Gender, sexuality and heterosexuality

The complexity (and limits) of heteronormativity

According to Steven Seidman, analysts of institutionalized heterosexuality have ‘focused exclusively on its role in regulating homosexuality’ and, while queer approaches theorize how ‘homosexuality gains its coherence in relation to heterosexuality, the impact of regimes of normative heterosexuality on heterosexuality has largely been ignored’ (2005: 40). Over the last decade and more, however, feminists have been analysing how normative heterosexuality affects the lives of heterosexuals (see Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993; Richardson, 1996; Jackson, 1999; Ingraham, 1996, 1999). In so doing they have drawn on earlier feminists, such as Charlotte Bunch (1975), Adrienne Rich (1980) and Monique Wittig (1992), who related heterosexuality to the perpetuation of gendered divisions of labour and male appropriation of women’s productive and reproductive capacities. Indeed, Rich’s concept of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ could be seen as a forerunner of ‘heteronormativity’ and I would like to preserve an often neglected legacy of the former concept: that institutionalized, normative heterosexuality regulates those kept within its boundaries as well as marginalizing and sanctioning those outside them. The term ‘heteronormativity’ has not always captured this double-sided social regulation.

Feminists have a vested interest in what goes on within heterosexual relations because we are concerned with the ways in which heterosexuality depends upon and guarantees gender division. Heterosexuality, however, is not a singular, monolithic entity – it exists in many variants. As Seidman points out there are hierarchies of respectability and good citizenship among heterosexuals, and what tends to be valorized as ‘normative’ is a very particular form founded on traditional gender arrangements and lifelong monogamy (see Seidman, 2005: 59–60; see also Seidman, 2002). Thus the analysis of heteronormativity needs to be rethought in terms of what is subject to regulation on both sides of the normatively prescribed boundaries of heterosexuality: both sexuality and gender.

With this in mind, this article re-examines the intersections between gender, sexuality in general and heterosexuality in particular. How these terms are defined is clearly consequential for any analysis of linkages between them. There is no consensus on the question of definition, in large
part because gender, sexuality and heterosexuality are approached from a variety of perspectives focusing on different dimensions of the social. It is not a case of some having a clearer view than others, but rather that the social is many-faceted and what is seen from one angle may be obscured from another. Sexuality, gender and heterosexuality intersect in variable ways within and between different dimensions of the social – and these intersections are also, of course, subject to historical change 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 dimensions of the social. I will then go on to outline some of the intersections that should be explored further if we are to appreciate the complexity of heteronormative social relations. In so doing I am certainly not claiming some privileged all-seeing perspective, but merely making some tentative suggestions on what might be seen from different vantage points.

**Concerning gender, sexuality and heterosexuality**

While my definitions of gender, sexuality and heterosexuality are relatively broad, they are, nonetheless, particular definitions, products of my own understanding of sociality. As will become clear, while I am insisting that gender, sexuality and heterosexuality are all social phenomena, there are differences in the ways in which they are socially constituted.

Gender, as I am using it, encompasses the division or distinction between women and men, female and male, these binary categories themselves and the content of those categories – the characteristics and identities embodied through membership of them. Gender is thus a social division and a cultural distinction, given meaning and substance in the everyday actions, interactions and subjective interpretations through which it is lived. If gender categories have no natural existence they cannot pre-exist the division and distinction through which they are constituted; thus ‘the principle of partition itself’ (Delphy, 1993: 3) is crucial. This division is a persistent and resilient feature of social and cultural life, yet it co-exists with considerable variability in the ‘content’ of gender (Delphy, 1993): how gender is lived varies historically and culturally as a result of other social divisions (such as class and ethnicity) with which it is enmeshed and through the local exigencies of individual, socially located biographies.

