

SEX AND POWER— BETWEEN YES AND NO

Unwanted Sex

The practicalities of negotiating consent can at times be tricky, as we saw in chapter 3. This is true even in the best of circumstances: when everyone involved is genuinely into what we are doing, when we want to respect someone else’s bodily autonomy, when we know how our partners communicate, when we are happy to communicate our own desires and boundaries and feel confident that our partners will respect them. But are there other external factors that might influence the choices we make with regard to consent? How do the ways in which we are taught to think about what sex is and how it works affect what we choose to do, how, when, and with whom? Are some choices easier to make than others? Are “yes” and “no” equally available options, or are there forces and

operations of power in our society that might nudge us one way rather than the other?

One very common experience that begins to shed a light on some of these questions is “unwanted sex”: sometimes individuals will consent (in a legal sense) to having sex even if they do not want it. Sometimes they will even initiate it. Sometimes, we may choose to have sex for reasons other than desire (for instance as work, or as a way of becoming pregnant). But in many cases unwanted sex is experienced as a violation, or at least as something not quite right, and nonetheless consented to.

Unwanted sex is well documented both in casual situations (hook-ups, friends with benefits arrangements, etc.) and in long-term relationships.¹ Most of the available research focuses on women and unwanted sex, but there is an increasing amount of anecdotal evidence that men and non-binary people experience this too. The reported prevalence of unwanted sex begins to raise questions about the limits of bodily autonomy. Why do we consent to sex we do not want? What other factors might influence our decision making?

In long-term relationships, unwanted sex is sometimes explained as relationship maintenance: doing things for your partner, even if you do not necessarily want to, in order to make or keep them happy or because they also do similar things for you. Women who experience unwanted sex in casual situations report that their self-image and

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ideas about what it means to be a sexually enlightened woman in our society are implicated in their experiences. Similarly, men who speak of unwanted sex report that they feel under pressure from societal expectations to be sexually active and to always want sex. Sexual orientation and relationship type also play a role in these experiences. Women in relationships with women, for instance, may make a conscious effort to ensure a certain amount or frequency of sex in their relationship, as they feel the romantic and sexual nature of the relationship would be invalidated otherwise, making it indistinguishable from a friendship.

All of these experiences point toward an important way in which power is exercised and individual agency and autonomy are limited in our society. The French philosopher Michel Foucault argues that power operates through discourse—the way we talk about things shapes how we see the world and even how we behave.² There is a long tradition in Western philosophy that regards individuals as unified subjects: coherent, rational, autonomous, whole selves in possession of agency. More recently, feminist theorists as well as philosophers working in the post-modern tradition, such as Foucault, have called this view into question. Alternative views have been proposed according to which subjects are fragmented and contradictory, shaped by their social environment, and *constructed* through discourse.³

Feminist theorists have built on Foucault's ideas to show how, for instance, beauty standards in our society generate practices such as dieting and exercise, which have a direct impact on women's bodies.⁴ Others have argued that the ways we think about sex, sexuality, and gender roles—the discourses about these things that are dominant in our society—produce a vast grey area of sexual behaviors and encounters that lie on a spectrum between mutually consensual sex and rape.

The ways we see ourselves or want others to see us, the resources we have access to in naming our experiences and desires (or lack thereof), the dominant ideas about what counts as sex, who should be having sex, and what sex means in our society all work in subtle ways to make some choices easier than others.⁵ In this way, the operation of power doesn't only stop us from doing certain things. Rather, it is *productive*: it constructs and produces subjects, bodies, and practices. It also operates multi-directionally rather than top-down. It is not exercised by the state, but by each of us over each other and ourselves, in a multitude of competing and contradictory ways.

In the remainder of this chapter we will return to some of the above examples in more detail to explore how the operation of power through discourse—that is, the dominant ideas about gender, sex, and sexuality in our society—may produce subjects who take some courses of action over others, and how those discourses *shape* our

exercise of agency and bodily autonomy with regard to sex and consent.

