

POWER AND PLEASURE: HETERONORMATIVITY AND HOMOPHOBIA IN
HETEROSEXUAL SEX

by

LAUREN STEWART

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Student: Lauren Stewart

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This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Sociology by:

Jocelyn Hollander	Co-Chair
CJ Pascoe	Co-Chair
Eileen Otis	Core Member
Yvonne Braun	Institutional Representative

and

Sara D. Hodges	Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School
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Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Lauren Stewart

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How do sex practices get constructed as normal? This research evaluates discussions of pegging, a gender non-conforming sex practice within heterosexual sex whereby women anally penetrate men. Data were collected from the website Reddit and its subreddit r/sex. 3,485 comments posted to 30 discussion threads were analyzed for common themes. Findings suggest that pegging confuses gendered expectations for “having sex”. Additionally, heteronormativity and homophobia were found to structure heterosexual interactions, including the ways in which gender and sexual identities, desire, and bodies are understood. This is illuminated by findings supporting “gender accountability” or the idea that we “do gender” because people anticipate how others will perceive their actions based on gender expectations. Finally, an examination of homophobia reveals ways in which homophobia operates in a hate-free zone. Homophobia was found to encourage heterosexuals’ treatment of homosexuals as distinctly different kinds of people than heterosexuals, including frequent boundary setting between what is gay and straight. Overall this project reveals that pegging is a culturally unintelligible sex act that causes a great deal of confusion, anxiety, and sometimes pleasure for those who partake.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Lauren Stewart

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
Portland State University, Portland, Oregon
Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro

DEGREES AWARDED

Doctor of Philosophy, Sociology, 2018, University of Oregon
Master of Science, Sociology, 2010, University of Oregon
Master of Science, Sociology, 2009, Portland State University
Bachelor of Arts, Sociology, 2007, Middle Tennessee State University

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST

Sexualities
Gender
Theory

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Graduate Teaching Fellow, Department of Sociology and Women's, Gender, and
Sexualities Studies 2009-2018

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of Sociology, PSU, 2007-2009

INDEPENDENT TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Women, Work, and Class (WGS 341) Summer 2017
Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies (WGS 101) Summer 2017
Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies (WGS 101) Spring 2017
Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies (WGS 101) Winter 2017
Sex and Society (SOC 457) Summer 2016
Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies (WGS 101) Spring 2016
Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies (WGS 101) Winter 2016
History and Development of Feminist Theory (WGS 321) Summer 2015
Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies (WGS 101) Spring 2015
Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies (WGS 101) Winter 2015
Sex and Society (SOC 457) Summer 2014
Sex and Society (SOC 457) Summer 2013

Sex and Society (SOC 457) Summer 2011
Sex and Society (SOC 457) Summer 2010

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- Graduate Student Dissertation Research Grant (\$2,500), Center for the Study of Women in Society, UO (2015)
- Research Travel Grant (\$300), Center for the Study of Women in Society, UO (2015)
- Small Research Grant (\$300), Department of Sociology, UO (2014)
- Charles W. Hunt Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, Department of Sociology, UO (2014)
- Wasby-Johnson Dissertation Award (\$7,000) Department of Sociology, UO (2012)
- Research Travel Grant (\$300), Center for the Study of Women in Society, UO (2011)
- Undergraduate Research, Scholarship, and Creative Projects Grant (\$3,500), URC, MTSU (2009)
- Tau Sigma Honor Society, MTSU (2007)
- Marian Clark Scholarship for Social Service Oriented Sociology (\$1,000), Department of Sociology and Anthropology, MTSU (2006)
- Alpha Kappa Delta, Sociology Honor Society, MTSU (2006)
- Golden Key International Honor Society, MTSU (2006)

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Politics of “Having Sex”

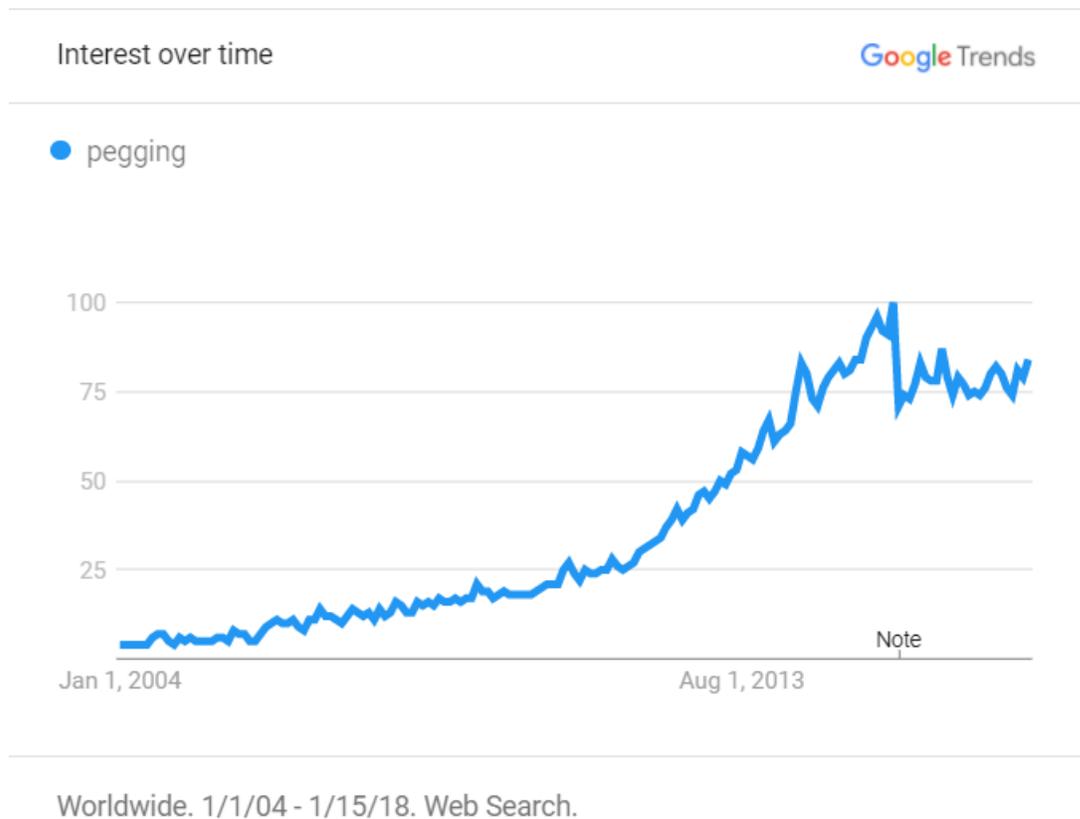
In 2001 sex columnist Dan Savage used his column in *The Stranger* to draw attention to an unnamed and largely unrecognized sex act – pegging (Savage 2001). Pegging refers to the act of a cisgender woman anally penetrating her cisgender male partner with a strap-on dildo. Suggesting that this act needed a name in order to legitimize (or perhaps popularize) its existence, or to simply have a way to refer to it, Savage held a contest for readers to vote on their favorite terminology. “Pegging” won and became the culturally recognized title of this practice.

