

Enabling conversations about sex and sexuality¹

By Mary Heath

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In this paper, I argue that the capacity to talk about sex and sexuality is vital to effective narrative practice, though these issues are little discussed among narrative practitioners. Building our skills in enabling such conversations can better equip us to move in the direction of reducing violence, discrimination and coercion; creating safety and improving wellbeing. I argue that being capable of conversations about sexual practices is critical to important goals, such as ending sexual violence and eliminating discrimination against queer people. The capacity to speak about sexuality is also important in supporting people who wish to move beyond traumatic or joyless experiences related to sex and into living thriving and pleasurable lives. This paper invites readers to reflect on their own confidence and ability in enabling conversations about sex and sexuality. Finally, it provides concrete suggestions for people who would like to increase their capacity for relaxed conversations about sex and sexuality.

Keywords: sex, sexuality, queer, rape, communication

INTRODUCTION

This paper arose from a conversation with Cheryl White. She noticed how seldom issues of sex and sexuality were being raised with and among narrative practitioners. When these topics were raised, the conversation did not go as well as it might. She emailed me with this goal:

Raising the consciousness, awareness, comfort, and skills level of narrative therapists from around the world so that they create a context where the people seeking their assistance can at least feel like it's possible to talk about their own sexual practices! (White, 2010)

In this paper, I aim to provide some information and tools that might be of use in taking up Cheryl's challenge. Perhaps most importantly, though, I aim to incite readers who are not already confident in their capacity to undertake conversations about sexuality to take up this project. I believe being capable of conversations about sexual practices is critical to goals that I hold dear, such as ending sexual violence and eliminating discrimination against queer people and those who do not comply with social expectations about gender. The capacity to speak about sexuality is also important in supporting people who wish to move beyond traumatic or simply joyless experiences related to sex and into living thriving and pleasurable lives.

THIS COULD GET EMBARRASSING – BUT PERHAPS ONLY FOR ME

Why should thoughtful conversations about sex and sexuality be hard to find, when I argue they are so important? There are contexts (in my culture, at this time) in which it is acceptable to refer to sex obliquely, and others in which jokes can be made. Yet the range of socially acceptable conversations about sex remains limited in my cultural context, and is even more narrowly circumscribed in some others. To speak of sex outside these contexts can be deeply embarrassing.

I teach criminal law at a university. As a result, I must speak rather explicitly about sex—more specifically, rape. Describing the law requires explicit discussion of sexual acts and parts of the

body. The first time I approached this task, I rehearsed my lecture with a friend. He stopped me when I was describing the legal definition of 'sexual intercourse' to ask: 'what's cunnilingus?'²

This was a brutal encounter with my own embarrassment. However, if I did not offer plain English explanations of 'fellatio',³ 'cunnilingus' and 'labia majora'⁴ I knew no-one would ask for clarification. The entire class laughs nervously at the suggestion anyone might ask a question. The embarrassed laughter grows louder when I describe a sexual assault prevention policy which famously requires explicit agreement to every stage of a sexual encounter.⁵ I model what this might mean: 'May I unbutton your shirt? May I kiss you? May I put my hand on your ...? May I put my ... in your ...?' Confronted with a requirement to get such explicit agreement, most students I teach believe they would never have sex (again).

However, while I am taking the liberty of assuming some readers may have a little embarrassment of their own, let's notice that claiming embarrassment is a privileged position. In many cultures, this is the socially acceptable response to explicit sexual talk. Confessing interest in sex, especially sex that is not 'normal', may have serious social repercussions. Expressing shock about what 'some people' do sexually marks us out as people who would never do that. People who have expertise in speaking overtly about sex may have gained it through stigmatised activities, such as sex work.

In spite of any embarrassment you may feel, I invite you to engage your curiosity and read on. I begin by speaking about the path I have taken to deciding that it is necessary, even vitally important, for me to be able to speak openly about sexuality.