The Dominant Discourses of (Hetero)Sex

If the way we talk about things shapes how we view the world and how we behave, the way we talk about gender and sex is likely to have a significant impact on how we think about consent, and on our sexual practice. Investigating such dominant ideas of heterosexual sex and relationships involving a man and a woman, the feminist psychologist Wendy Hollway has identified three key discourses that shape our views of sex and of gender roles in sex: the male sexual drive discourse, the have/hold discourse, and the permissive discourse.⁶ Although their heteronormativity limits their analytical usefulness at times, these three dominant ideas highlight how the operation of power through discourse may shape our behavior and go some way toward explaining why some individuals may choose to consent to unwanted sex. They also show how this operation of power is distinctly *gendered*, that is, it has different effects particularly on men and women.

The Male Sexual Drive Discourse

The male sexual drive discourse tells us that sex (specifically partnered, heterosexual sex) is a biological necessity for

men. It casts men as less in control of their sexual desires and arousal than women. In this way it at least partially absolves men of responsibility for their actions when aroused. As feminist campaigners have pointed out, we can see the operation of the male sexual drive discourse in cultural practices that compel women to dress a certain way to avoid provoking male desire. School dress codes, for example, require girls to cover up so as not to distract boys, whose reactions to certain types of clothing are deemed natural and appropriately male. Such rules excuse boys' behavior—their distraction and even the harassment of girls—and instead transfer the blame for it to girls. Common rape myths and victim-blaming perceptions, such as the idea that women provoke their attackers through the way they dress or act, are also an extension of the male sexual drive discourse.

We can see, then, that the male sexual drive discourse is directly harmful to women in that it constructs them as responsible for men's behavior, and as a result blames them for consent violations committed by men. But it can also be harmful to men. Because this discourse constructs men as constantly seeking heterosexual sex, it generates the expectation that sex is the main type of interpersonal interaction that men seek with people they are even only potentially attracted to, and that they are constantly up for it.

There is no room here for friendship or working relationships. There is also little room in the male sexual drive

discourse for emotional bonds beyond the sexual. Ideas of what it means to be a man are deeply intertwined with this discourse, with men's self-worth all too often being measured by the number of their sexual conquests and their emotional unavailability. Some men report feeling pressured by these constructions of masculinity and ideas of the male sexual drive to always consent to, or even initiate sex, even if they do not want it or would prefer a different kind of bond and experience.

The “Have/Hold” Discourse

Another dominant idea about heterosexual sex and relationships that shapes the way individuals act in relation to sex is the “have/hold” discourse. Named after the traditional phrasing of Christian marriage vows (“to have and to hold”) originating in the *Book of Common Prayer*, this is the idea that women, while less interested in sex than men, have a strong interest in long-term, stable, romantic relationships. This also casts sex as something that should only or predominantly take place within such relationships, and puts the responsibility for ensuring this on women. Women who fail to do this, for instance by having casual sex, suffer social consequences. They are stigmatized and shamed as “sluts.” If they experience sexual violence, they are constructed as having brought it onto themselves through their immoral and unfeminine behavior. This is true both socially and in legal practice, where

a rape victim's sexual history may be used as a reason to not prosecute a case or in some jurisdictions brought up in court to undermine her credibility.

The male sexual drive and the have/hold discourses have their origins partly in Christian approaches to gender roles and sexuality. Extreme versions of these discourses have been (re)elevated to religious doctrine and enshrined in religious institutions in US evangelical communities. This in turn has had the effect of enabling systemic sexual abuse within these communities, something that is only just emerging, for instance under the #ChurchToo hashtag on social media. A look at how exactly these discourses are leveraged and taken to extreme in evangelical communities can shed some light on their operation in wider society and rape culture.

