REVIEW

Sexuality and the Dimensions of Power

Chris Brickell

Abstract   Power, many scholars agree, is intrinsic to the relationships between sexuality, individual experience and social dynamics. Beyond this basic agreement, though, writers and researchers have adopted different foci. This article critically reviews several approaches to the power–sex relationship, and suggests that four readily discernable but interlaced dimensions of power operate upon the sexual: definitional, regulatory, productive and unequal. As a number of examples from the literature show, these ideal typical forms twist and interweave in both theory and practice. I suggest that to be mindful of all four facets of power and their interrelationships is to account for multiplicity, and to avoid the reductive characterizations that have sometimes characterized academic writings on power and sexuality. In this way, both theory and research in the area of human sexuality can be more thoroughly conceptualized.

Keywords   Sexuality · Sex · Power · Inequality · Theory

Introduction

Power is intrinsic to sexuality; that much has become clear in the burgeoning literature on eroticism and social life. Questions of power and sexuality arise frequently, in a range of disciplines: sociology, history, anthropology, social psychology, sociolinguistics, political studies and public health. Scholars in each of these fields are interested in the ways power inflects and even structures human sexuality. From the work of Anthony Giddens to that of Catharine MacKinnon, Gayle Rubin and recent scholars of cybersexuality, questions of power and sexuality

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form the focus of a considerable quantum of social theory, while researchers ask how power makes an impact on safer sex practices, sexual violence and young people's educational experiences. Libertarians have sought to free sex from the fetters of restraint and 'moralism', radical feminists have argued that sexuality and domination are mutually informing, and poststructuralist scholars have explored the mesh of power relations through which sexual subjects are constituted.

But how might we bring together the range of perspectives on sexuality and power? In this article I attempt to systematize the existing writings on this subject, in order to map out the field and suggest where the debates might go from here. I begin by laying out a four-dimensional approach to power. My four dimensions are these: definitional power, which often has a strong normalizing aspect; regulatory power, which includes the institutional force to direct particular forms of sexuality; productive power, through which desires and sexual knowledges are constituted; and unequal power, through which material factors work to maintain systematic inequalities. I suggest these dimensions exist both in the academic literature and also in society at large. They are first order as well as second order constructs, that is, they reflect the everyday lived experiences of people as well as scholarly analysis.

These are ideal typical forms, analytical devices. Hardly ever will any of the four be found in their pure form, and many examples of theory and research tack back and forth between them. Nonetheless, such an analytical separation shows us how different strands of power are articulated, and how they interweave, interlock and move apart. While not every strand meshes with the others, sometimes they come together in various ways. To systematize the different facets of sexual power is also to clarify their grounding assumptions, I suggest, and to make it less likely that any one particular approach can stand in for the whole field. In this way, the claims of each particular perspective are situated within their specificity, as component parts of a wider and more complex terrain.

This article, then, introduces each of the four dimensions of power and sexuality. For each one it offers a discussion of key assumptions and some of the classic articulations, some examples of recent theory and research, and some critical commentary. These discussions are necessarily far from exhaustive. The aim is to abstract the key features of each of the four strands, not to offer a thorough survey. The second section of the article explores the points of similarity, difference and tension between the four dimensions. By highlighting two particular examples—the historical negotiation of Western male homosexual identities and contemporary uses of the internet—it asks how we might account for the different strands of power in future research and theorizing in the area of sexuality.

Definitional Power

The power of definition drives descriptions and subsequent evaluations of sexual relations, be they positive or negative. This power of delineation and judgment resides in the popular assumptions that circulate in a culture, and can be reinforced in a range of spaces, among them the media, the street and the friendship group. In her 1984 article 'Thinking Sex', Gayle Rubin offered the most well-known

systematization of this dimension of power. Rubin described the 'hierarchical system of sexual value' that operates in 'modern Western societies'. This hierarchy, Rubin argued, is expressed through categorizations, stereotypes, ideologies, condemnations, and systems of erotic taboos, all of which inscribe pervasive distinctions between 'good sex' and 'bad sex' (Rubin 1984, p. 280). Rubin laid out the steps on the hierarchy:

> Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top of the erotic pyramid. Clamoring below are unmarried monogamous heterosexuals in couples, followed by other heterosexuals. Solitary sex floats ambiguously […] Stable, long-term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectability, but bar dykes and promiscuous gay men are hovering just above the groups at the very bottom of the pyramid. The most despised sexual castes currently include transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models, and the lowliest of all, those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries (Rubin 1984, p. 279).

There is an agreement in society at large, Rubin suggests, about what kinds of sexual expression are 'better' than others, and this agreement is widely circulated lest anyone be in any doubt about the limits of 'acceptable' sexuality.

