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The Social Construction of Heterosexuality

Much of modern sex research has grown from the social constructionist viewpoint articulated by Simon and Gagnon in *Sexual Conduct*, the pathbreaking book that encouraged a generation of young scholars to look beyond the collection of data points and into the cultural construction of sexual norms, values, perceptions, and behaviors. Way ahead of their time, Simon and Gagnon made all things problematic and asked us to at least understand the cultural lens we used to interpret behavior and gender.

John Gagnon's later work continued to teach us not to take the ordinary for granted. Since this volume is in his honor, it seems appropriate to write on the most ordinarily taken for granted aspect of sexuality that there is: heterosexuality. Not its facts, figures, behaviors, and other statistics, but rather the very fact that it exists as a location on this planet.

I would not be surprised to get a ho-hum reaction to this enterprise. We tend to explain the exotic and problematize the exception. If most people are five foot ten, we try to explain under five feet or over seven. If something is common and normative, we think we understand it, and we certainly feel no need to explain it. But, in fact, that tendency merely constructs a black box, a familiar shape that fools us into thinking we can explain something merely because we come in contact with it every day. This acceptance of the common obfuscates in two ways: we create post hoc justifications about why what exists is supposed to exist (and mistake that for wisdom), and by accepting a "natural order of things" we hide all the nuances of "fact" by inhibiting further investigation or critique. As a result, we have neglected the social construction of heterosexuality as if it was unproblematic—as if we are born, and poof! we are totally and adequately heterosexual, a mere outcome of some natural selection with an invariant program that creates

heterosexuality as a uniform product, with no other markers or interesting differences within until other shades of sexual orientation are introduced.

In fact, "doing heterosexuality" is no less problematic than homosexuality—though its punishments are more for failure than for accomplishment—and the norm is enforced and sanctioned differently from exceptional behavior. Reactions to failures of heterosexual enactment are less violently corrected than portrayals of homosexual identity—except, of course, when a failure of adequate enactment causes an attribution of homosexuality, and psychic or physical violence follows in order to preserve normative heterosexual roleplaying along narrowly constructed and strongly idealized stereotypes.

Just what are those stereotypes and idealistic portrayals of heterosexuality? They vary by region of the world, country, and subculture, but they share a common body of work, and those normative expectations are fed to us at the same time we are being breast-fed. Countless research papers have shown that even infants are programmed into adult sexual niches: we are socially constructed as heterosexual as soon as we are propelled out into the world. Hospitals still paste blue or pink bows on babies' heads, and oohs and ahs about the "little man" and baby girl usually quickly include comments on chests, legs, and genitals, creating expectations for the man or woman to be. Baby boys are held less and cooed at less, says the research, not because they are loved less (there is certainly some evidence that they may be loved more in some families) but because they are being handled in a way that preserves their manliness—their heterosexuality—right from the start. Little girls are dressed in brighter colors and frillier outfits because they are supposed to be supremely adorable as part of their core equipment right from the beginning.

Heterosexuality has its grave expectations. They are not articulated all at once—some are never openly articulated—but we all know that a lack of articulation of norms doesn't mean they don't exist. Briefly, I would like to mention some of the presumptions and social scripts that guide our management of heterosexuality, and comment on some of the consequences of our peculiar rules and regulations.

There are several overarching requirements of heterosexuality that I believe organize the major script of being heterosexual in American society. First of all, heterosexuality is confabulated with gender performance. Whatever the culture, its norms about masculinity and femininity are supposed to co-vary with heterosexual enactment, and gender itself is expected to be unambiguous and performed according to the cultural outlines of the moment. Even today, after the sexual and gender revolutions of the late 1960s and 70s, heterosexual dress codes, mannerisms, and body language are still strictly mandated. Although our culture has antiheroes who disdain these conventions (most notably located in the worlds of rock and roll, grunge, heavy metal and other communities of art and counterculture), the majority culture creates cultural icons in its magazines, TV shows, movies, featuring models that tell us what exact gender displays portray heterosexual correctness.