In using ‘gender’ to refer to all aspects of the distinction and division between male and female (as well as departures from the normative binary), I reserve the terms ‘sex’ and ‘sexual’ for that pertaining to the erotic. While ‘sex’ denotes carnal acts, ‘sexuality’ is a broader term referring to all erotically significant aspects of social life and social being, such as desires, practices, relationships and identities. This definition assumes fluidity, since what is sexual (erotic) is not fixed but depends on what is socially defined as such and these definitions are contextually and historically variable. Hence sexuality has no clear boundaries – what is sexual to one person in one context may not be to someone else or somewhere else.
While I am making an analytical distinction between gender and sexuality, the empirical connections between them require exploration and should be neither presupposed nor neglected. They are important in order to appreciate the ways in which sexual practices, desires and identities are everywhere embedded within non-sexual social relations (Gagnon, 2004), most, if not all, of which are gendered. And clearly these linkages are crucial for any analysis of heteronormativity since the ‘regulation of gender has always been part of the work of heterosexist normativity’ (Butler, 2004: 186).

Yet analysing these connections presents difficulties since, as I have indicated, sexuality and gender are rather different and not directly comparable social phenomena (cf. Sedgwick, 1991: 29). The former is a sphere or realm of social life, lacking defined boundaries while the latter is a fundamental social division ordered in terms of a clear binary distinction. Gender defines the social categories women and men and locates them differentially in virtually all spheres of life, including the sexual. What is more comparable with gender as a social division is the binary divide between heterosexuality and homosexuality. But to focus on this alone directs attention away from the broader scope of sexuality as a sphere of life. Even in its gendered aspects sexuality is not reducible to the heterosexual/homosexual binary – and it is ordered not only by gender, but by other social relations and identities (Whittier and Simon, 2001). As a sphere of life it encompasses a multitude of desires and practices that exist across the divides of gender and heterosexuality/homosexuality.

Heterosexuality, however, should not be thought of as simply a form of sexual expression. It is not only a key site of intersection between gender and sexuality, but also one that reveals the interconnections between sexual and non-sexual aspects of social life. Heterosexuality is, by definition, a gender relationship, ordering not only sexual life but also domestic and extra-domestic divisions of labour and resources (Van Every, 1996; Ingraham, 1996). Thus heterosexuality, while depending on the exclusion or marginalization of other sexualities for its legitimacy, is not precisely coterminous with heterosexual sexuality. Heteronormativity defines not only a normative sexual practice but also a normal way of life. What I am suggesting, then, is that gender, sexuality and heterosexuality, while interconnected, are not all phenomena of the same order. Different dimensions of the social appear to be in play here, complicating these linkages and thus the operation of heteronormativity.

The social and the normative

Critical, feminist, gay and queer theorists, in seeking to denaturalize gender and sexuality, are generally committed to a social ontology. They do not, however, share a common ontology of the social since they have drawn on a wide range of often divergent perspectives – Marxism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, interactionist sociology, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and postmodernism – which focus on different aspects of gender and sexuality informed by differing conceptualizations of the social.
Having come to the study of sexuality through interactionist sociology while committed to materialist feminism, I have long been uncomfortably situated between two apparently irreconcilable theoretical positions. I have, however, come to see theoretical eclecticism as necessary, since gender, sexuality and heterosexuality are constituted within and across a number of dimensions of the social, requiring different modes of analysis. In recent work I have suggested that the social can be thought of in terms of four intersecting levels (Jackson, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2006b), but the term ‘levels’ has proved problematic. Since I want to avoid implying a hierarchical ordering of the social, I have settled on ‘dimensions’ as an alternative.

The first of these dimensions is the structural, the patterned social relations that shape the social order at a macro level where gender figures as a hierarchical social division and heterosexuality is institutionalized through such mechanisms as law and the state. Secondly, all social relations and practices are imbued with meaning,3 which encompasses the language and discourses constituting our broad cultural understandings of gender and sexuality and the more context bound meanings negotiated in everyday social interaction. Thirdly, there is the ‘everyday’, the routine social practices through which gender and sexuality are constantly constituted and reconstituted within localized contexts and relationships. Finally, in and of the social, there are social agents or subjects, sexual and gendered selves who through their embodied activities construct, enact and make sense of everyday gendered and sexual interaction.

