

Sex, Power, Belonging

People's struggle in fulfilling their sexual desires and autonomy provides insight into how power dynamics are perpetuated, drive people's behavior, and ultimately shape one's sense of identity, belonging, and alienation from both individual-focused and society-oriented perspectives.

Mary Peng 18 November 2019

Mary Peng is an intended Global Development Studies major and Philosophy and Anthropology double minor at the University of Virginia.

Let's face it. What do college students always talk about? The celebrity or celebrity's kids on campus? Too little time, too much stress, too many exams? Late night conversations about social constructs? Sex, dating, and relationships? Yes, yes, yes, and a big yes. The amount of time and energy that we invest in thinking and talking about sex and dating is probably more than you have expected. A 2019 poll of 2,000 Americans looked at how frequently respondents consciously think and talk about sex typically. The study discovered that, on top of thinking about the deed eight times, the average American polled actually has conversations about sex in some way five times a day. We want to talk about sex, and indeed we need to.

In a time where issues of sexual orientation, gender roles, and sexual identities are constantly being swept under the spotlight of public scrutiny, we need to talk about sex. We need to talk about sex not only as a physical act of passion, but also as the complex act of social intercourse. Humanity is built upon social intercourse, connection and interaction between people, exchanges of thoughts and feelings, and sex is a central part of this system. We identify ourselves according to our sexual orientation; we orientate our lives to seek suitable mates; we create images of ourselves that are considered attractive and desirable. Through our distinctively complicated experiences of sex and love, we make sense of and become part of the dynamic world of social linkages.

Sex is a social intercourse.

Cultures of sex shape the reproduction of power, the reproduction of belonging, and the reproduction of alienation. By looking into people's struggle in fulfilling their sexual desires and autonomy, we gain an intimate perspective of how societal power dynamics is constructed, drives people's behavior, and ultimately shapes one's sense of identity, belonging, and alienation.

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I'm a sophomore at the University of Virginia (UVA), who spent the past three months researching issues of identity and belonging with a primary focus on the LGBTQ community at UVA. Personally, I'm very passionate about issues of human rights, equality, social power dynamics, sexual liberation, and reproductive justice. When tasked to explore different dimensions of identities and belonging, I set out to study the lives and stories of LGBTQ students to understand how sex-related experiences, which include all aspects of sex, sexuality, and gender, reveal and inform social power dynamics, and vice versa.

I met Inga two months ago through a mutual friend. Inga came out in high school, and strongly identifies with the queer community. Sexual orientation was never a source of anxiety for her before college. "It's very frustrating that most of the girls here just always talk about hooking up with boys without even bothering to know whether we like boys in the first place. Our (gay women) experiences and needs are kind of invisible", said Inga when I asked her what frustrated her the most at UVA. Inga's eyes dimmed when she talked about being "sexually alienated" in a predominantly straight culture.

In a stereotypical straight culture, gender norms are accentuated and conventional gender roles are expected to be fulfilled by your testosterone-driven, assertive, and dominant men and your hyperfeminine and graceful girls. Straight culture endows people that fit in the socio-cultural norm with unearned benefits as a result of the sexuality they were born with.

Inga recalled that during her first first-year hall meeting, one of her hallmates asked her residential advisor how serious the hook-up culture was at UVA. Her question turned into a full-blown discussion on dating in college. "Yeah finding someone for you seemed quite easy here. You go out, go to a party, or go to a bar, and bam you meet someone", said Inga in a very amused and slightly sarcastic tone, "but it was all about girls and boys". She sounded bitter but calm, as if she had no choice but to accept the social norm. "I had to go out of my way to meet girls. It doesn't just happen for me...Sometimes people, who I assume have no ill intentions, ask me how 'it' works between two girls as if they were showing respect for the queer community."

Under the predominance of straight culture, sex itself could be a source of privilege and anxiety. For people that fall outside the heterosexual norms, the embodiment of sexual desires and acts of intimacy are often subject to public attention, discomfort, curiosity, or ridicule, which, according to Inga, is not only "mentally exhausting", but also induces "great psychological harm". Sexual identities and experiences are one of the most intimate dimensions of one's life. The lack of recognition and support for one's sexual experiences becomes a source of disempowerment and marginalization in a culture that grants privileges and power based on sexuality.

I felt a tremendous sense of guilt because as a straight female, I never intentionally tried to understand the experiences of the queer community, just like Inga pointed out. People's behavior and actions are engineered by their identities. As a result, people that embody the heterosexual norm often automatically exclude themselves from the "non-norms".

Over the course of my research, I attended many social events with Inga. At a frat party, where heterosexual norms of gender roles and sexual agency are blatantly highlighted, we decided to “act lesbian”. We started to dance in a very sensual way that was clearly beyond pure female friendship, which proved to be quite provocative. A guy came over to us and shouted in a very amused voice, “would it be illegal if I jumped in there?” I was utterly shocked, but not surprised. The amusement or other strong feelings that people might have had in reaction to my overt embodiment of lesbian sexuality speak to the extent of power imbalance between constructed heterosexual norms and non-norms. When the assumed non-norms are brought under the spotlight as an act of rebellion against or deviation from the dominant norms, the sudden reversal of power dynamics, accompanied by the claiming of agency by the oppressed, inevitably creates tension.

For people at the disadvantageous end of the social asymmetry of power, one that is based on one’s gender and sexual orientation, sex is not just sex; sexuality is not just sexuality. They become a public statement, a divider that creates different modes of reality that people of different identities---arguably one of privilege and one of disadvantage---constantly experience.

