the penetrative part of sex.

Indeed, heterosex is often referenced as *phallogentric* to denote the primacy given to the erect penis during sexual activity (Tiefer 2004). Although women’s orgasmic sexual pleasure is most often located in the external structure of the clitoris, “real sex” is still positioned as coital (Tiefer 2004). Furthermore, vaginal orgasms (or women achieving orgasm via penetration) is idealized and privileged over clitoral orgasms achieved through activities such as oral sex (Gerhard 2000). Indeed, coital sex is idealized in a manner that often promotes unsafe sexual practices. For many decades, health practitioners have recommended that noncoital sexual activities be promoted as “safer” sex for the avoidance of sexually transmitted disease and pregnancy (Diorio 2016). Yet this approach has failed to gain widespread traction due to the firmly entrenched coital imperative.

The Orgasmic Imperative

The idea that sex must be highly pleasurable and should happen easily, automatically, and without much communication abounds in Western culture. Pleasure is seen as an integral part of sexual activity, and this pleasure is typically understood as “orgasmic” (Opperman et al. 2014). Hence, an “orgasmic imperative” (Potts 2000) exists in relation to heterosex, where the orgasm is seen as the “end point and high point” of any sexual exchange (Jackson and Scott 2001: 104). Yet men’s and women’s orgasms are constructed divergently and the “performance” of orgasm is highly gendered (Chadwick 2017). Men’s orgasm is seen as

natural, automatic, and unproblematic, whereas women's orgasm is deemed more elusive and as requiring work (Frith 2015a), even if viewed as integral to successful sex (see also Farvid and Braun 2006). Male ejaculation has been tied to orgasm, whereas female orgasm is deemed more invisible, requiring audible signs to reaffirm it: "men make a mess; women make noise" (Jackson and Scott 2001: 107). The construction of female orgasm as inherently invisible or un-see-able pressures women to show signs of it. Women are expected to display audible sounds of pleasure as well as provide physical proof of "cumming" (Frischherz 2018). Recently, visual signs of women's orgasm (for instance, cumming via squirting) have entered popular discussion due to representations in popular shows such as *Sex and the City* as well as in pornography (Frith 2015b). The demand for performance has perhaps also motivated the prevalent social practice by which women "fake" orgasm (Frith 2018). Finally, alongside the orgasmic imperative, achieving mutual orgasm (via penetration) is seen as "the holy grail of intercourse" (Farvid and Braun 2006: 301), the pinnacle of any sexual exchange (no matter how difficult to achieve).

The Reciprocity Imperative

An important aspect of modern heterosex is the emphasis on mutuality, particularly in terms of pleasure (Opperman et al. 2014). Women's sexuality has traditionally been governed by a sex/love conflation: women are thought to equate sex with love rather than with physical or sexual pleasure (e.g., Roberts et al. 1995). However, there has been a gradual eroticization of female sexuality (Seidman 1991), particularly through the processes of mediatization discussed at the outset of this chapter, and women's pleasure has now become more central to heterosex (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips 2003). Accompanying the focus on women's pleasure is a discourse of reciprocity (Gilfoyle, Wilson, and Own 1992), in which pleasure (in the form of orgasm) is seen as important for *both* partners (Braun et al. 2003). Yet the importance of women's pleasure has also reinforced a requirement that men must *produce* that orgasm (Braun et al. 2003). Hence, men tend to occupy the agentic role of *providing* women with pleasure. Women's "right" to pleasure and orgasm comes with its own imperatives, however. The failure to reach orgasm has traditionally been seen as failure on the part of the man, but women are now also carrying their share of shame and inadequacy in this regard (Nicolson and Burr 2003).

The Risks of Sexual Dysfunction

The notion of sexual dysfunction is a medicalized term, whereby medicalization describes the sociological process of bringing human sexual behavior within the parameters of a medical purview (Tiefer 2012). Sexual difficulties from this perspective may be related to problems of arousal, desire, physical sexual function, or orgasmic issues (Fishman 2015). Such concerns are often individualized and essentialized in a manner that removes the interpersonal or cultural components involved in their shaping (Potts et al. 2006). A more nuanced and contextualized approach to sexuality (where ebbs, flows, and changes are deemed a typical part of the diverse and complex sexual lives of both men and women) is often sidelined in favor of a biomedical "one size fits all" approach, in which being able to have regular sex is not only seen as important for any committed relationship but as affecting the identity and happiness of the individuals involved. Men's erectile issues have accordingly become medicalized, and since 1998 Sildenafil (Viagra) is widely prescribed to treat symptoms deviating from "hard" masculine sexuality. The success of Viagra prompted pharmaceutical

companies and clinicians to arrive at a consensus for the definition of female sexual dysfunction, ultimately resulting in DSM-IV definitions of disorders of desire (Moynihan 2003). Recently, pharmaceutical efforts to produce and sell similar medication to treat female sexual dysfunction have resulted in the production and marketing of Flibanserin (tradename Addyi). Famously known as “Pink Viagra”, despite major differences in drug use and effect (Segal 2018), the marketing and production of this drug have been met with backlash from healthcare workers, researchers, academics, and activists (Tiefer, 2010). Such campaigners are concerned with the medicalization of female sexual dysfunction as well as the safety and effectiveness of such medications. The medicalization of sexual desire, rather than viewing sexuality as contextually bound, fluid, and changing across the lifespan, promotes a rigid and narrow model of “sex for life” (Potts et al. 2006), and one that differentially increases sexual labor for partners (Cacchioni 2007). Such discourses not only benefit pharmaceutical companies’ revenue generation, they have real material effects on the individuals who find themselves the objects of scrutiny when it comes to variation in sexual desire or capacity (Flore, 2017) – sidelining wider critiques of a hydraulic, heteronormative and penetrative sexuality.