Fashion designers and media stars are quite important. They become the cultural trend setters for the young. No one who has observed the fashion impact of Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, and other teen idols can deny with a straight face (as it were) that popular culture creates gender norms. And, I should add, it is not just children or

teens who use movie stars and band members as guides to sexual correctness: the Academy Awards telecast is watched by millions of avid viewers with one of the central agendas of the entire evening being the observation of who wears what, who appears with whom, and how all of this translates into sexiness. Just about every sitcom and drama is a commentary on who is a man's man, who is a man's woman, and how do characters carry off their evocation of male and female sexual power. Even as we note characters as caricatures, they serve as sexual ideals. The fan magazines exist and prosper because millions of Americans want to follow the stars' lives, copy their wedding dress, gossip about their love affairs, and resemble them as much as possible. This goes way beyond casual ogling; stars are the new royals and their lifestyle choices—such as turning to plastic surgery—begin national trends, in this case creating a new acceptance of plastic surgery so that standards of attractiveness in middle-aged women are changing (helped, of course, by television shows making the process as well as the product fascinating. *The Swan* and several other programs actually show operations or stages of recovery, touting the self-determination of the patient while minimizing the pain and possibility of complications. Of course, in the very act of setting standards based on stars, gender roles become more problematic, since it is hard to measure up against the fantasy embodiment of masculinity and femininity.) It is fair to assume that for many who mimic the style and look of a sex god or goddess, the gap between their idol and themselves serves to erode the individual's confidence in competent heterosexual performance. Who can ever be as "male" and macho as Bruce Willis, wisecracking as he incinerates a building full of bad guys, saves his buddy, and beds the astoundingly beautiful women who populate action films? Who can be as charming as Cameron Diaz—perfectly proportioned and the object of everyone's desire? Who can be as winsome and pure of heart as Julia Roberts, a woman leggier than most runway models, in the storybook romances in which she stars? In drama after drama, she offers the eternal portrayal of female heterosexuality: seeking Prince Charming, losing Prince Charming, regaining Prince Charming. The themes of romantic acquisition and loss may be recast within the frame of a professional woman's life, but this reframing pales next to the strong outline of normative female heterosexuality: that is, for a woman, the central and most important theme in her life will be love. Love is the question, love is the answer, and whatever it takes to get it, keep it, maintain it, and cherish it is what the movie is really about.

We venerate and create fantasy masculinity and femininity—often, ironically enough, portrayed through the exquisite acting of gay or lesbian actors—but the truth really doesn't matter. The James Bonds, the lone wolves, and the cynical detectives and cops tell us what male sexuality in America is supposed to look like. The young lovelies and studmuffs of the movies and TV sitcoms tell us what adequate heterosexuality is supposed to look like. The unspoken sub-clause is that the rest of us who could not fit well in the ensemble casts of *Friends*, *CSI*, or *Grey's Anatomy* have a sexuality that is unfinished, inadequate, and somehow unworthy. This is a disastrous recognition for those who have already experienced self-doubt about their masculinity or femininity within their peer group. Most young girls and women are insecure about whether they are attractive, articulate or desirable. Even without comparison to mythic media icons, they struggle mightily to feel sexually worthy. Women turn themselves into wraiths trying to be thin enough, and put themselves in physical jeopardy by paying surgeons to sculpt

their bodies so that they can have thighs, abdomens, and breasts that fit the sexual profile of what they believe men want. Women, and increasingly men, spend thousands of scarce discretionary dollars to change their faces and physiques to fit prevailing standards of beauty so that they will be able to compete in the heterosexual mating market or retain spouses who might otherwise stray to better models of masculinity and femininity.

One can't help but reflect on this: while noblemen of the eighteenth century might have had to work at being dandies, twenty-first-century men are spared these indignities. Just being male used to be enough to be granted provisional heterosexual status. However, increasingly, in some sort of cosmic justice, men seem to be following suit: commercial interests have finally realized that having both sexes terminally insecure is better for business than just having one sex feel inadequate, so now men are in the mix of creating better bodies, more hair (on their head; now many men feel required to get electrolysis for the stuff on their back!), and stiffer erections to make sure that they look and act like the cultural cut-outs they believe will ensure their sexual selection by women. The medical establishment is only too happy to oblige these neuroses.

The past decade has seen the collusion of pharmaceutical research with the medical establishment to create a cultural crisis about potency. The new standard of genital adequacy is to have penises that could compete with the fantasy penises in purple passages in X-rated books and movies. Now "rock hard penises" and "hot throbbing members" will actually exist in life as they do on porn stars. The vision of what a penis ought to look and act like can come true by using Viagra, Levitra, or Cialis, even if few men naturally match the size or performance of these porno-penises unaided by a drug. Viagra, so the media and doctors on lease from Pfizer have said, can give you the erection you've always dreamed of, and as a result, a new baseline standard of erections and performance gets created. Penis performance, always a potential problem for men, now invokes new fears: readiness throughout the lifestyle becomes standard. The natural aging of the organ becomes deviant as we try and create genitals that conform to standards created by chemists rather than nature. Male heterosexuality requires a stiff erection unto death. In order to make male heterosexuality unambiguous, we create a new version of what constitutes achievement of competent sexuality.

