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Institutional Heteronormativity: Challenges Against Gender and Sexual Hegemony

From a sociological perspective, gender and sexuality are intimately entwined: the social construction and significance of one can rarely be understood without considering the other. Social theorists assert that gender identity is one of the most fundamental ways by which an individual is recognized, both by others and by themselves. Expanding on Goffman's dramaturgical analysis of 'performances', West and Zimmerman (2009) make the claim that gender is a product of social interaction—the emphasis is on ongoing, everyday achievements and becoming aware of taken-for-granted behavioural assumptions. Essentially, we work at gender every day to make ourselves knowable and recognizable to others, we 'do' gender in an attempt to conform to our perceived ideals in our social world. What's problematic is that gender is not something we always have, or something purely internal. Rather, it is a phenomenon being produced and reproduced all the time (Butler 2007). One of the most important ways an individual's identity is shaped is by political and cultural spheres; so while it is individuals who 'do' gender on an ongoing basis, "the enterprise is fundamentally interactional and institutional in character, for accountability is a feature of social relationships and its idiom is drawn from the institutional arena in which those relationships are enacted" (West and Zimmerman 66). That being said, as long as there are instances of normative enforcing by these domains of power it becomes nearly impossible to 'undo' gender; and so 'doing' gender is unavoidable (West and Zimmerman 66).

Institutional heteronormativity is a pervasive concept that attempts to disenfranchise individuals by limiting their expression of their identity. This paper will inspect how

governmental, educational, and medical institutions have affected the personal, societal, and psychological aspects of an individual's identity, pertaining to the linked concepts of sex, sexuality, and gender. Scrutiny of these social institutions demonstrates how gender and the body are constructed as strict binary pairs not only in regards to gender, but in promotion of heterosexuality as well. We take it for granted that sex and sexual categorizing are congruent—that knowing the latter, we can deduce the rest (West and Zimmerman 64). This taken-for-granted assumption is intrinsically linked to sexuality; heterosexual attraction is constantly interpreted as 'natural:' to be male means functioning within female attraction (Connell 247). These categories of sex, gender, and sexuality are proven to be socially and historically constructed, devised through the power of discourse, historical social relations, and repetitive acts of performativity (Sullivan 2003). Drawing on Butler, who advocates "an alternative configuration of culture in which such distinctions become malleable or proliferate beyond the binary frame" (Butler 2007), this paper will demonstrate how social order is maintained by the marginalization of certain forms of gendered identities, recalling that power and domination are relational.

Norms and stereotypes are promoted through 'agencies of socialization' and included within these understandings is a strict dichotomous relationship between male and female: "we operate with a moral certainty of a world of two sexes" (West and Zimmerman 64). This same dichotomous relationship is how we understand sexuality, one is either homosexual or heterosexual, a widely accepted view, despite Kinsey et al's (1948, 1953) research that demonstrates a reformulation of sexuality as a continuum with both behavioural and cognitive dimensions (Connell 102). Queer theory has largely focused on the cultural operation of power and how it is manifested through these specific binary and hierarchical categories of

identification (homo/hetero, male/female). One of the ways that institutional powers attempt to keep us in our gendered place is through psychiatric normalization. Historically, homosexuality has been medicalized and associated as a psychological disorder: the DSM-II listed homosexuality as abnormal behaviour and listed it under Sexual Deviations. This erroneous view was not revoked until 1974. This is the most classic example of demedicalization in American society (Conrad 255) which progressed in response to the protest and picketing of the gay liberation movement (along with some sympathetic psychiatric allies). The impact of this medical label internalized ideas of homosexuality as an illness and is still prevalent in 'traditional' views that envisage lesbians and gays as perverted and immoral (Rahman and Jackson 3). This shift nonetheless represents the possibility for social change, the public acknowledgement of a largely private and repressed identity. The demand for this claim of equality is indicative of wider social changes that potentially threaten or undermine previously taken-for-granted essentialist beliefs, values, and the very social-structural arrangements associated with the traditional heterosexual gender order (Rahman and Jackson 5). Therefore, despite the fact that sexuality should be a private issue, sexuality and gender cannot be understood as merely personal since they raise key questions about the connection between structure, culture, the self and identity –and the operation of power across all these aspects of social life. This paper will demonstrate how structural inequalities are still maintained through discourse and institutional assertion of authority, and will do so by revealing examples that demonstrate how legislation and normative policing attempts to constrict sexual identity.