These distinctions are intended as a means of exploring the varied ways in which gender, sexuality and heterosexuality intersect, not as a total theorization of the social or some kind of theoretical synthesis in which the different dimensions form a unified whole. On the contrary, although these dimensions of the social are interrelated, they cut across each other, as well as interlocking, producing disjunctions between and within them. Moreover, it is difficult, if not impossible, to focus on all at once; thus we generally have only a partial view of multi-dimensional processes. In concentrating on one aspect of the social, others disappear, and analytical tools that illuminate one point may cast little light on another.

Where, in this, do we locate heteronormativity? The concept has become widely used as shorthand for the numerous ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life, pervasively and insidiously ordering everyday existence. It is, however, often used as if it were synonymous with institutionalized heterosexuality. But as an institution heterosexuality, while exclusionary, also governs the lives of those included within its boundaries in ways that cannot be explained by heteronormativity alone. Norms are generally understood as concerned with meaning, with values, beliefs, or taken-for-granted assumptions that in some way guide human action. Hence we can think of the assumptions that sustain particular institutions and practices as normative. Moreover, since norms are generally conceived as embedded in everyday activities, in ‘how things are normally done’, it is also possible to think of practices being heteronormative. Subjectivity, too, can be conceived as affected by, or effected

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through, norms. Norms may therefore be thought of as operating within a number of dimensions of the social. However, to say that a phenomenon such as heterosexuality or gender is normative is not to provide a full analysis of it and may prove to be overly deterministic.

It is worth pausing to consider the history of the ‘norm’ in social theory, which has left traces on contemporary usage of the term heteronormativity. ‘Norms’ were, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, central to the explanatory vocabulary of sociology, considered to be what welded the social order together. Within the dominant ‘social systems’ approach of the time, norms were envisaged as integrative, which presupposed a large degree of consensus; even deviance could be conceptualized in terms of an alternative normative order. As characterized in an influential critique of the time, norms were assumed to be external to the individual and constraining, but since they were ‘internalized’ they were postulated ‘as being constitutive, rather than merely regulative, of the self’ (Dawe, 1970: 210, emphasis in original); by implication, they were also constitutive of social action. By the late 1960s this perspective was under attack. For Marxists the social order was based on conflicts of class interests and hence ‘ideology’ displaced notions of a normative order – but did much of the same conceptual work being seen as external, constraining and, in Althusser’s (1971) famous formulation, constituting individuals as subjects. A further challenge to the ‘normative paradigm’ came from adherents of the alternative ‘interpretive paradigm’ (Wilson, 1971) who argued that the self, social conduct and, indeed, social reality were products of local, contextual interpretive processes generated in and through interaction rather than deriving from external norms. Where the existence of a normative order was admitted, it was seen as a taken-for-granted resource for localized interpretation and action, what is assumed to be commonly known, rather than a determinant of meaning and conduct.

The reappearance of the term ‘normative’ in a new critical guise can be traced to Foucault (1979). Yet within this more critical perspective there are some troubling echoes of the old, conservative sociology – externality, in that ‘the norm appears to have a status and effect that is independent of the actions governed by the norm’ (Butler, 2004: 42) – and the idea of norms as constitutive as well as regulative, leaving little room for agency. Here, though, normalization as process replaces a static view of normative integration (see Butler, 2004). Thus there is a degree of convergence with the interpretive sociological tradition through which the normative status of heterosexuality is (re)produced through everyday interaction (see e.g. Kitzinger, 2005).

I would suggest that the social ordering of gender, sexuality and heterosexuality cannot be reduced to heteronormativity alone. Further, to appreciate workings of heteronormativity requires attention to the different dimensions of the social in which its effects (and its limits) can be perceived. And, if heteronormativity pivots on the privileging of heterosexuality through its normalization, it can only be understood through attention to what it governs, both gender and sexuality, and how each of these is interwoven with the institutionalization, meaning and practice of
heterosexuality and the production of sexual and gendered subjects or selves. I offer here only a sketchy, and still evolving, outline of a complex picture that begins to emerge when different dimensions of the social are taken into account, a picture of connections between gender, sexuality and heterosexuality that are manifested variously within and between dimensions, are not always unidirectional and where the linkages are stronger at some points than at others.

