



The Limits of Heteronormative Sexual Scripting: College Student Development of Individual Sexual Scripts and Descriptions of Lesbian Sexual Behavior

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Simon and Gagnon's sexual script theory identifies multitiered influences, which shape individual ideas about sexual relationships. The cultural celebration of heterosexuality as the accepted standard dominates major social institutions and permeates cultural sexual messages. The reception of these heteronormative messages influences the formation of individualized sexual scripts; however, how individuals apply these individualized scripts to understanding the sexual lives of others is little understood. More specifically, what are the effects of heteronormative sexual scripting for imagining a sexual scenario not marked by a male–female partnership? This study asked a sample of heterosexual, bisexual, and non-identified college students at a 4-year private institution in the north-eastern United States to define lesbian sex. Results suggest the influence of culturally heteronormative sexual messages for orienting one's initial understanding of what sex is, though participants described various levels of acceptance, rejection, and/or revision of these messages as they formed their own scripts. However, when asked to define lesbian sex, participants drew from the more rigid heteronormative cultural script to form their definitions. The association of lesbian sex with vaginal penetration by a phallic substitute, such as a dildo, affirmed the overarching influence of the heterosexual, male-centric sexual standard for shaping the individual sexual imaginary.

Keywords: sexual scripts, sexual behavior, lesbians, heteronormativity, college students

INTRODUCTION

American attitudes toward sex in the twenty-first century appear, on their face, more liberalized than ever. Institutionalized support for non-dominant sexual lifestyles, such as the 2015 United States Supreme Court decision, which legalized same-sex-marriage, is lauded as evidence of a major cultural shift affirming the legitimacy of relationships beyond the heterosexual norm. However, a recent representative study of Americans revealed that individuals were more willing to grant the formal right of marriage to gays and lesbians than informal rights, such as public displays of affection (Doan et al., 2014). Additionally, Loftus' (2001) longitudinal study of American attitudes toward homosexuality between 1973 and 1998 determined that individuals tend to separate civil liberties from morality, and that extending the former is often more about tolerance than acceptance. These findings suggest that attitudes toward the non-heterosexually identified may be partially informed

by individual understanding of what constitutes appropriate intimate behavior.

However, how sex, heterosexual or otherwise, is understood as a physical act is often examined on the basis of individual experience; that is, studies of sexual behavior often ask individuals to reflect upon their own sexual encounters. Alternatively, how is individual-level understanding and construction of meaning around what sex is, to include how it is performed and for what purpose(s), applied to understanding the sexual practices of others? And, what can the application of individual scripts for imagining sex beyond the standard male–female partnership reveal about the limits of dominant heteronormative sexual scripting? Using an in-depth semi-structured interviewing, this exploratory study sought to capture the effects of heteronormativity for young adult development of sexual scripts and subsequent understanding of non-heterosexual sex by asking a sample of heterosexual, bisexual, and non-identified college students to define and describe sex between two women. Presenting these participants with a sexual scenario absent the culturally privileged male body challenges the dyadic heterosexual framework, which governs socialization to sex and which may limit the imagined possibilities for sex outside this normative framework.

Literature Review

The long history of policing sexuality and sexual behavior in conjunction with economic, political, and social agendas affirms sex as a topic of struggle for control of its defining characteristics, acceptable behaviors, and the types of bodies that may participate in sexual acts. This has attendant consequences for how individuals are socialized to sex. Describing the process by which sexual knowledge is transmitted, Simon and Gagnon's script theory acknowledges the individual's role in both receiving and adapting macro-level messages about, and conceptions of, sex (Simon and Gagnon, 1999). Namely, they identify three levels of scripting – cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic – which collectively inform individual understanding of sex as a physical act. More specifically, “cultural scenarios not only specify appropriate objects, aims, and desirable qualities of self/other relations, but also instruct in times, places, sequences of gesture and utterance and, among the most important, what the actor and co-participants (real or imagined) are assumed to be feeling” (Simon and Gagnon, 1999, p. 31). Script theory understands cultural scenarios of sexual behavior to be collectively developed and communicated by social institutions, though it is at the interpersonal level where individuals shape and enact their own sexual scripts, reckoning their identities, expectations, and experiences with that of the dominant script (Gagnon, 1973). Finally, the intrapsychic script encompasses individual fantasies and desires, whether these are acted upon or not.

Major social institutions, to include family, schools, media, and politics, promote a heteronormative sexual script, which structures societal discussions and depictions of sex, with a particular emphasis on monogamy and, ideally, the production of children within the bonds of marriage (Foucault, 1990; Irvine, 2002; Hockey et al., 2007; Fields, 2008; Garcia, 2012). Implicit in these messages is the assumption that individuals will form heterosexual partnerships, aided by gendered narratives rooted

in biology, which present men and women as naturally different. The construction and deployment of these narratives effectively obscure the social processes that, produce the gender hierarchy (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Connell, 2000), render heterosexuality compulsory, and direct individual adherence to their respective sexual roles as men or women (Rich, 1980; Ahmed, 2006).