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I further canvassed for opinions the only way that seemed logical to me when exploring sex and power---I ventured into Tinder. I created a lesbian tinder profile. I set my profile visible to both men and women, but made sure that my sexual orientation was visible to both too. The responses I received were indeed, for the lack of a better word, “interesting”. Some people questioned my sexual orientation and asked me if I was really a lesbian. Some people tried to “convert” me. Some people simply ignored my indicated sexual orientation.

I did not respond to anyone because I did not want to get them emotionally involved and potentially mislead one’s feelings. This was also a major ethical concern that I constantly had to wrestle with throughout my research. I needed to make sure that I would not compromise anyone’s rights or hurt their feeling as I switched to a pretend identity only temporarily. Nevertheless, I experienced a much more aggressive attack from the straight culture than I had ever imagined there would be.

Now, the question we need to confront is whether everyone has the same opportunity to fulfill their sexual autonomy and whether fulfilling one’s sexual freedom and autonomy is equally easy for people within and outside the norm of the dominant culture. Clearly, from my experiment on Tinder, the answer is a definite no. The saddening reality is that for many people, their sexual agency, the ability to have one’s sexual desires honored and fulfilled and the right to choosing how they experience their sexuality, is constantly undermined. Sex, in addition to being biological, becomes deeply social, cultural, and sometimes political. Overt oppression and discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation are indeed malicious, but what’s

equally or arguably more harmful is the publicly invisible but constantly perceived attack and challenges that people face in the lived experience of sexuality.

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The disparity in sexual autonomy not only defines people's drastically different sexual experiences, but also reveals the power imbalance that shapes the reality of privilege versus oppression between people within and outside the sexual-social norms. Sometimes we are preoccupied with the institutional injustice resulted from the hierarchical systems of power that privilege certain individuals and marginalize others. However, oppression, belonging, and marginalization are not merely social and political phenomena, but also lived experiences that are deeply psychological and emotional. The frustration, difficulties, and struggle that one has to reconcile within his or her most intimate sexual experience speak to how power dynamics in the public sphere constantly drives the psychological experience of empowerment and disempowerment.

"I feel sexually undesirable sometimes, and that's a really scary thought. It makes me feel like I don't belong." This particular remark from Inga stuck with me throughout my research. Sex is such a powerful mechanism that connects an individual's private and public spheres of power dynamics. Individuals internalize the sex-based social construct of power imbalance as society attributes value, agency, and power to certain sexual and gender norms. The heartbreak and frustration in pursuing one's pleasure, happiness, and sexual agency enforce one's perception of their desirability in the most emotionally intimate way. Individuals then externalize and claim power through their sexual agency according to these rules of power and privilege. Through this process of internalizing the external power structure and externalizing the internal self-perception, people collectively sustain the cultural norms of "powerism", the process of associating different social meanings and powers to the desirable dominant identity and the undesirable targeted identity. How sexual agency is perceived, claimed, experienced, and exercised informs how this cycle of social categorization self-perpetuates.

As eloquently articulated by Agustín Fuentes, an American primatologist and biological anthropologist whose work focuses largely on human interaction, every human brings with her or him a suite of embodied experiences to every sexual encounter and every thought and consideration about sexual encounters (2012). At a minimal level, this includes one's gender, the current gender expectations of his or her society and all the subdivisions in that society s/he belongs to, personal life history and past experiences and exposure to sexual activity, sexual orientation, and age, health, body image, religion, politics, economics, etc. One's sexual experience, including everything that ranges from the heartfelt pursuit of sexual desires, autonomy, and liberalization to the frustration of sexual disempowerment and insecurity, involves at its heart the establishment of attachment, the conscious deliberation on one's power and social agency, and an inextinguishable drive to belong.

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The discussion of discrimination and oppression often leads us to a socially oriented perspective that emphasizes the collective, systematic, and societal causes and effects of belonging and marginalization. However, issues of belonging and marginalization are essentially human issues. We should also strive to understand these issues from intimate and psychological perspectives that acknowledge and highlight the authenticity and uniqueness of individual experiences of belonging and marginalization. Not only should our thinking extend horizontally across macro social complexities, but also extends vertically through each individual's identity development from micro to macro levels. Understanding sex in a social context in turn gives us a unique and emotionally potent window into how power and belonging are entwined. Observations about the strikingly similar ways that people who fall outside heteronormativity fight their battle of sexual recognition and sexual agency provide insight into how oppression is felt and understood from both individual-focused and society-oriented perspectives.

We all want to live in a world that allows one's freedom, most intimate desires, autonomy, and rights to be recognized and fulfilled without us experiencing unnecessary fear and psychological burdens. When you are done reading this article and resume your daily life, ask yourself if sex just means sex to you, if you think you can express affection in most social situations and not expect hostile or violent reactions from others, if you assume that strangers will never ask "how does sex work for you?", if you have role models of your gender and sexual orientation, and if you never worry about people being taught that your sexuality is a perversion. If the answers are yes, yes, and yes, try to remember that you've been given an unearned privilege that is unjustly stripped off of many people. They could be your future children, your family, your friends, your loved ones. Be aware of what groups are marginalized and how their experiences may impact their safety and comfort in their daily life. Use that power to a better end. Listen, don't judge. Help, don't harm. Accept, don't reject. Love, don't hate. Speak up, don't stay silent.

After all, we love intercourse. To be human is to want to do it—to need to do it. But this "it" is not just sex, but your passionate connections and interactions with people that allow you to cherish personal pleasure and move beyond to embracing hopes, dreams, and so much more.

* To protect my informant's identity, Inga's name is a pseudonym.

Citation

Fuentes, Agustín. "Why Is Sex So Complicated?" Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, 3 Dec. 2012, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/busting-myths-about-human-nature/201212/why-is-sex-so-complicated.