This story suggests a great deal about sex. Sex is commonly taken for granted as a pre-social given, as a “natural” act; however, as the origin story of pegging indicates, until practices are named and defined they are, in a sense, not “sex.” Sex is best understood as a set of somatic pleasures society designates as “sex”, differentiating these experiences from other somatic pleasures (Foucault 1978). Sex, then, is not a natural act, but is a socially constructed phenomenon. “Having sex” *could* refer to a host of somatic pleasures and possibilities but in significant ways it does not. Everyday cultural narratives of “having sex” reflect heterosexual experiences in which “having sex” usually means penis-in-vagina (PiV) intercourse. All other kinds of sex acts are given modifiers (e.g. oral sex, anal sex) and some sex acts (e.g. mutual masturbation, fingering) are not actually considered sex, but are instead known as “foreplay,” “fooling around,” or “hooking up”. Some acts, such as anal sex, rim jobs, golden showers, etc., are constructed

as deviant; thus, bringing an act into existence through language does not guarantee constructing the act as acceptable.

Savage (2001) wrote: “What term, from this day forward, will be the commonly accepted slang for a woman fucking a man in the ass with a strap-on dildo?” Through naming the act of women anally penetrating men as “pegging” we literally see the creation of culturally intelligible sex (Butler 1990). As Figure 1 reveals, a quick Internet search indicates “pegging” has received increased public curiosity since 2004 (when Google begins revealing collected search data). These data are worldwide yet the majority of pegging searches took place in America, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

Figure 1: Google Searches Containing the Term "Pegging" 2004-2018



Pegging made its TV and film debuts in 2015 and 2016, respectively. My research indicates that both of these media representations' names and symbolism correspond to the pegging experiences of straight men and women. As *Broad City's* (2015) episode titled "To Peg or Not to Peg" suggests, there is great ambivalence, wrought with anxiety and fear, over whether or not to peg. In 2016 actor Ryan Reynolds was pegged in honor of National Women's Day in the feature film *Deadpool*, symbolizing that having sex is a deeply political act.

The increased public awareness of pegging, in addition to its taboo status, makes pegging an interesting sex practice for sociological investigation. This project is structured by two broad research questions:

- (1) How does a sex practice transition from a culturally unintelligible sex act to one that is culturally recognized?
- (2) How do cisgender, heterosexual men and women negotiate gender normativity and homophobia alongside their desire, or their partner's desire, to peg?

To answer these questions I conduct an analysis drawn from public conversations posted on the popular website Reddit. These discussion threads contain candid conversations, often in the form of advice, about identity and sex practices and serve as a site of rich sociological data.

Sexology and Normal Sex

There is no universally agreed upon definition of "sex". However, there is consensus that "sex", for most people, refers to penis-in-vagina (PiV) intercourse. Research from the US, the UK, and Australia all indicate that over 90% of those surveyed

define “sex” as PiV sex (Sanders and Reinisch 1999; Pitts and Rahman 2001; Richters, de Visser, Rissel and Smith 2006; Sanders, Hill, Yarber, Graham, Crosby and Milhausen 2010). These studies also show what does *not*, for most people, “technically count” as sex. Many people, for example, do not consider oral-genital sex to really be sex. Sanders and Reinisch found that 61% of respondents considered oral sex as “sex”, compared to only 33% in Pitts and Rahman’s study. Yet both studies found that 99% of people consider PiV sex to be “sex”. These same studies found that 19% and 80%, respectively, considered penile-anal intercourse as “sex”, suggesting there is greater discrepancy over whether or not people consider penile-anal intercourse as sex. Further, Pitts and Rahman (2001) researched college students in the UK whereas Sanders and Reinisch (1999) sampled college students in the American Midwest, thus, these populations may have different ideas about what constitutes sex. No research, to my knowledge, has focused on whether or not men’s reception of anal penetration within heterosexuality is considered “sex”. Despite discrepancy as to which acts constitute “sex” there is consistent data suggesting PiV sex is typically considered sex. It is reasonable to conclude that most heterosexuals consider “normal sex” as penis-in-vagina intercourse.

Since most people define “sex” as PiV intercourse, it follows that this sex act dominates most heterosexual sexual encounters. While ideas about sex may be in flux, the primacy of PiV sex for heterosexuals has been empirically researched for decades. Researchers did not know much about sex practices of typical Americans until Alfred Kinsey’s groundbreaking research *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953). Kinsey revolutionized the way Americans think about sex. In particular, Kinsey showed that adult men and women engaged in a

wide variety of sex practices, including homosexual and non-procreative sex. This was shocking news to 1950s America. Understandably, most people focused their attention on Kinsey's findings of diverse sex practices. Yet, I draw additional conclusions from Kinsey's research for this project. While people engage in a variety of sex practices, no sex act comes close to comparing with the frequency of PiV sex, and that has not changed in over 60 years (Kinsey 1948; Kinsey 1953; Masters and Johnson 1966; Richters et al. 2006). PiV sex is a habitual sex act for heterosexuals, a constrained behavior that feels like choice (Butler 1990; Butler 1993). PiV understandings of sex are so deeply embodied by most heterosexuals, and therefore most people, that it is given cultural legitimacy as the very definition of "sex" and is overwhelmingly what most heterosexuals actually "do" during sex.

Theorizing Gender and Sexuality

Gayle Rubin's (1984) groundbreaking essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" was one of the first essays to question sexual oppression outside of feminist understandings of men's domination of women. It is, therefore, largely considered a canonical Queer theory text. Rubin argued that, in addition to men's domination of women within heterosexuality, there are other forms of sexual oppression and a failure to theorize them is ultimately a failure to explore the ways in which sex, like race, class, and gender, is a primary form of social organization. Rubin's "charmed circle" of sex acts helps us understand what kinds of sexual practices and desires are supported through institutions, ideologies, and interactions. Rubin maps culturally acceptable sex as monogamous, within marriage, of the same generation, of the same race, in private, and as procreative. Additionally, her discussion of "the sex

hierarchy: the struggle over where to draw the line” (14) indicates that Western/American culture has long struggled to determine what constitutes appropriate sex. In many ways it is this question alone that fueled the birth of sexology and much of early psychiatry (Foucault 1978). However, the White physicians who founded these fields did not approach the question of “what is sex” as something to be explored. “Having sex” was assumed and, therefore, institutionalized as PiV sex for as long as science has had anything to say about sex (Foucault 1978; Sommerville 2000; Katz 1995).