Aspects of this approach inform the 'queer theory' that began to take shape several years after Rubin's landmark article appeared. In the introduction to his influential volume *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner outlined the system of moral evaluation that lies at the heart of heteronormativity, one of queer theory's central concerns. While Rubin placed heterosexuality at the top of her hierarchical system of sexual value, Warner discussed the system of judgment in more explicitly symbolic terms. Heteronormativity, he proposed, signals 'heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as society' (Warner 1993, p. xxi). This involves a set of assumptions and symbolic manipulations that allow heterosexuality to be equated with humanity itself.

In an essay in the same collection, Janet Halley expanded upon Warner's analysis. Halley (1993) suggested that heterosexuality operates as a default category whose members are bribed into complicity with the notion that heterosexuality is both coherent and socially unquestionable. Although a presumption of heterosexuality is the default setting, Halley argues, those who involve themselves in socially transgressive statements and actions may find their social position redefined, and they are removed from the default category of heterosexuality. These people are then placed by others into an abject category of homosexuality.

In its focus on positionality and normalization, then, queer theory's concept of heteronormativity draws—if not always in an acknowledged way—upon Rubin's account of definitional power. That is not its only antecedent, though. Steven Seidman states that social stigma strongly informs the construction of homosexuality as a deviant status and heterosexuality as a norm (Seidman 2003, p. 49), and in so doing he gestures towards another of queer theory's starting points: labeling theory (Plummer 1979). This approach has been influential within sociology in particular. As Mary McIntosh wrote in 1968, the creation of 'a specialized, despised and punished role of homosexual keeps the bulk of society pure in rather the same

way that the similar treatment of some kinds of criminals helps keep the rest of society law-abiding' (McIntosh 1981 [1968], p. 32). The application of stigma, then, not only underlines the perceived unacceptability of one particular form of sexuality, but actually shores up an entire system of rules and boundaries. The role of such boundary-setting in the wider socio-sexual system has exercised the minds of scholars for some time. As McIntosh argued—anticipating by two decades the performativity theory of Judith Butler (1990)—the labeling of 'unacceptable' forms of sexuality is a mode of constitution as well as a means of social control.

Social interactions—and the particularities of their power relations—play a vitally important role in definitional processes. As recent work in sociology and sociolinguistics reveals, interactions are spaces in which people define, negotiate and normalize sexual meanings. Those who study men's talk in groups, for example, examine how men use the telling of stories—especially those that feature narratives of homophobia and the sexual conquest of women—to reproduce solidarity, inscribe the acceptable limits of male in-group behavior, and maintain hierarchies of sexual value (Cameron 1998; Flood 2008; Kiesling 2006).

Scott Kiesling's study of fraternity men, for instance, examines the definitional processes through which particular forms of heterosexuality are constructed in a group setting. Kiesling's research participants tell conquest stories to glorify a promiscuous male heterosexual practice, and simultaneously ridicule their peers for 'spending too much time with their girlfriends at the expense of the fraternity' (2006, p. 121). Yet, some of the same men conceptualize and perform their heterosexual identities differently in other settings. When they are not in the fraternity group, some of those who are most committed to the fraternity persona also adopt a position of monogamous commitment to a female partner (2006, p. 124). These definitional processes, Kiesling points out, are as context-specific as they are normative.

This all raises two more questions, though. *Who* or *what*, precisely, are the agents of social control here, and *how* are norms and definitions materialized? That such agents of control exist is beyond doubt. Rubin identifies a conservative society in general, queer theorists point to controlling symbol systems, and linguists target talk-in-interaction. These categorizations, norms and expectations have significant consequences: they demarcate boundaries of meanings, affect collective attitudes and individuals' sense of self, and limit what is possible (Weeks 2000, p. 59). In order to address these issues more fully, we need to examine the other aspects of sexual power.

Regulatory Power

Regulatory and definitional power often go hand in hand. Regulation—in the sense I use it here—incorporates dense networks of definitions and norms, but extends its reach far beyond their borders. This dimension of power circulates from and emanates within the broadest social climate, and it involves the ability to enforce the norms and definitions explored so far. The agents of regulation are multiple, and their effects and interrelationships have generated a considerable contemporary and historical literature. These include the state, religion and medicine.

Governments pass laws that specify which forms of sexual expression are permitted and which are not, and transgressors may be ignored, fined, jailed or even put to death (Bernstein 2005). For instance, incest is often—although not always—illegal. Definitions, though, vary between countries (Arens 1986, chap. 1). Sex between grandparents and grandchildren, for instance, or stepparents and stepchildren is illegal in some jurisdictions but not in others (Bell 1993, p. 127). Many states impose an age of consent for heterosexual and homosexual relations, and these have the effect of demarcating boundaries between childhood and adulthood. Once again, however, these boundaries vary between societies, and sometimes within them: occasionally same-sex relationships attract a higher age of consent than opposite-sex ones, and sometimes they are completely forbidden (Waites 1998).