There is, of course, a female equivalent. Far before Viagra became a global brand, women's and fashion magazines created yearly standards for the year's "look," which often meant a new kind of body. The mass media would launch cover stories announcing "breasts are back" (I'm not kidding—this was a real cover in 2005) or "the six secrets to making him go crazy all night." Women's magazines, and increasingly men's magazines, do not have stories on sex—the magazines are almost *entirely* about mating and dating—and even the products are advertised to help live the good life of a popular sexual being. If we stand back for a moment, it becomes clear that the entire message of advertising is that heterosexuality is *not* natural: it is not easy—and, indeed, it will take everything they can sell you for you to even hope to sustain a decent sexual presentation and the possibility of creating a successful seduction, engagement, and marriage. Being successful—as a body—as an actor—as a heterosexual—is certainly not seen as a fact of nature. No—it is seen as an act of will.

Which leads us to the obvious conclusion that, far from being normal, heterosexual

identity is fragile. Very fragile. Easily polluted. Given all the possible paths leading to failure of sexual competence, we are warned that we must be very careful in our construction of it.

This ability to fail publicly brings us to our second proposition: that our performance of heterosexuality is supposed to be accepted and applauded by others. All of this dressing up and strutting out is not just to attract the opposite sex—it is supposed to fend off criticism and attribution as a homosexual. Homosexuality and heterosexuality are like twins: no matter how different they become, they are part of the same piece, the same drama. Homosexuality exists in its own right—but if it did not, it would be invented to enforce compliance to proper gender enactment.

Straight men dress in ways to announce their sexuality, much the way the homosexual men often mimic it to announce their own: exaggerating the costumes of masculinity into mating signals for men with men. The two sexualities, considered so polar, actually butt up next to each other, trying to accomplish different things with the same cultural and physical equipment.

But that is the point, is it not? Heterosexual men and homosexual men, have the same socialization, as do heterosexual women and homosexual women, so it takes some work to distinguish our sexual presentation from one another. No wonder then that we have “fey” gay men and “butch” lesbians. Gay men and women need to work hard to create territory that is unambiguously in revolt against heterosexuality because heterosexuality itself is much more subtle and problematic than we pretend it to be. Hence, exaggerated performances exist among both heterosexuals and homosexuals as each group tries to demonstrate who they are to like others and elicit appropriate reactions. Still, no matter how broad a sexual display is, the audience may not react to even the most counternormative gender role if sexuality is not seen as problematic in that area. For example, there are some locales where people seem almost naïvely unconscious. One sees, for example, environments where women present themselves as “butch” and may even have the build and demeanor of a man, and men who are as fey as anyone who ever cross-dressed in a San Francisco gay rights parade are benignly unconscious of the thin line they walk in the gender role enactment wars. Part of this is innocence is one of place: residents of small towns that cannot imagine that anyone in their town could be gay and so integrate their friend’s and neighbor’s generally non-normative gender display into some other social construct (“weird,” “eccentric,” “not vain,” etc.) rather than gayness. Even though the butch farmer’s wife may be secretly hankering after the farmer’s wife next door, “audiences” may attribute the non-normative gender or sexual display to asexuality rather than homosexuality. As long as the person in question does not claim an alternate sexuality, they may be spared approbation. On the other hand, this is not always the case. The young who resemble disapproved-of, nonheterosexual attributes can justly quake in school halls, worrying that they will be attacked emotionally or physically—or just disdained.

This brings up a third specification: we are supposed to have certain kinds of bodies that reveal our heterosexuality. For all the jokes about “Pat” on *Saturday Night Live* (the person we could not figure out as male or female, who would confuse us by tempting us with a clue as to her “real” gender and then add another clue that would cancel out the first lead), the truth is that the real joke on us was how much anxiety it caused the viewer to watch a character without a gender and/or sexual identity we could identify.