Sodomy Laws

Yet cultural ideas about sex do change at the institutional, ideological, and interactional levels. This is best highlighted through the repeal of America’s sodomy laws with the landmark Supreme Court victory of *Lawrence v Texas* in 2003. Sodomy laws, arguably the most ancient and blatant form of institutionalized homophobia, affecting all aspects of homosexuals’ lives (Lambda Legal 2012), crumbled with this court case. Sodomy laws had enormous effects on the queer community and have therefore been given critical attention within queer theory and queer activism (Rubin 1984; Jagose 1996; Nussbaum 2010; Bergman 2012).

However, heterosexuals were also offered possibilities of sexual liberation through the repeal of sodomy laws. This perspective has not been as critically theorized or researched. That is, we know much more about how the repeal of sodomy laws affected the sex practices of homosexuals than heterosexuals. It is important to note that until 2003 there was only one set of sex acts legal in all 50 states, PiV heterosexual sex in private. This means that prior to 2003 a lot of heterosexuals were having illegal sex. Though it was rare that heterosexuals were charged with sodomy laws for engaging in

non-procreative sex, these laws played a significant role in shaping heterosexual ideology. Sodomy laws clearly linked religious ideology (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism most specifically) with America's legal system and thus formed a critical nexus of power shaping America's sexual culture. The demands of the Gay Liberationist and Women's Movements significantly transformed dominant sexual culture and the ultimate repeal of these laws. And so in 2003 all consensual sex between adults in private became legal. However, a cultural transition, unlike a legal one, cannot happen overnight. We now find ourselves in a cultural moment where gay sex is legal, as is the queering of heterosexual sex. That is, heterosexuals are under no legal obligation to uphold normative gender expectations during sex as they were prior to 2003. This begs the questions, what does gender non-conforming heterosexual sex look like? What are the risks and benefits to individuals and relationships?

Sociological and Queer Theories of Gender and Sexuality

Gender and sexuality are inextricably linked concepts. Queer theory has played a more significant role in understanding this dynamic relationship than traditional sociological theories of gender. This is not to suggest sociology as irrelevant nor to deny that many of those engaging in queer theory are indeed sociologists. In this section I review research and theoretical insights from both sociology and queer theory.

Sociology's primary contributions to gender theory are that gender is a primary form of social organization and stratification (Acker 1990; Connell 1995) and that gender is interactional and experiential (West and Zimmerman 1987; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Pascoe 2007; Hollander 2013). West and Zimmerman's work is foundational to the understanding of "doing gender" or "the activity of managing situated conduct in light of

normative conceptions and attitudes appropriate for one's sex category" (1987: 127). West and Zimmerman understand sex category as the way others perceive our gender displays "that proclaim one's membership in one or the other category [of sex]" (127). Gendered expectations correspond to sex category and constitute what gendered behavior is culturally and situationally expected. "Gender" is thought to be "omnirelevant" so that "a person engaged in virtually any activity may be held accountable for performance of that activity as a woman or a man, and their incumbency in one or the other sex category can be used to legitimate or discredit their other activities" (West and Zimmerman 1987: 136). Because our gendered behaviors are going to be interpreted through accountability to our sex category, we "do" gender with this accountability in mind (West and Zimmerman 1987; Hollander 2013; Hollander 2018; Schwalbe 2005). Furthermore, this doing of gender is highly situational (Hollander and Fenstermaker 2017). Though sex category is used during micro interactions, sex categories map on to the structural gender binary of man/woman. Thus, significantly, it is accountability that links interaction to social control and social structure (Hollander 2018).

As previously stated, gender and sexuality are fundamentally intertwined. Queer theory's contributions to understanding this nexus of power are best articulated by theories of *heteronormativity*, or the ubiquitous institutional and individual practices and assumptions upholding the beliefs that (1) there are only two, mutually exclusive and complimentary genders, (2) that heterosexuality is the only natural and normal sexual expression, and (3) that appropriate heterosexual relations are of the same race, generation, and are done in private (Warner 1999; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Heteronormativity renders some sexual practices and desires disgusting, forbidden, and

even unimaginable by society's members (Butler 1990; Nussbaum 2010).

Some of the most well respected theorists of gender point to heterosexuality for explanations of power and oppression (Rich 1980; Rubin 1984; Butler 1990; Pharr 1997; Pascoe 2007). Adhering to gender normativity and heterosexuality are pathways to privilege and power. Judith Butler's work most critically examines the power embedded in gender and sexuality by drawing attention to the restrictive aspects of normative sexuality and gender identities. "Indeed, the construction of gender operates through *exclusionary* means ... through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation" [original emphasis] (1990: 8). Butler claims that the elimination of certain human characteristics from the social production of gender renders some gender expression as not only non-commonsensical, but unintelligible to society at large. Any agency an individual has over their gender expression is always constrained as this "choice" is "*compelled* by a regulatory apparatus of heterosexuality" [original emphasis] (Butler 1990: 12). Butler claims that heterosexuality presents itself as the only original and natural sexuality, relying upon the constructed notion of gender as "proof" of its naturalness. Butler uses homosexuality as her primary example to argue that sexual expressions other than heterosexuality are socially constructed as copies of an original heterosexuality. However, Butler's radical theory argues that there is no "original" sexuality and that heterosexuality is a mechanism to secure the power arrangements of our dichotomous gender system.

Queer theory illuminates that a sexual binary, like a gender binary, is a pervasive construction that produces our collective reality of the world and our own subjectivity (Sedgwick 1990). In order for one to reap the privileges afforded to these normative

gender and sexual identities, one must adhere to the restrictions of these normative categories. Heterosexuality and gender normativity from this perspective are understood as not only problematic but violent as they call for the eradication of “half” of the human potential.