Religion operates as a further mode of sexual regulation. For several centuries, scholars have noted, many Christian teachings have sought to restrict carnal desire, replacing it with self-control and notions of a procreative 'duty' (Carmody 2005, p. 469; Crawford 2007, pp. 233–235). Religion and the state sometimes intersect; some religious leaders demand their interpretation of scripture be reflected in the legislation that regulates a country's sexual life. In the USA, and elsewhere, for instance, Christian and non-Christian groups contest the degree to which religious arguments ought to guide state action on such issues as abortion, surrogacy and same-sex marriage (Ginsburg 1989; Chauncey 2004). The denunciation of homoeroticism in the Qur'an is taken to justify the death penalty in some Islamic states—including Iran and Yemen—even though Islamic attitudes to sexuality have varied over time, between countries and according to the precise political regime in place (Ilkkaracan 2002; Patanè 2006).

Medicine has also played an important regulatory role (Hart and Wellings 2002). Medical discourses have tended to reinforce ideas about women's sexual passivity, and those deemed to be 'over sexed' have sometimes been institutionalized and subjected to surgical interventions including removal of the ovaries (Groneman 2000, p. 20). In Western countries reproduction and childbirth are typically regarded as the terrain of medical professionals, and are usually medically regulated (Segal 2004). Same-sex desires have sometimes been targeted by medical professionals who presume homosexuality to be a sickness in need of 'cure'. Interventions have included sterilization and a range of 'therapies' based upon induced nausea or electric shocks (Guy 2000). As these examples demonstrate, medicine also overlaps with notions of sexual morality.

Institutional power, however, is rarely total. Rubin (1984) points out that legislative frameworks do not always perfectly reflect the prevailing values given to sexual conduct. Sometimes, for instance, strict laws governing such matters as abortion or homosexuality are interpreted liberally, in line with the changing norms of the culture. Even within itself, the state is rarely monolithic. Any government apparatus can be seen as an 'intricate web of discourses, social actors and institutions', and 'state regulatory strategies often contain gaps and contradictions' (Bernstein and Schnaffer 2005, p. xv). These gaps can allow room for resistance. Pardis Mahdavi explains that even in post-revolution Iran, where the clergy has control of the state and morality police (*komiteh*) patrol the streets searching for

transgressors to arrest, there is a developing—and defiant—subculture of extra-marital sexuality among the young (Mahdavi 2007).

There is something very real about the power of cultural and institutional regulation, even though regulatory forms of power leave gaps—sometimes narrow, other times wider—in which resistance might grow and potentially take hold. The most repressive manifestations of regulatory power, whether expressed in severe legal punishments or a pervasive climate of fear, are very real for those who build their lives among them. However, regulation and resistance do not constitute the entire field of sexual power. We need to consider how power generates—rather than merely constrains—the sexual. How do social processes give rise not just to restrictions and limits, but also to pleasure itself?

Productive Power

Michel Foucault's work has played a particularly pivotal role in answering the question of how sexuality is 'powered up'. A scholar of sexuality and its history, Foucault emphasized the role of power and knowledge in the construction of sexual subjectivities (Foucault 1990; Garton 2004). There is no essential sexuality to be expressed or repressed, Foucault famously argued, and he challenged the assumption that an independent, pre-social sexuality can be located within, and then liberated from, the shackles of definition and constraint. In Foucault's view, the history of sexuality involves far more than a study of 'the various mechanisms employed in different societies to repress it' (Halperin 2002, p. 88).

Sexuality, for Foucault, comes into being through the circulation of discourses. These linguistic and symbolic systems enable the constitution of meaning; they are 'practices that form the objects of which we speak' (Foucault 2002 [1972], p. 54). As these discourses change, so too do the fundamentals of sexual meaning, although past systems of discourse live on in active tension with new ones. Sexuality is shaped in and by history, entwined all the while in 'coils of power' (Weeks 2000, p. 60).

While sexual discourses involve language, classifications and representations, they operate more widely than that. Foucault was concerned with the construction of sexuality in its broadest sense; sexuality (as an object of study) and sexualities (the ostensibly stable individual character states founded on particular erotic interests) have emerged within particular historical contexts. As Foucauldian scholar David Halperin writes, sexuality operates as a device (*dispositif*) for the organization of subjectivities, social relations and knowledges (Halperin 2002, p. 88). This argument has been developed most thoroughly with respect to homosexuality in the West, where a cluster of activities and dispositions are said to have congealed into a subjectivity during the late nineteenth century (Halperin 2002; Sedgwick 1990). At the same time, a few scholars have explored emergence of heterosexuality as a category and a mode of experience (Katz 2007; Seidman 1991). Others account for the 'inventions' of the fetishist and the nymphomaniac, two further categories of nineteenth century expert knowledge (Groneman 2000).