In general, we *hate* the idea that someone is not firmly assigned to a body type and look that telegraphs both gender and sexuality. In fact, it occurs to me that this intolerance of gender ambiguity may be one of the reasons our society hates fat people. Fat pads out physical differences between the sexes; the roundness we associate with women covers both men and women who are fat: breasts and chests look alike, genitals shrink in reference to the greater bulk of the body, and facial contours become more similar. It is another kind of androgyny, and most people are extremely uncomfortable with it when it is so extreme that they cannot distinguish biological sex. Extreme androgyny like Pat is seen as sexual failure—and therefore sexual identity may be imputed as homosexual even though homosexuality really has nothing to do with body type. Still, all kinds of gender ambiguity or cross-referencing the other gender (especially using the other gender’s costumes or customs) has been historically grounds for severe punishment (including death, in some countries and during certain periods of history) or humiliation (open season as a target for humor or bullying). Interestingly, temporary trespass of gender/sexual confabulation is allowable for certain kinds of ritual celebrations such as fraternity costume parties, English music hall performances or Halloween. Anyone who wants to continue the joke too long, however, is quickly labeled deviant, and—to show how strong our feelings are—subjected to violence or contempt. Our culture does not want to lose the hard edges of gender, precisely because people depend on the standards of gender enactment to help them delineate heterosexuality from homosexuality. Imprecise as that may be, it is the tool most people use for a quick assessment of sexual identity.

This brings me to a fourth point about heterosexuality, which has to do not with the body, but the psyche: In order to be considered heterosexual, individuals are presumed to be singularly and unproblematically aroused to the opposite sex and the opposite sex only.

Within sexual identity, the heterosexual package includes the idea that heterosexuality is unitary—all or nothing. We are not supposed to have to learn heterosexuality: it is supposed to come with our genitals and gender behavior. Any indication of flexibility (a continuum of arousal and attraction that may be greatest towards people of the opposite sex but has some arousal to same-sex persons) is, even among the most sophisticated of people, seen as discrediting heterosexuality. In some American Indian cultures, bisexuality is acknowledged as having a place in the sexual pantheon and can be seen as a gift; heterosexuality can co-exist with homosexuality in the same person without putting either into question. In most Western societies, however, and in many non-Western societies, same-sex arousal immediately incurs identity reassignment; we do not want to think of our sexuality as polymorphous. Indeed, the Freudian phrase would be “polymorphous perverse”: a disordered drive rather than merely a lusty or extensive one. In our society, sexual identity as a heterosexual allows for no trespass of this central vision of unadulterated heterosexuality.

Interestingly, though, we have developed a pragmatic out for some people who can satisfy the gender norms of heterosexuality so satisfactorily that if they choose the right explanation for same-sex behavior we will not discredit them. While, in most cases, we disallow any behavior but heterosexual conduct, we do have a vision of male and female sexuality that allows a “loophole”—if you will, an apt phrase for the conundrum. Indeed, there are men who so satisfy the norms of masculinity that they can get away with non-

heterosexual behavior, at least for a time, and not be reassigned a gay identity. These are the men who are so hypermasculine we believe their accounts of a sexuality so brutish that, when they say any hole will do, we believe them! Rock stars who are outrageous in every other respect are often allowed to have both male and female partners and continue to maintain their dominant sexual status as heterosexual. Another common example are men in prisons, men who have a scarcity of females, or men from cultures where maleness is considered so sexually powerful that they can just enforce their definition of the situation on anything as long as they take in certain cultural scripts that protect heterosexual identity. As an example, I once interviewed a Greek man named Spiro who was sexually adept with both men and women. He seemed to have no trouble having both male and female partners without having either leave him because of his bisexual activity. When I asked him how he could have sex with both men and women without being labeled as gay, he replied, "It is no problem. You see we have four types of men in Greece: men who fuck men, men who fuck men and women, men who fuck women, and queers." I was somewhat flummoxed since I knew he had sex with both men and women and would not consider himself "queer." So I asked him, "Who are the people you consider 'queer'?" "Oh," he said. "The queers are the ones who get fucked." Or, put another way, Spiro had a culture that created a vision of men as voracious sexual creatures who naturally will have what they can—as long as they are not degraded by taking the female role, a humiliation from which, apparently, one is denied reentry into the club of heterosexual men. If you are a man who wants to have sex with men in Greece, yet do not want to be thought of as homosexual, you can accomplish this goal, as long as you do not blunder into the "female" sexual role. How this translates intrapsychically may be more difficult, except if you are, like Spiro, from a culture where sexually available women are scarce and sex, any way you can get it, is approved of by your friends.

The allowances for women are different, though not entirely. There are some women whose heterosexual credentials are so impeccable that they evoke increased erotic interest in men rather than relabeling when they take on a same-sex lover. Madonna, for example, gave a well-publicized passionate kiss on the lips to Britney Spears which, while it got headlines, did not hurt Madonna's draw as a performer or her perception by fans as an outrageous heterosexual woman. In some parts of the United States there are those who would give erotic points to women who have sex with women even if they are top superstars . . . as long as the sexual encounter is done for the pleasure of men. Women can have sex with women as performers—or as the hors d'œuvre in a meal that will be consummated in heterosexual intercourse. Simply put, in our contemporary urban culture, situational bisexuality is sexy, but real lesbianism is an affront.