A PERSONAL HISTORY

I was born in Australia in 1965. I grew up in a white, Anglo, upwardly mobile family of mixed class heritage with – need I say? – heterosexual parents. Sex was not discussed, marriage was the normal way to live, and gay people were invisible. Eventually I was given some information about menstruation and reproduction. It came with a great deal of embarrassment, if not shame. Mostly, it was received in silence. I did not go home from school and ask my parents for details. There was no

information about pleasure. Most of what we were told seemed far removed from actual humans. Late in high school one of my sisters asked me if you had to do 'that' with a man to have a baby. I had to think hard and wasn't entirely sure of my conclusion: 'I think so'. We were both appalled by this realisation.

With this scant supply of sexual knowledge, as a young woman I felt I had to pretend to be knowledgeable about a lot of things I was completely clueless about. However, ill equipped as I felt, I was conscious that I had much more information than my grandmother. She once told me she had been given no information at all about menstruation and therefore thought she was bleeding to death when her first period arrived. I was also better informed than my mother had been. I had enough information to have choices about my fertility. My parents have always made me feel I was wanted, but I eventually realised that I was almost certainly not a planned child, conceived as I was two months after their marriage and in challenging circumstances for what soon became their young family.

And then along came AIDS

In the Australia of my parents' generation, many unwanted children were conceived for lack of information about sex and contraception. However, having come to adulthood in the 1980s, when AIDS first came to Australia, I am part of a generation of Australians where people died because they didn't have sexual information. This is still happening in parts of the world. In the early 1980s, it became clear that if sex could not be discussed, people would die for lack of needed information. It was equally clear that I was still too embarrassed to be capable of the explicit conversations about sexual practices and safer sex that might be necessary to keep myself (and others) safe. I got to watch and learn as braver people, particularly gay men, positive women, BDSM⁶ practitioners and sex workers, tried to enable people like me to speak about sex so that we could prevent people becoming sick when treatment for HIV was unknown and dying before effective treatments had been discovered.

For me, the 1980s was also the period in which I discovered feminism. Along with my peers, I put a

lot of effort into trying to figure out how to make the world a more egalitarian, safer place. We were not just thinking about large scale social change. We were trying to figure out how to apply our political principles to our intimate relationships. We discussed and experimented with openly negotiated multiple relationships. We believed achieving genuinely egalitarian relationships which did not treat our lovers as property was a serious ethical and political obligation. We were bold, and sometimes naïve, experimenters in the name of freedom (in some cases, we were also dedicated pleasure seekers).

The 1980s later came to be known as the period of the feminist sex wars. Having grown up in a rather conservative family, I took the opportunity of going to University to read and think about ideas I had never encountered. I was prepared boldly to read where many others (but no-one I had known up until this point) had read before. As part of this project, I read feminist debates over pornography (seen by some as free speech and by others as generating sexual violence) and BDSM (seen by some as an exercise of female agency and others as eroticising domination and submission, the root cause of women's oppression).

These debates were by no means mainstream, but they were part of my social context. I saw a few strident voices effectively silence wider conversations on these topics which were created with difficulty in the US during this period (Vance, 1989; Hollibaugh, 2000; Allison, 1995). This must be seen as a failing of the conversation by the silent (me among them for the most part) as well as the strident.

Eventually I came to see anti-pornography and anti-BDSM approaches, even when I agreed with them, as problematic. I was being asked to condemn pornography when I had never read *Playboy*.⁷ I was being expected to condemn BDSM without having much idea of what it involved or why people would be interested in it. When I saw lesbians who were doing BDSM being ostracised by the lesbian community, I knew that couldn't be right even if I objected to what I assumed they were doing. In the 1980s, to be openly lesbian was a much more marginalised life than it is in Australia now. To be ostracised by your own sub-culture meant a life of considerable isolation.