One of the ways that social policing creates barriers for gendered identities is through the family, and along that domain, the institution of marriage. Currently, the Canadian government embodies the most conservative policies of its history, led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Historically, these conservative views saw the family as a factory for heterosexuality, influenced by the need for labour supply and the state's desire for subordination. The repression of homosexual desire, while certainly part of a general authoritarianism, thus has had quite specific reasons (Connell 36). In the case of marriage, limiting relationships to a strict binary duality essentially totalizes the foundations of the family, kinship and ultimately, society under the same rubric. While same-sex marriage is recognized in Canadian culture, there have recently been stipulations that have affected the union. Dan Savage, a Seattle-based gay activist who married his boyfriend in Vancouver in 2005, was caught off-guard by news of the Canadian government's legal position that thousands (Globe and Mail 2012) of non-resident gays and lesbians who came to Canada to wed are no longer legally married. Savage's marriage made up his identity, and he woke up one morning to find that his self-identity (how he defined himself) varied from this newfound ascribed identity (how others--in this case the legal realm viewed his identity). This creates inconsistencies and confusion, and is one example of how progressive legislation is hindered by the domination brought about by hegemonic ideologies. In this case, the government is using coercion to maintain the sublimation of homosexual identities. There is, after all, a difference between tolerance and acceptance.

Connell developed the concept of "hegemonic masculinity," both to describe the dominant ideal of masculinity in patriarchal structures, and to direct our attention to the multitude of masculinities that do not conform to this dominant form (Connell 1995). According to Schippers' expansion on Connell's concept of masculinities, Dan Savage, along with other men who exhibit feminine characteristics (that is, desire for other men) would instead be classified under 'hegemonic femininity:' "men who exhibit hegemonic femininity are viewed as contaminating to social relations more generally" (Schippers, 96). Homosexuality is therefore

meaningful and socially significant precisely because it forms the basis of an identity which is outside the conventional gender order. As a result of this challenging of gender norms, it is placed at the bottom of the gender/sexuality hierarchy. The maintenance of power relies on the submission of gendered beings to the norm and any break from this submission produces stigma and the process of 'othering' (Goffman 135). For Kimmel, manhood is not the manifestation of an inner essence, it is socially constructed: "our fears are the sources of our silences, and men's silence is what keeps the system running" (79). Heterosexuality is presumed to be an inherent feature of masculinity; consequently, males that exhibit alternative expressions of manhood are considered 'less than' (Kimmel 76). This process of 'othering' stems from the homophobic assumption "that homosexuality is *both* uncivilized and unnatural" (Butler 329). In this way, gender dichotomy is institutionalized, and, just as importantly, so are sexual relations. Regulation of sex and gender reiterates the sustaining illogic of power, which is claiming to protect our interests while producing fear of the 'other' and maintaining dominion of social control.

At different levels of society there are variations of domination, as Schippers' (2007) expansion of Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity (in which she developed a gendered hegemonic ideology that incorporates femininities) goes on to note. Schippers conceives that, systematically, women are subordinated, and there exists within that framework certain femininities that are doubly marginal (Schippers 102). As a result, the "polluted status of lesbians" (Butler 328) is a threat to the hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity, so "practices and characteristics that are stigmatized and sanctioned if embodied by women include having sexual desires for other women," (Schippers, 95). In general, research has paid less attention to young lesbian and bisexual women and girls, compared to that done on young gay men and boys (Scherzer 88). This lack of relational data further oppresses female

queer identities, and thus hinders institutional developments to include equality. The following example will demonstrate the explicit way that systems of power deny rights and esteem based solely on the basis of sexual identity.

