

# **Queer, Queerer, Queerest?**

## **Feminisms, heterosexualities and queer theorizing**

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'Queering' heterosexualities

Queer theorizing problematizes all forms of unitary subjectivity (e.g. 'lesbian', 'homosexual', 'heterosexual') and disrupts the binary oppositions that organize thinking about sexuality in Anglo/European/North American cultures and white settler societies (Petersen, 1998). This often eclectic body of post-structuralist intellectual work developed in the United States against the background of a series of lively confrontational political actions (e.g. grassroots action by ACT UP and Queer Nation) and academic conferences at which philosophers, literary theorists and historians reflected on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues (Butler, 1990, 1993; de Lauretis, 1991; Fuss, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1991, 1993). This intellectual and political work was directed at constructing 'queer' as 'permanent rebellion' and transgression (Seidman, 1996). It challenged conventional gay and lesbian politics, problematized sexual and gender categories, embraced sexual pluralism and celebrated the mutability of selves (Stein and Plummer, 1996; Gamson, 1996).

If queer theorising is directed at disrupting conventional understandings of sexualities, including the use of the word 'queer', it should be deployed to 'trouble' analyses of intimate relationships between women and men. Why is so much importance attached to the gender of those who are the objects of our erotic attention? Does self consciousness about 'sexual orientation' perpetuate binary thinking about sexualities? What is similar and different about the intimate lives of those currently labeled as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and heterosexual? How can the fluidity of sexualities be

recognized without neglecting the institutional mechanisms that privilege certain relationships and stigmatize others?

This chapter poses more questions than it answers as it explores the relevance of queer theory for erotic relationships between women and men. I conclude with some critical reflections on the possibility of 'post-heterosexuality' and the conditions under which people can be 'post-heterosexual' (Smart, 1996a).

Lesbians and gay men whose lives connected with mine in the 1970s educated me about sexual difference, while radical feminist politics and lesbian separatism challenged me to define myself as 'heterosexual'. In the last decade, feminists like me have again been challenged to reflect on the relationship between their heterosexuality and their feminism (Kitzinger, Wilkinson and Perkins, 1992; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993; Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996; Maynard and Purvis, 1995; Richardson, 1996). These challenges, and the questions queer theorists have raised about 'sexual orientation', provide the context for this chapter. It is also shaped by a persistent sense that many of those currently defined as 'heterosexual' have an interest in the subversion of heterosexuality as an institution and the disruption of binary categorizations of people and relationships.<sup>1</sup>

### Challenging the hetero/homosexual binary

The major focus of critical attention in queer theory is the hetero/homosexual binary (Sedgwick, 1990), a symbolic code that is basic to the constitution of selves and social relations in Aotearoa/New Zealand and other social contexts. This binary opposition is identifiable in a variety of social texts (films, television, novels, advertisements, drama, popular music) and organizes social relations in households, schools, workplaces, community organisations, religious institutions, governments and sports clubs. It informs legislation, the regulation of immigration, citizenship, property rights, rights in children and inheritance.

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While other political responses to heteronormativity have focused primarily on the construction of an oppositional gay or lesbian subject as a basis for asserting citizenship rights, queer analysis entails critical engagement with the strategy of constructing such a subject (Seidman, 1995: 126). Queer theorists suggest that the construction of 'gay', 'lesbian', 'homosexual' or even 'queer' identities consolidates the hetero/homosexual binary rather than destabilizing it. The task of queer theory, as an intellectual and a political project, is to demonstrate the contingent features of the hierarchical hetero/homosexual opposition and expose its political features. It also involves seeing identities not as the property of persons, but as relationally constructed positions - without the social category 'homosexual', there is no identity 'heterosexual'. Disruption of both of these constructions is vital to the project of acknowledging the wide range of social behaviours and social relations through which people express physical intimacy, genital connection, and emotionally charged sensual engagement.