Evangelical doctrine fully subscribes to the idea of the male sexual drive (or “lust”) as uncontrollable and insatiable. It also subscribes to the idea of women as less or not at all interested in sex, thereby casting them as the gatekeepers to sex. Sex outside of marriage is constructed as impure and sinful, and responsibility for it is placed squarely on the shoulders of women. At the same time, women in evangelical communities are taught to be subservient to men from a young age and are barred from leadership posts within churches. Institutionally and doctrinally, this is an abuser's dream, as has become clear from the countless stories emerging from a growing “exvangelical”

movement. Abuse in evangelical churches appears to permeate all levels, from youth group leaders to superstar preachers in megachurches.

One common element in many victims' accounts reveals how these churches' doctrinal teachings not only enabled the abuse by putting abusive men in positions of authority but also systematically deflected the blame onto the victims. Women fully believed that they had failed in their task as gatekeepers to sex, that it was them who had sinned. In some cases, abusers took advantage of this, shaming their victims further and thereby ensuring that they could not seek support. Where victims did seek support within church structures, institutions protected abusers, blamed victims, and in some cases even told victims that the solution would be to marry their abusers.

In evangelical communities, the extreme application of the male sexual drive and have/hold discourses, combined with other doctrinal and institutional factors, has allowed rape culture to fester. Women's self-worth in particular is tied to a toxic cocktail of sexual purity and submission to men, putting them in an impossible double bind. But it is important to understand that these are not isolated communities, and that their thinking is highly influential both in and beyond the United States. "Purity culture" has for several decades been exported beyond evangelical communities and used as a recruitment tool by churches. Evangelical organizations have developed and continue

to deliver “abstinence only” sex education (frequently the only kind of sex education available) in schools across the United States, reproducing extreme versions of the male sexual drive and have/hold discourses, and fostering rape-supportive attitudes among young people.⁷ More diluted versions of these discourses then operate throughout society with similar though perhaps more subtle effects.

The Permissive Discourse

A third, more recently developed idea about gender and sexuality that operates alongside the male sexual drive and have/hold discourses is the permissive discourse. It originates in ideas about free love and sexual expression of the 1960s. Like the male sexual drive discourse, the permissive discourse sees sex and sexuality as natural, biological. At first glance, ideas about free love are less gendered than either the male sexual drive or the have/hold discourse. Rather, they construct sexual expression as a right regardless of gender. They encourage us to explore and express our sexuality, which on the surface may seem harmless and even benign. But in its interaction with other dominant ideas, the permissive discourse may be just as powerful and potentially harmful in the way it shapes our choices.

The permissive discourse frequently combines with some more recent ideas about sexual liberation and personal responsibility to put pressure on women to engage in

sometimes unwanted casual sex. Since the 1980s we have seen the rise of neoliberal ideas, which place emphasis on (and measure human value in terms of) individualism, agency, and personal responsibility. The ideal neoliberal subject is constructed as entrepreneurial, constantly seeking self-improvement in all areas of life. They are presented as freely choosing actions from an almost unlimited range of options and bearing full responsibility for those choices, regardless of structural or social constraints.

Think, for instance, of how we tend to talk about stress, mental health, and work–life balance in the workplace. We tend to tell people to look after themselves: go for a walk, do exercise, don't work late, eat well. In this neoliberal view, we are all responsible for managing our own mental health and work–life balance. The hidden assumption is that we can choose to perform actions that make us better at this, and conversely that if we are still experiencing problems, that is our own fault for making the wrong choices. What this model neglects is the role of structural factors beyond our control: we may not be able to cut down our hours because our pay or performance review depend on them; we may not be able to exercise because we are working two jobs to make ends meet; we may not be able to eat well because of time or financial constraints. Neoliberal ideas actively work to obscure the role of exploitative or oppressive structures by shifting responsibility to the individual.

Neoliberal ideas operate similarly when it comes to sexual consent. If a good neoliberal subject should always seek self-improvement, and if, as the permissive discourse would have us believe, the expression and exploration of sexuality is a key part of that improvement project, then there is significant pressure to engage in sex in order to continually improve ourselves. And if we freely chose those actions (because social factors and structural pressures are disregarded), then we must also bear the responsibility for them. So, if we consensually engage in sex we do not want due to the social pressures of the permissive discourse and dominant ideas about self-improvement, then we have no one else to blame but ourselves.