A view from above: the structural dimension

While gender has been considered a structural phenomenon, implicitly at least, in past feminist debates on patriarchy and explicitly in recent materialist feminist analyses (e.g. Delphy, 1993; Ingraham, 1996), sexuality and heterosexuality are more rarely approached from this angle. A notable exception is Chrys Ingraham, who sees heterosexuality as ‘an institutional organizing structure’ (1996: 187). The rarity of such analyses reflects the displacement of the concept of social structure by postmodern scepticism and the recent sociological emphasis on the fluidity of the social (see Adkins, 2002). I would argue that there is still a need for a ‘view from above’, a means of appreciating patterned inequalities in distributions of resources, divisions of labour and hierarchies of advantage and disadvantage, which situate men and women in a hierarchical relationship and which privilege heterosexuality.

In appealing to the structural I am envisaging neither fixed or foundational underpinnings to social and cultural relations of the kind found in some forms of structuralism, nor some over-arching social structure that determines all aspects of social life. Social structures are subject to historical change and cross-national variability; for example capitalism, while a global phenomenon, does not take identical forms even within the wealthy countries from which transnational capital is controlled. Social structures – or what Ingraham terms ‘social totalities’, ‘are not monolithic, but consist of unstable patterns of interrelations and reciprocal determinations’ (1996: 171).

I would consider gender and heterosexuality as structural phenomena. Despite changes and variability in the ways that gender is lived, the division of gender remains entrenched and continues to be associated with material inequalities. Moves towards gay citizenship rights may have made it easier to live outside heterosexuality, but they have not seriously undermined heterosexual dominance (Seidman, 2002). 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 privileges monogamous coupledom as the ideal and this in turn is enshrined in much state policy and institutional practices defining which social relationships are socially validated (Richardson, 2005). Here heteronormativity, while responsive to change, continues to legitimate specific forms of relationship.
Within the structural dimension of the social the connections between gender and heterosexuality are particularly strong – hence Ingraham’s notion of heterogender as the ‘asymmetrical stratification of the sexes in relation to the historically varying institutions of patriarchal heterosexuality’ (1996: 169). I agree that institutionalized heterosexuality is by definition gendered and the heterosexual contract is a powerful mechanism whereby gender hierarchy is guaranteed (cf. Wittig, 1992). This is manifested not only in heterosexual couple relationships (still the nexus of familial relationships despite their increased variability and instability) but also for example in gendered labour markets. Gender-segregated occupational structures and their associated wage differentials, historically associated with particular economic and labour relations within heterosexual families, have persisted despite the decline in the male breadwinner wage. However, I think it wise, even in this context, to keep gender and heterosexuality analytically distinct in order to facilitate further exploration of the ways in which they sustain each other.

Furthermore, while attention to the structural dimension of the social enables us ‘to link the local to the macro level of analysis’ (Ingraham, 1996: 171), specific structural linkages between gender and heterosexuality cannot be assumed to determine other points of connection within other dimensions of the social. While gendered inequalities in the workplace are, as I have suggested, associated with inequalities in domestic divisions of labour, we cannot deduce from them how each individual heterosexual couple lives. How structural constraints impinge on everyday life, differentially enabling and/or constraining our patterns of existence, is a matter for investigation.

Where does sexuality as such figure here? By my definition, sexuality is not in itself a structural phenomenon, though it is of course ordered in crucial respects by the intersection of heterosexuality and gender. Moreover if structural phenomena have enabling and constraining effects on other dimensions of the social, sexuality will not be immune, particularly since it is always embedded within wider, non-sexual relations. As such it is also affected by social divisions other than those of gender and heterosexuality/homosexuality. One illustrative example is class. Consumer capitalism has accommodated queer practices as lifestyle choices (Evans, 1993; Hennessy, 2000), but these are not equally available to all; for example, working-class lesbians may not feel comfortable in fashionable queer spaces and may lack both the material accoutrements and cultural capital facilitating entry to such spaces (Taylor, 2004). The celebration of queer lifestyles by the materially privileged rests upon the exploited labour of the underprivileged, those who produce the commodities on which that lifestyle depends (Hennessy, 2000). Among heterosexuals, too, there are class differences in the extent to which women, in particular, can escape the normative regulation 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 forms of cultural capital available to us by virtue of our class location also affect the resources we
can draw on in making sense of our sexual lives and fashioning sexual selves (Skeggs, 2004). Some of these structural effects have little to do with heteronormativity per se, but they do suggest that opportunities to escape its most conventional forms are not equally distributed.