A key component of the deconstructive features of queer theory is also the destabilizing of the key distinction upon which heterosexuality is founded, namely a binary understanding of gender. Just as queer theory recognizes the power of the hetero/homosexual binary, but problematizes it, so it recognizes and problematizes the boundary between male/female, she/he. Resistance to gender binaries, reflection on multiple genders, and appreciation of the way binary differences are sustained through gendered performances are key ingredients of queer theorists' work (Butler, 1990, 1993). Queer theorising and queer practice also resists fixity including the consolidation of 'queer theory' (Jagose, 1996). It celebrates instability and multiplicity, embraces parody and questions assumptions about 'the naturalness' of all sexualities.

### Queer theory and heterosexualities

Queer theory has destabilized gay and lesbian identities (Epstein, 1996; Warner, 1991) and embraced the possibility of a sexual politics that breaks free from 'a stagnant hetero/homo opposition' (Namaste, 1996: 206) It has challenged the efficacy of forms of political identification (i.e. 'woman', 'lesbian' and 'gay') that have been the basis of rights based political action.

But the crucial form of unitary identity to challenge is 'heterosexual' - the privileged component of the hetero/homosexual binary. My project is to turn the attention of queer theory not to gay, lesbian or transgender activism and analysis, but to what is, or has been, constructed as 'heterosexuality'.

Queer theorists argue that the hetero/homosexual binary is both pervasive and unstable (Butler, 1990). If this is the case, it must be possible to 'destabilize heterosexuality', not in the interest of reversing people's choice of gendered objects of desire, but in order to construct oppositional discourses of sexuality. One way to destabilize heterosexuality is to look critically at the way it is constructed as a unitary category. Just as gay and lesbian attempts at constructing identities have been challenged by the multiplicity of sexualities and forms of identity that are embraced by those who define themselves in this way, so heterosexualities are diverse and contradictory and engaged in by those who are also significantly distinguished by ethnicity, class, age, parental status etc...

Eve Sedgwick (1990) has argued that engagement with the gender of those who are desired diverts attention from a variety of other ways of reflecting on differences with respect to sexual activity. Whether intimacy is pursued in a long term monogamous relationship, whether it occurs between people of different ethnicities, ages, or levels of physical mobility, whether it involves a casual encounter, whether it is overtly or covertly commercial are all obscured by the hetero/homosexual binary. According to Sedgwick:

It is a rather amazing fact that, of the many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of "sexual orientation" ... (Sedgwick, 1990: 9).

I want to argue that queer theory opens up the possibility of forms of investigation of sexualities that pay attention to variety with respect to the forms of relations and the types of acts that Sedgwick identifies.

#### Acknowledging antecedents

I am, of course, not alone in considering the impact of queer theorising on the analysis of heterosexualities. Challenges to identity politics by queer theorists have initiated a number of attempts by feminist theorists to utilize queer rhetoric as they engage in a project of rethinking heterosexualities.

In her lively contribution to the Australian journal *Critical inQueeries* Wei Leng Kwok argues for the possibility of 'que(e)rying' straight sex (Kwok, 1995). She responds with enthusiasm to Lynne Segal's claim that heterosexual sex can be 'no less "perverse" than its "queer" alternatives' (Segal, 1994: 318). Like Kwok, I am attracted to the possibility that feminists might use queer theory to disrupt assumptions about the inevitability of relations of dominance and submission when women and men are sexually intimate. If queer theorising entails questioning oppositional hetero/homosexual thinking, then it must have implications for how we think about intimate relations between women and men.

Segal argues that feminists need to disrupt rather than reinforce assumptions about the inevitability of male power in intimate relations between women and men (Segal, 1994: 309-310). This power is best disrupted if it is not taken for granted. Vaginas can be conceived as absorbing men's penises rather than being penetrated by them in acts that inevitably mean domination. And why assume that penetrative sexuality is at the core of all sexual interactions between women and men? May sensual interactions between women and men be 'queerer' than the hegemonic discourses of heterosex might suggest?