Sex, as a gender complementary act, is communicated to young adults from multiple sources. In schools, this is found in the formal curriculum (Darroch et al., 2000; Hartley and Drew, 2001) as well as in informal policing of gendered and sexual behavior by staff and students alike (Pascoe, 2012). Heteronormative messages are also prevalent in media; a content analysis of 25 television programs most watched by adolescents found the predominance of a heterosexual script marked by gendered behaviors in which male characters treated women as sexual objects and women willingly sexually objectified themselves (Kim et al., 2007). The reception of gendered sexual messages during one's formative years is found to influence sexual relationships forged post-adolescence. Miller and Byers' (2004) study of 152 heterosexual couples found that both men and women drew upon gender stereotypes to determine how much foreplay and intercourse their partners preferred, with women significantly underestimating men's desired length of foreplay. These gendered sexual stereotypes may be understood to affect the individual experience of sex, to include an emphasis on male sexual pleasure. Studies of college-aged heterosexual men and women find that men are more likely to receive than perform sexual acts, such as oral sex, and are more likely to experience an orgasm than their female partners (Armstrong et al., 2012; Jozkowski and Satinsky, 2013).

In defining sex as a physical act, Jackson asserts that gender and heterosexuality are structures that mutually reinforce the taken-for-grantedness of male–female partnerships, where “the heteronormative assumption that women and men are ‘made for each other’ is sustained through the common-sense definition of vaginal penetration by the penis as ‘the sex act’” (Jackson, 2006, p. 113). Though multiple scholars find evidence that definitions of what constitutes sex have become more encompassing over the past several decades (Sanders and Reinisch, 1999; Carpenter, 2005; Bogle, 2007), the embeddedness of the traditional model of sex as penile–vaginal penetration situates initial constructions of individual sexual scripts (Laumann et al., 2004) and, perhaps most notably, structures a conception of sex that privileges male heterosexuality. Medley-Rath's (2007) content analysis of *Seventeen* magazine's sex and health advice columns between 1982 and 2001 documents the equation of penile–vaginal penetration as the defining act of virginity loss and, in turn, what it means to have had “real” sex. Further, *Seventeen's* classification of oral sex and digital penetration as sexual acts as opposed to sex privileges the male body (namely, the male penis) as a necessary component for sex to occur.

The pervasiveness of the heteronormative standard for defining what sex is should be understood to affect how non-heterosexual sexual partnerships are understood, especially those in which a male is not present. Historian Leila Rupp notes that while evidence of sex between women is present throughout history, these acts were nevertheless framed by a male-centric

conception of sex, such that “what we find historically and cross-culturally is ... that sex was so defined by the participation of a penis that what women might do with their bodies did not count as sex” (Rupp, 2012, p. 850). To be sure, reception of the dominant heteronormative sexual script is open to acceptance, adaptation, or rejection by the individual. Studies of the sexual practices of women who have sex with women (WSW) capture how definitions of sex shift based on the sex of their partners. In a recent study that asked women who have had sex with both men and women to define which sexual behaviors constituted sex, 93.6% of the surveyed women considered penis–vagina intercourse to be sex with a man, while 57% considered a man performing cunnilingus as sex (Schick et al., 2015). In contrast, 91.9% of the women surveyed considered cunnilingus between two women to be sex, followed by vaginal fingering (90.4%). Further, a survey of over 2,000 women in the United States and the United Kingdom found vibrator use to be more common in WSW relationships than in heterosexual ones (Schick et al., 2011). These findings suggest that individual definitions of sex may shift and incorporate additional sexual behaviors based on one’s sexual experiences. However, less is known about how individuals apply sexual scripts to understand the sexual practices of others, particularly given a scenario absent a male–female partnership. Specifically, how do heteronormative sexual scripts inform individual definitions of sex between women?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

In total, 14 interviews were conducted with undergraduate students at a mid-sized private university in the Northeast United States during the 2010 fall semester. Participants were recruited for participation in the study through flyer and e-mail advertising on the university’s campus. Interested participants contacted the researcher *via* e-mail, and both the researcher and the interested party mutually agreed upon a date and time to conduct the interview. As per IRB guidelines, all interviews were conducted in a private conference room on campus during regular business hours (9:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday–Friday). Interviews ranged in length from 45 min to 2 h. Participants ranged in age from 19 to

22 years. Four participants were male (29%), and ten were female; this gender breakdown is not commensurate with the make-up of the university as a whole, where males form the majority (57%). Though data on the race of participants were not collected, the university’s reported racial make-up of its student body at the start of the 2010–2011 academic year was 70% white, 6% Hispanic, 6% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4% African American. Eleven of the participants identified as heterosexual, one female participant identified as bisexual, and two female participants did not identify with a sexual orientation. Of the two female participants who did not identify with a sexual orientation, one had engaged in both same-sex and opposite-sex sexual relationships, while the other had engaged solely in heterosexual sexual relationships. Further details on the participants included in this study can be found in **Table 1**. All names are pseudonyms.