Young women who experience unwanted but consensual sex frequently use the permissive discourse combined with their understanding of themselves as sexually liberated and always in search of self-improvement to explain those experiences and take responsibility for them. One participant in a study on unwanted sex even referred to her multiple experiences of unwanted sex as “wonderful” because she felt they had all taught her something.⁸ Here, dominant ideas about sexual expression and personal responsibility limit individuals’ ability to say no to sex they do not want, and deflect the blame for these experiences back onto the individual.

Dominant Discourses, Contradictory Pressures

Dominant discourses like these may evolve over time, and they rarely do so coherently. This is evident from the fact that all three of these discourses are operational in our society, yet they are also all contradictory. The have/hold and male sexual drive discourses reflect much older ideas about sexuality than the permissive discourse. They may also not be equally dominant across different sections of society, but they are still pervasive. The contradictions of the three discourses put contradictory pressures particularly on women, who are constructed as responsible for either not provoking or satisfying men's sexual needs, as gatekeepers to sex who are to ensure that it only happens under the right circumstances, and as responsible for expressing their own sexuality. The three discourses also set up men and women in opposition to each other, stigmatizing women who fail to balance the contradictory demands put on them while also leaving little room for men to explore intimacy and emotional connection beyond sex.

The three discourses are a good starting point in understanding the contradictory pressures society puts on us when it comes to sex, particularly as they relate to gender roles. A useful next step is examining how sex itself is discursively constructed. What are the dominant discourses that structure what counts as sex, who does what, and how it all works?

Sexual Scripts

A good way to think about how we define what sex is and how it works is as a kind of script. We already began to explore in chapter 2 how sexual scripts are another way in which power operates in our society to shape how we think and act in relation to sex. Viewing sexuality through a script theory lens allows us to examine more closely some of the assumptions we make about how sex *should* work, as well as account for at least some of the ways in which individual agency and autonomy are shaped by the discursive construction of sex and sexuality.

Sexual script theory originates in the symbolic interactionism movement within sociology and was first developed in the 1970s.⁹ It is a reaction against two conceptions of sex that were dominant at the time and are still highly influential today. The first is the idea that sex and human sexuality can be explained purely as a biological instinct. This idea is reflected in the male sexual drive discourse, which sees men as biologically driven to seek heterosexual sex. It is also present, albeit more obliquely, in evolutionary psychology variants of the have/hold discourse, which seek to explain women's alleged preference for long-term stable relationships through evolutionary factors.

Sexual script theory also reacted to a second idea regarding sex: the psychoanalytic approach, rooted in Freudian ideas of sexual drives and their interaction with the

demands and restrictions society puts on us. At its core, psychoanalysis too sees sex as biological, but it casts it in conflict with the social dimension of our experiences.

In contrast to both of these, a sociological approach to sex sees it not as entirely or even mainly biological but as a social phenomenon. The way we *do* sex is profoundly shaped by our social structures and the ideas we have about it. What counts as sex, who does what, and how, can vary widely across historical periods and cultures, indicating that our sexual practices—at least a significant component of them—are indeed culturally and socially constructed: they are produced by discourse. Sexual scripts then are the culturally dominant ideas about how sex *should* work: what counts as sex (or even what counts as erotic!), who does what, under what circumstances, in what order. Without access to the appropriate scripts, according to script theory, we might find ourselves in a situation that has all the components of a sexual situation (for instance, privacy, a partner we might be attracted to, nudity, etc.), and not perceive it as a sexual situation at all.

Western cultures in the early twenty-first century have certain dominant sexual scripts. These scripts are highly gendered, as well as cis- and heteronormative. We tend to define sex as penile-vaginal intercourse that happens between one cisgender man and one cisgender woman. Men are seen as the active initiators of sex, women as passive gatekeepers. We tend to place the starting point

of sex somewhere around kissing and touching, and the endpoint at a cisgender man's ejaculation, and there is a clear line of progression between these two points. There is some latitude in the script for things like safer sex practices and types of relationship, but by and large this is how we think of sex in our culture.

