



Heteronormativity and Teaching at Syracuse University

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Man, I Feel Uncomfortable

A recent television commercial shows five men in a Chevy Colorado pickup truck, the radio blasting Shania Twain’s “Man! I Feel Like a Woman.” One man, seated in the center of the back seat of the crew cab, is singing happily along: “The best thing about being a woman / Is the prerogative to have a little fun!” The others wear uncomfortable expressions on their faces, particularly those on either side of the singer; the camera focuses on a knee shifted away, demonstrating the roominess

of the truck’s back seat.¹

Discomfort, of course, is the source of much contemporary humor, which often stems from dissonance or friction between what we expect and what actually occurs. On *Friends*, for example, we laugh when Phoebe’s song about animals in the barnyard becomes an exposé of the meat industry—we don’t *expect* people to sing about such things to small children. The raw humor of the Farrelly Brothers’ movies and the droll wit of Ellen DeGeneres’s standup comedy operate in similar ways,



disrupting audience expectations.

We *expect* a truckload of guys racing across a desert landscape to be macho men, ogling rather than empathizing with women. Such expectations constitute our sense of normalcy, the regular day-to-day operations of our world. The “normal” being disrupted in the Chevy commercial is the normal of gender boundaries and this causes discomfort for the other passengers. We might call this homophobia, echoing the sentiments of *AdAge.com* columnist Bob Garfield (2004) who calls the commercial “kinda cute and kinda homophobic.” This concept, however, fails to fully account for the range of gender and sexual expectations at work here.

What’s expected here is heterosexuality. Two genders, each sexually attracted to the other. Clear boundaries. No exceptions. The discomfort evidenced by the four non-singing men results not (merely) from a fear of homosexual advances by the Twain fan. This commercial, part of Chevrolet’s “American Revolution” campaign, demonstrates the deeply institutionalized

nature of our binary gender system. Gender is certainly *not* included in this revolution. How far does this institutionalization extend? What questions do we need to ask of the world around us to begin to disturb the taken-for-granted nature of gender and sexuality?

What critical concepts can make this work possible?

Compulsory Heterosexuality and Heteronormativity

Those of us asking such questions experience our own sense of dis-ease in the world. We might find the costuming of gender an uncomfortable fit; sexual attraction may not follow societal dictates. Adrienne Rich’s (1980) influential essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” argues that heterosexuality is taken as a given, as the natural order of things, effectively erasing (or at minimum, marginalizing) lesbian experience. In response, Rich coined the term “compulsory heterosexuality” to describe the unquestioned status of this particular ordering of the world, further noting “the economic imperative to heterosexuality and marriage and to the sanctions imposed against single women and widows [...]” (p. 634). Rich argues for the analysis of heterosexuality as a political institution (p. 637).

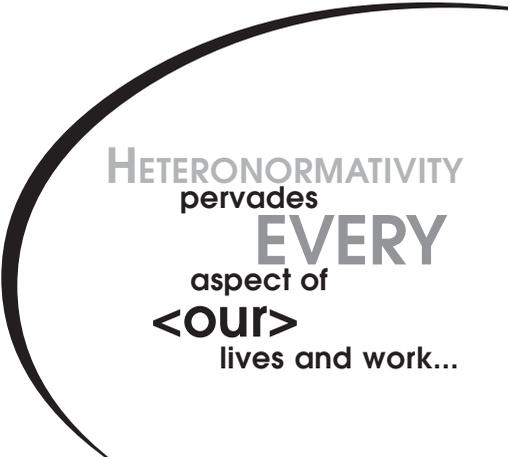
Queer theorists extend this idea, placing the entire matrix of gender and sexuality on the table. Gender, that sense of belonging to a particular category of persons (usually “male” or “female”), is intricately wound up in sexuality, often understood to mean “whom do you desire.”² Within contemporary Western culture’s binary gender system, one is expected to desire—to love—someone of the opposite gender. Michael Warner (2002) employs the term “heteronormativity” to more effectively probe the “complex cluster of sexual practices [that] gets confused, in heterosexual culture, with the love plot of intimacy and familialism that signifies belonging to society in a deep and normal way” (p. 194). Warner continues:

A whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness—embedded in things and not just in sex—is what we call heteronormativity (p. 194).