In short, I saw the costs of silencing conversation about these practices on relationships and organisations. Where conversations requiring a language for sex and desire opened up, they were often started by BDSM practitioners and sex workers, who were talking about how to negotiate sex, how to negotiate consent, how to be or become a woman able and prepared to talk about what she'd like to do sexually. Many of these opportunities were lost, and others came at a high cost – but these difficult times turned out to be the beginning of quite different conversations within queer communities and within feminism. These conversations were started with courage: generations of misogyny have created a wealth of English language slurs for women who openly express and pursue their sexual desires, to say nothing about how such women have been treated.

Teaching rape law (and other forms of sex education)

Given my own experiences as a recipient of sex education, I decided that, as a parent, I needed to be able to communicate that sex was a perfectly reasonable subject of conversation that did not require side servings of embarrassment, shame or humiliation. However, my daughter turned out not to be the only person I would be talking about sex with.

I have already mentioned that I teach rape law. At first, I believed that I was only teaching students about rape law. However, it was soon clear that this would be as much an emotional experience as an intellectual one. My classes contain people most of whom are at the prime period of their lives statistically for being sexually coerced (if female) or perpetrating sexual coercion (if male) (de Visser et al., 2003). Shouldn't this impact on the way I teach them (Heath, 2005)? My classes are distressed to think that anything short of what the law defines as rape is acceptable. Shouldn't I be prepared to speak about ethical sexuality and not only about coercive sexuality? Shouldn't I be holding out for a rape free world and not just a better rape statute? I have decided I need to figure out how I can respond to these concerns.

Every time I stand in front of a class and speak about rape, I am communicating about sex with students in my classes. Although what I say is

important, the real message that students take away relies just as much on the way I speak, my capacity to invite them to laugh, my facial expressions and my attitudes (Harrison et al., 1996; Denborough, 1996). In order to take seriously my role as a sex educator – a person who is inevitably communicating some message about sexuality to students – I need to keep working on my own embarrassment and any place where I privately despair about rape, the prospects for social change, the possibility of sex as life affirming and joyous.

Further, I need to be able to speak to the experiences it is likely that my classes are having in relation to sex. Looking out into a class of 300 people, I lack detailed knowledge about most of them as individuals. Yet, if they are statistically typical, they are a mix of homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual (as well as people who reject such labels). The men have already experienced the peak risk period for sexual victimisation in their lives (de Visser et al., 2003). There are perpetrators of sexual assault as well as people who have been pressured or coerced into sex in the room. Those now in their late teens and twenties who have tried heterosexual (most of the class) are likely to have had their first experience of intercourse at 16 (Rissel, 2003a). Some of them have just discovered – in my class – that they were below the age of legal consent when they did so, even though they may have understood that experience as consensual. However, the evidence also suggests that most young heterosexuals (and queers are not doing a whole lot better) know that their partner is consenting to sex because s/he 'doesn't move away' (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Beres et al., 2004; Beres, 2007). In other words, I believe many members of the class are sexually active, some are at disproportionate risk of sexually assaulting or being sexually assaulted, and most do not engage in overt sexual negotiation.

Sexual negotiation is, of course, vitally important to ensuring sex that is not coercive. But skills for sexual negotiation are also critical to increasing the possibilities for mutual pleasure, and surely this is not completely irrelevant even if it is not my principal goal. Conversations about needs and desires are crucial conversations which could usefully go further than 'Yes' or 'No'. If we cannot say 'I love it when you ...', or 'Please don't ...', or

'Can we go a little slower/quicker/harder/gentler please?', how can we hope to enter into more complex sexual conversations? Research in Australia shows 96% of women and men expect their partner not to have sex with other people when in a regular heterosexual relationship, yet 35% have never discussed this with that partner (Rissel et al., 2003b). What else is being left out of our conversations?

I hope to incite students in my classes to aspire to more than 'not moving away' as the height of communication about sex, no matter what their ages. Current thinking in rape prevention suggests that young people need to be equipped with strategies and skills for ethical sexuality rather than left to work out for themselves what generations before them appear not to have figured out (Carmody, 2003, 2005, 2006). Needless to say, if I can't speak about sexuality, I will not be able to progress these goals, in class or outside it.