#### Deconstructing heterosexuality - alternative strategies?

What arguments have been advanced by those who have embarked on 'deconstructing' and 'que(e)rying' heterosexualities'? What aspects of heterosexual behaviours, meanings, relationships are targeted for attention?

One area for attention is what Susan Bordo has referred to as 'the mutable, plural penis rather than the majestic, unitary phallus' (Bordo, 1993: 697). 'Penile precariousness and mutability' is a major focus of Lynne Segal's analysis of heterosexualities (Segal, 1994: 222). She is interested in destabilizing the body of meanings surrounding the penis as a source of power and domination in intimate encounters between women and men. Destabilizing heterosexuality entails critical engagement with dominant narratives about the power of penises as sources of control, rather than organs which often defy the control of men. (The attraction of Viagra is, of course, that it potentially restores some of that control. This product occupies a wonderfully contradictory position with respect to ideas about the power of the penis. It both acknowledges the vulnerability of penises and provides the technology to enhance control of 'the mutable penis').

Segal argues against seeing penile penetration as 'possession' or necessarily an expression of domination. In this respect she echoes the words of Wendy Hollway, who, in her response to the special issue on heterosexuality in the journal *Feminism and Psychology*, provides a very personal statement about penetrative heterosexuality as an expression of the blurring of bodily boundaries, trust, openness to risk, and mitigation of isolation (Hollway, 1993: 415). Segal argues that the destabilizing of old narratives about heterosexualities requires acknowledging that genital sexuality between women and men can be 'pleasurable, self-affirming, supportive, reciprocal or empowering' as well as 'compulsive, oppressive, pathological or disabling' (Segal, 1994: 260). Rather than a unitary 'heterosexuality' there are 'many heterosexualities'. The task is one of sabotage, subversion and disruption of conventional cultural codes relating to gender and sexuality (Segal, 1994: 242-266).

Queer theory and the possibilities of 'post-heterosexuality'?

Carol Smart is similarly critical of unitary understandings of heterosexuality in feminist writing. She advocates attention to a multiplicity of heterosexualities 'open to the same constructive scrutinies as have been lesbian and gay sexualities' (Smart, 1996b: 168). This does not entail neglecting the institutional power of heterosexuality (Smart, 1996b: 171). This power is

manifest in rights to marry, define a sexual partner as next of kin as well as opportunities to confer employment related benefits, immigration status or citizenship on a partner.

The decoding of acts as 'heterosexual' and the recoding of acts as 'ambivalent' is a major part of Smart's project (Smart, 1996a: 236). A key component of this is critical attention to 'penetration' as a quintessential heterosexual practice (Smart, 1996b: 161). Smart alerts us to the possibility that women may practice penetrative sex on men and discusses the place of penetrative sexuality in gay and lesbian relationships. If the meaning of penetration can vary depending on the genders involved in sexual intimacy, penetration in heterosexual encounters cannot have a single meaning, but must be available for a variety of possible readings (Smart, 1996a: 236). It should not be interpreted as inevitably symbolic of male activity and female passivity any more than penetration between women should be interpreted as inevitably imitative of conventional heterosexuality.

Against the background of Smart's attempts to 'decode' and 'recode' penetration it might be useful to look at 'heterosexual practices' as repeated practices which are consistent with the articulation of heterosexuality as an institution. According to this analysis, one might be a woman who is sexually intimate with a man, but not necessarily someone who engages in 'heterosexual practices'. It is not the genitals of the bodies which define certain acts as 'heterosexual practices', but the relationship between these activities and 'the heterosexual drama' of male activity and female passivity, male aggression and female submission (Ehrenreich, Hesse and Jacobs, 1987) or what Segal (1994: 245) refers to as 'the conventional narratives of sexuality and gender difference'.