Ethics Statement

This study was approved by and carried out in accordance with the university’s Institutional Review Board guidelines. All subjects consented to participation in the study before any data were collected. Subjects were informed that their participation in the study was completely voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All subjects were over the age of 18 years. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, all participants were debriefed at the conclusion of the study and provided with a list of support resources should they need them. This included contact information for the university’s Counseling Services office.

Procedures

Simon and Gagnon’s (1999) three levels of sexual scripting (cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic) were used to organize the interview guide, though the semi-structured, in-depth nature of these interviews provided participants the space to reflect or elaborate on their experiences and/or thought processes. Each participant was asked to define sex and recount the process by which they learned about sex, to include what was learned and from which sources. Such questions were formulated in order to capture the types and kinds of messages individuals received about sex (cultural), in addition to how they themselves understood and

TABLE 1 | Study participants.

Name	Gender	Age	College year	Major	Sexual orientation
Abigail	Female	21	Senior	Biology	Heterosexual
Alexandra	Female	20	Junior	Mechanical engineering and social sciences	Heterosexual
Anthony	Male	19	Sophomore	Management	Heterosexual
Beverly	Female	21	Junior	Asian studies and graphic design	Heterosexual
Brent	Male	20	Junior	Bioengineering	Heterosexual
Carol	Female	20	Junior	Unknown	Heterosexual
Daniel	Male	19	Sophomore	Mathematics	Heterosexual
Daria	Female	22	Fifth-year senior	Philosophy	Does not identify
Grace	Female	21	Junior	English	Does not identify
James	Male	21	Senior	Pre-medicine	Heterosexual
Kelly	Female	20	Junior	Computer science	Bisexual
Marie	Female	22	Senior	Psychology	Heterosexual
Megan	Female	19	Sophomore	Global studies	Heterosexual
Sarah	Female	22	Fifth-year senior	Physics	Heterosexual

defined sex in relation to their own experiences (interpersonal) and desires (intrapsychic), sexual or otherwise. Having gathered information about the subject's understanding of sex, participants were then asked to define and discuss lesbian sex. Use of the term "lesbian" was not meant to dismiss other sexual arrangements, identities, or terminology but rather signified the act of sex taking place between two women. Additionally, this terminology ensured standardization of the interview process in terms of the interview guide, though participants were free to respond to these questions on the basis of their own understanding of lesbian sex. All interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the participants, and the researcher transcribed each interview in its entirety.

Data Analysis

The researcher conducted focused analyses of the 14 interviews using Atlas-ti software. The initial round of coding consisted of assigning a unique code to each question in the interview protocol, followed by line by line coding of participant responses, informed by Simon and Gagnon's three levels of sexual scripts: cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic. Analyses of these initial codes, combined with subsequent rounds of focused coding based on these initial findings, produced themes and patterns that could be examined further. The findings of this study are organized into two sections: the multilevel social processes that contribute to individual understanding and experience of sex and participant definitions of sex between two women.

FINDINGS

Constructing Individual Sexual Scripts

Consistent with existing literature, participants in this study acknowledged the reception of sexual messages from four major sources: parents, schools, peers, and media (Epstein and Ward, 2008). Also consistent with the literature (Moran, 2000; Bay-Cheng, 2003; Stone et al., 2013) were participant descriptions of their exposure to information about sex from parents and schools as limited, vague, or framed as dangerous. As Daniel, a 19-year-old heterosexual male, explained it.

[Sex] was presented to me [by my parents] in pretty much reproductive terms. So it was, sex is something that happens when a man and a woman love each other very much, and they get naked, and the man puts his penis inside the woman's vagina ... and impregnates her, and then the baby forms in her uterus and is born nine months later.

The men and women in this study acknowledged that their conversations with parents and educators within the bounds of sex education sought to distance personal experience, pleasure, or desire from a more "practical" definition of sex. Daria, a 22-year-old fifth-year undergraduate female, who did not identify with a sexual orientation and was in a relationship with a man at the time of the interview, recalled "my remaining question after sex ed was, 'How do people have sex?' It was a joke." School emphasis

on portraying sex as a risky behavior to be avoided was consistent throughout the interviews:

Marie (22, heterosexual female): We'd have auditoriums and they would almost scare us away from [sex], and bring in people that say "Sex is bad, don't do it."

Abigail (21, heterosexual female): [Sex education] was mostly based on different diseases that you could get ... So it was very much just about "don't do this" and then it'd fast-forward to "these are the consequences" and actual sex was completely not covered.