SOME CONCLUSIONS I HAVE DRAWN

Sexual practices are not beyond the scope of self-reflection, moral inquiry or political evaluation. However, conversations about them need to proceed in ways that are enquiring and curious, tender as well as robust, thoughtful and inclusive. Otherwise, we risk condemnation and silencing rather than a conversation. Feminism and other practices of self-reflection and political analysis incited me to consider the ethics and politics of sexual practices in ways that I continue to find vital and interesting. However, my decisions to engage in these conversations and the practices of self-reflection that drive them are not decisions I would impose on others.

Having spent a lot of time thinking about coercive sexuality over some decades now, I no longer experience concern about people who are engaging in sexual practices that I personally find unappealing, puzzling or just plain boring, provided they are undertaken with mutual enthusiasm. I am much less interested in critique of other people's paths to pleasure than I was in the past. I have described some of the reasons I have decided I need to be able to talk about sexuality. They may not be your reasons. However, here are some further reasons for you to consider.

SOME REASONS TO TALK ABOUT IT

Not talking about sexual practices you find distasteful or puzzling doesn't make them – or your embarrassment about them – go away. You will need some practice at speaking about these matters with people other than your clients if you want your clients to be able to speak with you. If sexuality doesn't come up at work for you, it may be that your embarrassment has something to do with that. Your clients are watching you for clues at every level when they come to see you. They are unlikely to raise sexual matters with you if they suspect this will make you uncomfortable, or that you are likely to be judgemental. It is likely that the stakes are high for them – higher than they are for you – and they will consider the risks of raising sex with you very seriously. Many of them would prefer to remain silent than take these risks, even with you. However, silence has costs, including human pain.

More importantly: if you think ending coercive sex would be a good idea, you need to be able to talk about sex. Otherwise you will be one of the people who can only tell their partner is consenting because s/he doesn't move away (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). You will be incapable of assisting others into conversations about ethical sexuality, and poorly equipped to engage in conversations about coercive sexuality that go beyond addressing trauma. Addressing trauma is vital, but this is usually not the sole life goal of a person who has had traumatic experiences.

If you would like to see an end to discrimination which uses sex between people of the same sex, and the existence of bodies that don't conventionally align gender and sex as excuses for its existence, you need to be able to talk about sex and sexuality. People who struggle with homophobia and transphobia have a lot of their attention tied up in the sex they presume gay people to be having. They are sometimes preoccupied with the bodies they imagine trans, intersex and non-gender conforming people to have, and this preoccupation all too often leads to violence and even murder. If you have no capacity to listen and respond relaxedly, how can you hope to support these people to change? Those of us who suffer because of their attitudes and actions would like to have as many allies as possible working on this project, rather

than doing all of the re-education work ourselves.

If you think shame and silence may not be the best way to keep people safe (from disease, fraud or coercion) or to ensure every child is wanted, you will need to be able to speak about sex. You will also need to be able to model sex as an appropriate conversational topic for those who privately wish they could ask a question. Or seven questions. Or negotiate safer sex with you.

SO NOW THAT WE ARE ALL FEELING MOTIVATED!

For some of us, being capable of conversations about sexuality at all would be an advance. However, we can go further than this, aiming to build our capacity for conversations about non normative sexual practices. In this context, 'non-normative' refers to practices that are not normative within the dominant culture of a specific time and place. 'From the ways in which people flirt with one another to the laws defining sexual crimes, all behaviours and attitudes related to sexuality are shaped and regulated by social norms' (Weiss, 2010, p. 287). Some norms are so pervasive they go largely unnoticed and without critique. For example, in my culture and time, female body hair has become non-normative, with distinct implications for what is 'sexy'. Almost 97% of Australian women shave their legs and underarms (Fahs, 2011, p. 453). On the other hand, sometimes practices which are subject to social censure are actually widely practiced despite being non-normative. For example, extramarital affairs, while widely condemned, are quite common (Barker & Langridge, 2010).