Studies of sex workers with male clients and female lovers make us aware that not all women who engage in conventional heterosexual practices are 'heterosexuals'. If a sex worker who temporarily assumes the role of a submissive subject or a dominatrix in the heterosexual drama of a sex work scenario is not 'heterosexual', then is it appropriate to label as 'heterosexual' women with male lovers who daily resist enacting these scenarios in their erotic relationships with men and in their negotiation of domestic work, childcare and employment responsibilities? Are their activities necessarily 'heterosexual practices' and what are the analytic implications of using the

physiological characteristics of their sexual partners to define them in this way? Why adopt this form of essentialism in the analysis of the sexual activities of women who are intimate with men, especially at a time when feminist theorists are challenging essentialist theory?

This raises issues about the meanings of certain practices in different sexual encounters. Of course, penetration may have different meanings in the context of lesbian and gay men's relationships and in relationships between couples we currently define as 'heterosexual'. However, not adhering to practices organised around phallic power must render these practices less 'natural', less inevitable, more contingent and hopefully much more fragile.

Following Judith Butler (1990), Smart seeks to 'denaturalize' heterosexualities and challenge unitary conceptions of sexual identity. The focus of her political project is to 'deconstruct existing heterosexual subject positions and to work towards post-heterosexuality' (Smart, 1996a: 234). She argues that it is possible to recognize the benefits of living a heterosexual life while subjecting heterosexuality to critical scrutiny. Her notion of 'post-heterosexuality' invokes the possibilities of intimate encounters that actively resist assumptions about phallic power, incorporate forms of sexual pleasure that are articulated in gay and lesbian literatures and are founded on alternative understandings of 'male' and 'female' subjectivities.

Smart challenges all those interested in analysing sexualities to differentiate between 'oppressive and empowering heterosexualities, between muted and flagrant heterosexualities, between masculine heterosexualities and feminine, even feminist, heterosexualities' (Smart, 1996b: 175). She suggests that women may have intimate relationships with men and yet have no commitment to 'orthodox heterosexuality' (Smart, 1996b: 176). Their relationship to heterosexuality may be characterized by ambiguity and ambivalence. Her assertions of the need to move beyond 'a fixed heterosexual subject' (Smart, 1996a: 234) are consistent with challenges to identity politics that have been articulated by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered theorists in the last ten years.

The implications of this discussion of 'post-heterosexuality'?



What is involved in queering or 'que(e)rying' heterosexualities? Is it just a matter of asserting that intimacy between women and men can be as 'queer' and 'perverse' as lesbian and gay sexualities or the complex sexualities of transgendered people? Or is there more to the challenge of queer theory than this? And what are the possibilities of talk about 'post-heterosexuality'? Is consideration of post-heterosexuality exclusively of interest to those theorising and researching heterosexualities? Should critiques of the concept of 'post-colonialism' be applied to post-heterosexuality? Does it imply that change has occurred when in fact gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people still encounter the power of heterosexuality as an institution?

Those who are distinguished as lesbian, gay and straight all have an interest in the achievement of an as yet unrealized post-heterosexuality. Reflection on this concept recognizes that we are all subjected to forms of talk, representations in popular culture and state practices that constitute heterosexuality as an institution, let alone the bundle of childhood and adolescent memories that assert themselves in a variety of situations. But it also recognizes that we can analyse that talk, we can subject what constitutes us to critical scrutiny. And as we do this, we are both produced by discourses about sexuality and constantly constituted subjects whose talk, interaction and counter-discourses brings other ways of being sexual into existence.

Regardless of whether the notion of post-heterosexuality is a useful tool for rethinking heterosexualities, there is a need for more investigative work and more writing that is orientated to exploring when and how institutionalized heterosexuality makes a difference in the context of a multiplicity of relationships between people with a variety of genitals and forms of gender identification. This will involve collaborative research among those currently labeled 'heterosexual', 'lesbian', 'gay', 'bisexual' and 'transgendered' who are critical of institutionalized heterosexuality and interested in exploring the contingent features of the gender of the people with whom we are physically intimate. This seems more fruitful than defending the pleasures of 'straight sex' or claiming its 'queerness'. Against the background of challenges to the labels many of us applied to ourselves in the 1970s, it may also be more productively 'perverse'.