One exemption from that reaction is lesbianism as a heterosexual porno fantasy. Women who look like *Playboy* bunnies, who are voracious sexual creatures—wild enough to do anything—are asked to do the inevitable porno three-way, and doing so does not endanger their heterosexual status. As long as female performers in porno eventually show that they are sexually available to men, their homosexual sex is seen as kinky rather than as deviant. These women never take on a lesbian identity; their job is to be warm-up artists, create sexual titillation, and make sure that the male viewer simply sees them as an erotic surrogate until he "finishes" the "job." The women in porno movies who make love to one another create a drama of female ecstasy that excites the male viewer rather than threatens him. These actresses do not leave the folds of hetero-

sexuality even in fantasy (although, in reality, many of them are stalwartly lesbian). For our purposes, however, what is interesting is that there are these temporary havens for homosexuality—but sexual identity is preserved because of the belief that beautiful, sexy women will be steadfastly immune to female charms when men are available. Furthermore, if the women who have had sex with each other follow convention and don't try to also take on male prerogatives (such as male dress or demeanor), same-sex appetite is seen as an erotic augmentation rather than a substitution. It is an odd erotic peccadillo of male sexuality that almost all female sexual behavior is catalogued as a dress rehearsal for male sexual enjoyment. Only when the male is truly convinced that the woman has absolutely no desire for the male voyeur, does the wrath of homophobia come to rest at lesbian destinations. Lesbians to most men are bisexuals, and bisexuals are heterosexuals-in-waiting; however, this fluid assignment is often not so gently experienced by the women who must decide if there is a sexual central self that is not really performing for men, but instead seeks a way to justify erotic and/or emotional desire for other women.

This relates to the fifth point: that heterosexual arousal is supposed to be strong and unambiguous. This is a very interesting requirement, and it flies in the face of almost every fact we know about sexual performance. More correctly, sexual arousal is always problematic some of the time: there when you don't want it, absent when you are hoping it will overwhelm you. Arousal is highly sensitive to other emotions—fear of rejection, tension, performance anxieties, distraction, and fatigue; in other words, numerous states of mind and body. Additionally, we are affected by subtle cues in the environment or in the other person's behavior that may consciously or unconsciously affect our behavior: the wrong words, the wrong look and suddenly we are deflated; a serious performance problem for men, especially if it happens often and becomes habitual. Many men, reflecting back on their boyhood, have talked about how disorienting it was not to have an erection under conditions one was supposed to (or to have it when one was not supposed to) and the doubts and fears and dysfunction that followed. Because an erection is supposed to be "natural"—both a perk and prerequisite of heterosexuality—its absence, or the presence of ambivalence, is supposed to be instructive of malfunction, or, in the eyes of society, potential deviance. In other words, your status as a heterosexual goes up or down with your penis.

Women have a variation of this theme, albeit not such a publicly noticeable one. For example, in a sexual interaction, women may be quite worried about the presence or absence of lubrication. Some women's vaginas lubricate quite copiously when aroused; other women remain quite dry no matter how aroused they are, or become less lubricated as they age and approach perimenopause or menopause. Women, like men, vary in the way their body reacts to stimulation. However, in the Book of Heterosexuality, aroused women are supposed to lubricate, and the lack thereof has been known to cause women—and their partners—some worry that the body is the truer source of information than the mind, and that not lubricating indicates lesser sexual interest or excitement. Lubrication, while easily fixable by modern water-based or silicone products, is perceived to be telling the woman (and her partner) something elemental. A standard of competent heterosexuality is unmet. Women have been let off this hook somewhat by being defined as having a mostly reactive sexuality (i.e., "you do not have to be the first to be sexually aroused," "as a woman you are entitled to be only mildly interested until you are aggressively aroused by a man"). In this scenario, if you are *not* aroused, it

is not that you are not heterosexual, it is just that this is the wrong person, you are not in love enough, or that your lover is not man enough to arouse you. In general, however, women's heterosexuality is perceived to be awakened by love. Love is supposed to be the motor of women's sexual emotions. In fact, female sexuality is supposed to be so relational that even inappropriate (i.e., homosexual) arousal can sometimes happen without necessarily impacting heterosexual identity. In this perspective, women are turned on because they are in love, and love is the motivating sexual force. Same-sex behavior, rather than exhibiting an essential part of a woman's true nature, is merely another act of true womanhood—female sexuality created by the power of love. Many women who have had extended lesbian relationships in their biography but do not wish to identify as a lesbian may, post hoc, define their same-sex love affair as primarily a love relationship with a sexual component that could only last for the length of that relationship. This vision of self-limiting sexuality (over when the love relationship is over) is not sustained by our culture when it concerns men. One moment of adult non-heterosexual arousal—no matter how passing the moment—is likely to be seen as definitive evidence of a core homosexual set of desires.