Gayle Rubin (1989, p. 281) generated an influential account of sexual norms in the US of the 1980s, describing normative sexuality as 'the charmed circle'. Inside her charmed circle is sex between heterosexual, married people for procreative purposes that takes place without an exchange of money, in couples (not alone or in groups) without the use of pornography or objects, and does not involve sadomasochism. Some of these norms have altered since Rubin wrote: sex before marriage, for example, is now much more widely accepted in the US and Australia than it was in the 1980s. However, her analysis points to indicators we might consider when looking for sexual norms. Some practices are non-normative

because of who is involved (for example, same-sex partners); the number of people involved (polyamory⁸, promiscuity, or swinging⁹); because of what is being done (BDSM, fisting¹⁰, use of sex toys, rimming¹¹) or where it is happening (in public, at beats¹², dogging¹³). Sex may also be seen as non-normative because of its relationship to risk, whether the risk is physical (barebacking¹⁴ or blood sports¹⁵) or emotional (involving connection to past abuse). In thinking about these practices, we need to be constantly aware that 'What one person finds repulsive, others find delicious, tantalizing and risky' (Shepard, 2010, p. 517).

Practical strategies

How can we equip ourselves for conversations about sexuality? As with any area of human culture you would like to learn about, humility, curiosity, self-reflection, willingness to ask questions and self-education projects are crucial tools. Just as a gentile might decide to learn about Judaism and anti-Semitism, or a white Australian might choose to self-educate about Indigenous Australians and racism, a monogamous, vanilla¹⁶ therapist might choose to learn about BDSM or polyamory or swinging or transgender lives. Of course, you need to exercise thoughtfulness in deciding when curiosity and question-asking make sense. It is important not to place others at risk or exploit them. However, this is not necessary. You can begin with books, dvds, the internet, podcasts, life stories, documentaries and blogs. The possibilities are more numerous now than at any prior point in history.

Let me be completely clear that I am not telling you what you should do (or think) sexually or in your workplace. I am not suggesting you should never assess a sexual practice to be inappropriate. However, talking about something or educating yourself about it does not require you to try it for yourself.

When I feel judgemental about conservative religious groups picketing films that they have never seen on the basis of their supposed content, I remember the times I participated in condemning activities that I had not experienced and did not understand. Consequently, I am now more likely to go and see *Borat* to find out whether I think it is racist or anti-Semitic and draw my own conclusions than to stay away and condemn it unseen. I do not

think that doing so is likely to contaminate me or turn me into a racist (at least on first viewing). The squirming I do while I watch is as educational as any other part of the experience. This is the kind of approach I invite you to take to researching the sexual practices or sexualities of others if you are among the altogether-too-embarrassed.

While in my opinion, the approaches I have mentioned are the key strategies, I will say a little more about some specific situations.

Creating room for multiple accounts of unwanted sex

For most narrative practitioners, when sex comes up at all, it comes up in the context of conversations about unwanted sex, often involving rape and/or partner violence.

Over recent decades, public conversation about sexual victimisation has moved forward dramatically as a result of feminist and anti-violence activism and the hard work of committed practitioners. I have been part of this activism and believe these are real gains. However, the now dominant victimisation discourse suggests that extreme trauma and permanent damage are inevitable results of rape and this perspective has costs as well as benefits. People who experience rape are framed as in need of professional assistance and beyond the help of ordinary members of the public. Friends feel unable or unqualified to assist, afraid they will do the wrong thing if they try to offer support. Many believe only a trained professional should attempt to support a raped person (Gavey, 2011). This construction stigmatises the raped person and leaves him or her beyond the help of ordinary mortals, a profoundly ostracising outcome (Gavey, 2011). Most people who experience rape will never speak to a counsellor about their experience but prefer to tell friends and family members (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004) making the professionalisation of responding to rape particularly problematic.

These conclusions are not required by research evidence, which suggests the impact of rape is variable. There is no single response experienced by every survivor. Some negative psychological consequences are common, but not all rape survivors experience them. For many who do, distress decreases over time (Gavey, 2011).