Despite significant scholarly work suggesting sexuality is a primary form of social organization, sociology has been resistant to investigate sex practices. In “I Can’t Even Think Straight: Queer Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology” (1994) Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer made a call for sociologists to incorporate the study of “sexual difference at the center of its intellectual inquiry,” (178) as opposed to leaving such investigations to the subfields of deviance and gay/lesbian studies. Yet, two decades after their publication, sociology continues to lag behind other academic fields in investigating the sexual world. This is seen through the handful of sexuality articles that appear in top tier journals and the absence of any sociology journal dedicated to sexuality. Sociology continues to give gender research primacy, often treating sexuality as an outgrowth of gender, as opposed to its own analytic category. Pegging serves as a useful sex practice to empirically explore the insights of Rubin, West and Zimmerman, Butler, and Sedgwick. The cultural mandates of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2000) provide straight men with a narrow range of sex practices that do not conflict with straight men’s core sense of a gendered self. I argue this contradictory experience of power is best understood as “sexual restriction” as opposed to “sexual oppression”. The concept of “oppression” becomes useless if applied to all circumstances of struggle and unfairness (Frye 1983). “Oppression” is most meaningful when it describes experiences in which “double binds” mean there is “no way out” of a given social arrangement (ibid).

That is not an accurate description of the experiences of straight men and pegging. However, this is not to suggest that the experiences of sexual restriction are not unfair, difficult, and at times even devastating.

Discourse and Cultural Intelligibility

Queer theory conceptualizes sexual power as “expressed discursively and enforced through “boundaries and binary divides” (Stein and Plummer 1994). Language is a primary way humans articulate thought and experience to themselves and others. The thoughts one seeks to articulate, the knowledge these thoughts rely upon, the ways in which the body contorts as it embodies this language are all culturally informed. Pleasure, desire, and physiological responses to erotic stimuli do not exist outside of cultural discourse. The physiological responses of bodies to erotic stimuli are only understood and made meaningful through a culturally intelligible discourse; tautologically, physiological responses are informed by discourse. That is, what is considered erotic and what elicits a sexual response are always influenced by and understood through cultural narratives. Quite simply, the language an individual uses to describe and convey their pleasure existed prior to the individual. Thus, like all aspects of existence, when the individual comes to detail their pleasure, to their self or others, they are bound to the rhetoric and images their culture recognizes, to their collective social reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Foucault 1978). In this sense discourse organizes experience (Barker 2005). It provides a framework for understanding and explaining physiological, emotional, somatic, and other experiences.

Discourse not only organizes experience, it also legitimizes it (Foucault 1978; Sedgwick 1990; Barker 2005). Heteronormative discourse reduces “sex” to a singular

form of somatic experience, penis-in-vagina intercourse. Other sexual possibilities are left *culturally unintelligible* (Butler 1990; 1993) meaning they are not reflected in the cultural discourse of “sex”, are considered unimportant, deviant, or weird, and/or fail to even be imagined as a sexual possibility. Heteronormative discourse renders some sex practices culturally intelligible. How does a sex act get rendered off limits? How are things brought into the realm of acceptability? Pegging is an ideal case to consider these questions and queer’s theory’s attention to text is a critical framework. Sedgwick’s canonical work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) outlines axiomatic principals for queer theory. Here she attends to “performative aspects of text...as sites of definitional creation, violence, and rupture in relation to particular readers, particular institutional circumstances” (p. 3).

Whereas sociology understands the micro level production of gender to happen within interaction, queer theory specifies discourse as the mechanism relied upon during these interactions, simultaneously giving more attention to power. *Discourse* is the critical mechanism in the social production of gender that Butler describes and in the production of culturally intelligible sex. Foucault (1978) conceptualizes discourse as the forms of language and representation that construct bodies of knowledge and reality. While discourse is carried out through individuals’ conversations, discourse extends beyond the individual. For example, young White men’s usage of a “fag discourse” (Pascoe 2007) both reflects and reinforces larger homophobic structures and ideologies.

Kelsy Burke’s (2015) “What Makes a Man: Gender and Sexual Boundaries on Evangelical Christian Sexuality Websites” is the only empirical research on pegging to date. Burke finds that when it comes to Christian men and pegging “men must find ways

to reconcile their interests in these seemingly emasculate acts with their status as Christian patriarchs” (4). Through the discursive work of redefinition, pegging is understood through what Burke calls “gender omniscience”, as a Godly act of physical pleasure, supported by scientific facts, and whereby God and a man’s female partner have an all-knowing certainty about the man’s true gender. These men rely on both Christianity and popular science to both further pathologize and discriminate against homosexual men, while also using these two discourses to redefine pegging as something quintessentially masculine and heterosexual. As queer theory suggests, Burke finds that language is critical to sexual experience. I analyze men’s discursive work to negotiate a sexual experience that lies outside our cultural imagination, pegging.

Homophobia

In the late 1960s psychologist George Weinberg first coined the term “homophobia”. He used the term to refer to a given heterosexual’s deep seated hatred of homosexuals and their fear of being in close proximity to homosexuals, especially gay men. Weinberg developed this concept at a critical moment of gay history, following McCarthyism and before the AIDS epidemic. The usefulness of the term “homophobia” cannot be understated. It served as a social movement discourse that contributed to unprecedented gains by gays and lesbians (Herek 1984). It created a framework for discussing the negative experiences of gays and lesbians and, in many ways, having such a framework was something new. The negative experiences gays and lesbians endured, however, existed long before the 1970s.

In *Homophobia: A History* (2000), Bryne Fone documents centuries worth of Western societies’ hatred of homosexuals, most specifically linking anti-gay sentiments

to foundational texts of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In these traditions, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah serves as a powerful tale of people living in sexual sin, most notably participating in homosexual sex. In this story, God burns the cities to the ground to punish those with abhorrent sexual practices and those who condone them. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah, in part, led to the establishment of “sodomy laws”. Sodomy laws criminalized homosexual and other forms of non-reproductive sex. These laws existed for centuries throughout Europe and America and claimed the lives of countless men engaged in, or thought to have engaged in, homosexual sex (Nussbaum 2010). Women’s lack of political recognition typically meant that they were not punished for homosexual sex to the same extent that men were. This is not to imply women were free to partake in homosexual sex; rather, it is to highlight that societal understandings of homosexual sex as sinful and disgusting have predominately focused on men’s sex practices. As I will continue to show, this gendered understanding lingers in contemporary homophobia.

While Sodom and Gomorrah might be the most well-known and influential religious story shaping the course of gay history, it is not the only example suggesting homophobia has been at work for a very long time. In *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia* (1997), Elizabeth Keiser documents homophobia in medieval art. Through analysis of a 14th century poem known as “Cleanness,” Keiser argues this is one of the first documented associations between homosexuality and disgust. During the 14th century of Western Europe, homosexuality had already been outlawed for hundreds of years under explicit patriarchy. Land and family expansion, two critical components of patriarchy, were dependent on heterosexual sex and, therefore, homosexuality was

outlawed. However, “Cleanness” is the first document we have justifying heterosexual supremacy outside of purely patriarchal understandings. In this poem, heterosexuality is presented as God’s divine artistic creation and homosexuality is portrayed as a disgusting abomination of heterosexuality.