This sense of rightness is very strong. Even those of us who experience discrimination based on sexual orientation easily overlook the simple, everyday ways

that normative gender and sexuality are reinforced. For example, a lesbian friend expressed her discomfort with transgendered individuals who pursue surgical options. When I suggested, following scholars such as Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000), that gender is more of a continuum or statistical distribution, she balked: “There are two bathroom doors—men’s and women’s—and that’s it.” Clearly the implication is that any “choice” has been made for us by “nature,” and it’s our job as individuals to learn to accept, and fit in to, these two “choices.”

But is it really that clear or simple? Bathrooms offer an excellent example of the challenge of such choices. Women, who, like my friend, are more comfortable in pants, or women who walk with confidence and wear short hair, or women



HETERONORMATIVITY
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EVERY
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<our>
lives and work...

who exhibit “male” characteristics such as facial hair, find themselves policed by others. “This is the *ladies’* room,” they’re told. The rebuke may be an honest mistake (we are taught to read gender quickly), or it may be a hostile attack. Honest mistakes—such as when a rushed clerk calls me “sir”—cause tremendous embarrassment to the individual making the error. While we might hope that such mistakes would open up discussion about the fluidity of gender, those making the errors are usually too embarrassed or angry for that to happen. Rob S. Pusch discusses this phenomenon more fully in his essay in this volume, “(Trans)Gendering the Classroom,” noting that blame is usually assigned to the person who could not be quickly identified as male or female. Such blame can be accompanied by life-threatening violence—the boundaries are aggressively policed.

Gender and sexual object choice are, then, deeply ingrained in all of us—even when we may think of ourselves (not without justification) as well educated in these issues. Heteronormativity is reified—“embedded in things,” as Warner observed—in ordinary, everyday activities: wedding magazines with spectacular brides on the covers; men’s magazines that usually feature scantily dressed women; toy store aisles divided into pink and black; bathroom doors marked “Men” and

“Women.” To “feel like a woman” (to quote Shania) is, as Judith Butler (1990) asserted, “an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body [...]” (p. 136). To feel like a man, as evidenced by the four uncomfortable inhabitants of the pickup truck, is no less policed by the gender border patrol.

Great, But What Does This Have To Do With What I Teach?

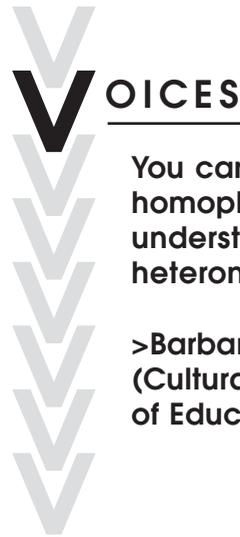
What Warner makes clear in his discussion of heteronormativity is its insidious and invasive nature: heteronormativity pervades every aspect of our lives and work. From framing research questions to evaluating the credibility of sources, the unquestioned assumptions of gender and sexuality structure our thinking, limiting the scope of possibility. Our jobs as scholars and teachers often require us to push ourselves and our students to ask the difficult questions, to step out of our respective comfort zones and peel up the edges of apparent certainties.

But such destabilization can be painful—even for those of us who don’t feel at ease with gender norms. For those students who face material risks—whose religious or family convictions explicitly and rigidly affirm specific heteronorms—questioning assumptions must be

undertaken with care and sensitivity. It must be remembered that heteronormativity operates within a matrix of other cultural norms: race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, age, religion, and so forth. Each of these brings its own complexities and challenges.

And yet, opening up inquiry is essential to higher education. How can we assist students in developing newer, more significant investigations when some of the most fundamental aspects of all of our lives go unquestioned? First, we can recognize our own complicity in heteronormative systems. Several writers in this volume describe circumstances in which instructors failed to recognize the ways in which their own behaviors—reactions to a name, for instance (see Pusch), or assuming a student was straight (see Stout and Moran)—reinforced those systems. Stout and Moran also describe an instructor using overtly heterosexual exercises in a foreign language class—a situation easily avoided through awareness and advance preparation.