While Foucault rejected the notion that an inherent sexuality awaited social sanction, he did recognize the importance of regulatory apparatuses. One starting

point was the perceived need to understand and control bodies during the latter part of the nineteenth century, at a time of rapid social and economic transformation. If 'the health, hygiene and composition of the population were the keys to progress and power', writes Jeffrey Weeks, then 'sex was the key to the question of population' (Weeks 1989, p. 122). This perceived need for bodily and demographic control legitimated medical approaches to social questions, and then helped to constitute the field of sexualities (Seidman 2003, pp. 32–33). In other words, this field was both created and controlled within the new Western societies in the service of medicine and capitalism; it undergirded industrialization and urbanization.

These kinds of concerns have continued into recent times. For instance, Allanah Ryan explores how Western states have attempted to produce healthy populations through the dissemination of particular knowledges and discourses of public health. From the nineteenth century onwards, Ryan argues, incitements to self-control and self-governance constructed notions of sexual normality. Much more recently, in a neo-liberal age, the focus moved from naming and shaming 'dangerous sexualities' to managing 'risk'. Health promotions—dissemination of new knowledges about 'risky sex'—encouraged notions of responsibility and new modes of self governing, and attempted to create autonomous and yet risk-averse citizens (Ryan 2005, pp. 209, 215).

Clearly, productive power enables and informs subjectivity in powerful ways. As societies change, people's sexual activities and modes of self-understanding reflect the shifting constraints and possibilities of social life (Brickell 2006). The concept of 'sexual scripts', first developed by John Gagnon and William Simon during the late 1960s, offers another way to think about the connections between the social world and the production of individual subjectivities (Gagnon and Simon 1973). This reflexive theory argues not that individual identities emerge mechanistically out of social structures, but that one's sexual world emerges at the intersection of meaning, subjective interpretation and social interaction. A given society makes available 'cultural scenarios', patterned constellations of language and action, convention and expectation, and individuals piece together sexual 'scripts' as they negotiate, routinize and internalize wider sexual meanings (Mutchler 2000; Whittier and Simon 2001).

Different histories, cultures and locations provide specific scripts and enable a range of sexual subjectivities. Within any given context—dating practices, sexual encounters, the interpretation of mass media representations, to name just three examples—we might ask which scripts are available, what it means to engage with them, and how power circulates within and between them. Such starting points profoundly influence the sexual subjectivities of those involved. In terms of heterosexual dating scripts, for instance, some researchers suggest that traditional expectations continue to structure contemporary experience: among first daters, on the whole, men tend to ask women out, set the plans and make the intimate moves, while women wait to be asked for a date, eat less at dinner, and take responsibility for regulating men's erotic advances (Bartoli and Clark 2006; Laner and Ventrone 2000). While not all dates follow this exact pattern, the researchers suggest these are the dominant social scripts that individual men and women must negotiate; they

produce powerful gendered expectations that people work with or against as they come to understand their location within the socio-sexual order.

An analysis of the productive power of sexuality demonstrates that while we are always subjects of power, power is not simply a matter of defining, normalizing or regulating. While it may be any of those things, it also constitutes the very meaning and experience of sexuality at both an individual and a social level. Sexuality is not merely expressed by individuals and/or repressed by external social forces, but is actively produced and then negotiated in a range of spaces. In order to further investigate how these processes of constitution—and their effects—differ between people, though, we need to directly address the topic of inequality.

Unequal Power

While I have touched on some of the discursive and symbolic means of privileging certain forms of sexuality, we might also consider the effects of power on the materiality of sexual practices and interactions. A focus on sexual inequality has emerged out of two areas of theorizing and activism: feminism and lesbian and gay politics. Within these fields, there have been two main foci. The first is the politics of heterosexual practice, and the second is the asymmetrical social relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality in many parts of the world.

Feminist analyses proceed from the assumption that gender is inextricably bound up with sexual expression, and many agree that gendered inequalities in society-at-large have long made their way into intimate, private lives. From that starting point, though, the field diverges. Radical feminists write of a 'phallocentric social order' and explore the ways in which gendered power relationships flow through into sexual practices (MacKinnon 1989; Thompson 1991).[1] Some scholars suggest that egalitarian heterosexual relationships are not possible in a world of structural inequality. Those involved with the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group during the 1970s made this point quite bluntly: 'any woman who takes part in a heterosexual couple helps to shore up male supremacy by making its foundations stronger' (cited Thompson 1991, p. 57).

Other feminist scholars argue that male power and heterosexuality have a more complex interrelationship. Stevi Jackson suggests that even though power and heterosexuality are coterminous and often mutually informing, male power does not necessarily determine each and every instance of heterosexual relations. It is important, she writes, not to 'conflat[e] heterosexuality as an institution with heterosexual practice, experience and identity' (Jackson 1999, p. 123). Some years earlier, Carole Vance wrote of the need to balance an analysis of oppression and patriarchal structures with attempts to facilitate women's sexual pleasure. To limit opportunities for the expression of female heterosexual desire, Vance argues, is to make it difficult for women to assert their agency in ways that resist men's sexual

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[1] On the point that (hetero)sexuality constructs gender itself, Catharine MacKinnon elaborates: 'Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away … Sexuality is the social process through which social relations of gender are created, organized, expressed, and directed, creating the social beings we know as women and men' (MacKinnon 1989, p. 3).

prerogative (Vance 1984, p. 4). The sociologist Anthony Giddens writes of a dawning 'intimacy as democracy' in which he suggests that erotic inequality has loosened its grip in recent years, but others, Lynn Jamieson among them, are not convinced (Giddens 2002 [1992]; Jamieson 1999).

