

Heteronormativity and Compulsory Heterosexuality

Questions:

- How do heteronormativity and sexism intersect and support each other?
- In what ways are queer women oppressed? How is this different from oppression faced by straight women?
- Is sexuality socially constructed? How?

Some Background on Sexual Orientation, Sexual Identity, and Heteronormativity

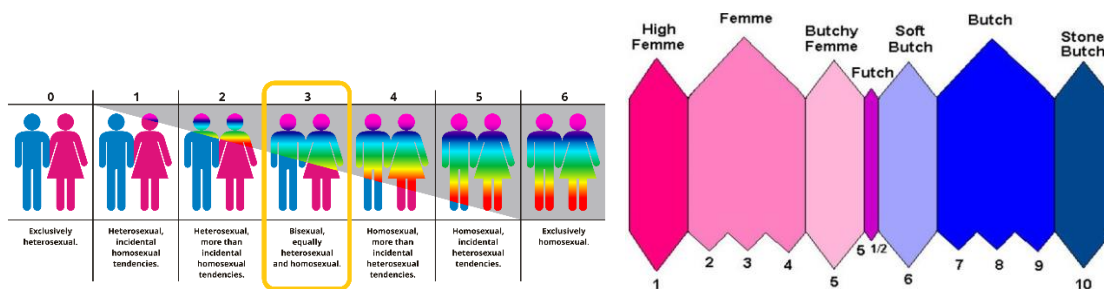
Sexual Orientation:

- What is it? Desire view vs. behavior view.
- Defined in terms of sex or in terms of gender?

Sexual Identity: how you identify (what label you apply to yourself); way of life, culture, community. Has a political dimension.

The LGBTQ+ label: stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer/questioning. Sometimes “I” and “A” are added, for intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+).

Some other important concepts: sexual fluidity; the Kinsey scale; gender presentation.



Question: why to these concepts and labels matter? And should we have more fine-grained sexual orientation labels?

Oppression in virtue of sexual orientation:

- homosexual behavior: criminalized in the US until 2003; still criminalized in over 70 countries; death penalty in 10 countries.
- gay marriage only legal in the US since 2015; only legal in 25 countries (i.e. illegal in about 170 countries).
- Same-sex attraction was considered a mental illness in the US until 1973.
- No federal anti-discrimination laws on the basis of sexual orientation.

Question: oppression does not occur only through the law. Other examples?

Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”

Central claim: heterosexuality in women is not a natural inclination; instead, heterosexuality is a political institution that partly constitutes the oppression of women: by removing the capacity to choose the place of sexuality in one’s life, and by putting women at the service of men.

Question: what exactly does she mean? Is she making a claim about women's natural sexual orientation? Do you think she is right? How does this match or fail to match with your experience?

Central argument: an argument to the best explanation. The claim that heterosexuality in women is not a natural inclination is the best explanation for the following facts:

- **Violence:** There are violent strictures in place to ensure women's loyalty and sexual availability to men.
- **Exploitation:** Our economic structures have historically made women have no choice but get married to men.
- **Cultural Imperialism:** There is powerful cultural propaganda presenting heterosexual relationships as the ultimate goal for women.
- **Non-Universality of Heterosexuality:** Despite these strictures, there have always been women who pursued intimate/romantic/sexual relationships with other women, and women who lived independently from men.
- **Marginalization:** queer women have been excluded from society, and are not represented in positive ways.

Group exercise:

- Give an example of one of these.
- Is the claim that heterosexuality in women is not a natural inclination the best explanation for these facts? Think of an alternative explanation.

Ways in which men benefit from compulsory heterosexuality:

- It gives men sexual, emotional, and economic access to women
- By making it harder for women to form meaningful connections, it removes women's capacity to change the social relations of the sexes.

Heterosexist ideology: beliefs that support thinking that women are naturally straight:

- Women are inevitably, even if rashly and tragically, drawn to men
- Primary love between the sexes is normal,
- Women need men as social and economic protectors,
- Straight families are the basic social units,
- Being single or queer leads to an unhappy life
- Women turn to women out of hatred for men, or just as a refuge from male abuse.

The Lesbian Continuum: includes a wide range of ways of life, including sexual-romantic relationships between women, close friendships and relationships of mutual support between women, refusing to get married, etc.

Question: is this a useful concept? Is it a good idea to group these different ways of life together?

Why we shouldn't group lesbians and gay men: do you agree?

- Lesbian existence is resistance to the sexist oppression of women
- Lesbians lack economic and cultural privilege relative to men
- There are important qualitative differences between lesbian and gay relationship culture.