Noting the limitations of their sex education and/or conversations with parents, the young men and women in this study explained that the media served as additional sources of information about sex, with every participant naming some media source, to include television, movies, internet, and magazines, when recalling the process of learning about sex. Media messages about sex were described in terms, which contrasted with those communicated by parents or the educational system. More specifically, participants noted that media messages were more transfixed on the entertaining or "fun" aspects of sex, while downplaying the emotional or love-based aspects. Abigail described television as perpetuating "the idea of casual sex being completely normal ... not [as] something that needs to be particularly valued," while Brent, a 20-year-old heterosexual male, offered that he watched pornography to learn how sex is performed, though he noted that "in pornography it's more mechanical than it is emotional ... Because you know, they're just fucking." Others recalled media as a valuable resource given its explicit visuals for how sex is performed. As Daria explained, "sexual positions you learn from the movies or from literature," while Kelly, a 20-year-old bisexual female, offered "we see sex scenes in movies and if you watched porn, which I did when I was learning about sex, you see how it's supposed to be done. So you kind of try to imitate that."

Kelly's reflection on her imitation of what she has seen in pornography or the movies within her own sexual relationships is couched in her description of those portrayals as depicting "how it's supposed to be done." While this may suggest the reception of a fixed idea of what sex is and how it is to be performed, the men and women in this study also noted that their personal relationships were influential for shaping their views on sex, to include learning what they desired sexually for themselves and their partners:

Sarah (22, heterosexual female): As far as what I've learned about sex, the majority has been through my own figuring things out. Of course feedback from my partners, some research, and I just have a large enough sample size [of sexual partners] to be like, "Ok, most people like this." [laughs] "This is like something that I should continue or not continue," stuff like that.

Daniel (19, heterosexual male): At least both of our behaviors when we first started having sex was more in keeping with the, you know, that traditional "guy does the heavy lifting the girl shouts a lot" kind of thing. And then it turned out that wasn't exactly, that wasn't

really what either of us enjoyed the most ... when we discovered something that was better than what we were doing, we did that.

The role of experience in shaping individual conceptions of what they most desired for themselves and/or their partners was also reflected in participant definitions of sex and reflects the process of reconciling interpersonal scripts in response to multilevel influences. Definitions of sex were diverse, ranging from more general descriptions of intimate physical contact to specific sexual acts, such as vaginal penetration. However, perhaps, the most prominent narrative was the delineation of one's own definition of sex as somehow different from a general, societal conception of sex. As Daria explained it, "I guess there's a practical definition of sex, which most people accept. But I guess for me sex is something that tends to be ... definitely has an element of the erotic." Grace, a 21-year-old female who did not identify with a sexual orientation but at the time of the interview was in a relationship with a woman, explained her definition thus: "I think in general society defines sex as heterosexual intercourse. I think my definition of sex is closer to anything that leads to an orgasm, or doesn't, depending on choice, but anything that could, I suppose." For Brent, "when the penis is inserted into the vagina would be the most technical definition [of sex]. If you were to describe sex, you could describe it as a beautiful, a physical bonding." Finally, as Kelly explained, "I know a lot of people would probably define [sex] as vaginal sex. But there's also anal sex and oral sex, and those are all different kinds of sex ... I would say that it's any type of contact with genitals ..."

In separating a "practical" or societal definition of sex from their own, these individuals suggested that a general definition was too restricted to account for the different physical acts or the emotions attendant in sexual acts, as noted by Brent's description of sex as a "physical bonding." However, when it came to defining sex itself, the inclusion of multiple sexual acts (oral sex, anal sex) and outcomes (presence or absence of orgasm) suggests an individual conception of sex more inclusive than the narrowed cultural script's definition of penile-vaginal penetration. Indeed, studies of both teenagers and young adults have found their definitions of sex to encompass a greater number of sexual acts (such as oral sex) compared to those of previous generations (Sanders and Reinisch, 1999; Carpenter, 2005).

The flexibility and continual reshaping of sexual schemas in light of cultural messages as well as individual experience was also articulated in gendered, heteronormative terms, such as Daniel's previous description of the "traditional" sexual relationship as one where males take the lead and women vocally affirm their pleasure. The juxtaposition of the dominant male with a submissive female in sexual relationships was consistently discussed by participants, though they made a point to note that these culturally prescribed roles did not necessarily align with their own views. Anthony, a 19-year-old heterosexual male, reflected on culturally prescribed gender roles in sexual relationships, such that he felt more in control or given to initiating sexual contact:

I don't necessarily agree with this way, I just think it's the way it is. I feel like being a male ... I have more control

over if I have sex with someone or not ... I just feel like as a man, you're more in control of actually, you know, the path that leads to sex.

From a female perspective, Sarah remarked that "I would tend to be judged for my sexual experiences because of the ridiculous double standard that's in place in our culture," while Kelly offered, "I think that especially if I'm having sex with a man, there's kind of an expectation that he should be the more dominant one, that he should be the one initiating sex and wanting sex."