Sixth: the appropriate—that is to say, the opposite sex—is supposed to be attracted to us. Sexual identity can be so shaky that it can also be changed by other people's attention to us rather than our own feelings about ourselves. In the movie *In and Out*, actor Kevin Kline is woefully out of touch with his sexual psyche. He is in his early forties and has gone with his girlfriend for years and years without any genital contact. When one of his famous students assumes he is gay—because of inappropriate gender behavior (including, if you will, that he is neat!) and “outs” him, it is the first time he is forced to confront himself. The gay news reporter who is sent to cover the story immediately sees the Kline character as a “closet case.” Not one really sexual moment happens that shows Kline demonstrating sexual desire for another man, but the beginning of his uncloseting is not proved by who he is attracted to (or not attracted to, as the case may be) but also by how others see him and by *who* wants him.

Thus, every heterosexual who is not claimed by the opposite sex as a heartthrob in their youth has doubts—and not only because of being ignored or feeling invisible, but also because of sexual aspirations lofted his or her way by other people with insecure sexual identities. Teenagers, young men and women, and women and men with sexually mixed biographies are all unsure of who they are and who they want, and so they all are more likely to project their own lack of ease onto another person.

Straw Dogs, a subtly homophobic film released several decades ago, insinuates that the central figure Dustin Hoffman is emasculated because he cannot control his flirtatious, wayward wife. This does not mean an immediate homosexual label, but it does mean that his character is not adequately heterosexual because he isn't macho enough to make the men fear him when they ogle and sexually harass her. Written to be a “ball buster” by nature, she is humiliated when the men verbally insult her and he does nothing. In turn, the “virile” workmen have nothing but contempt for a man who will not get physically aggressive when other men decline to respect his woman and ogle her without retribution. The local men hate him for his effiteness and his social class (he has been pilloried by the working-class men fixing his house as being a “poof”) and it becomes a war to the death when the working men get more and more contemptuous of him and turn into sexually salivating males who plan to lay claim to the wife. They study

Hoffman and decide that he is a putz because they can see his wife is running around on him, and they are pretty sure he knows that she is. Whether or not he knows or does not know, in their minds he *should* know, and do something about it. They decide to do with her as they will since he is obviously not a manly man who deserves to have his female property respected. In the end, however, in order to protect his home, woman, and life, Hoffman “gets it” and resorts to primordial battle to retrieve his wife and his self-respect. They attack him and he triumphs over them, but in order to do so, it is necessary for him to kill every one of these men. At the end of the film, in the eyes of his wife, himself and the director, the Hoffman character becomes a true man in the deepest sense of heterosexual glory.

For women, the archetypal story is the transformation story—that of a woman not sufficiently self-discovered enough to take on the accoutrements of femininity and win her man. Pure evocations of this theme can be found in the musical *Annie Get Your Gun* when the Annie Oakley character cleans up to try and get her man, or when the Rancher's Daughter in *Rodeo* puts on a dress to go to the dance. The high point of claiming heterosexuality is claiming one's birthright of loveliness and recognizing one's longing for a man. Women do not necessarily get assigned a lesbian identity if they do not put men in as the obvious center of their life, but they may be seen as desexed if they are not adequately heterosexually active.

Being desexed is not an easy place to be sent to, however. Let a woman tell you what it feels like to be invisible—that is, not sexually attractive enough to be noticed as they walk by, enter a room, or try to engage in interactions with men. Women see other women drawing male attention but feel too old, too heavy, too short, too tall, too awkward, too bright—too *something* to get some of that attention themselves. When a woman feels this way, her sexuality is irrelevant and therefore denied her. If she is not desired, she does not exist. Many teenage as well as older women feel consigned to this purgatory where nature or nurture has somehow failed to give them the talents they need to feel fully sexual.