## Critical responses?

What arguments have been advanced against these attempts to 'queer' sexual encounters between women and men, or at least to undermine the construction of a unitary 'heterosexuality' and embrace variety, complexity, mutability and mutuality rather than 'oppression' in differently gendered intimacy?

The major focus of criticism has been that those who embrace the possibilities of change fail to attend to the ways in which heterosexuality is institutionalized in cultures like ours. Attention to the fragility of heterosexual codes of behaviour neglect the practices of gender which produce uneven distributions of money, property and access to legal power.

Elizabeth Wilson articulates these criticisms in her challenge to the transgressive features of some heterosexual behaviours that are claimed as 'queer' (Wilson, 1997). She cites an account offered by a woman in a heterosexual relationship who straps on a dildo and 'fucks' her male partner and who suggests that this feels 'altogether queer' (Wilson, 1997: 368). Wilson argues that while this may feel transgressive, it may not necessarily be subversive or political. She argues that this type of transgression 'can't deal with the systematic or structural nature of oppressive institutions' (Wilson, 1997: 369). She suggests that, unless we have a clear idea of how things might be different, this sort of transgression can end up as 'shallow posturing'.

Similar concerns have been identified by Stevi Jackson who argues that heterosexual desire is 'premised on gender *difference*, on the sexual "otherness" of the desired object' (Jackson, 1995b: 21), and this sexual difference is associated with an elaborate gender order. She claims that there is nothing intrinsically unequal about the varieties of practices associated with heterosexual sex, nothing intrinsically unequal about male and female reproductive organs and how they might connect. What is problematic is that the practices of heterosexuals occur in the context of a gender hierarchy that provides a context for all interactions, including those between couples of the 'same' gender. 'To desire the "other sex" or indeed to desire "the same sex" presupposes the prior existence of "men" and "women"

as socially - and erotically - meaningful categories' (Jackson, 1995a: 132). Gender and heteronormativity provide a context for all intimate interactions, but this context has different consequences when those interacting are women and men.

According to Jackson, the key to change lies in undermining gender differences in the distribution of labour, income and property, rather than 'freedom' in sexual encounters between women and men. It is the wider structure of 'gender' as a regulatory trope that constructs heterosexualities. Since heterosexuality 'is not simply a sexual institution', changes in the sexual practices of heterosexuals are not enough to dislodge its power (Jackson, 1995a: 134). Until the gender order that underlies heterosexuality is undermined we may claim rhetorically that heterosexuality may be 'queered', but this is a matter of gesturing to possibilities, rather than indicating achievements.

VanEvery (1996) also cautions against accepting too readily the accounts of resistant heterosexualities offered by feminist analysts. She argues that these accounts ignore information available to us about the majority of heterosexual households. These are contexts in which women earn less than their partners and therefore are in some respects 'dependent' on men's earnings. They spend more time in unpaid work than men and are often expected to be sexually available, regardless of whether they actually comply. The context of living a 'heterosexual life' inhibits the pleasures of heterosexual sex as they are outlined by feminists like Segal, Hollway and Kwok.

Heterosexuality, according to VanEvery (1996: 51-2) can afford women many pleasures, but it is about more than sensuality and erotic pleasure, because it usually takes place within relationships that are not exclusively sexual. Heterosexual erotic encounters often occur in relationships in which people negotiate about money, about who will stay home in the evening for the children, about responsibilities for cooking dinner or collection of a child from a sports event. VanEvery argues that women are frequently positioned as 'wife' in heterosexual interactions, regardless of whether or not they are married, and their intentions about equality. This is the context neglected by Segal, Hollway and Smart. VanEvery's interviews with women who were living in heterosexual living arrangements convinced her that women can engage in

heterosexual sex while challenging the hegemonic construction of heterosexuality and gender. At the same time, she argues that we cannot analyse sexual relationships between women and men without inquiring into the contexts of the relationships within which they occur. This includes attention to the way in which relationships that challenge male dominance depend on men's agreement and occur within a context in which heterosexuality is sanctioned by the State and the church (VanEvery, 1996: 53).