Instructors in the sciences may not immediately see the relevance of this to their own teaching. I offer the following example as a reminder of the role language plays in constructing (and restricting) understanding in all our fields. Earlier this year, scientists from Harvard Medical School and the Massachusetts General Hospital published findings in the journal



VOICES

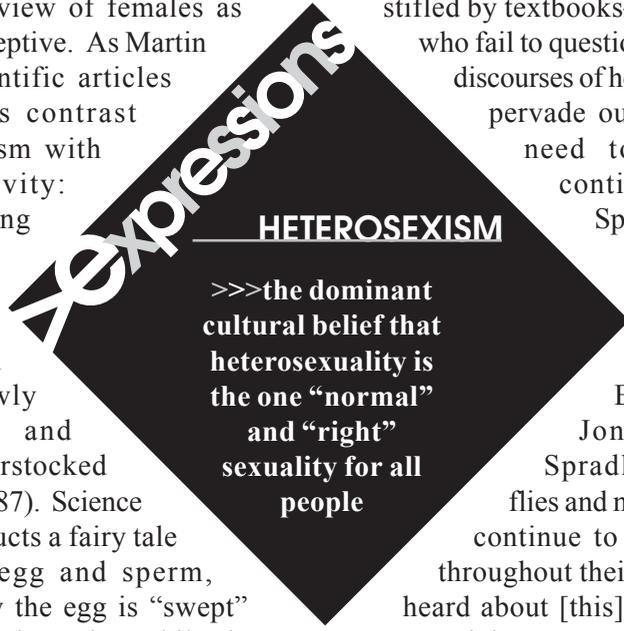
You cannot understand homophobia without understanding heteronormativity.

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Nature with the potential to disrupt our understanding of reproduction. The accepted “dogma” that female mammals are born with a finite number of eggs (while males continue to produce sperm throughout their lives), according to these researchers, may not be true (Johnson et al., 2004).

Of course, all fields make discoveries, or approach issues from new perspectives, or introduce new theories. What makes this discovery of interest is why the “dogma” remained unquestioned. Emily Martin argues in her 1991 article “The Egg and the Sperm” that researchers perpetuate heteronormative readings of sexual reproduction by relying on gendered stereotypes. The view that eggs—or more

accurately, ovarian follicles containing ova—are present at birth coincides nicely with a view of females as passive and receptive. As Martin observes, scientific articles and textbooks contrast male enthusiasm with female passivity: “Far from being *produced*, as sperm are, they [ova] merely sit on the shelf, slowly degenerating and aging like overstocked inventory” (p. 487). Science actually constructs a fairy tale romance for egg and sperm, describing how the egg is “swept” along the fallopian tube, while those enthusiastic sperm “propel” and “penetrate” (Martin, 2004, p. 489). The findings of Johnson and his colleagues demonstrate that norms perpetuate gender expectations and assumptions that might not actually be true.



That spirit of inquiry that brings us to scholarship and teaching can be easily stifled by textbooks—and instructors—who fail to question assumptions. The discourses of heteronormativity that pervade our lives and studies need to be challenged continually. Dr. Allan Spradling responded to the Harvard study in a report on National Public Radio’s Morning Edition. As reporter Jon Hamilton noted, Spradling “studies fruit flies and notes that the females continue to produce new eggs throughout their lives. But until he heard about [this] study, he’d simply accepted that mammals weren’t like fruit flies.” Hamilton declared, “My personal reaction when I heard it was, you know, I never should have believed that. You know, why wasn’t I more skeptical?” (NPR, 2004).

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>>ENDNOTES

- 1 > While Chevrolet does not include this among the commercials to be viewed on its website, it is receiving regular airplay. In addition, interested readers can access filmmaker Michael Bay's description of the spot at www.michaelbay.com (Pilligan, 2003).
- 2 > For a fuller definition of the term "gender," see Pusch's essay in this volume.

