SEXUALITIES

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Abstract:

Referring in a plural case to "sexualities" indicates significantly more than a contemporary strategy at being inclusive across a spectrum of sexual diversity. Given the less than optimum ways many people have been, and still are, treated, based on minority sexual identity, or their attractions, practices or gender differences, then using the plural case is a poignant reminder of the full wealth of humanity and not simply majoritarian representations of it.

Key Words: Bisexuality; Compulsory Heterosexuality; Gender; Heterosexism and Homophobia; Heterosexuality; Homosexuality; Identity Politics; Lesbianism; Queer Theory; Sexuality and Religion; Transgender and Transsexual

Text:

Referring in a plural case to "sexualities" indicates significantly more than a contemporary strategy at being inclusive across a spectrum of sexual diversity. Given the less than optimum ways many people have been, and still are, treated, based on minority sexual identity, or their attractions, practices or gender differences, then using the plural case is a poignant reminder of the full wealth of humanity and not simply majoritarian representations of it. In many parts of the world, sometimes with better treatment or worse, the acknowledgement of a facet of being human attributed to one's sexuality is now widespread. Even within many healthcare systems of thought, sexuality has developed into a dimension of the holistic person deemed a necessary consideration for happiness; fulfilment; physical, mental, relational and spiritual health and well-being (WHO 2006). According to Michel Foucault (1984) and similar post structuralist thinkers, however, the very concept of sexuality is a Western post-Enlightenment development which is socially

constructed and something still far from being universally valued. This process of social and situational construction continues to evolve, as new ways of being are added to the project, including asexuality and cybersexuality. There are many layers on which the thought processes concerning sexualities develop and conflict, some of which will be explored here.

Foucault used a genealogical method to trace ancient Eastern discourses and associated practices that celebrate the joys and pleasures of sex. He referred to these discourses as the *ars erotica,* the art of the erotic / the art of sex. Conversely, in the West, he claimed that from medieval times onwards, Christian penitential practices laid foundations for a growing systematisation of ways of knowing and discoursing or organising life. Foucault referred to these ways of knowing and organising life as "discursive practices", especially in relation to the formulation of science or knowledge and power-over sex and gender. Foucault referred to this phenomenon as the *scientia sexualis*, what Skolbekken (2008) might describe as the "pathologization of normality".

Chronologically speaking, however, in this Western scientific schema for the classification of human sexual ways of being, the first sexual identity or orientation to be differentiated and labelled as such was homosexuality, by the apologist K.M. Kertbeny, in 1869. The fact that this original naming or labelling was almost immediately appropriated by psychiatrists, starting with K.F.O Westfal, also in 1869, clearly set the foundations for later pathologisation of all non-heterosexual ways of being, with a paradigm shift moving away from the confessional box and onto the metaphorical psychiatrist's couch. Whilst confessing to sins such as *'η 'επιθυμια της σαρκος* (ē epithumia tēs sarkos) the "lusts of the flesh" (Holy Bible 1 John 2: 16) meant scrutinising physical and mental acts requiring confession to a priest, the paradigm shift in more secularist ways of thinking moved from acts themselves into a real personage: 'the' homosexual (Foucault 1984). Often-times and almost the world over, thereafter, confession of this particular labelled and stigmatised identity could lead to criminalisation, providing a direct route to a prison cell or some other fate including medical and surgical castration through to execution.

Foucault highlighted the importance created by naming, when he said "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (Foucault 1984, 43). The practical realities, still witnessed across parts of the globe to this present day, see

homosexuality and other queer identities and life-ways equally demonised, pathologised and criminalised, even to death (ILGA, 2013). Foucault's words resonate when he asked "why we still burden ourselves today for once having made sex a sin".

By way of a diametrically opposing contrast, the second constructed sexuality or orientation identity to be labelled was that of heterosexuality. The labelling took place not long after homosexuality but apparently failed to gain popularity for many decades. The very fact that the presumptive starting point of sexuality for *homo sapiens* is of a monolithic nature, i.e., heterosexuality, is witness to the power of the discursive practices of orthodox ways of thinking. These mainstream methods of thinking enshrine a majoritarian view of being as the *de facto* 'norm' of natural sexual essence. The presumption that the majority are the natural and rightful sexual 'norm' fortifies taken-for-granted rights and privileges accrued under an ethos of heteronormativity, with its privileging practices conferred through heterosexism. The extreme and most dangerous manifestation of hegemonic [hegemony] heterosexism is called hetero-supremacy. From a majoritarian starting point, the onus is then placed on those who feel at odds with this way of life to declare themselves as other, to "come out" as being different, ultimately being non-conforming to the majority's 'norm'. The stigmatising effects on the hiddenness (concealability) and outcomes (course) of either remaining "in the closet" or coming out, can have both positive and / or negative effects on the individual, as witnessed in the vast writings on this subject covering time, situations and places.