**Meaningful connections**

Structural and institutional patterns give rise to and are sustained by forms of understanding whereby they appear natural or inevitable – and it is here that the normalizing effects of heteronormativity are evident. As well as shading into the structural/institutional, however, the dimension of meaning shades into everyday practice as part of the world-taken-for-granted and is implicated in the constitution of subjectivity. Meaning thus cuts across macro and micro aspects of social relations. At the level of society and culture as a whole, gender, sexuality and heterosexuality are constituted as objects of discourse and subject to regulation through specific discourses in circulation at any historical moment. At the most fundamental level these discourses serve to distinguish male from female, to define what is sexual, to differentiate the normative from the deviant.

Here there is room for, and evidence of, fluidity and change, particularly within popular forms of public culture (Roseneil, 2000). Yet the admission of greater sexual diversity has limits. For example, Steven Seidman suggests that the ‘normalization’ of gay characters in US cinema requires that they be ‘gender conventional, committed to romantic-companionate and family values, uncritically patriotic and detached from a subculture’ (2002: 160). Thus being gay becomes ‘normal’ without overly unsettling heteronormative ideals. It has been suggested that the boundaries of the normative are being redrawn, separating the ‘good homosexual’ or ‘normal gay’ from the ‘dangerous queer’ or the bad citizen (Smith, 1997; Seidman, 2002, 2005). The advancement of gay citizenship rights has, moreover, been paralleled by the increasing acceptance of the idea that homosexuality and heterosexuality are innate proclivities, thus positioning gays and lesbians as permanent minorities (Rahman and Jackson, 1997; Seidman, 2002; Richardson, 2005).

Yet it is undeniable that considerable shifts have occurred in the meanings of both normative and non-normative sexualities. Such change is inexplicable if norms are seen as properties of a cultural order external to us. Any norm, as Butler says, ‘renders the social field intelligible and normalizes that field for us’ (2004: 42). If heteronormativity and gender norms have this effect, it is because they circulate not only through the wider culture but also within everyday interpretive practices. However, while they may govern intelligibility at that level, meaning is not simply dictated by cultural norms, but is also negotiated in, and emergent from, the mundane social interaction through which each of us makes sense of our own and others’ gendered and sexual lives. Here the normative is mobilized as a condition for the intelligibility of the social, informing the ‘natural attitude’ (Schutz, 1972; Kessler and McKenna, 1978), but the intelligibility so produced is, nonetheless, a ‘practical accomplishment’
So, for example, most of the population, most of the time, takes for granted the existence of ‘men’ and ‘women’ as given categories of people who ‘naturally’ form sexual liaisons with members of the ‘opposite’ gender. Yet the everyday ‘doing’ of gender and heterosexuality in the ethnomethodological sense, producing a sense of an intelligibly gendered heterosexually ordered world, entails a variety of cultural competences and complex interpretational processes, evident even in the simple act of attributing gender to another person (Kessler and McKenna, 1978; West and Zimmerman, 1987). The interpretive work this entails goes unnoticed because it is so habitual that it is assumed that we are simply recognizing a natural fact. Thus in so far as heteronormativity persists in everyday meaning-making, it is contingent upon being constantly reaffirmed; hence it can potentially be unsettled or renegotiated – although we need to be aware of how any such challenges can be accommodated back into the ‘natural attitude’.

Within the dimension of meaning we can see how gender and sexuality constantly intersect, where the construction of gender difference is bound up with the assumption of gender complementarity, the idea that women and men are ‘made for each other’ (Katz, 1995; Ingraham, 1999). Hence the boundaries of gender division and normative heterosexuality are mutually reinforced. However, as Kessler and McKenna (1978) suggest, within everyday interaction the attribution of gender appears to have primacy in that 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. 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’ (and thus select and interpret many potential differences/similarities between individuals in order to ‘recognize’ those that signify gender).