In Missouri, 18 year old Constance McMillen was denied access to prom after requesting to bring her girlfriend as her date. She urged school officials to reverse the policy on both her choice of date and attire (McMillen wanted to wear a tuxedo to the dance). Adolescence is a crucial time of self discovery, and the school system is an active participant in the development of a student's identity. The ban on same-sex dates is not only a violation of McMillen's constitutional rights (USA today 2010), but this type of social ostracism affects how a student internalizes his or her self-worth. In terms of anti-homophobia policies, one of the main findings of the 2007 U.S. Climate Survey was that LGBTQ students in schools with comprehensive safe-school policies (that explicitly address homophobia) report lower levels of harassment, fewer homophobic comments, more staff intervention, and more willingness to report harassment and assault to school staff members (Taylor and Peter 295). The need for a respectful, safe, and nurturing environment is thus crucial to anti-hate crimes and lack thereof results in stigmatization of individuals when due examination of the structure is most warranted. That the homophobia is deriving from the school itself is suggestive of a pervasive culture of homophobic thinking, meaning that McMillen's relationship with her peers would be strenuous and repressive. Douglas suggests that all social systems are vulnerable at their margins (Butler 238) and McMillen represents her institution's fear of homosexuality, and more importantly, fear of change and disruption to their established bodily boundaries. McMillen's homosexuality thus becomes the foremost aspect in the definition of her identity, and her institution views her sexuality as a "repulsion," an unforgivable break from the hegemonic order (Butler 329). Despite

an established body of research designed to inform policy and practice concerning the troubling impact of heteronormativity in educational institutions, aggressive heteronormative practices are still prevalent (Sullivan 2003). The maintenance of power relies on silence, and McMillen's refusal to submit further stigmatizes her, as not only did the school deny McMillen access to prom but the entire social function was cancelled, to which McMillen remarked "a bunch of kids are really going to hate me for this" (USA Today 2010).

McMillen's request to wear a tuxedo to prom affected how she would 'do' gender and further went against the school's established norms. Inspection of hegemonic masculinity illuminates the system of sexual politics—most men benefit from the subordination of women, and hegemonic masculinity is the cultural expression of ascendency ("Masculinities" Connell 359). Those who do not submit essentially challenge the hierarchical gender difference and question male dominion. There is assumed to be a sort of "fit" between hegemonic masculinity and subordinated femininities, but McMillen's rejection to comply with gendered norms of emphasized femininity and her adoption of butch/femme ideals challenges not only her sexuality but also her sex category. By taking on a more 'masculine role,' McMillen would be challenging a strictly established pattern of gender assignment (sex=sex category=gender). One of the most familiar features of sexual display is external behaviour and clothing that emphasizes this stereotypical difference ("Masculinities" Connell 359). In other words, girls are expected to emphasize their vulnerability by conforming to the 'tight skirts and high-heeled shoes' typecast. Not only is gender assignment organized around these performances, but desire is similarly organized around identification and similarity rather than around difference and uniqueness ("Masculinities" Connell 359).

These concepts of hegemonic masculinity are repeatedly seen through research on communal and organizational institutions to demonstrate a certain form of masculine identity that is most honoured, and others, by contrast, are less honoured, more marginalized, and even entirely excluded. What is demonstrated by both McMillen and Savage is the dire need for a safe place to talk about gender experiences in the promotion of public policy interventions. Developments in the LGBTQ movements are evident in wider cultural acceptance, wider discourse, more media representations, and more instances of toleration. In terms of intersectionality, both McMillen and Savage can maintain their voice through their dominant class and race positions, as well as their geographical locations. There is, however, a lot less discourse and understanding of intersex and trans individuals. Trans are those whose gender identity or gender expression do not match the societal conventions of their sex at birth, and who may or may not experience same-sex attractions (Taylor and Peter 260).