Where historical artefacts exist, where they have not been obliterated, re-written, covered-up, or removed from public discourse, there is abundant evidence of people experiencing plurisexual attractions, relationships and / or sexual practices in times and places the world over. Such attractions, relationships and practices are treated with either more, equal or less respect than majoritarian (heterosexual) life-ways. Authors who claim to trace 'gays through the ages' often use as a starting point contemporary socially constructed labelling theories to 'write back' into eras which are now displaced in times and space (Halperin, 2002). A farcical example is of the 2004 Hollywood film on the emperor Alexander The Great, which some religious people boycotted, dubbing the production "Alexander The Gay". More serious is the classic example of a mis-translation of various Holy Books of Faith Traditions, such as the New Testament for Christians, where two Greek words (*arsenokoitai*

and *malakoi,* Holy Bible, 1 Corinthians 6: 9) are given a modern-day spin by wrongly conflating and interpreting them as meaning "homosexual" or "homosexual pervert" (Good News Bible) . At the time of original authorship neither the noun nor the identity or lifeway existed as we understand them today. The consequences of this mis-translation of the Bible have been, and continue to be, centuries of religious and cultural persecution and denial of equal human rights for non-heterosexual persons.

Current expansion to a plural use of the noun 'sexualities' emphasises far more than binary extremes of homo- and hetero-sexualities. Such binary extremes, as divergent polarities in total opposition, were viewed by early twentieth century sexologist Albert Ellis (1913 – 2007) as being more on a continuum across (bi)sexuality. Ellis considered that being fixated at either extreme might be considered "fetishistically deviated". Ellis suggested that human sexuality is a less fixed and more fluid or moveable relation, oscillating on a continuum of identity, attractions and practices between such polar opposites.

The arguments presented here thus far can highlight on-going tensions in the discourses of those who prefer a biologically essential (or essentialist) stance on orientation and identity labels, including many gay and lesbian theorists, and those who question the very reasons behind even wanting to use such labels to define or confine people. The latter include critical theorists such as Queer Theory. Debates have raged for generations over whether non-heterosexual orientations / sexualities originate in 'nature or nurture'. Not surprisingly, relatively few voices ask similar questions about heterosexuality, e.g. whether it is a choice; whether it is the product of nature or nurture, or why heterosexuals aren't expected to "come out" about their orientation like non-heterosexuals are. One might argue that this silence demonstrates the all-pervasive and omni-present power of heteronormativity.

Unlike the identity politics of many Gay and Lesbian Theorists, inclined in favour of equal human rights for sexual orientation based on arguments of immutablity in similar ways to such claims for gender and minority ethnicity difference, Queer Theorists critically explore the whole notion and *raison d'être* of "coming out". Anthony Grey (1993) describes this process, for non-heterosexuals, as being akin to coming out of sex shame and sex hate, into which the heteronormative discourses of most societies inculcate all those who 'can't even march straight'.

Since the nomenclature of homo- and hetero-sexualities was defined in the late 19th and early 20th centuries a whole spaghetti alphabet of abbreviations and labels has since been developed. The abundance of other orientation labels is certainly not limited to bisexual, bicurious, intersex, lesbian, transgender and queer. Notice that the ever growing list, one might say a 'rainbow alliance', of LGBT / LGBT+ / LGBTIQ/q (where Q might stand for Queer and q refer to those 'questioning') culminates in labelling all those sexualities which define themselves (or are defined by others) as being other than heterosexual. So, a continuum, with binary, some would argue, immutable, polarities and lots of rainbow colours and shades in between would appear still to exist in major discourses and practices, even if various critical theories would call for their dismantling or non-use.

A defining characteristic between heterosexuality and non-heterosexuality often includes the mark or sign (stigma) of difference, which, for some, is positively celebrated as grounds for human rights equal to their heterosexual brothers and sisters i.e., those constituting the popular majority. For others, their sexual identity (label) remains concealed, for reasons which include fear of discrimination which might result in anything from a restriction of basic civic freedoms such as family, housing, jobs, homeland and relationships, even to dangers for life itself in places where being gay is tantamount to a death sentence.

Many of the labels used of all orientations emanate from ancient languages of Greece and Rome. *Sexualis* is a Latin noun, often used in conjunction with a qualifying prefix. *Homos*, it is important to reiterate, is from Greek meaning "the same as" and not the Latin *homo* meaning male gender: man. Bi- (originally Greek) refers to both or two of something; whereas *trans* is of Latin origin *transire*, i.e., to cross over or pass over. Trans is applied variously to trans-sexual, trans-person, trans-gender, and differently: transvestite (*vestire* to wear clothing). With so many different identity labels for all non-heterosexual ways of being, one might argue that the umbrella term of 'hetero-sexual' ought to be applied to them all, properly, as being "other" (Greek: 'ετερος *heteros*) sexualities. If that were the case, then those who form the world's majority orientation would simply be orthosexuals: straight ('ορθος), a popularly used term without usual pejorative implications.