These arguments focus on the social contexts within which people pursue relations of sexual intimacy. Systematic gender differences with respect to the division of labour, access to income and connection to a wider community can make sex acts between women and men symbolic of male power. These gender differences provide the context for intimacy even when they are challenged by individual women and men. Queering heterosexuality involves dismantling the legal differences between lesbian, gay and heterosexual households. It might involve the de-gendering or re-gendering household tasks and childcare. It must entail disruptions to the dominant heterosexual discourses that provide a context for acts of intimacy between men and women.

### Queer escapes?

Diana Fuss (1991: 1) has argued that the hetero/homosexual opposition corresponds to an 'inside/outside' opposition that privileges heterosexuality. Feminist critiques of heterosexuality as an institution have sometimes made feminists who are intimate with men feel as if they are 'on the outside' in the context of feminist communities. While they may be privileged in terms of institutional supports for heterosexual life styles, they have often occupied an uncomfortable position as 'heterosexual' feminists. They are, to use the analysis Fuss offers, 'inside/out' - simultaneously both 'inside' and 'outside' at the same time.

A sense of being on the 'outside' as a heterosexual feminist, particularly on the outside with respect to the rights to claim association with intellectually engaging queer theory is succinctly articulated by Wei Leng Kwok. She reflects on a '(heterosexual) guilt' that often emerges when she reads queer

theorists or attends queer conferences. Challenged at a seminar about her use of queer theory, she finds herself excluded from 'the dizzying heights of queerness' despite her desire to 'escape from the intellectually boring' (Kwok, 1995: 141).

Are there some dangers here? If 'queer' is 'a fashionably trendy space', as Kwok suggests, it seems important to both recognize and resist attempts to rhetorically embrace heterosexual practices as 'queer'. Are heterosexual feminists who argue for the 'queerness' of straight sex merely trying to jump on an intellectually fashionable bandwagon? Are we trying to revitalize and defend boring, hegemonic straight sex by associating it with queer theory?

I want to argue that claims about the queering of straight sex may well have these rhetorical elements, but that it is none the less valuable to take the insights of queer theory to a discussion of sexual intimacy between those who, in a gendered world, are defined as 'women' and 'men'. In the process of doing this it is important to distinguish between heterosexuality as an institution (e.g. a set of rules about the regulation of intimacy between genders and the relations between children and parents) and the complexity of interactions that occur between men and women who are involved in intimate relationships. Just as gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people want to resist homogenization of their identities and practices and use queer theory as a source of insights in their attempts to achieve these goals, so those currently defined as 'heterosexuals' may want to use this bundle of intellectual work to resist homogenization of their practices and relationships. They may also want to deploy queer theory to challenge constructions of a specifically 'heterosexual' identity.

Attention to the diversity of meanings, actions, interactions and relationships that can occur between women and men who are sexually intimate does not entail defending heterosexuality as an institution nor being 'defensive' about the gender of your lover. Feminists who are sexually intimate with men often share with those who identify as 'queer' a commitment to undermine heteronormativity. They have their own reasons for challenging gender binaries. These challenges may involve public political action, but they can also take the form of disrupting assumptions about heterosexuality, including some feminist accounts of heterosex that assume male dominance and female submission and construct unitary accounts of 'the heterosexual'. It is

probably not appropriate for those currently defined as heterosexual to embrace the label 'queer'. However, queer theorizing is a challenge to pursue studies of sexualities in Aotearoa/New Zealand that decentre the gender of lovers as the most important aspect of sexual activity, recognize the historically contingent features of 'heterosexual' as a social identity and encourage continuing transgression of established understandings of sexualities.

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