Victimisation narratives about rape are so strongly socially preferred we risk silencing people who don't adhere to them. When a person who has experienced unwanted sex says, 'My friends think I was raped but I don't', they are not necessarily in denial. They may be engaged in a profound moral inquiry about their own complicity in the experience. This is not to suggest that the other person/s can or should be exonerated. They may be seeking deeper self-knowledge in order to assure themselves that they can address anything they may have done or felt which they believe may have rendered them vulnerable.

We need to allow for accounts of ambivalence, confusion, pleasure and resistance, as well as those of pain and trauma. Unwanted sex is a highly variable experience which cannot be accounted for by a single narrative. There are ambiguous sexual encounters. There are people who are genuinely confused about what has happened. If we close out conversations about self-blame we can close out conversations about self-responsibility. If we stress the traumatic nature of rape to the exclusion of all other possibilities, people wonder what is wrong with them if they feel okay. Others will conclude that, if they don't feel permanently damaged, what happened to them wasn't really rape. People who experienced physical pleasure in the course of abuse will feel that they cannot speak about this experience or its impact on them. There is never just one way to understand any human experience.

The primacy of the victimisation narrative suggests a very crisp boundary between rape and non-rape which does not, in my opinion, exist.¹⁷ Pretending it does risks leaving 'ordinary' heterosex, in particular, unchallenged. Postfeminist writers 'stop short of feminist analysis ... in their willingness to forgo a critique of the conditions that foster ambiguity between rape and sex: that is, a culture of heterosexuality in which power is allowed to infuse sex in different ways for women and men – ways that consistently foreground men's rather than women's rights and desires' (Gavey, 1999, p. 75).

Finally, we can't assume conversations about non-normative sexual practices are not conversations about sexual victimisation (or vice versa). Some people were victimised in contexts which previously held pleasure for them. For some, pleasure must now be found in new ways. Some

people are working through victimisation in sexual contexts rather than (or in addition to) therapy. And these things are as true for people with non-normative sexual practices as they are for heterosexual, vanilla folk. The erotic can be a place of discovery, exploration, creativity and healing – and not only for those who have experienced sexual coercion. We should hope that people who are seeking human connection and pleasure – sexual or otherwise – will struggle through whatever stands in the path of finding them. And that some may seek our support in doing so.

Queer friendliness

If you are embarking on making yourself more obviously queer friendly, begin by checking your basics. Consider whether you are assuming that people who come to see you are always heterosexual: do you give their partner/s a gendered pronoun before they have done so? Do you assume they only have one partner? Do you assume anyone with a same-sex partner is lesbian or gay, closing out bisexuality or other options? Many queer people have a lot of practice at massaging interactions with those who assume we are heterosexual so that we can set the mistaken person 'straight'¹⁸ but reassure them that we have not taken offence. However, this is not true for everyone. People who avoid using pronouns have chosen not to tell you the gender of their partner/s directly and will have their own reasons for that decision. It is important to work at not contributing to the reasons life has given them so far.

Next, have you considered your intake forms and processes? Does your form require people to identify themselves as male or female? If so, is it excluding people who are neither or both, who may be transgender, transsexual, or intersexed? Does your form presume heterosexuality? Years ago, after a long search for a non-homophobic relationship counsellor, my then partner and I came in for an appointment. The form required one partner to be listed as the male partner and the other as the female partner. I immediately wrote myself down as the husband, fervently hoping my partner wouldn't walk out. We were there because our relationship was in crisis and had waited weeks for this appointment. We could have lived without this level of added stress.

Does your service require intake to be done in a public place? My partner has faced questions such as the following (loudly, in the waiting room, as a form is completed on a computer):

Q: 'Next of kin?'

Q: 'Your relationship to that person?'

A: 'She is my partner.'

Q: 'Married or single?'

A: 'Marriage isn't one of the options available to us.'

It takes a lot of courage and resilience to face insensitive processes in front of total strangers who may or may not be homophobic. The fact that a service has not recognised its intake process may be aversive or risky for non-heterosexuals communicates a good deal in itself.