The queer community, then, still has to struggle against these heteronormative ideals. One of the most harmful realities is evident when returning to the psychiatric normalization of gendered identities: what the DSM-IV classifies as 'Gender Dysphoria'. There is a growing population of individuals who challenge social gender norms, and who are classified as intersex. The identification of 'abnormal' chromosomal makeups, for example, is sometimes possible at childbirth, and sometimes not until puberty. Either way, there is manifold scientific evidence that suggests sex is much more complicated than the strict binary relationship that is so prevalent in the beliefs of formal institutions (Dreger 2010). The current definitions of male and female are overly simplistic, and health practitioners are so intent on 'normalizing' human beings to the male/ female binary that they readily perform extremely invasive surgical procedures. These surgeries are performed not because they promise to render the patient healthier, but because

they cause serious threats to established social categories (Dreger 2010). Our culture has such romanticized and archetypal views on gender that it is startling for many to imagine other forms of sex identities. Gender, then, functions as a democracy based almost exclusively on anatomy, and yet the prevalence of intersex demonstrates that this ideal is terribly limited. There should exist a fluidity in any interpretation of gender which should allow for progressive gains in our understanding, yet any gains are instead being overshadowed by more conservative and heteronormative outlooks.

'Gender dysphoria' is a "psychological disorder simply because someone of a given gender manifests attributes to another gender or a desire to live as another gender" (Butler 85). This is a current, formal diagnosis used by psychiatric practitioners. This medicalization reiterates commonly held views that gender is strictly dichotomous, and further promotes the conception that gender 'normally' maps directly onto sex, and that hormones are essential determinants of sexual difference. Recognition is a defining feature of the self, meaning in order for a person to be granted permission for sex reassignment, they must first be diagnosed with this disorder (Butler 88). Take for example, those who identity as two-spirited. Amongst their communities they are highly regarded (Feinberg 47). Yet, according to this diagnosis they are in need of repair, and psychologically unstable because of their refusal to commit to a single gender. Other examples include those who decide to live as transgender as opposed to transsexual, or those who must officially relinquish their mental health in order to be acknowledged for sex reassignment. Identity is largely created through community, "while the 'I' produces discourse, 'I' can only come into being through being named and receiving social recognition, and thus discourse and the community are first needed to enable the 'I' " (Butler 84). In other words, transgenders who wish to undergo sex reassignment are only permitted to do

so once they undergo psychological assessment and receive recognition from the medical sphere that they are psychologically impaired. Furthermore, the DSM has traditionally subverted sexuality in cases of gender dysphoria, enforcing it so those who have sexual feelings about transsexualism are denied access to sex changes. Add to this the pervasive conservative ideals that transsexualism and homosexuality are intrinsically linked (Blanchard and Clemmensen 1988), and it is easy to see how such parties are deeply disenfranchised and marginalized and misunderstood. Gender Dysphoria, then, exists as the most overt and harmful case of institutional heteronormativity, and the ramifications of such a classification undermine the social, as well as personal, interpretations of gender. As Connell, West and Zimmerman have illustrated, 'doing" gender is the normal process that each individual undertakes, and this natural process should in no way be punishable as a psychiatric impairment.

Evidently, the medicalization of homosexuality still exists but is overtly hidden through labels such a 'Gender Dyshoria' the DSM imposes a model of coherent gendered life that demeans the complex ways in which gendered lives are lived. These heteronormative assumptions are further being reinforced through our formal institutions which in turn, legitimate inequality. It's important to challenge these dominant views, and to understand that gender is socially constructed, a performative accomplishment too easily manipulated and suppressed.

Work Cited:

Representation 1: DSM-IV 'Gender Dysphoria.'
Drew on Butler's critical interpretation of the harmful effects and outdated medicalization of this disorder. Class text *Gender Relations in Global Perspective* primary source of knowledge.

Representation 2: USA Today 2010
Link to website: http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2010-03-10-noprom_N.htm
When 18-year-old Constance McMillen requests to take her girlfriend to prom, the result is the school cancels the entire social event. The ban on same-sex dates is a violation of McMillen's constitutional rights. The article goes on to suggest that, like other schools in America, Itawamba Agricultural High School change it's policy to permit allow inclusion. While this representation is an American example, it is a radical example of the unjustices that the LGBT community faces in the school as a social institution.

Representation 2: Globe and Mail 2012
Link to Website: http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/dan-savage-i-had-been-divorced-overnight/article2300428/
Dan Savage's reaction to the government's view which was outlined in a legal brief filed in a divorce proceeding in Toronto. Which argues that same-sex marriages that non-residents contracted in Canada are only valid if those marriages are also legal in their home country.

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