



## “It's a real negotiation within yourself”: Women's stories of challenging heteronormativity within the habitus



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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptual schema, this article examines heteronormative themes within the habitus and how women may come to challenge such understandings. Ten women were asked in semi-structured interviews to reflect on how they came to understand constraints in their sex lives, and how they have negotiated these constraints. Four themes emerged in regards to women's habitus, reflecting prevailing discourses of heteronormativity. However despite Bourdieu's scepticism of change, the data also suggests that women are challenging these notions, albeit in ambivalent and uneven ways, through a process of critical reflexivity, sitting with vulnerability, and the adoption of alternative discourses. These stories suggest Bourdieu's concepts are insufficient for understanding women's capacity to resist heteronormativity within the habitus without further development by feminist scholars.

### Introduction

Sexual negotiations are constructed within a complex set of social, cultural and historical contexts and discourses (Gavey, 1992; Jackson & Scott, 2007; Parker, 2009; Vance, 1984). These discourses influence our understanding of what counts as ‘sex’, how sex should be conducted and with whom, as well as the meanings attributed to, and the experience of, sex. Sexual negotiations, specifically in the Western world, take place in relation to a dominant, symbolically sanctioned, heteronormativity (Rich, 1986; Vance, 1984). Heteronormativity encompasses the ‘normative status’ of heterosexuality as the sexuality ‘which renders any alternative sexualities “other” and “marginal”’; and also hetero-patriarchy, through which (hetero)sexuality is ‘systematically male dominated’ (Jackson, 1999: 163).

A significant number of studies have asked young women about their understandings of sexual pleasure and negotiation living within a heteronormative world (Allen, 2003; Baker, 2010; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Chung, 2005; Fine, 1988; Gavey, 2005; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 2003; Powell, 2008; Sieg, 2007; Walker, 1997). This research comprehensively details how heteronormativity constrains a woman's ability to negotiate and experience equality in relation to sexual outcomes, and how this inequality is produced and maintained. It details extensively how women continue to experience rape, sexual assault, unwanted and coerced sex as a result of heteronormativity (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Walker, 1997).

This article furthers this body of research by exploring the ways

heteronormative understandings may be unsettled; reframing the research question from ‘doing gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and ‘doing heterosexuality’ (Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016) to asking how we may begin to ‘undo’ gender (Deutsch, 2007) and heterosexuality.

In doing so, I seek an understanding of sexual agency that recognises structural inequalities but also pays close attention to the process of resistance; capturing the awkward blend of heteronormative resistance and replication in women's everyday lives. Several feminist scholars are already exploring alternatives to the constraint/freedom dichotomy in relation to women's negotiations of sexual pleasure and engagement (Egan & Hawkes, 2008; Karian, 2012; Powell, 2010; Renold & Ringrose, 2008, 2011). This research furthers their work in several ways. Firstly, existing research tends to be narrowly focused on the experiences of heterosexual girls and young women. This research widens this focus by documenting the experiences of older women who are able to reflect on their experiences and how these have been shaped over time, as well as listening to women from more diverse sexual orientations.

Secondly, inspired by the work of Powell (2010, 2008), this article draws on feminist extensions of Bourdieu's conceptual schema. Powell is one of the few researchers who has applied Bourdieu's concepts specifically to the sexual field, however a growing number of feminist researchers are finding value in his concepts as a potential framework to bridge the gap between cultural determinism and the self-fashioning claims of neoliberalism (Adkins, 2004; Chambers, 2005; McLeod, 2005; McNay, 1999). This article draws specifically on his concepts of habitus and field to understand how heteronormativity may be drawn into the

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body, but also argues his frameworks are underdeveloped when it comes to explaining women's capacity for resistance.

Bourdieu uses the concept of habitus to refer to a deeply internalised system of dispositions and schemas through which we interpret and respond to the world in a seemingly 'common sense' way (McNay, 1999). Habitus provides us with a pre-reflexive level of practical mastery, allowing us to navigate social environments without having to consciously reflect on each experience. Our habitus is formed through an ongoing socialisation process, whereby we learn the sexual desires, feelings, roles and practices typical of our group within society, without consciously being aware of doing so (Parker, 2009). Bourdieu (2001) refers to this as 'feel for the game'. Because habitus is so ingrained, Bourdieu argues that people often mistake 'feel for the game' as natural rather than developed through social environments. Bourdieu (1991: 23) sees heteronormativity as part of the habitus, legitimising 'a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalised social construction'. Because heteronormativity is so deeply embedded pre-reflexively, we come to see ideas like 'he wants sex, she wants romance' (Gray, 1995: 1) as 'common sense'. The concept of habitus is particularly useful for understanding why change is often not the 'simple conversion of...wills' that neoliberalist discourses would lead us to believe (Bourdieu, 2001:41–42).

Bourdieu's 'field' describes a social playground where cultural rules, such as the rules associated with heteronormativity, apply. It is both a 'field of forces' and a 'field of struggles' (Bourdieu, 1977). In other words, it is a social space in which discussions, negotiations and interactions take place between agents and institutions (whereby agents 'struggle' for positions within the field), and also a space where our dispositions (our habitus or 'feel for the game') are formed. The 'rules' of the field (in this case heteronormativity) are internalised by agents (in the form of habitus).