These articulations reflect script theory's description of the continual process of developing and revising interpersonal sexual scripts in relationship to cultural narratives and personal experiences. Traces of this process could be seen in participant descriptions of gendered sexual roles and consequent double standards within the context of a cultural narrative, which regards male-female relationships as the norm. Individually, participants expressed that they either disagreed with traditional gender roles, saw them as informing negative stereotypes of women, or, as Daniel noted, shifted their interpersonal scripts once their relationship progressed to reflect what they desired for themselves sexually. This pattern of adapting the traditional gender script suggests the flexibility of gender roles in sexual relationships (Seal et al., 2008; Camoletto, 2011); while dominant sexual scripts may have formed participants' initial ideas about male-female sexual roles, subsequent changes in these views, and their application within one's own sexual relationships, reflect the development of an individual sexual script borne of continual engagement with, and reaction to, multilevel influences.

Considering an Alternative: Participant Conceptualization of Lesbian Sex

Participant descriptions of their sexual values, desires, and relationships reflect the ability to shape and adapt individual scripts, though their initial reflections on coming to learn about sex support the embeddedness of cultural messages within a heteronormative framework. Juxtaposing the influence of media with that of schools and families, the silencing or censoring of certain subject matter by the latter two sources became salient when participants considered the experiences of non-heterosexually identified individuals. The role of media and interpersonal interactions for providing then unheard-of viewpoints and possibilities were especially salient for the two women in the study who did not identify as heterosexual. Kelly, a 20-year-old bisexual female, described learning about gays and lesbians through the internet and interactions with others, which for her was both eye-opening and validating:

As a kid I would make comments sometimes, like "Can I marry a girl when I grow up?" or something, just out of curiosity. And [my parents] would say well no, that's not something you can do, that's not normal ... I think definitely the internet helped educate me a lot more about [same-sex relationships]. And I actually started to learn more about homosexuality and actually come into contact with other gay people, so once that

had happened I realized that wow, ok, this is actually something that is valid and that I maybe shouldn't be ashamed about.

In recounting parental messages about sex, Kelly stated that reactions to her questions about marrying an individual of the same sex were not validated as something acceptable or desirable. Instead, Kelly credited the media and interpersonal relationships for shaping her views around same-sex relationships.

Grace, who did not identify with a sexual orientation but who at the time of the interview was in a long-term relationship with a woman, also spoke of the media and peer groups as fruitful sources of information:

I didn't even have a grasp of same-sex relationships or same-sex sex acts at all until high school. I started to meet people who identified with the LGB community ... I guess what I learned about same-sex sexual relationships basically was a gradual, learn-as-we-go kind of thing.

In their identification as non-heterosexual individuals, both Kelly and Grace present contrasting views and ways of understanding an individual's learning process with respect to sex. For these two women, their felt desire for individuals of the same sex and the process of forging same-sex sexual relationships were made difficult by messages received from the schooling and family institutions, which excluded mentioning of such relationships. In this way, media and interpersonal relationships with individuals who identified as gay or lesbian were important to both validating feelings of same-sex desire and to presenting alternatives to dominant cultural constructions of sexual relationships as occurring between a man and a woman.

As detailed in the previous section, the participants in this study recounted how cultural sexual messages were too rigid, or out of sync, with their own views of what constituted sex, and how men and women should enact their gendered roles in sexual relationships. However, which sexual narratives do individuals draw from when asked to define lesbian sex? When asked to describe the type of sexual *acts* two women might engage in, participants offered multiple and varied sexual behaviors. In particular, vaginal–vaginal rubbing and manual stimulation were frequently mentioned as sexual acts two women might engage in. Sarah, a 22-year-old heterosexual female, also noted that “if you have two women, you could have toys or fingers or oral.”

However, when asked to define lesbian sex, participants shared their difficulty in articulating an intercourse equivalent between two women. Unlike their previous definitions of sex, which were inclusive of sexual behaviors such as oral sex, participants seemed to draw from dominant cultural narratives of sex to define sex between two women. Namely, these definitions cited the presence of a penis or other phallic substitute as necessary for sex to occur between two women. Such findings were present throughout the interviews.

Brent (20, heterosexual male): It's so easy to define [sex] when there's a penis involved ... well you've lost the

penis now, and you've lost the something inserting into some other orifice ... I'm gonna go on a limb and say there isn't lesbian sex ... there's no lesbian sex with only the human body being involved ... you could define lesbian sex with uses of dildos or strap-ons or what-not. It's almost like I want it to be more of like penis in a hole to be sex.

Alexandra (20, heterosexual female): ... contact of genitals. If I could figure it out. I don't know ... I don't know how [lesbians] do anything involving penetration, I guess that's what I'm saying. And maybe they don't.