Sex as Dangerous (for Women)

Heterosexuality is a domain imbued with pleasure as well as risk and danger (Vance 1984), a site of intimate *injustice* (McClelland, 2010) that is highly gendered. For example, in terms of pleasure, or at least orgasmic pleasure, there are huge asymmetries in terms of men’s and women’s experiences. While heterosexual men tend to orgasm most of the time during a sex session (95%), heterosexual women tend to orgasm only 65% of the time (Frederick, John, Garcia, and Lloyd 2018). Yet women are at greater physical risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016), and there is of course much more at stake for them if there is an unplanned pregnancy (physically, psychologically, and socially). Furthermore, women are much more likely to be victims of rape or sexual assault as well as intimate partner violence. The term *gender-based violence* has been coined to denote all forms of “physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering” perpetrated against women and girls, experiences impacting *many* women (World Health Organisation 2016). For example, in New Zealand, which is a relatively affluent nation, 35% of women report physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence. When psychological or emotional abuse is included, this number increases to 55% (NZFVC 2016). As many as 38% of female homicides are committed by a male intimate partner (World Health Organisation 2016). Although “biology is not destiny” (Fausto-Sterling 2020), there are some very material risks that affect heterosexual women disproportionality, particularly in the domain of intimacy. Heterosexuality, it seems, is not just risky for women; it may also be deadly.

The Excitement Imperative

The enticement to sexuality in the contemporary context means that sex must be anything but bland, boring, or “vanilla.” Sexual fetish, BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance submission, sadomasochism), and kink have thus become less taboo and more mainstreamed—at least in representation (see Martin, this volume). Perhaps the most notable cultural phenomena that brought BDSM into mainstream discussion was the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy (Downing 2013). Although dubbed “mummy porn” and “vanilla bondage” and critiqued for its misrepresentation of BDSM (Harrison and Holm 2013), *Fifty Shades of Grey*

was deemed responsible for a rapid rise in the discussion of BDSM and bondage sex toy sales (Wood 2017). While typically acknowledged as a sexual subculture within the literature, the experiences and practices of individuals themselves are neglected (Simula 2019).

In terms of common definitions, sexual or erotic fetishism refers to finding objects or body parts that are not normatively considered sexual to be sexually arousing—for example, feet, toes, or knees on the human body, or even buildings or cars. The term *fetish* refers to an object of sexual interest, and a *fetishist* is the person who holds that fetish. *Kink* refers to the practice of fetishism. Lastly, *BDSM* refers to a matrix of practices involving bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and/or sadomasochism. These practices may extend beyond sexual contact into everyday relational practices and often require detailed mutual discussion and agreement on the terms of “play” (Hérbert and Weaver 2014). Recent forms of kink or fetish include cosplay and furies. *Cosplay*, a contraction of “costume play,” refers to designing, creating, and wearing costumes inspired by fictionalized characters (e.g., from video games, comic books, and television shows), sometimes in a sexualized manner (Scott 2015). *Furies* (or furry fandom) refers to individuals or couples who fantasize about and dress up as anthropomorphic animal characters as part of their leisure time or sexual activities (Satinsky and Green 2016). While cosplay is often seen as a fun but “nerdy” hobby, furies are often alienated, positioned as outsiders, and made fun of on the internet as well as in video game communities. It appears that hierarchies of respectability also structure the world of kink, fetish, and sexual fantasy.

Conclusion

Our critical encyclopedia of discourse and heterosex has conveyed two key ideas. The first of these ideas is that language and heterosex are deeply enmeshed, overlaid, and intersecting. The theorization of sex without attention to language and discourse will miss something vital to the doing, feeling, and experiencing of sex. The second idea is that as much as things change, they also stay the same. For all the innovation and change around the institution of heterosexuality, particularly as we progress into a highly digital and virtual age, discourses surrounding sexual practice still resemble earlier versions of heterosex, even if changes in sexual practice may appear radical. Past discourses, particularly those aligned with longstanding Anglo-Western discourses about gender, have “grippy fingers” and are reluctant to let go. Yet as we conclude the writing of this chapter in the wake of the global #MeToo movement, we are also hopeful that a serious reworking of the norms of heterosex may be in our future. In fact, many commentators have come to call the present #MeToo moment a “tipping point.” The extent to which this reinvents heterosex as grounded in (true) equality and reciprocity remains to be seen. As we navigate in-and-out of the COVID-19 pandemic, it appears that various shelter in place orders were challenging, but did not have immediate negative effects for couples, with young couples as particularly resilient (Sachser 2021). For single people, various manifestations of mobile dating and cybersex offered intimate contact in times of isolation (Banerjee and Rao 2021). Finally, COVID-19 brought into sharp focus inequities across the globe (Ahmed et al. 2020), not only related to intimate partner violence (Piquero et al. 2021), and sex work (Singer et al. 2020) in the intimate domain, but basic access to the vaccine, food and shelter – sharpening structural inequities within and outside Anglo-Western countries. The past suggests that the future of heterosex in discourse is not likely to be a journey into uncharted territories but rather a remapping, in a post-pandemic

climate and through new and emerging technologies, of what we already know. But what is clear is that gendered, racialized, technological and economic inequities affect the shape, process and stratification of heterosexuality – affecting the material outcomes of how we experience heterosex. More attention to the uneven terrain of heterosexuality seems vital for more equitable intimate futures (see also Farvid forthcoming).

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