Thinking ourselves outside of this dominant paradigm takes conscious effort, and doing so in the context of partnered sex is particularly difficult. This is one way in which the existence of dominant scripts shapes our desires and our actions when it comes to sex. If you are fully immersed in the dominant script and that is your only conception of sex, even just imagining something else is an almost insurmountable obstacle. If, for instance, you are a survivor of sexual violence and parts of this script are traumatic and triggering for you but you have no access to alternatives, your choice may be as limited as not engaging in partnered sex at all, or doing so in ways that are harmful to you.

Even if we have done the work of thinking through and finding alternative scripts that are more appealing to us, we are still operating in a culture that has one particular, dominant idea of how sex works. So, finding potential partners who either already have or are willing to reconsider the dominant sexual script themselves is a challenge and puts practical limits on our options for exercising agency and autonomy in consent negotiation.

Sexual scripts can also interact with other dominant discourses to affect how we think about sex, relationships, and consent. One example of this is the strong association between sexual and romantic relationships in our culture, which itself is a reflection of the have/hold discourse. And while this association has been destabilized since the 1960s through, for instance, the permissive discourse, this destabilization has largely been one-directional. So a sexual relationship can but does not have to be romantic (think, for instance, of hook-ups and friends-with-benefits arrangements). But a romantic relationship is generally seen as necessarily also sexual. Only with the advent of asexual activism in the last decade or so have we seen attempts to destabilize the link between the two in this direction.

The construction of romantic relationships as necessarily sexual puts pressure on individuals to engage in potentially unwanted sex to maintain a long-term romantic relationship. Think of the huge amount of sex advice literature on how to keep the “spark” alive in your marriage: they reflect this construction. Many people report that over time in a long-term relationship they lose interest in sex (sometimes as a result of a change in circumstances such as the arrival of children). Some of them are perfectly happy with this, yet they find themselves under significant pressure to maintain a sexual relationship, and then

they find themselves engaging in unwanted sex as a kind of relationship-maintenance practice.

How we conceptualize what is and is not romantic in the context of dominant sexual scripts may also affect whether and how we can negotiate consent and exercise our bodily autonomy. As our sexual relationships move from casual to more committed and romantic, we tend to change our sexual practices, particularly concerning sexual health. This is driven by the assumption that a committed romantic relationship is also sexually exclusive, and as a result the focus of sexual health practices shifts from protection from STIs to pregnancy prevention. Cisgender women in relationships with men then frequently find themselves under significant pressure to dispense with condoms and other barrier methods and move to hormonal contraception instead.¹⁰ This in turn can have a range of negative effects on women, including not only the sometimes significant side effects of hormonal contraception but also potential exposure to STIs.

Dominant sexual scripts are particularly harmful to those they marginalize or exclude. Queer people are one such group. As the dominant sexual script is built on the assumption of cisgender partners of different genders and prescribes strict roles and sequences of events, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual, aromantic, and other people who don't fit into the allosexual, cis and

straight framework do not find themselves reflected in it. This has some interesting and at times contradictory effects. On the one hand, the absence of a dominant script to follow leaves a space for exploration and open communication: you and your partner have to make your own script. On the other hand, the dominant script may still nudge individuals down specific paths, or harm them in other ways.