These individuals' difficulties in defining lesbian sex suggests a shared understanding of sex as involving the presence of a penis – we see this in Brent's reflection that “it's so easy” to define sex so long as a male penis is assumed to be present. Participant definitions of lesbian sex thus became troubled largely because of the marked absence of the male body, leading them to state that something was “lost” or difficult to figure out. This loss and difficulty was rectified *via* substitution of a phallic representative, as when Abigail stated that lesbians “maybe would use toys or whatever to sort of substitute for the penis.” That this substitution would only “sort of” replace the penis, however, suggests a heterosexual scenario with a cisgendered male and female as the most authentic form of sex.

For Grace, a 21-year-old female who did not identify with a sexual orientation but had engaged in both same-sex and mixed-sex sexual relationships, the difficulty in defining lesbian sex was experienced both personally as well as through conversations with others:

In terms of how society defines heterosexual sex as intercourse between a man and a woman, I feel like if I had to give a standard definition, it would be a million times easier to say well gay men have anal sex, but no one really knows what lesbians do, ever. I mean, I've had people just ask me [in reference to her same-sex relationship], “Well, how do you have sex?” Like, well ... what day of the week is it? [laughs] I feel like it's a lot less definable simply because society defines sex as penetration. So, because there's no penis usually, I mean no natural penis, in a same-sex female relationship, it's a lot less easy to define.

Grace's quote exemplifies the differences in definitions of sex based on the bodies involved, not solely on the basis of lesbian sex being more difficult while gay sex is “a million times easier” to articulate, but on the basis of the lack of penetration as proving troublesome (both for Grace and for those who have asked about her sexual relationships with women) for defining sexual activity in which there is not a “natural penis” present.

Perhaps, even more curious when considering the previous definitions is that the use of fingers or other body parts as having penetrative capabilities was not mentioned as an act indicative of sex. Though the insertion of fingers was mentioned as one type of sexual *behavior* that two women might engage in, engagement in this behavior was not described as

sex between two women. Rather, the suggestion of a penis substitute (for example, the multiple mentions of strap-ons) figured prominently in these definitions of lesbian sex. The narrowed criteria for describing lesbian sex marked a departure from more flexible definitions offered earlier in the interviews, when participants were asked about “sex” without the lesbian qualifier. These conceptions of sex as a phallic penetrative component acting on a receptive orifice reflect the application of a male-dominant, heteronormative cultural script as the basis for considering non-heterosexual sex, particularly between two women.

Indeed, the mentioning of sex toys was almost always discussed when defining lesbian sexual relationships as opposed to heterosexual relationships. The frequent mention of a dildo or strap-on as specific types of toys used in lesbian relationships distinguishes these objects as specifically tailored to sexual relationships in which a penis is absent. Some participants explained their mention of dildo or strap-on use by lesbians in relationship to media constructions of lesbian sexual behavior. For example, Carol, a 20-year-old heterosexual female, noted that “the media portrayal of lesbians has been, you know, there are women that use strap-ons and stuff ... whereas media portrayal of gay men, it’s unnecessary for them to.” Carol’s mention of toy use as “unnecessary” for gay men suggests that media depiction of gay and lesbian sexual relationships constructs such relationships in ways that emphasize the penis as the necessary object with which to conceive of a sexual relationship. In this way, the female body’s possession of a vagina and clitoris, and the potential for sexual acts to be performed on or pleasure to be elicited from them, is of little consequence if a penis is not present.

While participants imagined that lesbian sex was just as capable of being pleasurable in relationship to heterosexual sex, the absence of a penis in lesbian relationships remained glaring. Sarah described the absence of a penis in lesbian relationships as perhaps advantageous in comparison to gay male relationships, stating “I feel like sex between two women really doesn’t even have the limits that you would have between two men because ... two women can still use a dildo and have vaginal intercourse the same way [as] a heterosexual couple.” However, this “advantage” comes in the form of two women’s ability to more closely mimic heterosexual sex, where the presence of a vagina and penis are implied, and the role of the dildo as the necessary and sufficient apparatus with which to achieve this similarity. A similar idea was expressed by Marie, a 22-year-old heterosexual female, though unlike Sarah, she noted that the absence of a male in lesbian sex marked a departure from a “normal” sexual experience that could prove limiting.

Researcher: So you had mentioned there would still be this level of frustration possibly within lesbian sex. Frustration stemming from what?

Marie: Just I guess knowing that they can’t have it normally, or in a normal way ... I guess [they would] be curious about, like, “Are we still getting that same satisfaction?” that the male, like they would have if there was a male there.

It is important to note that these participants did not believe that the absence of the penis detracted from the possibility for lesbians to experience sexual pleasure, though Marie’s proposal of frustration within lesbian sexual relationships equates the presence of a male body with heightened sexual satisfaction for women. In this way, the dominant, heteronormative cultural script figured prominently for framing conceptions of the achievement of pleasure *via* vaginal penetration by a penis.

Further, the male penis as the more privileged site of sexual pleasure was articulated by several male participants in this study.