The homo/hetero binary, however, by no means exhausts the gendered meanings of sexuality. Where heterosex is concerned, the heteronormative assumption that women and men are ‘made for each other’ is sustained through the common-sense definition of vaginal penetration by the penis as ‘the sex act’. Feminists, along with some HIV/AIDS activists, have tried to dislodge this assumption, but, in the Viagra age, it is more entrenched than ever. The idea of gender complementarity further presupposes that men and women are naturally different in their sexual desires and proclivities. Although some of the old familiar stereotypes may have been eroded, it is the degree of difference and the forms of difference that are changing – not the idea that there is a difference. Best-selling 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 this (see, for example, Gray, 1996); popular science continues to represent evolutionary psychology, based on the reproductive imperative, as ‘fact’.
Everyday interaction and practice

In discussing everyday meanings it is virtually impossible to separate them from the practices they reciprocally order and are ordered by. Gender, sexuality and heterosexuality are thus continually produced and reproduced within the third dimension of the social, where they are lived out by embodied individuals. In everyday life we ‘do’ gender, sexuality and heterosexuality in two senses. In the first, ethnomethodological, sense this ‘doing’ entails the production of a socially intelligible ‘reality’ through everyday interpretive interaction (Kessler and McKenna, 1978; West and Zimmerman, 1987). In the second sense ‘doing’ entails actual practical activities – whether having sex, dressing for work or organizing a night out – constructing a gendered, sexual or heterosexual performance. In both senses, however, social interaction with others is essential to practice, to our ability to negotiate and fit ourselves into ongoing social activities.

The doing of social life (in both senses) can be seen as heteronormatively ordered. Butler comments that when norms ‘operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernable most clearly and dramatically in the effects they produce’ (2004: 41). This is where close attention to what actually goes on in the everyday dimension of social practice can help, since then norms are visible not only in their effects, but in the act of reproducing them. An excellent example of this is Celia Kitzinger’s recent discussion of displays of heterosexual identity through talk (Kitzinger, 2005). Using the techniques of conversation analysis,7 she demonstrates how heterosexuals continually produce themselves and others as heterosexual within ordinary conversations, which are not ostensibly about sexuality or relationships, where ‘nothing special’ is going on but where heterosexuality is routinely and repeatedly displayed. This analysis allows us to see the process of normalization in action, in the everyday process of its production, where normative heterosexuality is available as a resource, but is also an ongoing accomplishment.

Heteronormativity is mobilized and reproduced in everyday life not only through talk, but also through routine activities in which gender, sexuality and heterosexuality interconnect. Gender asymmetry is a key feature here, but takes variable forms. In their daily lives women are frequently identified and evaluated in terms of their sexual availability/attractiveness to men and their presumed ‘place’ within heterosexual relationships as wives and mothers. At work, for example, the increased sexualization and aestheticization of labour can result in particular standards of (hetero)sexual attractiveness impinging on women’s self-presentation and job opportunities (Adkins, 1995; Black, 2004), while assumptions about domestic responsibilities affect both the implementation of and resistance to equal opportunities policies (Cockburn, 1993). Here gendered assumptions seem to be informed by heterosexual ones. But this does not apply in the same way to heterosexual men. While womanliness is almost always equated with (hetero)sexual attractiveness and (heterosexual) domesticity, manliness can be validated not only through (hetero)sex, but also through...
physical or mental prowess, courage or leadership abilities (Connell, 1995, 2000). Where a man’s heterosexuality goes unquestioned, his gender is less bound to and defined by (hetero)sexuality than that of a woman. When either men or women breach heteronormative conventions, however, they are equally susceptible to being defined by, reduced to, their sexuality.