Next, remember the difference between identity and experience. 97-98% of Australian adults identify as heterosexual, but only 91% of men and 88% of women have exclusively other sex sexual experience. Most people who have had sex with someone of the same sex identify as heterosexual. 1.6% of men and 0.8% of women in Australia identify as homosexual, while 0.9% of men and 1.4% of women identify as bisexual, though many people (including lesbians and gay men) assume bisexuals to be far fewer than homosexuals. 3% of the adult Australian population have never had sex with anyone (this is a higher proportion of the population than lesbians and gay men combined) (Smith, 2003; Grulich 2003).

Queer people are looking for clues and have often asked people they trust prior to deciding on a practitioner they hope might be queer friendly (Mulligan & Heath, 2007). For women in a study I undertook, the decision to disclose a non-heterosexual identity remained a seriously considered decision. Without indications that it would be safe, some non-heterosexual women decided not to disclose even when they knew their practitioner was making incorrect assumptions about them. Some did not disclose even when they believed non-disclosure might prejudice the care they received (Mulligan & Heath, 2007). You can offer clues such as friendly posters, magnets

indicating your preparedness to talk about sexuality, rainbow stickers, sexual health paraphernalia (sex positive environments are viewed as more likely to be queer friendly) and you can distribute the local gay/queer/sex positive press.

Non-heterosexual women told us they were seeking open mindedness (they appreciated a practitioner who 'doesn't bat an eyelid' or 'treats my sexuality as unremarkable') and skill. Many women were prepared to educate a practitioner in hopes that those coming after them would benefit. Those who had encountered a self-educating practitioner deeply appreciated their care and thoughtfulness (Mulligan & Heath, 2007).

Some tools for thinking about non-normative sexual practices

Feminists have generated some valuable tools for thinking through encounters between dominant groups and groups which are routinely treated as 'the other'. 'World travelling' is one such strategy. World travelling invites those of a dominant culture to imaginatively travel to the world of a dominated (sub)culture. It proposes that we treat debates over controversial practices such as genital cutting and BDSM as encounters between a dominant culture and another (sub)culture. World travelling has been adapted and built upon as it has been used to think about the oppression of women (Frye, 1983); relationships between racialised and white women (Lugones, 1987) and dominant cultures' responses to female genital cutting (Gunning, 1991-1992). Most recently, Maneesha Deckha (2011) has recommended using world travelling as a strategy for considering claims that sadomasochism is or could be a feminist practice. World travelling proceeds through three key steps (Deckha, 2011).

First: ... examine your own cultural history for evidence of the practice that you might now see as 'backward' or 'horrific'. In many cases, the practice occurred in your own culture in the past (or occurs in the present). For example, genital surgeries are performed in western nations on healthy bodies; clitoridectomy was practised in the past to cure hysteria and masturbation, and there are many cultural references to BDSM in fashion, glamour magazines and TV.

Second: ... look for parallels between the othered practice and the normalised practices of your own

culture. We are able to understand (and accept) the practices of our own cultures because we understand a good deal about the wider context in which they take place. We do not have the same amount of contextual information about other cultures. Even when we work hard to understand another culture, we cannot reliably acquire the degree of understanding about how it operates that a person brought up within it would have. If we want to understand the practices of other (sub) cultures, we need to provide these practices with the degree of context required to understand them. Examining parallels allows us to reflect on our own cultural practices in ways which may lead to new insights about the way we think about 'other' cultures' practices.

For example, Deckha suggests that we can often find parallels between stigmatised practices (such as BDSM) and the desirable, right or permissible practices of dominant culture. In relation to BDSM, she points to the ubiquitous pursuit or tolerance of pain in exercise, in relation to beauty (XXX wax anyone?) and in workplaces. She argues that dominance and submission are commonplace and even eroticised in bureaucracy and corporate structures (as well as in too many families). Yet BDSM is stigmatised while these practices are treated as ordinary.