It is through the interplay of field and habitus that Bourdieu (1977) attempts to reconcile the binaries of sociological thought around constraint/freedom. The strength of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, as opposed to the traditional dichotomy of structure and agency, is understood to be both its inherited and innovative nature; it is affected by institutions but then shapes these institutions. Bourdieu (1984:170) states;

*'Habitus is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two over time: dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures, and that shape current practices and structures and also, importantly, that condition our very perceptions of these.'*

Whilst this article focuses predominantly on the sexual field, it must be noted that individuals experience multiple fields at various hierarchical levels as we move through our lives, and thus the habitus is both impacted, and impacts, multiple fields with their own rules and limits. Further, whilst heteronormative understandings may tend to dominate within the sexual field, a field is a complex space full of agents with differential access to capital. This understanding of fields as multiple, overlapping and complex arguably provides the potential for change; as individuals moving between and within fields may experience dissonance between field and habitus, prompting what Bourdieu (1977:83) refers to as 'symbolic mastery'. Several feminist theorists (i.e. McNay, 1999; McRobbie, 2002) note limitations to such changes, suggesting that the kind of reflexivity that comes about due to dissonance may 're-inscribe' rather than 'resist' gendered (and sexual) norms. Adkins (2004:207) takes this argument further by suggesting reflexivity in modern society is itself part of the habitus, and therefore we should instead focus on 'a conceptualisation of mimesis which understands norms as never fully occupied'. In other words, rather than focus on field dissonance, we should explore the instabilities and resistances inherent to the process of norms being drawn into the body, such that the habitus does not always fully reflect the rules of the game. Both of these arguments are explored through the women's stories shared here.

By focusing on women's thoughts and feelings around negotiation,

as opposed to the behavioural aspects of negotiation, this article takes as its focal point the habitus; how the field shapes the habitus (albeit in uneven ways) and how the field may provide potential for disruption in the habitus. In other words, whilst the stories explore both the 'inherited' and 'innovative' nature of habitus, what is not demonstrated is how innovation is practically applied; how habitus may shape the field. There is a tendency therefore, to overlook the two-way nature of the relationship between habitus and field. Yet it is the ability of the habitus to shape the field that we must not lose sight of if we are to affect social change. Generations of women shouldn't have to continually challenge heteronormativity within the habitus to negotiate 'twice as well' to achieve the sexual outcomes they desire. Rather, we need to be working towards a playing field where all genders have equal capacity to negotiate and achieve their desired outcomes. As Haug (1987: 278) argues, we cannot simply leave 'each and every woman (to) confront the reflection of her failings and abnormalities alone', nor can we 'simply...develop techniques for a more satisfying sexuality. Instead we must 'revolutionise these relations...of sexual subjection as they exist today.' Thus it is worth noting that whilst 'institutions may be impervious to individual acts... acts that change consciousness could encourage collective action to transform institutions' (Deutsch, 2007:121, see also Atkinson & DePalma, 2009). Whilst we can recognise that 'symbolic transformation... is not enough (and that) institutions must also change in order to break the cycle of development of the gendered habitus', I, alongside others, argue that this transformation is an important first step, one that can prompt change within the field (Chambers, 2005:337).

Finally then, whilst Bourdieu's concepts are useful, a careful balance must be struck between a priori theory, and valuing the knowledge of women's lived experience. In many places, Bourdieu's work is insufficient for conceptualising the ambivalent and uneven ways in which heteronormativity is resisted at the level of habitus. Heeding McLeod's (2005: 13) warning, I reiterate that as researchers in this space we must 're-engage' rather than 're-iterate' Bourdieu's concepts.

## Methodology

Ten women living in Australia participated in this research, ranging in age from early twenties to late fifties. Two women identified as lesbian (both reflecting on sexual experiences with more than one gender), one as bisexual (reflecting only on sexual experiences with men), five as heterosexual (with one describing previous sexual experiences with more than one gender), and one did not identify (but reflected solely on sexual experiences with men). All participants were cis-gender. Five of the ten women described memories that involved casual sex, ranging from one-time sexual experiences with someone they had only just met, to long-term sexual arrangements outside of a 'committed' relationship (3). Five participants were in long-term, monogamous relationships with men at the time of interview.

Participants were initially drawn from the researcher's network, with one additional participant recruited through snowballing. The study requested participants who felt they had experienced greater sexual freedom over time, and were willing to discuss their sexual negotiations. Participants were purposefully selected giving thought to sexuality and age, enabling the collection of rich and diverse stories with multiple sites of resistance.

Data was collected from semi-structured interviews, conducted in an interactive, dialogic manner guided by open-ended questions (Lather, 1991; Patton, 2001; Reinharz, 1992). Questions were designed to assist participants to reflect on, and share their memories of, coming to understand constraints within their sex lives and attempting to overcome these constraints through negotiation. Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed and given pseudonyms. All transcriptions were provided to the relevant participant to check for accuracy and encourage further reflection. One participant provided further reflection, which was included in the data. A thematic and narrative

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