A number of recent studies—many of which address the prevention of HIV transmission—suggest the persistence of inequalities within heterosexual relationships. British research into young people's sexuality and safe-sex behaviour during the 1990s found young women often had difficulty in resisting young men's sexual expectations and impositions, and its authors documented the cultural privileging of male sexuality over female. 'A fundamental inequality between women and men is central to the conventions of heterosexuality in the UK', they argued (Holland et al. 1998, p. 3). More recently, others have drawn similar conclusions. The authors of Canadian and South African studies report young women's difficulty in negotiating pleasurable sex and insisting on the use of condoms in sexual encounters. Women's reluctance to jeopardise a relationship makes it likely they will cede to men's desires, including 'the frequency, the way, where and when to have sex' (Omorodion et al. 2007, p. 433; Reddy and Dunne 2007, p. 168). This, it is argued, has serious consequences for safe-sex campaigns and women's wellbeing more generally.

As such examples show, sex is often bound up with material concerns and consequences. In their research on condom use among sex workers in China, Susanne Choi and Eleanor Holroyd note that the state's withdrawal from the provision of social services has exacerbated poverty, and weakened sex workers' agency in the process (Choi and Holroyd 2007, pp. 495–496). To refuse to have sex without a condom—that is, to resist men's prerogative—is to risk losing a client, and this is a risk many poorer sex workers simply cannot afford to take. While workers can attempt to persuade their clients, and to ultimately refuse unsafe sex, the interlocking of men's demands and state power creates a structural context that tightly constrains these women's lives.

While there is comparatively little research on coercion and sexual violence within male same-sex relationships, the available literature suggests that age, rather than gender, operates as the key axis of inequality. A typical dynamic involves older men exercising coercive power over their younger counterparts (Fenaughty et al. 2006; Krahé et al. 2000; Mutchler 2000). While inequalities between heterosexuality and homosexuality are perpetuated through law, religion, medicine, hate speech and everyday discrimination (Herek et al. 2002; Nairn and Smith 2003; Pilkington and Augelli 1995), the material effects of social structures, and the inequalities intrinsic to these, can also be seen in the relationships between men involved in same-sex encounters. As we can see, inequality plays out across several planes.

Conflicts, Convergences and Connections

It would be a mistake to think we could create a master theory of power and sexuality by suturing together each of the four perspectives canvassed above. While

I argue that power operates in four dimensions—it defines, regulates and constitutes sexuality, and also undergirds inequalities—not all of the authors canvassed here agree on why or how it does so, and some of them prioritize some dimensions of power over others.

The disagreements arising from such differences have sometimes been bitter, and their legacies long-lasting. One such disagreement was the 'pleasure/danger debate' in feminism. This took shape around the 'Scholar and Feminist' conference at Barnard University in 1982, and quickly bifurcated: those who identified with the 'pleasure' stance regarded themselves as radical challengers of sexual repression, and those who inherited the 'danger' label focused on the pervasive structuring effect of male domination (see the contributions in Snitow et al. 1983; Vance 1984; also MacKinnon 1989; Thompson 1991, chap. 14). It became clear that the assertion of women's desires and a critique of gendered power—for instance—were not always part of the same agenda. Although both sides in the pleasure/danger debate spoke in the name of sexual progress, they conceptualized this progress—and one another's position—rather differently. Members of the first group were dismissed as domination's dupes, and those in the second were characterized as 'anti-sex moralizers'.

As acrimonious as the 'pleasure/danger debate' became, it cast a long shadow.[2] This has been somewhat unfortunate, as the polarized terms of this debate relied on a set of dichotomies and exclusions that have hampered attempts to understand the multifarious qualities of sexual power. Some writers continue to imagine sexuality as *either* a duel between repression and expression, *or* as an overdetermined expression of inequality. For example, Caroline Daley recently suggests that erotic history is a battle between 'puritans', the repressors of sexuality, and 'pleasure seekers', those who stood their ground against the wave of moral judgement (Daley 2005). On the other side of the ledger, Sheila Jeffreys seems to regard heterosexual expression as always, inevitably and only a matter of eroticized inequality (Jeffreys 2003, chap. 7). Such monolithic positions are unfortunate, as they reject the possibility of a more nuanced set of analyses.