Hundreds of years later, this discourse of disgust continues to be a dominant feature of societal homophobia. In *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law* (2010) Martha Nussbaum eloquently describes the ways in which disgust toward homosexuality has been embodied and institutionalized for centuries throughout the Western world. She argues that “disgust” is the foundational motivation for homophobia and, therefore, what must be confronted to achieve a sexually egalitarian society.

A historical knowledge of “homophobia” is necessary to understand a primary critique of the term. While the conceptualization of “homophobia” has unquestionably assisted in political gains, it has also pathologized individuals and failed to recognize the institutionalized nature of these beliefs (Herek 1984). Because of this, some scholars advocate using the phrase “anti-gay culture” or “heterosexism” to describe the workings we generally ascribe to “homophobia” (Herek 1984; Herek 1990; Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, and Meyer 2008). I share these criticisms of “homophobia”; yet, after careful deliberation, do not advocate for abandoning the term. It has been too politically useful and necessary for queer liberation. It continues to provide a cultural framework allowing for discussions of anti-gay attitudes and practices. I think we must expand our understanding of all that “homophobia” might entail and move beyond labeling any given heterosexual as homophobic or not, as Weinberg’s original conceptualization of the term

articulated. We must accept that we all live in a profoundly homophobic culture that is marked by historical and contemporary institutions, ideologies, and interactions that treat homosexuals as deviant, disgusting, and weird. This profoundly homophobic culture shapes everyone's understanding of their own and others' gender and sexuality.

Gender and Homophobia

Much scholarly work has documented that homophobia is about more than negative attitudes toward same-sex desire. Homophobia is fundamentally also about gender. In one of the most important works on these issues, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (1997), Suzanne Pharr argues that homophobia is one of three primary ways that gender roles are maintained.

Patriarchy – an enforced belief in male dominance and control – is the ideology and sexism the system that holds it in place. The catechism goes like this: Who do gender roles serve? Men and the women who seek power from them. Who suffers from gender roles? Women most completely and men in part. How are gender roles maintained? By the weapons of sexism: economics, violence, homophobia.

(Pharr, pg. 8)

Pharr demonstrates that “gender roles” are maintained through sexism and that homophobia is a primary “weapon of sexism”. Therefore, Pharr argues that homophobia is not just a gay issue – it is also a women's issue. Pharr's work is incredibly important to sociologists' understanding of the structural nature of homophobia. Unlike Weinberg, Pharr allows for an ideological and institutional discussion of homophobia, while not ignoring individuals.

Homophobia works effectively as a weapon of sexism because it is joined with a

powerful arm, heterosexism. Heterosexism creates the climate for homophobia with its assumption that the world is and must be heterosexual and its display of power and privilege as the norm. Heterosexism is the systematic display of homophobia in the institutions of society. Heterosexism and homophobia work together to enforce compulsory heterosexuality and that bastion of patriarchal power, the nuclear family.

(Pharr, pgs. 16-17)

Pharr understands “heterosexism” as the institutionalized forms of heterosexual supremacy, and “homophobia” as the corresponding attitudes and practices of individuals. Pharr’s work, much like Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex”, are examples of queer theory before we had a name for it. Both of these authors wrote during the “second wave” and both extended insights contributing to the formation of queer theory and “third wave” feminism. Queer theory interrogates how sexuality serves as a primary form of social organization and stratification while always considering the intersecting nature of oppressions. In this case, Pharr gives us an intersectional analysis of gender and sexuality. “Gender roles” were heavily theorized in second wave feminism as scholars and activists sought to articulate how they were maintained and the inequality they produced. Scholars like Pharr and Rubin argued that the cultural disdain of homosexuality must be explored to answer such questions. Homophobia affects not just homosexuals, but heterosexuals as well. This is because homophobic discourses and ideologies are critical for upholding “gender roles” or what we more commonly refer to now as “gender binaries”.

While Pharr is writing with very different motivations, her work is foundational to

my project. Pharr directs our attention to the use of homophobia *within* heterosexual interactions. She clearly understands homophobia as a tool for men's oppression of women. This project considers her insight, explores additional ways that homophobic discourse is used within heterosexual interactions, and considers the effects of such discourse on heterosexual individuals.

Masculinities and Homophobia

As the history of sodomy laws and the development of the term "homophobia" indicate, men's sexual practices often dominate the cultural imagination of disgust in ways that women's do not. The relationships between masculinity and homophobia are complex. While everyone is subjected to the pervasive ideological and institutional measures of heteronormativity, these restrictions affect groups of people in significantly differently ways. The research presented in this dissertation considers the experiences of sexual restriction for the group that also benefits most from this power dynamic, straight men. Scholars argue that heterosexuality, like whiteness, is a fundamental component of the contemporary construction of "man"; therefore, a man must engage in heterosexuality to reap the full benefits of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005; Pascoe 2007; Kimmel 1994). This affects groups of men differently but has negative consequences for all men. Sexuality is made something to police, and gay men are targets of straight men's violent defense of the category "man". Straight men's homophobia comes at a great cost to straight men as well. Pascoe (2007) identifies a "fag discourse" whereby white, heterosexual men police each other's gendered behavior in situations typically void of any sexual behavior. This suggests that straight men's homophobia polices straight and gay men, albeit in very different ways.

Theorizing penetration reveals that American's tend to organize gender and sexuality through an active/passive binary whereby men are active and women are passive. Within this cultural construction those who penetrate (active) are imbued with more social power than those who are penetrated (passive). This construction is a mechanism of misogyny, heterosexism, and, most important for this research, homophobia (Pharr 1997). If men penetrate and women are penetrated, then men who receive penetration are aligned with femininity. This helps explain the overall feminization of gay men and why the "fag discourse" is a primary way men police other men's gendered behavior regardless of sexual practices (Pascoe 2007; Kimmel 1994; Messner 1999). Despite gay and lesbian social and political gains, research shows that the act of gay men's anal penetration remains understood through a "discourse of disgust" in society at large, but especially by straight men, and even by those supposedly accepting of gay relationships (Johnson 2004; Nussbaum 2010).

Whether or not straight men find gay men disgusting, there is still the tendency to treat them as "others". Thus, emerging cultural understandings of gender and sexual identity suggest that homosexuality is becoming more legitimate, but also as its own category of human. Foucault famously wrote that, "the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (1978; 43). Significantly, this category of the male homosexual plays a critical role in boys and men's relationships with each other and with women. Pascoe (2007) documents the "specter of the fag" as a profoundly unmasculine man that haunts teenage boys' interactions. Ward (2015) finds that "the homosexual" is fundamental to White, heterosexual, males' self-identification as straight men and to homosocial male bonding. My research considers how "the homosexual", and

its related constructs, influence heterosexual men and women's decisions to not peg.