The Greek and Latin nouns are also often used in conjunction with prejudice, discrimination and hatred referred to as 'phobia'. The Greek noun $\phi o \beta o \varsigma$ is more accurately a fear of

something, as used in psychiatric diagnoses of phenomena such as irrational and debilitating fear of spiders, closed or open spaces. These psychological fears are usually amenable to effective treatment with CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy). However, the sexuality phobias (with the possible exception of erotophobia: fear of sex itself - or even talking about it) are more rightly akin to the hatred implied by the terms racism and misogyny than classic psychiatric fears of irrational nature.

The positive attributes of a pluralist approach to sexual orientations and ways of being, or, conversely, their demonisation, pathologisation and criminalisation, are inextricably linked to the treatment of gender differences. In social hierarchies where patriarchal, heterosexual, reproductive (and sometimes monogamous) male heterosexuality reigns supreme, then stigma and discrimination can be multiplied against all those who are 'other', be this on grounds of gender or sexual orientation or both. Such stigma and discrimination might be overt, covert, intrapersonal, institutional, cultural and internalised. Even an ethnic backlash against sexual minorities has been charted in post-colonialist studies, where hypermasculinised, homophobic, identities are seen to be the 'tonic' for dealing with a presumed imported, colonialist, other (Ward, 2005).

Equally, another important point to clarify is the difference between terms, sometimes inaccurately used interchangeably, for sexual orientation and sexual preference (Evans, 2004). For those who consider orientation to be immutable, read: natural; given at birth, then there is a world of difference between the inalienable rights conferred through a way of being or identity, which is different to notions of individual choice implied in the term preference. There is a transient or changeable nature to the choices implied in preference which is alien to the immutability concepts inherent in orientation. Likewise, sexual preference more accurately designates a choice or particular liking, an inclination, for sexual practices, types of sex, attire, situations, loving / anonymous relationships etc. The immutability of sexual orientation arguments, on the other hand, are more akin to current gender and ethnicity theories. They are predominant, too, in biological essentialist discourses including those that might debate the presence or absence, for example, of a 'gay gene' or 'gay brain'.

In many ways, just as most – but significantly, not all - people have their gender defined and recorded at birth, so the normalising discourses of heteronormativity presume or assume

'straight until defined otherwise'. With the fluidity of ways of sexual being and relatedness, however, then it is possible to see sexual attractions and practices throughout all times and places, which fail to fit the model of socially constructed or fixed identity labels. No truer is this statement than in the cases of situational homosexuality; or the bi-curious; heteroflexible; 'gay for pay', and SMSM (Straight Males who have Sex with Males), to name but a few.

Prejudice based on gender difference and personal self-loathing or hatred, such as in internalised homophobia, are often manifest as hostility and discrimination (including a lack of basic, shared, equal human rights) which are found more highly in males than females. Even the hostilities of homo 'phobia' [*sic*]and bi 'phobia' [*sic*] are frequently based on cultural notions of 'letting down' superior gender and hegemonic patriarchal, reproductive heterosexual, role expectations. This is frequently seen in relation to boys, men and trans-males who do not conform to the masculinist agendas of predominant discourses within their own societies. In relation to females, the matter is compounded with feminised gender roles and expectations which clearly put non-conforming females at heightened risk of suffering all forms of coercive treatments and gender-based violence, endemic within masculinist forms of domination.

Since the times referred to in history by Foucault, which gave rise to essentialising discourses of multiple sexualities, the world has witnessed increased equality in human rights for many non-heterosexual peoples. Sadly, the equality agenda, bringing genuine equality to all irrespective of gender or sexual identity / attractions / practices, is still a far-from finished project in universal human rights. Even into the 21st century, from developed countries through to resource poor and developing communities, especially those suffering the ravages of religious extremism and war, violence, discriminatory laws, the brutal taking of life is still predominant against those whose sexualities and gender are deemed lesser and more dispensable to that expected by masculinist and hetero-supremacist ideologies.

It is a basic human right, not a concessionary privilege, for so many to feel safe and equal to the majority, despite of their sexuality or gender difference, i.e., their minority status. It is a basic human right – more than a privilege - which is all too often lacking for the majority of queer folk in history and the world over.

CROSS REFERENCES

SEE ALSO:

Asexuality; Bisexuality; Bicurious; Cybersexuality; Gender; Hegemony; Heterosexuality; Homosexuality; Identity Politics; Intersex; Michel Foucault; Lesbian; Queer Theory; Stigma; Transgender.

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