Disabled people are also frequently excluded from dominant sexual scripts in two ways. They are commonly desexualized, in the sense that we tend to think of disabled people as not having sexual needs, experiencing sexual attraction, or having sex. Some disabled people may very well be asexual, but the two are not necessarily correlated: many disabled people do in fact experience sexual attraction and have sex. But dominant sexual scripts exclude many disabled people whose disabilities mean that they cannot engage in the kind of sex sanctioned by the script. As a result, some disabled people find themselves stepping outside the script, rewriting it in ways that work for them in their own intimate relationships, or finding wider communities where alternative expressions of sexuality are encouraged and supported.¹¹

We can see from accounts of people excluded from dominant sexual scripts that those scripts are far from universal in their application. For some there is no script to follow at all, while for others the dominant script just

does not fit very well. In fact, sexual script theory accounts for this by suggesting that scripts exist at three different levels. The dominant script we have been discussing so far exists at the cultural level. But we also have scripts at the individual level (the things we personally find sexy, the ways we would like to engage in sex), and the interpersonal level (the mash-up of cultural and individual scripts we ultimately end up negotiating with partners). Significant disjunctures between scripts at different levels may exist even for individuals who otherwise fit the non-disabled, cisgender, allo- and heterosexual “norm” that cultural scripts assume.

Negotiating and resolving these disjunctures is key if we are to exercise agency and bodily autonomy and if our consent is to be meaningful. Researchers have identified three key strategies that individuals tend to use to resolve disjunctures between sexual scripts at different levels.¹² Some of them are more successful in enabling individuals to exercise bodily autonomy and helping them challenge dominant discursive constructions than others. The first such strategy is conformity: you go along with the dominant cultural script even if ultimately it doesn't work for you. Consenting to unwanted sex is frequently an example of conformity, as is following the default, penile-vaginal intercourse script even when there are other sexual activities you would prefer. Here, the existence of the dominant script constructs one particular way to have sex as the

obvious and default choice and shapes individuals' desires and actions.

There are other ways to reconcile disjunctures between sexual scripts at the cultural, individual, and interpersonal levels. A second key strategy is exception finding. People who employ this strategy broadly subscribe to the dominant cultural script while also finding ways in which it does not apply to them or their relationships. You may, for instance, think that your own relationship is different from the norm, that the way you and your partner do gender roles is non-conforming, or engage in "off-script" sexual practices. Even if you are not fundamentally challenging the cultural script, this kind of exception finding can be an effective way to exercise agency and autonomy.

The final strategy here is to seek to transform the dominant sexual script at the cultural level. This involves not just finding exceptions in your private life and sexual practice, but questioning and seeking to destabilize dominant scripts. This can be done, for instance, by seeking out like-minded communities, engaging in conversation about the assumptions that underlie default scripts and common sexual practices, and continually developing your own understanding. Feminist, asexual, queer, disabled, and some BDSM communities have mounted a series of successful challenges and destabilized dominant sexual scripts and gender roles. They have done this both in limited localized ways and in ways that have had a wider lasting impact,

enabling others to challenge the operation of power through dominant discourses and sexual scripts in their own lives and potentially making alternative choices, desires, and practices more obvious or easier to access.

Disjunctures in sexual scripts and the strategies we use to negotiate them are a key mechanism for long-term change in dominant sexual scripts. Individuals may employ different strategies with different partners, or at different times in their lives. They may find ways to challenge the operation of the default script in their own private lives, and that may be enough for them, opening up a space for creativity, bodily autonomy, and meaningful consent within the wider constraints of social structures and dominant discourses. Or they may seek to effect wider cultural change. We have seen examples of such change, for instance, in the at least partial incorporation of safer sex practices in the cultural sexual script particularly in the wake of the HIV epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. We may be seeing a further shift regarding consent right now, in the wake of the #MeToo movement. We will explore what effective, lasting change may look like in chapter 7.

Identity, Marginalization, and Consent

As we have seen in the operation of the male sexual drive and permissive discourses, and the respective interaction

of each with ideas of masculinity and the neoliberal subject, one of the key ways in which power operates through discourse is by *constructing subjects*. This means that how we talk about people or groups of people, how we as a society treat them, shapes who they are, makes some choices easier to access than others, and thereby shapes their actions when it comes to sex.

Sometimes these effects are very obviously material. We can see this, for instance, in the recent controversy over transgender people's use of public bathrooms appropriate to their gender. The way transgender people are talked about—misgendered, and their identity denied—has a significant material impact on their lives, and exposes them to the risk of violence and harm.