Some research suggests that men's homophobia is being altered in significant ways by more "inclusive" gender performances (Anderson 2009). Others suggest that, while homophobia may be changing, it is still a prominent component of men's socialization despite men's claims of egalitarianism (Pascoe 2007; Johnson 2004).

Related research suggests that straight men are incorporating aesthetic characteristics of marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities into their style and language (Demetriou 2001; Barber 2008; Bridges 2010). Some scholars question whether these practices challenge or perpetuate existing systems of inequality (Bridges 2013).

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) are skeptical that these challenges represent any real change to existing structural inequalities and consider these may be largely insignificant local variations of gender performativity. Anderson's (2009) work on "inclusive masculinity" counters this notion, claiming that contemporary challenges to masculinity, specifically the transformation of homophobia, works to erode gender and sexual inequality in meaningful ways. And yet a third explanation, addressed through work on "hybrid masculinities" (Demetriou 2001; Bridges 2013), refers to the ways men incorporate aspects of marginalized and subordinated masculinities, in ways that are more widespread than Connell and Messerschmidt acknowledge, but do not pose the significant threats to existing inequality as Anderson claims.

Sexuality is a primary location to observe these transformations of masculinity and to better understand meaningful change. Most of the research around masculinity and homophobia furthers our understanding of transformations in men's attitudes towards *others'* sexual behavior. But these findings also suggest another area of investigation: is

there evidence that straight men are transforming how they perceive and engage in their own sexual behaviors and not just that of queers, including incorporating sexual practices deemed gay or feminine?

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation uses pegging as a case study to examine transformations in the cultural intelligibility of gender non-conforming heterosexual sex. In the second chapter I describe the methods of data collection and analysis used in this study. I give an overview of the Reddit community and review literature concerning online research.

In the third chapter, “Having Sex: A Heteronormative Template,” I examine the discursive work in which men and women engage to make pegging seem normal. I uncover “gender role reversal” as the dominant discourse men and women on Reddit employ. Here men and women uphold a strict gender binary in which pegging provides an opportunity to safely cross. A temporary gender role reversal during pegging is constructed as kinky and not as a threat to their beliefs in a gender binary and gender normativity.

In the fourth chapter, “I’ve Got You Pegged: Sexual Aesthetics and Gender Accountability,” I explore ambivalence and the reasons people decide not to consent to pegging. In this chapter I further my analysis of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) and “sexual aesthetics” (Bridges 2013) to make sense of why this discursive redefinition is not a liberating framework for some people.

In the fourth chapter “I’m Not Homophobic But’: Heterosexuality in an Anti-Gay Culture,” I delve further into people’s ambivalence by examining homophobia, heteronormativity, and the confusion that pegging engenders. In this section I explore

women's participation in homophobia as a way to enforce hegemonic notions of masculinity and heterosexuality in their male partners.

Why Study Pegging?

Pegging allows insight into gender relations within heterosexual sex, including what happens when gender and sexual expectations are distorted. Sexology gives us rich data, revealing that most heterosexuals define sex as penis-in-vagina (PiV) intercourse and that most heterosexuals engage in this act more so than any other act (Kinsey 1948; Kinsey 1953; Sanders and Reinisch 1999; Pitts and Rahman 2001; Richters, de Visser, Rissel and Smith 2006; Sanders, Hill, Yarber, Graham, Crosby and Milhausen 2010). A historical understanding of homophobia (e.g. sodomy laws) complicates these embodied understandings of sex as simply choice. A historical understanding of homophobia reveals structural prohibitions that made non-procreative sex illegal within heterosexuality. While these laws have been repealed, their legacy remains deeply embedded in contemporary sexual ideology and embodied by individuals. Sociology and queer theory suggest that heteronormativity and homophobia will complicate heterosexuals' pegging desires. The ways in which cisgender men and women negotiate their desire to peg is relevant to understanding contemporary gender relations within heterosexuality and power relations between heterosexuals and queers.

Pegging is an ideal sex practice to examine the ways in which a culturally unintelligible sex act gains cultural recognition. As Google search data (Figure 1), television and film representations, and Reddit indicate – pegging is catching on. People are curious and confused about it. Like most things that leave us curious and confused, many people turn to the Internet for answers and to talk about it with other people.

CHAPTER II

METHODS

This research seeks to better understand the ways in which a sex practice transitions from a culturally unintelligible sex act to one that is culturally recognized. Further, this research investigates how cisgender, heterosexual men and women negotiate gender normativity and homophobia alongside a desire to peg. Hegemonic masculinity normalizes ideas that men's sexual pleasure is naturally grounded in their ability to penetrate. This corresponds to the normalized assumption that women are to naturally desire receiving penetration. Pegging fundamentally contradicts the gendered expectations of penetration within heterosexual sex, and serves as a useful case study to answer questions about discursive transformations of sex and heterosexual's negotiation of homophobia and sexual pleasure.

The boundaries of heterosexuality are formed not only by the embodied power dynamics between men and women, but also from the power relations between heterosexuals and homosexuals. Heterosexuality is a requirement of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) and cultural discourse posits heterosexuality as the most legitimate and natural form of male sexuality. The cultural associations between gay men and anal sex threatens straight men who receive anal penetration, not only with femininity, but with queerness as well. However, we are living in a time of queer liberation, where the lines between gay and straight are continually blurred. Further, men's homophobia is increasingly unacceptable. Pegging is an ideal sex practice for studying straight people's negotiations of pleasure and homophobia. Pegging offers the

potential of intense sexual pleasure, but only if one is willing and able to transgress deep social and psychic boundaries of gendered sexual behavior.

Analysis and the Internet

To better understand the ways men negotiate the experiences of pegging I turn to the Internet. The Internet is the 20th century's most expansive and radical transformation of worldwide communication. In 2017 more than 4.1 billion people used the Internet globally (Internet Society 2018). This figure speaks to the popularity of Internet technology and is therefore a significant factor in deciding to conduct online research. However, the sheer number of people who go online is not the primary reason I decided to conduct online research; rather, it is because of *what* people do online. "Sex" has long been the primary example of the kinds of things our culture considers taboo (Rubin 1984). Offline, talking openly and honestly about sexual experiences is difficult for most people; however, for reasons outlined below, online discussions of sex are much easier. Therefore, I conducted an analysis of online discussions using the social media website Reddit.