Given how hard all of this is to accomplish, my seventh point is both ironic and laughable: once our sexuality is enacted, it is supposed to be stable and unconflicted. Heterosexuality is supposed to be a rock. Once established, it is not supposed to turn into anything else, which is a comfort to young men and women who may feel that once heterosexuality is initially established, they can relax *if* they become satisfied with the way they look, turn on to people, get turned on to, match the norms of the present gender culture, and so on.

My own research tells me that that reassessment of one's sexual self can occur, and when it does, it is most likely to come through relationships—that indeed our sexuality *is* relational, especially (but not only) for women. The annals of research on sexual identity are full of stories of women who had never had even a same-sex fantasy who unexpectedly became besotted with a specific person and found their sexuality bending towards the bright light of that love. For example, I have interviewed a woman who was having an affair with another woman while her husband, dreadfully ill, was incapacitated for half a year. They met at work and it was love at first sight. They stayed together for years without the husband finding out and the revelation to one of the partners of the extent of her sexual interest was deeply unsettling to her. She could not deny the fact of her love and attraction—and she was 60 years old when she received this new infor-

mation about herself! Whether the revision of self-identity occurs because of a special partnership or because one is just totally furious with men because of a series of bad intentions or behaviors, it is shocking to most people to realize they have a flexible sexual self. I have interviewed many women who became homosexual not through lust, but through disgust with the men who had disappointed and abused them. Heterosexual identity may not always unravel when a person shuts down because of a disastrous relationship of a love affair that seems to transcend gender, but most people would not be surprised that it had to change.

The fact is that change is shocking to participants. Heterosexual identity—all sexual identity—is considered immutable by most lay people, except insofar as someone's "true" sexuality may be repressed, suppressed, or denied. The cultural prejudice and presumption is that the presence of any homosexual feeling is a dead giveaway of one's sexual essence because homosexual behavior is somehow more a truth of the body than heterosexuality. (The reasoning seems to be that any homosexual behavior demonstrates a true core sexual predilection, since no person would take on the stigma of homosexuality if it were not compulsively necessary.) Both homosexuals and heterosexuals have displayed incredulity and downright rejection of an applicant for a new sexual identity or claim when the claim is from a heretofore homosexual male who is now in love with a woman and believes that his sexuality is oriented in a new way. Our culture doesn't even want to believe such a male really feels what he says he feels. Heterosexuality, in this instance, is so weak that it is easily eclipsed and overpowered by homosexuality. In cases of homosexual exploration, even minimal acts are coded maximally, but in cases of heterosexual exploration by gay men, new sexual experience with women is considered trivial and even psychologically distressed. Despite this reaction, from the lay and scientific community alike, there is still some scientific evidence and certainly adequate anecdotal evidence that both men and women can regroup sexual identity in adulthood when a single important emotional relationship refocuses their sexual energy.

Finally, my eighth and last point about heterosexuality is that intercourse is the heterosexual lingua franca and all else is tangential embroidery. Men and women are not just catalogued because of the gender eroticized but how we eroticize our partner of any gender. Our acts define us, not just our psychology. Key among these acts is the central act of heterosexuality, intercourse. Competent and complete heterosexuals are supposed to prefer intercourse to all other acts. Heterosexuals should have intercourse more frequently than other acts; it should be the main location for our ejaculations and orgasms; and, in general, it should be played as the main event in lovemaking, even if there is a very full program of other kinds of sexual behaviors. Indeed, we seem to need to check in with various kinds of studies, to be checked against the facts and figures of normalcy. While the famous Kinsey studies tried to make it clear that, in their opinion, one pattern of "outlets" was as good as another, those famous studies showed means and medians for sexual acts that made the mean not only average but prescriptive.

This presumption continues in modern texts on human sexuality. Questionnaires, which get at only a rough estimate of sexual habits, are given credence way beyond what their crafters ever believed in, and these ballpark figures now not only define heterosexuality, they define "healthy" or "inhibited" heterosexuality, thereby giving heterosexuals new ways to feel insufficient or suspect. A gigantic field of sexual therapy has arisen since the late 1960s (when Masters and Johnson first published their books on actual

sexual behavior), and the public has become quite aware of all the ways there are to fail sexual "competency."

In sum, while heterosexuality is seen as natural, naturally organized around intercourse, strongly held, invariant once achieved, and wholly captivating by those who own it, we know, inside our hearts, and in the light of evidence, that none of these suppositions are entirely true. The question I would pose now is, does this obvious social construction of heterosexuality really matter? Does it matter if heterosexuality is much less unitary, stable or scripted than we thought it was?

That's not clear. . .