So how might we better understand the relationship between desires expressed, constituted and regulated? Undoubtedly, attempts to control and extinguish desires do exist, and these can make life miserable for those involved. However, to look closely is to notice that the regulatory and the constitutive are mutually informing. The sexuality that is controlled and yet often resists is also—in part—constituted through those controls and resistances. Our experiences, however harsh, inform our sexual practices and sexual subjectivity. The converse is also true. There are constructed subjects who resist—sometimes actively—as well as those who comply; often, of course, people do both. Similarly, inequality exists, and can play a powerful structuring role, but is often mediated—if not necessarily displaced—through individual and collective negotiations.

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[2] Recently the journal *Sexualities* hosted a special issue (8 (4), 2005) to commemorate the 20 year anniversary of the publication of Vance's book *Pleasure and Danger*, a key marker in the debate.

We can further explore these points of connection and complexity by taking the four dimensions of power to two specific examples: the construction of Western gay male identities, and the sexual possibilities offered in recent years by the internet.

My own recent work on the history of male homosexuality in New Zealand between the mid nineteenth and late twentieth century explores the intersections between different forms of power (Brickell 2006, 2008). It argues that men in the past actively adapted and reconstituted knowledges about same-sex desire as they built sexual identities for themselves. They took their culture's symbolic resources—art, literature, notions of irony and artifice—and molded them together individually and collectively. Homoerotically inclined men pieced together sexual scripts: alternative ways of knowing about masculinity, intimacy and eroticism. At the same time, they negotiated their material worlds: public and private spaces, sexual encounters and family relationships. Numerous men collided with the repressive apparatus of the state and tangled with the censorious judgments of others, but in other moments their relationships with their society's power relations were more complex. Dominant social forms like medicine and media commentary could be both oppressive and revelatory; while these regulated men's behavior, dominant discourses also reassured men they were not alone. So, too, did the law, which performatively signaled possibilities and helped to maintain a set of shared parameters around sexual activity. As Matt Houlbrook observes in his work on 'queer London', desires have been constituted, at least in part, through the complicated meshings of power and dominant and resistant discourses (Houlbrook 2005).

These men, then, did more than resist social regulation in any straightforward way, a fact that highlights the multi-dimensional quality of resistance itself. It is not so much that my subjects said 'yes' to sex and 'no' to repression—although there is a degree to which they challenged the repressive apparatus of the state and prevailing definitions of what it meant to be a respectable sexual citizen—but they also exercised resistance in a constitutive sense, by redefining and helping to remake sexuality in new ways. By picking up and deploying new symbols, knowledges and practices, sexual subjects can rework as well as resist aspects of their worlds.

Sexual definition and categorization also involves complex relations of power. In his work on the history of homoeroticism in New York, for instance, George Chauncey shows that linguistic categories have guided the ways people organize, interpret and judge their own and others' sexuality, and that erotic and intimate identities have often been defined, constituted and evaluated in the same moment. Chauncey carefully charts the boundaries between several turn-of-the-twentieth century classifications, among them 'fairies' and 'normal' men. The 'fairy' was a potent cultural figure whose effeminacy marked the boundaries of acceptable masculinity by reassuring 'normal' men of their manhood. At the same time, and somewhat contradictorily, the fairy also served as a sexual partner for normal men and a repository for their deepest anxieties (Chauncey 1995, p. 115). Normative formulations, then, built upon and cross-cut the constitutive aspects of power.

There are contemporary examples, too. Let us return to the example of young men in groups. Deborah Cameron notes that group participants often talk in ways that distance them from those (other) men understood as 'gay'. In this way, they are

able to 'displace the dread specter of homosexuality' that might otherwise trouble their homosocial bonds (Cameron 1998). Conversely, as C. J. Pascoe writes, the term 'faggot' is often used to patrol the borders of masculinity among young men—even those whom others do not routinely identify as gay (Pascoe 2005). The taunt 'dude, you're a fag', Pascoe suggests, works to both define and reinforce acceptable behavior. Once again—just as in Chauncey's example—to define the sexual 'outside' is to constitute the 'inside'. These are potent points of intersection between all four forms of power surveyed here. The normative and the regulatory are used to enforce inequalities, while there is also a productive component: we can actually see how a heterosexual identity is actively constructed with and against a homosexual one. The consequences for gay and lesbian citizens, as we have seen, can be negative and serious.

Scripting theory adds another dimension to our understanding of these intersections (Mutchler 2000). In men's prisons in contemporary US society, notes David Keys, location-specific cultural repertoires are used to define the situation and situate the participants in various ways (Keys 2002). The resulting scripts inform inmates' subject positions as well as the wider economy of sexual classifications. Old hands test the neophytes to see whether they possess the coercive power to assume the dominant role of 'man' or 'wolf', or whether they are destined to become a passive 'woman', 'punk' or 'queen'. Those who resist the imposition of new sexual meanings are sometimes treated coercively by their fellow inmates. This is a new script for many, and does not reflect prior or subsequent lives on the 'outside'; individuals' prior sexual commitments are reshaped to conform to a strict model of active or passive involvement. The productive power of the prison, then, is informed by the institutional setting and the relations of domination that circulate inside it, and the multiplicities of power converge.