Thinking specifically about how heterosexual sex confirms femininity and masculinity, gender asymmetry works in a different direction. Among young people, first heterosex may make a boy a man, but it does not make a girl a woman (Holland et al., 1996). Impotence, now renamed as ‘erectile dysfunction’, is said to undermine a man: the promise of Viagra is to keep men ‘forever functional’ as men (Marshall and Katz, 2002) – there is little evidence that women partners of such men feel that their femininity is undermined by a lack of penetrative sex (Potts et al., 2002). These assumptions about sex can be seen as heteronormative. However, far more than sex goes on within heterosexual couples, who ‘do’ heterosexuality (and simultaneously do gender) as much through divisions of labour and distributions of household resources as through specifically sexual practices. The concept of heteronormativity tells us little about this, about the ways in which couples practise, negotiate and potentially struggle over their mundane gendered and heterosexual routines.

The sociality of the self

How do 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? How is heteronormativity reproduced at the level of subjectivity while clearly not keeping everyone within its bounds? Answering these questions adequately, in my view, requires a conceptualization of a social self rather than a psychoanalytic notion of the psyche.

The idea of the social self, originating from the work of G.H. Mead (1934), bridges the gap between an understanding of subjectivity as fractured and decentred and the notion of a consciously fashioned self found in some theorizations of modernity, as well as allowing for agency through the emphasis on interpretive practices. Here the self is not a fixed structure but is always ‘in process’ by virtue of its constant reflexivity, a product of socially located biographies in which our past and present lives are in dialogue. The past may shape the present, but the present also significantly re-shapes the past in that we are constantly reconstructing our memories, our sense of who and what we are in relation to the present. The self is not separate from the social but a dimension of it since it is the possession of reflexive selves, our ability to locate ourselves in relation to others, that makes sociality, and the interpretive processes on which it rests, possible.

This interactionist tradition allows for the analytical separation of gendered and sexual aspects of the self, seeing them as empirically and contingently, rather than necessarily, interrelated (Gagnon and Simon, 1974, 2004; Jackson, 2006b). This means that particular forms of gendered
and sexual self-hood are culturally and historically specific; particular modes of self-construction become available at different historical moments in specific social locations (Plummer, 1995; Whisman, 1996). Moreover, gendered and sexual selves are never fixed and continue to be reflexively renegotiated or reconfirmed throughout our lives, allowing for considerable variation. This does not mean that we are free to make and remake our sexual selves as we choose – we are constrained by the cultural resources available to us and by the taken-for-granted of the natural attitude prevailing in the social milieu we inhabit but, because these are resources rather than determinants, variability is possible and agency is a factor even in conformity.10

In modern western societies gender attribution seems to be foundational to the self in that the moment we are born, through a crucial act of social categorization, we are ascribed a gender (Kessler and McKenna, 1978; Kessler, 1998). This is one of the first social categories a child learns, the first identity she adopts. It 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. From this perspective, a gendered sense of self precedes awareness of ourselves as sexual (see Gagnon and Simon, 1974, 2004).11 As soon as we turn to heterosexuality, however, the picture changes, because children come to understand non-sexual aspects of heterosexuality – families, mothers and fathers, for example – way before they gain access to specifically sexual scripts or discourses. This heteronormative ordering of the social becomes taken-for-granted, a resource available for reconceptualization, as sexually significant once children become sexually aware.

The heteronormative order, however, is by no means absolute, heterosexuality is not guaranteed and there is no single form of heterosexuality (or of homosexuality, lesbianism or bisexuality) – self-formation is a variable process. What is significant, however, is how central gender continues to be, whatever the outcome, although there are multiple ways of being male or female. For young heterosexuals, becoming sexual is profoundly gendered (Holland et al., 1998; Wight, 1996; Tolman, 2002) and so are sexual relations in later life (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996; Potts et al., 2002). Becoming lesbian and gay does not entail a loss of gender since homosexuality, as much as heterosexuality, is defined by gender. Yet it does require negotiating different ways of investing gender with erotic significance and different forms of gendered self-understanding. Gay men and lesbians frequently tell stories of self in which they ‘always knew’ they were lesbian or gay or came to ‘realize’ that this was the case – often on the basis of feeling that, as children, 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). That heterosexuals are not called upon to tell such stories is indicative of heteronormativity’s effects, but we should not neglect the significance of gender normativity within the heteronormative contexts in which our selves are forged.
Conclusion

Heteronormative assumptions interconnect with the institutionalization 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. I have argued, however, 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 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. The connections between heterosexuality and gender are much tighter and much more reciprocal than the links between gender and sexuality or sexuality and heterosexuality – precisely because heterosexuality is not only sexual. This is not to say that the ‘sexual’ in heterosexual is unimportant – for it is forms of sexual practice (as well as other non-sexual practices) that help define what constitutes a heterosexual and what defines its perverse other.

