



The pervasiveness of heterosexuality in contemporary relationships: Implications for domestic democracy

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SYNOPSIS

This paper makes an empirical contribution to theories and explanations relating to heterosexuality and gendered power relations. It emerges from a study which considered how second wave feminism and the introduction of social policies have made a difference to women's lives. The paper draws upon the data from the interviews of the earlier study to focus on women's understandings and experiences of gender (in)equality viewed through the lens of pseudo mutuality, a psychological concept adapted here to consider gendered power relations. In so doing, the paper challenges the explanations given by the women in the study which suggest that their relationships are not *unequal*. Findings dispel assumptions of a uni-directional relationship between social change and personal life; (masculine) heterosexuality has been much harder to disrupt in women's private lives, within their intimate heterosexual relationships.

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Introduction

Women's increased involvement in public life is a relatively recent legacy of second wave feminist activism and state initiatives to redress gender inequality. This paper considers transformations in women's private lives and emerges from a qualitative study of 40 Australian women aged 19 to 81 years in various forms of intimate heterosexual relationships. Interviews explored the ways women developed expectations and negotiated aspects of their relationships in the areas of paid employment, health, caring arrangements and money-management (Author, 2009). Despite much being written about intimate relationships, there has been little empirical work on the ways that couples relate to one another (Jamieson, 1998), and on the ways and circumstances in which money is implicated in gendered power relations (England, 2010). This paper contributes in important ways to filling this void. It highlights difficulties in describing intimate non-marital relationships and brings together theories and explanations relating to heterosexuality and gendered power relations to show that, more so than in the public realm, (masculine) heterosexuality has been harder to disrupt in intimate heterosexual relationships.

As a teenager in late 1970s Australia, I was amongst the generation of young working class women who were the

first beneficiaries of second wave feminist activism and state initiatives to redress gender inequality. Significant gains for women included increasing participation in paid employment, fertility control, higher educational attainment, maternity leave and equal opportunities legislation. Paradoxically, past successes in transforming the material conditions of women's lives have undermined the relevance of feminism for those who see social, legal, economic, political and reproductive gains as *obvious* entitlements. Moreover, in this light, feminism can be viewed as outdated, anti-male and a threat to loving relationships (Bryson, 1999). This is of particular concern when a Western individualist discourse gives the false impression of equality having been achieved (Budgeon, 2001: 13).

The impetus for the study was to distinguish between public stories of social change and private everyday practices. This is not to suggest that feminism has failed, rather, change has been much harder in women's private lives. Yet private lives *have* transformed; statistical trends show later age of first marriage, women's increased participation in paid employment, higher educational attainment, increased divorce, acknowledgement of same sex relationships and the growth in lone parent and step-families. There is greater acceptance of diverse living arrangements such as younger people cohabiting prior to marriage and adults having more than one significant intimate relationship during their lives. The way relationships are

spoken about has changed with common usage of *partner*, initially a 'political' statement to promote a greater sense of equality without denoting marital status. Transformations were apparent in lives of the women who participated in the study. The majority were university-educated, all had been in paid employment, most were working at the time of interview, and more than two-thirds were in non-marital relationships, a form described by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) as *detraditional*, one not based on a nuclear heterosexual family. While the most common, detraditional relationships varied greatly in terms of form and the way the women described these relationships.

What follows is consideration of popular perspectives of intimate relationships, patterns of money-management, feminist explanations relating to heterosexuality, and concepts that describe practices of intimacy. These writings make an important contribution to understanding the extent to which heterosexuality regulates women's everyday lives. They also explain why women see their relationships as *not* being *unequal*, the central question of the paper. Discussion then moves to the study design, data and conclusions.

Intimate heterosexual relationships: perspectives and practices

Much has been written about intimate heterosexual relationships, ranging from right-wing concerns about the decline of marriage to assumptions that new forms of relationships are more egalitarian. These two shifting perspectives, *breakdown* and *democracy*, are dominant in the sociological literature on contemporary relationships, while a third perspective, *continuity*, in terms of unchanging practices and power relations, is somewhat marginalised (Gillies, 2003). Giddens (1992) concepts of *plastic sexuality* and the *pure relationship* are popular, implying that individuals are free from the constraints of reproduction and that relationship longevity is premised on mutual choice. It is ironic that Giddens' career has predominantly focused on left wing analyses of Western democracies giving scant regard to the impact of gendered power relations, social class and other material conditions on people's lives. Furthermore, Giddens' optimism largely neglects men, instead suggesting that democratic intimacies are being spearheaded by women (Monaghan & Robertson, 2012). This is significant as there is currently little empirical work on the links between the types of heterosexual relationships entered into by men and other aspects of intimacy such as care and belonging (Robertson & Monaghan, 2012).

According to the modern view of relationships, couples have an 'individualistic logic'; on the one hand resulting in risk-reducing strategies that endanger long-term relationships and, on the other, better preparing them for the eventuality of divorce and living alone (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 28). An alternative view could be that couples may at the time see the relationship as a long-standing arrangement, which does not turn out as expected, rather than as temporary from the start. The individualistic discourse is, however, significant, with studies (Baker, 2010; Chung, 2005) showing a tendency amongst women to emphasise a sense of agency rather than victimhood at the expense of invisibilising gendered power relations. Similarly, Hockey, Meah, and Robinson's (2007) cross-generational study of twenty extended families with its

focus on 'mundane practices' (routine elements and experiences of everyday life) highlighted resistance and agency of the participants as they negotiated their heterosexual lives. Importantly, these studies also challenge the notion that heterosexuality is uncomplicated and reliant on the hierarchical subordination of women.

Popular perspectives of intimate relationships not only ignore a body of literature on gendered power relations but also are, arguably, implicated in women's understandings and experiences of gender equality. An early feminist critique of the pure relationship was that inequalities persist because of men's unwillingness to give up privileges and meet the changes that women have made in their own lives (Jamieson, 1998). More recently, the pure relationship has been critiqued for assuming that 'personal life effects social change by spreading democracy through the search for more intimate and equal relationships' (Jamieson, 2011: 2). Feminists continue to argue that the so-called gender revolution has stalled because transformations have been asymmetric with women changing more than men (England, 2010).

Money and gendered power relations

Historically, the dominance of the male breadwinner model meant that money tensions were resolved in highly gendered ways. Husbands had legitimate control of money and were expected to provide for families; wives were expected to meet family needs without necessarily having control of this money. Pahl's (1989) typologies of money-management amongst married couples showed that the manager of the finances was not necessarily the person who controlled the money, and when money was pooled in a joint account, equal access and entitlement to that money did not automatically follow. It has been argued that intra-household economies are important dimensions of intimate relationships, at the interface between the couple and wider society, mediating the extent to which gender inequalities in the labour market are replicated in the private sphere (Volger & Pahl, 1994).

Recent writings suggest that as more men are partnered with employed women whose education and earnings approximate or exceed their own, marriages or cohabitations must necessarily be transformed with both individuals having their own incomes and an equal share of resources (Graf & Schwartz, 2011: 103). Large-scale surveys indicate that young childless and older re-partnered couples are likely to keep money partly or completely separate, especially when one partner earns more than the other (Volger, Brockman, & Wiggins, 2008). Given that money is always a potential source of conflict, and managing and controlling money are two separate functions with the potential to conceal gendered power relations, it will be used as an instrument to interrogate the pervasiveness of heterosexuality in women's lives.

(Masculine) heterosexuality

While gender has always been a central category of feminist analysis, theorising heterosexuality is a more recent development (Jackson, 1996; Richardson, 1996; VanEvery, 1996). Studying heterosexuality was suddenly legitimated by

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