I decided against using interviews as finding a sample of men willing to discuss their pegging adventures with me was not fruitful. Additionally, and more importantly, I decided an analysis of online discussions allowed for a more interesting perspective to study men's negotiations with pegging. The Internet has drastically altered our culture's relationship to sex. Endless sexual possibilities are but a click away, providing unprecedented opportunities for individuals and sex researchers. In her study of online sex workers, Suzanne Jenkins (2010) writes "Internet technology can offer an opportunity to extend the scope of sex work research into new territories by providing a platform for

the voices of people working in areas of the industry about which little is known” (92). For my study, Internet technology allows for the research scope to extend to straight men’s discussions of their gender transgressive sex practices, conversations and practices about which little is known.

The anonymous possibilities of the Internet may provide a space for people to have candid conversations with each other about sensitive topics (Waskul 2003; Campbell 2004; Bell 2007; Adler and Adler 2008; Hsiung 2000; Boero and Pascoe 2012). This provides unique opportunities for the researcher to study social interaction (Hsiung 2000; Im and Chee 2006). Sex researcher Angela Jones writes “...[S]tudying online forums is a felicitous methodological strategy for observing the social interactions of a group...Unlike traditional focus groups, these spaces also provide a unique opportunity for research, because researchers can observe conversations among community members without intruding in the process” (2016: 233). An online analysis allows me to observe social interaction in ways interviews and focus groups cannot. Social interaction is a driving force in gender and sexual hegemony and is therefore critical to my analysis.

Reality, Interaction, and the Internet

A central concern for conducting online social research is that what happens online may be “less real” than what happens off line (Waskul 2003; Hine 2000; Jones 2016). This criticism extends to three inextricably linked concepts of sociological significance: identity, interaction, and social space. With regard to identity, the general criticism of realness is that the anonymous possibilities of the Internet allow people to create personas that do not correspond to an individual’s corporeal body and offline

identities. Research suggests, however, that people generally do not create personas that differ substantially from their offline selves (Kendall 2002; Campbell 2004; Waskul 2003). Yet this is a possibility and there is evidence that people do make dramatic changes to online personas (Waskul 2003). However, this does not necessarily imply an inauthentic self (if such a thing is even possible). For example, research on cybersex reveals that sometimes men present themselves as women, and women as men, heterosexuals explore gay sex, and those in monogamous relationships may try an online threesome (Waskul 2003). This may be understood as the Internet providing a space for people to explore interests and desires not so easily accomplished in the “real” world and not necessarily as evidence of inauthentic selves. “With the freedom to be and do anything [on the Internet]” (Odzer 1997: 43) people may explore what they never considered an option. Criticisms of reality suggest that the “online persona is distinct from and less valid (less “real”) than the offline persona” (Campbell 2004: 44). But where does one’s “authentic self” begin and end? Does the online self not influence the offline self, and vice versa? A fundamental component of the criticism of reality is the disembodied nature of online personhood. Campbell argues this line of thought is reflective of the mind/body dualism which “is not only problematic but oppressive, allowing the individual to be conceptualized in fragmented terms and the body to be viewed essentialistically as some presocial given” (2004: 45).

Research suggests that online interaction resembles that of the offline world more than is commonly thought (Kendall 2002; Campbell 2004). Campbell (2004) argues that the expectation on social networking websites is that people use them as “a medium of communication rather than a site of performance” (37). This is not to say that people do

not manage their presentation of self online by selectively focusing on some aspects of self and ignoring others, but this is also true of offline interaction (Goffman 1959).

Furthermore, interactions that originate online do not necessarily remain there as people can meet in person after establishing an online relationship (Constable 2003; Campbell 2004; Boero and Pascoe 2012). Finally, normative behaviors associated with race, class, gender, etc. are not easily challenged, even in anonymous online spaces. Kendall (2002) finds that regardless of an articulated egalitarian ideology, the men in her study still secured hierarchies within the group that did not challenge existing inequalities.

Location is critical to sociological analysis and the durability of the Internet means its understanding as a “social space” will be of increasing significance to research. “There is little doubt that the Internet, for all its faults, is perhaps the most fascinating and explosive technological and social development of the twentieth century” (Whittle 1996: 15). Cyberspace is not a real thing or place. It is an abstract concept. But sociologists are well equipped to study identities and interaction in abstract locations. “After all, there is no such thing as a society either. We all live lifetimes in society and none of us have ever seen one. Nor is there any such thing as an institution, a norm, or a value. “All we “see” are the doings of people, the consequences of what they have done, and the places where these activities occur” (Waskul 2003). Despite the Internet being a relatively contemporary phenomenon, symbolic interactionist theories established well before the emergence of the Internet are useful in understanding the cultural changes this technological revolution engendered (Robinson 2007).

Limitations of Analysis

While online analysis allows for me to observe candid group discussions about taboo topics, this method does pose significant limitations. I was unable to interact with any Redditors, including asking clarification or follow-up questions. Any information posted on a public Internet site is open to analysis without requiring the researcher to obtain approval from their institution's human subjects review board. I decided to forego the institutional approval as I did not want to pose questions to the group as a method of data collection. I wanted to limit my analysis to what they decided to talk about on Reddit. However, this also meant that I was sometimes left confused and unable to ask anyone a follow up question as this would have breached the human subjects' agreement. Not having the opportunity to ask follow-up questions was frustrating as many of these conversations left me wanting to know more.

Another related limitation is that relying on online analysis meant only analyzing what Redditors considered important enough to talk about. This was of course useful in determining what issues are relevant to this group. However, there were a few topics that I considered relevant to these discussions that were rarely, if ever, mentioned. For example, I wanted to know more about men's attitudes towards anally penetrating women. I was surprised at how infrequently the topic was broached. Having a better understanding of men's attitudes towards anally penetrating their female partners could add needed complexity to understanding men's negotiations of pegging, but I was unable to pose those questions to Redditors.

Reddit

Reddit.com is a news, entertainment, and social networking website that bills itself as "the front page of the internet." Launched in 2005, in 2013 the website had the

attention of 6% of online adults (Duggan and Smith 2013). In May 2013, when this research began, some 71 million unique visitors entered the website (www.blog.reddit.com). Registering an account is necessary to post information, though anyone can access Reddit's information without registering. Reddit can be understood as an open-source, centralized location for both popular and obscure knowledge. Website members contribute all of the information that appears on Reddit by simply posting a link to a news story, a picture, or a personal story for other members to read. The website name speaks to the goal that, at the "water cooler", people will say "I already read that on Reddit". The intention of the website, however, is not simply to gather and display information. A primary goal of the website is to generate discussion among members about posts, thus providing the site with social networking characteristics. In 2006 Reddit and a similar website, Digg, were two of the first websites to transform the static information characteristics of the Internet (Web 1.0) into a participatory network (Web 2.0) by introducing the "like economy" now evident throughout social networking sites such as Facebook (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013). Included in the "like economy" is member's ability to show approval of a post as well as link information scattered across the Internet together through members' sharing of hyperlinks to stories on other websites (ibid).