Anthony: I guess it’s just the way the anatomy is, like sex for a girl doesn’t have to end in an orgasm to be pleasurable. And I feel that’s definitely the case, because you know, I guess just the actual motion, the action, the friction is good enough. Like if [sex] doesn’t end in orgasm it’s ok because like the experience was still just as good, whereas with ... guys it’s like a build-up that gets you really pumped for *it* [orgasm], and when *it* doesn’t come, that’s really upsetting.

Brent: My sexual experience with my girlfriend, she doesn’t come to climax during sex. Granted, there’s a large population of women who don’t climax during sex. But I was talking to my friend about it, and he said maybe next time just try working her up more. Until she’s going to get to a point where you’re not going to [orgasm] so quickly that she’ll be able to finish before you.

This emphasis on the male orgasm, to include the belief that the male orgasm is more easily achieved, is consistent with previous research (Bogart et al., 2000; Frith, 2013; McCarthy and Wald, 2013). Anthony’s quote reflects the application of the gender hierarchy for understanding sexual pleasure, where the male orgasm is understood as the pinnacle of sexual pleasure (and upsetting, if not achieved), whereas for women, the friction (created, significantly, by the male penis) “is good enough.” For Brent, the understanding that most women do not climax during sex is explained in terms of women’s needing to get “worked up more.” In this way, women’s sexual pleasure is still defined on the basis of orgasm, at the same time that the woman’s body is described as in need of more attention to reach that point compared to men. While women’s ease of climax was considered on the basis of these men’s heterosexual relationships, the application of a heteronormative, male-privileged sexual framework to definitions of lesbian sex was evident in the responses of both men and women in this study. Most notably, the absence of the penis, associated with the male body, signified the difference between sex and “lesbian sex” and guided participant discussions of sex between women, most notably in prompting mention of what needs to be added to the lesbian scenario (a phallic substitute) to more closely mimic the (hetero)sexual standard.

DISCUSSION

This study was initially conceived in response to a gap in the literature, more specifically how the transmission of heteronormative sexual scripts inform individual conceptualization of relationships

not marked by a heterosexual partnership. This study asked a sample of heterosexual, bisexual, and non-identified college students to define and describe “lesbian sex,” a term that signifies a deviation from the sexual norm of male–female partnerships. Such an inquiry provides a means from which to examine how individual-level sexual scripts are formed and applied to a sexual scenario outside of a heteronormative framework. Further, asking participants to describe sex between two women removes the male body from the equation, providing further insight into heteronormativity as a gendered construction. Of course, this neither does assume a monolithic understanding of what heterosexual sex is like nor of what lesbian sex is like. Instead, this study acknowledges script theory’s identification of multiple levels from which sexuality and sexual practice is depicted, discussed, and conceived of. According to script theory, dominant, cultural-level scripts frame how sex is socialized by major social institutions, such as schools, families, and media, though individual agency allows for shifting, adaptation, and/or experimentation with new scripts, whether these are acted upon or not (Simon and Gagnon, 1999). Thus, asking individuals to describe sex between two women, an act which the majority of the participants had not participated in, becomes a means from which to theorize about how sex is understood as a physical experience and how the development of individual sexual scripts informed by both cultural sexual messages and personal experience structures this understanding. That these participants referenced and applied a penis-in-vagina model of sex to a scenario involving two women suggests limits to this understanding – that is, these individual-level conceptualizations of sex (heterosexual and otherwise) reflect the enduring effects of heteronormativity for drawing boundaries around what constitutes sex in the physical sense.

In particular, the means by which gender and heterosexuality sustain themselves as both structural concepts and individually lived identities (Jackson, 2006) was evident in the orientation and description of lesbian sex within a heterosexual, male-dominant model of sexual relationships. The cultural pervasiveness and legitimacy of this model directed the types and kinds of sexual messages that individuals received about sexuality from institutions and individuals, whether in the form of Anthony’s assertion that women’s sexual pleasure need not involve climax, or, for women such as Kelly who spoke about their sexual desires for other women, an invalidation of those desires by parents.

The overarching heteronormative model of sex as a cultural frame from which to understand sexual partnerships not marked by a male and a female was most evident in the almost unanimous mention of dildos, strap-ons, or otherwise phallic representatives within lesbian sexual relationships. While all participants agreed that lesbian sex could be just as pleasurable as heterosexual sex, remarks about adding a penetrating phallic representative to the scenario suggests the view that sexual pleasure can only be heightened from the presence of the male penis, manufactured or otherwise. The emergence of this theme supports the privileging of the male body and male sexual pleasure, even in instances where a cisgendered male body is missing. Despite evidence that lesbian women prefer the fingers and tongues of their partners to the use of a dildo to achieve orgasm (Coleman et al., 1983), the predominance of a cultural sexual script delineating gendered,

complementary roles from which males ultimately benefit, served to inform how non-lesbian-identified individuals imagine sex between two women. Further, participant mention of the clitoris as a localized site of female sexual pleasure (whether heterosexual or lesbian) was almost non-existent and illustrates the effects of sexual socialization and experiences grounded in a gendered heteronormativity.