At other times, the way the discursive construction of subjects operates to oppress and shape individual agency can be more insidious. This is frequently the case when it comes to issues of sexual consent. We have already touched on the way the male sexual drive discourse creates an expectation for men to always seek sex while making it more difficult for them to seek other types of intimate connections. The way society constructs us as subjects, and the ways in which we as a result view ourselves, can have an impact on the choices that are available to us and thereby on the choices we make.

These effects can also be compounded if we experience multiple marginalizations. For instance, the ways in

which we are constructed as women may intersect with the ways in which we are constructed as black, or queer, or disabled to put particular pressures on us and shape our experiences in particular ways.¹³ In the remainder of this chapter, we will look at some examples of how the discursive construction of some marginalized subjects can shape their choices and actions when it comes to sex and consent.

One very common discourse about what is “normal” and “human” posits that experiencing sexual attraction to other people is part of what makes us human. Thinking back to the three discourses of (hetero)sexuality we explored at the beginning of this chapter, both the male sexual drive discourse and the permissive discourse are predicated on the assumption that sex and sexual attraction are natural, biological, and part of the normal human experience. Yet not everyone experiences sexual attraction, and not everyone who does, does so in the same way. People who do not experience sexual attraction in the same way as the majority are frequently pathologized. There is a pervasive idea that something must be wrong with them, and that it can be fixed, for instance through therapy or meeting the right person.

Over the last ten or fifteen years, asexuality and other related concepts, such as demisexuality and aromanticism, have emerged as distinct identities under the queer umbrella. This development has largely been driven by activists, the formation of an asexual community in online

spaces,¹⁴ and to an extent by scholars who have researched asexuality. Asexual activism has highlighted a number of ways in which the presumption that everyone is allosexual (i.e., experiences sexual attraction), harms asexual people and limits their exercise of bodily autonomy.

One example of this is the complete lack of coverage of asexual identities and experiences in both sex and relationships education and (perhaps more crucially) mainstream popular culture. This means that unless an asexual person is lucky enough to stumble upon online asexual communities, they may not have access to the language and ideas to describe who they are or to make sense of their experiences. Combined with a general expectation that everyone is allosexual and should at some point have sex because it is natural, this puts asexual people in a position where they may consent to sex they do not want simply because it is the done thing. One asexual commentator on Twitter described early sexual experiences, consented to before coming to identify as asexual, “like being raped by no one in particular.”¹⁵

Asexual activists and scholars researching asexuality have coined the term “compulsory sexuality” to describe the discourses and systems at work here.¹⁶ Compulsory sexuality describes a collection of discourses, ideas and practices. These include the idea that sexual attraction is natural and something that all humans experience, that it is necessary in order to live a full life and relate to others

in appropriate ways, and that sexual and romantic attraction (as well as a variety of other kinds of attraction) necessarily go together. Articulating the idea of compulsory sexuality in turn has allowed asexual activists to disentangle some of the assumptions involved in it and develop concepts such as different types of attraction (sexual, romantic, aesthetic, etc.) that may but do not have to be correlated. It has also enabled people under the broad asexual and aromantic umbrella to push back against societal pressures and to better exercise their own agency when it comes to sex and consent.¹⁷

The idea of compulsory sexuality as a mechanism through which power operates is useful not just when considering asexuality. It helps highlight a range of other intersectional effects regarding consent on different groups of people and different kinds of bodies. The association between allosexuality and “normality” or “humanity” means that a discourse of desexualization can be used as a means of social control against marginalized groups. By constructing some groups as non-sexual, they are declared deviant, other, or something less than human. There is a wealth of research that has shown how this discourse is leveraged, for instance against older and disabled people, Asian men, and fat people.¹⁸

Discursive desexualization in turn can shape the choices available to those it is leveraged against in their day-to-day lives and sexual practice. Because desexualization

is closely related to dehumanization and othering, someone who experiences it may feel a need to react against it by “proving” their own sexuality. There is also significant cultural pressure on individuals to do so. Think, for instance, of the popular cultural trope of the fat girl in high school who suddenly receives sexual and romantic attention from a boy. The expectation of her is that she is grateful for that attention and consents to whatever he demands in an attempt to counteract her own desexualization and dehumanization. This trope carries over into the real world, and fat women are very much expected to be grateful for any attention they receive and not to reject potential partners.