If we fail to consider the parallels between what is normalised in our own culture (the XXX wax) and what is regarded as 'other' (BDSM), we are at risk of hypocrisy. Racialised and/or colonised people are all too aware of having their cultural practices interpreted as barbaric, primitive or strange by people from dominating societies whose cultural practices are not scrutinised in the same way. Those with power tend to assume that their cultural practices are above criticism. They do not have the intense awareness of the ways their cultural practices are interpreted by others that less powerful people are forced to have.

Third: ... Deckha recommends seeing yourself as the other sees you. She argues that you must 'realize the hegemonic position that [you] may occupy vis-a-vis the Other and that the Other might connect your cultural inquiry into histories of discipline and exploitation (Gunning, 1991-1992)' (Deckha, 2011, p. 134). If we do not, we risk unawaresly reproducing the experiences of racism, colonialism,

stereotyping and discrimination that ‘people like us’ have inflicted on ‘people like them’ in the past. We will also struggle to understand when the other appears defensive or anxious when we unreflectively believed our enquiries were innocent.

Only after taking these steps should we decide whether to support, tolerate or condemn the practices of (sub)cultural others.

AND SO, TO CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION ...

Human diversity is a delightful and spectacular phenomenon. We are no less diverse in relation to sexuality than in other areas of social and cultural life. Just as in other spheres of social life, there is no need or obligation for each of us to adopt the sexual practices of others. However, I hope I have convinced you that there are some excellent reasons to work toward being capable of holding thoughtful conversations about them. I hope that doing so can equip us to move in the direction of reducing violence, discrimination and coercion, creating safety and improving wellbeing. Human thriving seems to me a highly desirable goal, and these conversations are part of achieving it.

NOTES

1. This paper is informed by conversations that span decades: it is not possible to thank all of the people who have encouraged, informed, criticised, debated and loved me into greater understanding here. I would like to express my gratitude in particular to Cheryl White, David Denborough, Sal Humphreys, and Deb King. I would also like to thank the many law students who have contributed to my understanding as well as those who attended the two workshops at which I first explored the ideas in this paper. Finally, my grateful thanks to the referees, whose thoughtfulness and commentary have very much improved this paper.
2. ‘Cunnilingus’ means oral sex in which lips and/or tongue come into contact with female genitalia.
3. ‘Fellatio’ means oral sex in which lips and/or tongue come into contact with a penis.
4. ‘Labia majora’ are the external lips surrounding the entrance to the vagina.
5. Antioch College Sexual Offense Prevention Policy: <http://antiochmedia.org/mirror/antiwarp/www.antioch-college.edu/Campus/sopp/index.html> (as at 26 September 2011).
6. BDSM means Bondage and Discipline; Dominance and submission; Sadism and Masochism. These practices are described by people who participate in them as involving erotic power exchange.

7. During this period, *Playboy* was a pornographic magazine featuring full frontal (female) nudity.
8. Literally, ‘many loves’. In this context, meaning openly negotiated multiple sexual relationships.
9. Sexual arrangements primarily organised around couple relationships in which partners may be (temporarily) exchanged, and/or sex involving other partners may be organised.
10. Sex involving insertion of an entire hand into the vagina or anus.
11. Sex involving oral-anal stimulation.
12. Public toilets or semi-private locations such as parks used for sex, predominantly between people who (mostly) do not know each other, usually involving sex between men.
13. Sex taking place in parked cars, where some people are watching others.
14. Unsafe sexual practices (the decision not to use barriers necessary for the prevention of the transmission of HIV).
15. Sexual practices in association with cutting or piercing and thus with the intentional presence of blood.
16. In this context, ‘vanilla’ refers to a person who does not engage in BDSM.
17. I am not denying that some experiences are clearly rape and others are clearly non-rape, I am suggesting that some experiences are interpreted, temporarily or permanently, as neither.
18. In this context, ‘setting someone straight’ means correcting their misunderstanding. However, ‘straight’ in other contexts can mean ‘heterosexual’.

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