Scripted forms of productive power can be seen, too, in the ways people make use of the internet in their intimate lives. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that the internet has rapidly—and actively—produced new approaches to sexuality. The world wide web provides a wide range of erotic imagery for every conceivable taste and some new interfaces for social interaction: bulletin boards, interactive sites for dating and social/sexual networking, blogs and webcams (Davis et al. 2006; Couch and Liamputtong 2008). All of these allow users to present or perform an erotic selfhood that differs from what is possible in everyday interaction. In their study of same-sex attracted youth, for instance, Lynne Hillier and Lyn Harrison suggest that the internet affords its users opportunities to 'try on' and 'test out' sexual identities before committing to them in real space and time (Hillier and Harrison 2007). In such an example, internet interactions permit both the constitution of new subjectivities and the empowerment of those involved.

Web-based forums also engender new roles for the intimately-engaged body, and users of erotic websites constitute themselves in particular ways (Gibbs et al. 2006). Dennis Waskul suggests that 'text cybersex'—where people use text to engage in sexual chat in real time—replaces sexual intercourse with 'outercourse' (Waskul 2003). In outercourse, Waskul suggests, participants interact not with the bodies of their cyber partners, but with 'the words and images that *represent* them' (Waskul 2003, p. 73). Given the replacement of interactions with representations, here are

new possibilities for sexual power. On the one hand, unwanted partners or interactions can be more easily 'filtered'—and subsequently rejected—than may be possible in everyday life (Davis et al. 2006). On the other hand, users may misrepresent their age, gender or appearance and 'deceive' their interlocutors. The tensions between these two aspects raises interesting ethical questions. If web users are not who they say they are, then how empowered are others to make informed decisions about filtering interactions online, or deciding whether to meet other users offline?[3]

These confluences of productive, definitional and unequal dimensions of power can be seen in other web forums. For instance, Carla Stokes (2007) has examined the homepages of black adolescent girls in southern states of the USA. Like Hillier and Harrison's study, Stokes' research shows that the internet operates as a stage on which young people rehearse sexual scripts. These girls worked with—and sometimes against—six sexual scripts 'with roots in controlling images of Black female sexuality': 'freaks', 'virgins', 'down-ass chicks/bitches', 'pimpettes' and 'resisters'. Many girls worked with more than one script at once; some adopted the sexual expectations of the surrounding culture—especially the hypersexualized and yet passive image of Black women—while others took on resistant representations in which female sexuality was powerful, assertive and self-determining (Stokes 2007, p. 179). Negotiations between definitional and unequal power can also be seen in male-dominated internet chat rooms, as Laurie Kendall (2000) demonstrates. The young male chat room frequenters in Kendall's study positioned themselves outside of dominant masculinities, as 'nerds' who preferred indoor, technological pursuits rather than outdoor physical ones, but they also considered themselves insiders: heterosexual men who sometimes deployed an 'ironic sexism' and an objectification of women that 'maintains the order of gender domination' (Kendall 2000, p. 264).

We can further explore such tensions in terms of webcams, another online innovation with the potential to refract and transform our different forms of power. Perhaps the most well-known example is that of Jennifer Ringley, the inhabitant of a college dormitory room who set up a webcam linked to a website ('Jenni's Room') and left it running for the best part of seven years, between 1996 and 2003. Everything Jennifer did was open to view, from sleeping to reading, masturbating and occasionally having sex with others. Sometimes she performed in 'shows' with garter belts and spike heels, but turned off the camera for a time after a male viewer sent an email demanding a striptease (Burgin 2000). This suggests a rather ambivalent pattern of gendered transgression and reincorporation. On the one hand, Ringley forced a reassessment of what it means to look at be looked at, and flouted the rules about the display of the female body by 'announcing her own precedence' and 'refusing to be humble' (Koskela 2004, pp. 209–210). At the same time, though,

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[3] The disjunctions between online and offline perceptions can create other problems too. One report on gay men's internet meetings suggests that sometimes an agreement to meet offline is interpreted as a type of 'contract' to have sex, and it can be difficult for the young or inexperienced to negotiate their way out of engaging in a pre-arranged—but subsequently unwanted—sexual encounter (Fenaughty et al. 2006, p. 26).

Ringley acceded to the imperatives of the male gaze, and was held to account by it. After all, she felt compelled to turn off the camera following male harassment.

Subsequent commentators have suggested that Jenni's webcam—and webcams more generally—work to transform the meanings of exhibitionism and voyeurism. The webcam, they propose, helps to constitute new forms of subjectivities and new modes of agency; it breaks down old definitions of publicity and privacy, acceptability and unacceptability (Koskela 2004, p. 208). In doing so, the increasingly widespread use of webcams partially reconstitutes the meanings of 'exhibitionism' and 'voyeurism' by making sexualized self-display more common and widely accepted. What kinds of definitional and productive power are invoked when subjects objectify themselves and their sexual activities by uploading their own clips to such websites as Xtube, Gaytube or YouPorn? Such technologies allow us to redraw the lines around socially acceptable modes of sexuality, and provoke new modes of self-expression and self-making.