We are far more a work in progress—a tender rather than solid template—than most of us are comfortable with. However, our intolerance of ambiguity makes it likely that we wish to overdefine our sexual identity, to not code our homosexual attractions or fantasies if at all possible, and to try like hell to accomplish heterosexuality as best we can. Except for the bravest and culturally independent among us, we want sexual categories, not open-ended choices or a continuum of desire and identity. Because heterosexuality is so hard to achieve and so fragile to sustain, we seem to need to continue to ignore the gradations of sexual reality and construct a sexual persona that gives us peace of mind in the present, if not necessarily for the future.

As for we social scientists, we continue to ignore such discordant data about sexual identification, desire, or fantasy, or believe it only defines a small number of heterosexually functioning men and women. We know that many heterosexuals have occasional same-sex fantasies or dreams of same-sex behavior, but we do not include it to reshape our definition of heterosexuality and its potential plasticity.

This is why the Kinsey scale has remained an academic rather than a popular concept. The scale which goes from 0 to 6, with 0 being totally heterosexual, 6 being totally homosexual, and 3 being you don't care what comes through the door, was revolutionary in the late 1940s and early 50s, when the study was initially done, but arguably could be just as revolutionary today. If we believe, as we might, that heterosexuality is a continuum of sexual desire rather than a bipolar construction, heterosexuality would be more truly described as often co-existing with homosexual desire, fantasy, love, or attraction. But we have intense resistance to trying to know how heterosexuality is actually practiced rather than socially constructed, and this has rather grave costs for everyone:

First, the stereotypes of invariant heterosexuality help us all fail being heterosexual enough, and this causes among many people low self-esteem, miscategorization of their sexuality, and fear of being "deviant." If our sexuality were less prescribed as a central identity and more as a behavior—one open to a multitude of expressions—we would be less immobilized by fear if we thought or did something less common. Indeed, in today's society, there is movement towards a less static vision of heterosexuality. The young, perhaps more with bravado than anything else, are more comfortable with various combinations of ambisexuality and more often than not, unapologetic for their choices.

Second, this same fear encourages some people in our society to discourage extending civil liberties to gays because we are fearful of compromising our heterosexuality. This school wants all the rewards in society to bolster heterosexuality, thereby keeping us more protected from, I guess, ourselves. There are movements to keep gay people

from having legal marriage. Could it be that restrictions of same-sex couples originate because we are so unsure about the steadiness of our heterosexuality that we feel extending heterosexual institutions to same-sex couples will endanger heterosexuality itself? This casts heterosexuality as a strangely unpowerful identity, one so weak that if its institutions are shared that marriage will unravel—but there is really no evidence at all that this will happen.

The third and maybe most important response to the perspective I have offered about our present vision of heterosexuality is that of the intrapsychic costs—of the present exaggerated naturalness of heterosexuality. The unannounced and unspoken contradictions of a pure heterosexuality cause great emotional difficulty to many people—especially at tender ages when self-confidence is low. With little reality to lean on, men and women experience extreme discomfort as they must face their fantasies or discordant early behavior. Surely much of our sexual dysfunction, insecurity, and panic comes from these early years of contradictions and high expectations.

My fourth and final point: even if many individuals concretize their heterosexual identity without much suffering or feelings of insufficiency, do we not incur sexual or psychic costs because we see heterosexuality as incongruent with certain kinds of acts or fantasies? For example, can a heterosexual man enjoy (without guilt or fears of sexual deviance) the experience of anal sex or have sex, happily, without intromission? Can a heterosexual woman enjoy a man who is less than traditionally masculine or prefer sexuality without intercourse as the centerpiece of her heterosexual life without feeling that she has betrayed “normal” heterosexuality? Intercourse itself is so central to the proof of heterosexuality that men and women who might enjoy oral sex more might never feel free to downgrade intercourse as the way they generally have the most pleasure. Why shouldn’t sexuality be more varied if it is about pleasure and not demonstration of heterosexual membership?

In conclusion, I think it is clear that if heterosexuality were indelible, easy to achieve, and easy to keep, we wouldn’t make all this fuss over it. The liberation of all sexualities is the liberation of each one. While political activism may be organized around the integration of homosexuality and homosexuals into the mainstream, it is not clear that there is a mainstream to be integrated into. Rather, there are many people trying to find a sexual identity that integrates their desires, experiences, and fantasies, however diverse they may be. Opening up the definition of heterosexuality will not endanger our welfare. We need to be able to do life as it evolves, creating sexualities that are unique rather than scripted from the one-size-fits-no-one-very-well tradition.