Also telling is what else was not mentioned by these young men and women, most notably the articulation of gendered sexual roles as they applied to lesbian relationships. While these young men and women discussed the reception of gendered sexual messages from varying institutional sources (and, for some, their rejection of these dominant messages as they applied to their own sexual experiences), the application of dominant/submissive roles to lesbian women was not mentioned. This further affirms the male body as the dominant figure in heterosexual relationships (as well as writ large), most notably in the male’s assumed role as the active penetrator of the female body. The introduction of a sexual scenario between two women thus signaled the absence of a dominating, penetrating body, an absence that was consequently rectified *via* the introduction of penetrative sex toys to the scenario.

Though the delineation of gendered sexual roles in women’s sexual relationships, such as butch/femme, have been a source of controversy both inside and outside of the lesbian community (Kennedy and Davis, 1993), more recent scholarship on young people’s views of lesbians suggests the portrayal of sex between women as influenced by media depictions of lesbian women as “hot” and “heteroflexible” (Diamond, 2005; Jackson and Gilbertson, 2009). In this way, lesbianism is understood within a dominant heteronormative framework, which views them as for the male gaze, provided they exude a hegemonic (read, heterosexually constructed) femininity. By adding the penis into a lesbian sexual relationship, the complementarity of the heterosexual pairing is thus restored. Participant mention of the penis, or a penis-like substitute, as part of lesbian sex seems to support this notion of heteroflexible lesbianism, such that sex with a woman is possible so long as the situation retains some modicum of the standard heterosexual arrangement.

To be sure, script theory affirms the flexibility and adaptability of the standard heterosexual arrangement at the individual level, as participants in this study detailed revisions to their interpersonal scripts in light of their own experiences and sexual encounters (Simon and Gagnon, 1999). However, when primed to define sex between two women, participants drew upon the dominant cultural script’s instructions on the “appropriate objects” for a sexual encounter (i.e., the penis and vagina) in which to develop their definitions, affirming the influence of macro-level cultural messages for orienting individual understanding of sexual relationships beyond the heterosexual norm.

Limitations

One key limitation of this study is the gendered make-up of this sample, as males only comprise 29% of the sample. While the insights of these four men certainly add to our understanding of the relationship of heteronormativity to the application of individual scripts to a sexual scenario involving two women,

they preclude an analysis of the influence of gender on this application. That participants in this study were drawn from a predominantly White institution also precludes a racial analysis of the findings, though the insights of this initial study provide a framework for further examination of this topic in ways that account for racial and gendered differences, both within and outside of the collegiate population. Finally, 78% of participants in this sample identified as heterosexual. Overrepresentation of this population was sought for this study to advance understanding of how the heterosexually identified define sex in a situation where a male–female partnership is not implied; however, further research is needed to determine if these definitions, and the scripting processes that inform them, differ considerably from that of non-heterosexually identified individuals.

Future Research

This exploratory research, focused on the individual-level constructions and perceptions of lesbian sex as a physical practice by a sample of college undergraduates, suggests the overarching effects of the heteronormative, male-dominant cultural model of sexual behavior for understanding alternative sexual partnerships, specifically between women. While this study utilized lesbian sex as a scenario from which to examine how individuals conceive of sexual relationships outside of the male–female realm, further research is needed to determine what parts of these conceptions, if any, are specific to lesbian relationships versus other sexual arrangements. Stated another way, how do individuals conceive of sex beyond the male–female dyad, and how are these conceptions shaped by the gender, age, implied sexual practices, etc., of the participants in these alternative arrangements? This opens up possibilities to explore how other sexual subcultures, such as swinging, BDSM, or “party and play” communities, are articulated and understood in a culture that upholds “respectable” (that

is, not kinky) monogamous, heterosexual sexual partnerships as the gold standard. Sexual scenarios in which penile–vaginal penetration between a cisgender male and cisgender female are not possible challenge the dominant cultural repertoire of sex as a physical act, providing an avenue from which to explore individual understanding of these alternatives.

The findings from this study suggest the pervasiveness of the heteronormative, male-centric model of sex for understanding sex between two women. However, the implications of these findings may suggest limitations for the boundaries of sexual exploration, or at least the boundaries of what constitutes sex. While the results of this study are not generalizable to the college population, they nevertheless open possibilities for further exploration into the enduring effects of heteronormativity for the sexual lives of individuals, to include how sexual subcultures are understood in relationship to the culturally celebrated male–female dyad. By asking individuals to reflect on sexual arrangements that they themselves have not experienced, we can better understand how heteronormativity shapes and conditions the limits of individual sexual experience and desire.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author JP confirms being the sole author of this manuscript. The author also collected and contributed all data utilized to write this manuscript and agrees to be accountable for the contents of this work.

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