Desexualization also affects women in relationships with women, as women’s sexuality tends to be discounted and devalued when it is not directed at men. We can see this, for instance, in how bisexual women’s relationships with men are treated as more valid and more defining of their sexuality than their relationships with women. One direct impact this has on women in relationships with women is that they report monitoring the frequency of sex in the relationship and actively working on increasing their own desire and having sex on a regular basis, regardless of whether they actually want it. Because sex is associated with intimacy, but also with the validity of a romantic relationship and lesbian or bisexual identity, there is a pressure on women in relationships with women to

engage in sex they do not want in order to feel secure in both the relationship and their identity.¹⁹

While some groups are desexualized, others can be hypersexualized and fetishized. This applies, for instance, to black women and men, Asian women, and bisexual people. Hypersexualization is just as harmful to individuals' ability to exercise sexual agency as desexualization, as it makes members of hypersexualized groups more prone to sexual harassment and violence. It also makes it more difficult to access justice for sexual violence, as victims are less likely to be believed and even more likely to be blamed for assault they experience.²⁰

Autonomy?

Dominant discourses about sex, gender, and consent interact with other ways in which subjects are socially constructed and marginalized to shape their sexual choices in a range of ways. The way we think about how men and women *should* experience their sexuality (the male sexual drive discourse, the have/hold discourse, and the permissive discourse) puts pressure on men to seek sex over other types of connection, while putting women in an impossible position trying to reconcile three contradictory demands. The way we define what counts as sex, and how a sexual encounter *should* progress, puts pressure on us

to have sex in one particular way that does not work for everyone, as well as excluding some of us from the dominant scripts entirely. And the ways our validity as human beings with full lives and meaningful relationships is tied to our sexuality allow for both desexualization and hypersexualization to be wielded as tools of power. This in turn puts some groups under pressure to “prove” their sexuality while making others more prone to sexual violence.

One result of all of these subtle operations of power is that unwanted (but legally consensual) sex remains remarkably prevalent among people of all genders, in both casual situations and long-term relationships. This highlights the way our choices and available courses of action are shaped by society. It may be tempting to reduce these operations of power to one dimension (gender) and one direction (men oppressing women), and this is the position held by some radical feminists.²¹ But it is obvious from the examples discussed in this chapter that reality is much more complex than that. Power is indeed multi-directional and multi-dimensional, and it is impossible to disentangle our apparently autonomous decisions and choices from our social context.

Some feminist philosophers have therefore developed the idea of autonomy in ways that take into account interdependencies and interpersonal relationships, as well as other external factors such as our social and material circumstances, which may shape our choices and actions.

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These approaches are broadly grouped under the heading of relational autonomy. They allow us to see how our relationships with others and our social context can both limit our autonomy but also nurture it.²² So what does this mean for the idea of autonomy in consent, and particularly for us in that moment where we say yes or no, where we hear our partners' yes or no?

A no, however obliquely expressed, remains a no, and we have an obligation to hear it and act on it. But a genuine respect for our own and others' autonomy puts additional obligations on us. We need to be aware of the operations of power that may shape both our own and our partners' sexual choices. We need to consciously act in ways that do not reproduce those operations of power, and that ideally challenge them. We need to be sensitive to how axes of oppression and marginalization operate and intersect. We need to rewrite sexual scripts, dismantle dominant discourses, and endeavor to level the playing field. How we do this will vary from partner to partner, from situation to situation. In chapter 6, we will examine some of the kinds of activist work going on that seek to do these things on a wider societal scale.

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