As these examples demonstrate, to analyze online sexual life is to observe constant shifts between definitional, regulatory, productive and unequal dimensions of power. The internet enables and produces new sexual possibilities—webcam displays among them—while interfacing with old ones. This becomes especially clear when online interchanges give way to offline experiences, and when widespread social discourses make their way into the online world. Existing inequalities both constrain and are transformed by new definitional and productive possibilities, as the case of 'Jennicam' and young men's and women's homepages and message boards show us. Jonathan Lillie puts the point succinctly:

> [a]lthough mouse-driven quests for knowledge merge in and out of pornographic zones and sexualized discourses, identity and the subject are always being constructed; mechanisms of discipline created through Internet terminals, software design, and the moral economy of the home are always at play albeit in different ways and with various possible outcomes (Lillie 2002, p. 41).

Conclusion

This article suggests that we can see at least four analytically distinguishable dimensions of power in relation to sexuality: the definitional, the regulatory, the productive and the unequal. It suggests that these are both discernible—in theory as well as in everyday life—and constantly interweaving. The complexities of these interminglings cannot always be anticipated in advance. Instead, as theorists and researchers, we need to closely analyze particular contexts and examples in order to tease out the points of articulation and intersection. In any given case—be it heterosexual practice, the sexual possibilities of the internet, or the historical construction of homoeroticism—we can see the shifts from one form of power to another and back again.

Yet, even when we attend to the convergences between the different forms of power, we can make out the specificities of their operation. It is important to do so,

I argue, in order to avoid easy assumptions about the unidirectional operation of power. To merely assume that sexuality is either expressed or repressed, for instance, or that we can simply read individual experience off wider social patterns and structures, is to ignore the complex constitutive operation of power. Conversely, to see sexuality in solely terms of definition, without analyzing the political regimes that enable that definition, is to gloss over important dimensions of materiality. To search for and plot out the different dimensions of power is to move in two directions at once, distilling on the one hand and synthesizing on the other. In her writings on gender and sexuality, sociologist Stevi Jackson lays out the challenge for social theory: 'the best we can do is to try to appreciate the complexity of social life without losing sight of its regularities' (Jackson 1999, p. 3). This is a worthy goal, and one I have attempted here.

At the same time, to acknowledge the different dimensions is not to close down disagreements about precisely *how* each of these plays out. Theorists and researchers will not agree about the relative importance of symbolism and material circumstances in the constitution of sexual experiences and identities, for instance. While I would argue for an analysis of the dynamic interaction of symbol and materiality, others may stress one or other side of this divide.[4] Similarly, academics do not always concur about the extent to which a particular situation or practice is an expression of inequality or an invitation to sexual freedom.[5] The degree to which a given situation is oppressive for those subject to it, the extent of possible resistance, and the political and social significance of that resistance—these matters, too, can never be closed off. After all, sexuality is as much a site of social contestation as any other area of social life, and social theorists and researchers diverge in their judgment as much as anybody else. To pay close attention to the different aspects of sexual power is not necessarily to reach the same conclusions about their operation.

A multiplex approach to the study of sexuality and power has important implications for the empirical work of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and others. Historians, for instance, can bear in mind a multiple approach when they look in the archives, to see how the inhabitants of the past experienced and conceptualized a range of sexual activities, and how they incorporated them—along with social norms—into their sense of who they were. Other researchers can do much the same when they go out 'into the field' to observe social interactions and to ask people about their sexual knowledge, their experiences of negotiating intimate relationships, and their sexual beliefs. Investigators might even take with them a mental checklist that looks something like this:

- In what context do people explore, mould and express their sexuality, and what political, historical, cultural, geographical conditions do they grapple with as they do so?
- How do interactions between people define the sexuality of selves and others, and how are these interactions informed by the micro-relations of power?

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[4] On this question, see Rahman (2000, p. 10); Valocchi (2005, p. 757).

[5] Two examples include prostitution and sadomasochism: see Kesler (2002); Duggan and Hunter (1995); Thompson (1991).

- How do inequalities limit—and also inform—what goes on in sexual contexts?
- What happens to sexual identities and sexual relationships as the modes of power that constitute, inform and bind them change over time?
- How do perceptions of power differ between those involved in given sexual situations?
- How do social scripts enable and reflect power relationships, and which scripts allow for the negotiation and possible reworking of these relationships?
- What are the precise relationships between social structures and sexual agency?

By asking these types of questions, we can embrace a multiform investigation of interlinked power relations, and look for more than just repression, or inequality, or symbolic constructions. To move our foci towards a multiple-axis analysis of power and sexuality is to enrich our research, and to encourage the production of complex, intellectually exciting and useful work.

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