It is at this point that the concept of heteronormativity has most purchase. But focusing on heteronormativity alone does not tell us everything there is to know about the institution and practice of heterosexuality. To enhance its utility as a critical concept heteronormativity needs to be thought of as defining normative ways of life as well as normative sexuality. The limits of the concept need also to be appreciated by paying attention to aspects of the linkages between gender, sexuality and heterosexuality that are not reducible to the heteronormative. If these complexities are under-appreciated we risk either seeing heteronormativity as so fluid and contingent that it can be easily unsettled or returning to the worst features of the old normative paradigm and positing it as a monolithic norm so entrenched as to be unassailable.

Notes

1. This is a substantially redrafted version of the keynote paper delivered at the conference ‘Heteronormativity: A Fruitful Concept?’, Norwegian University of Technology, Trondheim, June 2005.

2. It now also co-exists with the increasing visibility of departures from the binary – but even these do not escape gender (Butler, 2004). For the intersexed conformity has been enforced through medical intervention (Kessler, 1998); others change gender or position themselves between male and female – but even the most radical are constrained to locate themselves in relation to gender, as ‘gender outlaws’ (Bornstein, 1994).

3. The term ‘meaning’ is deliberately chosen in preference to such terms as ‘the symbolic’ or ‘signification’, because of their more specific theoretical connotations.


5. I am avoiding the use of ‘totalities’ since, despite Ingraham’s caveats, this term is too easily misunderstood as implying a deterministic totalizing perspective. For more detailed discussions of Ingraham’s perspective see Jackson (2005, 2006b).

6. Garfinkel enumerated seven taken-for-granted assumptions mobilized in
producing for ourselves a gendered view of the world (1967: 122–3).

7. Conversation analysis analyses, in minute detail, ‘naturalistic’ talk – i.e. not interviews or prepared scripts but ordinary, everyday conversation. This makes Kitzinger’s analysis too complex to be easily summarized.

8. I have discussed this at greater length elsewhere (Jackson, 2006b).

9. There are some very crude and over-simplified versions of Mead’s conceptualization of reflexivity in circulation that assume a pre-social ‘I’ and a social ‘me’. In Mead’s own writing the ‘I’ is only ever a fleeting mobilization of the self; the ‘I’ and ‘me’ are more accurately conceived as moments of the self rather than different ‘parts’ of the self. For an excellent discussion of this see Crossley (2001: 146–9).

10. In much recent theory agency is understood as operating only through resistance, but we all make choices and reflexively understand our social worlds even when those choices and reflexivity are mobilized only within the conventional and accepted.

11. 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 mean 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).

References


**Stevi Jackson** is Professor of Women’s Studies and Director of the Centre for Women’s Studies at the University of York. Her main research interests are feminist theory and sexuality, with a particular emphasis on heterosexuality. She is the author of Childhood and Sexuality (Blackwell, 1982), Christine Delphy (SAGE, 1996) and Heterosexuality in Question (SAGE, 1999). Recent journal articles include: ‘Why a Materialist Feminism is Still Possible (and Necessary)’ (Women’s Studies International Forum (2001) 24(2–3): 283–93) and ‘Sexual Antinomies in Late Modernity’, with Sue Scott (Sexualities (2004) 7(2): 241–56). She is currently working on a series of articles on the gendered self and, with Sue Scott, a book on theorizing sexuality.

**Address:** Centre for Women’s Studies, University of York, Heslington, York YO10 5DD, UK. Email: sfj3@york.ac.uk