Reddit allows group consensus to be revealed. Members vote "up" or "down" on each post to calculate a contribution's "karma". For example, if in total five people vote, but four people vote "up" and one person votes "down" then the karma is calculated at three. In actuality karma scores are typically in the hundreds or thousands. Posts with the highest karmas appear at the top of the webpage and are then organized in descending

order according to karma. The logic here is that this ranking will help members decipher “what’s good and what’s junk” (<http://www.reddit.com/wiki/faq>). The good stuff appears at the top and the junk is at the bottom. Ideally this keeps moderators (discussed below) from censoring offensive or incorrect posts as group members will down vote said posts so that they appear far enough down the screen that no one actually reads them. The mathematics behind calculating karma scores sounds simple at first but is actually a complex algorithm. It is considerate of new posts with low karmas that cannot compete with older posts that already have high scores. It also considers contentious karma scores as posts that reveal members disagree with each other should engender conversation, which is a primary intention of Reddit. Further, karma scores are not limited to original posts. *All* responses to original posts (OP) and *all* responses to other responses undergo the same karma calculations. In all cases the OP appears at the top of the webpage and is distinguished from all other comments by a text box and bold font. Listed below the OP are comments responding to the OP, what I refer to as “primary responses” and responses made to primary responses, or what I refer to as “secondary responses,” and so on. This produces a fractal display of all responses.

You do not have to register with Reddit to access its information, but an account is required to post links or comments. One unique feature of Reddit is its commitment to anonymity. All that is required for membership is a username and password. No demographic or contact information is collected beyond IP addresses. The anonymous possibilities of Reddit means little can be known about users aside from crude calculations regarding age, gender, and location. Multiple research efforts confirm, though, that this is a site dominated by young men. In a nationally representative study

Pew research found that 15% of all online men ages 18-29 visit Reddit and 8% of those 30-49; furthermore, men are twice as likely as women to use this site (Duggan and Smith 2013). Google Ad Planner estimates that the average Reddit user (59%) is a 25-34 year old male from the United States (www.blog.reddit.com). Lastly, members are most likely urban or suburban residents, with only two percent of rural residents claiming to use the site (Duggan and Smith 2013).

Though anecdotal, my own experiences of talking to others about researching Reddit confirm this is a popular place for young men. As one coffee barista proclaimed, “I don’t know how many hours of my life I’ve lost to Reddit.” I have a 23 year old male friend that I first turned to for help with Reddit. He and his friends eagerly engaged in hours of discussion with me on multiple occasions, simply because they loved talking about Reddit. Recently, I gave a guest lecture in an Introduction to Women’s Studies course. Seven of the approximately thirty students were recognizable as men to me. I introduced my research by asking how many students use Reddit. All of the men and two women raised their hands. All but one of the male students waited after class to say something positive to me about my research, and Reddit most specifically. What remains most surprising to me when I tell a young man I research Reddit is not simply that he is aware of the website, but how enthusiastically he expresses to me his love of the website.

Subreddits

Reddit is organized by a subcategory system known as “subreddits” indicated as r/NameofSubreddit. It is better to think of Reddit as a hub of thousands of websites than as one single site. As of June 2015 there were over 850,000 subreddits, with hundreds, sometimes thousands of new subreddits created every day. Each subreddit is dedicated to

a different topic and themes range from international politics to cute pictures of kittens. A few subreddits, such as the incredibly popular r/science, require that members reveal their name in addition to their credentials (“flair”) so that members can investigate a person before coming to a decision about their post. Other people, namely celebrities and politicians, maintain a public identity so that they can be “followed” in Twitter style fashion such as President Obama’s participation in “Ask Me Anything” in August of 2012. Whether or not people remain anonymous is largely a personal decision, with few subreddits like that of r/science requiring you reveal your identity.

In order to manage the massive amount of information contained in these tens of thousands of subreddits, members “subscribe” to subreddits that interest them. There is no fee or any type of requirement for subscription; one simply clicks the box that reads “subscribe”. Then, when you first log on to Reddit, the hottest news from all of the subreddits to which you subscribe appear on the homepage. You also have the option to display the most popular posts from all of Reddit, hence the logo “the front page of the Internet”.

Subreddits are organized by discussion threads. It is helpful to consider the threads of these subreddits as a pub. In each of these pubs, someone stands at the front of the room and poses a question to everyone in the bar, and to those passing by outside. Then, as if sectioned off at tables, people start conversing with each other in smaller groups about the question. Sometimes they get off topic, sometimes they tell jokes, sometimes they get angry, and they often ask more questions. Some people talk a lot more than others, and some people stay a short while in comparison to others.

r/sex

Data were collected from the popular subreddit “r/sex”. The purpose of this subreddit is to host “civil discussions about all facets of sexuality and sexual relationships” (www.reddit.com). Originating in 2009, r/sex is one of the more popular subreddits and continues to grow its membership. In January of 2013 there were some 257,000 members, in September of that same year the number grew to over 350,000 members, and in April 2018 that number now reflects more than 900,000 subscribers (ibid). These numbers reflect subscriptions alone and viewership may be even higher as anyone can see the information posted on r/sex. Though I cannot say with certainty, my experience on Reddit suggests that r/sex more frequently relies on personal stories/questions as original posts (OP) than the news links representative of many other subreddits. Personal stories are ubiquitous on this subreddit with nearly every original post selected during investigation containing no external links. Many of these stories are solely concerned with sharing the details of sexual experience and/or seeking advice.

The sidebar of r/sex states, among many other guidelines, “Absolutely no hate-speak, derogatory or disrespectful comments will be tolerated. This includes sexist and rape jokes” (<http://www.reddit.com/r/sex/>). There are six moderators for r/sex. Human Subjects Review did not allow me to interact with anyone, including moderators, and so I cannot say with certainty the kinds of decisions the moderators make. However, after conducting my analysis I think it is reasonable to conclude that moderators may remove “hate speech” but not all homophobic discussion. For example, one post that remained on Reddit claimed “...I’m pretty homophobic. Two dudes together is repellant to me.” This comment likely remains as homophobia is not being directed toward any specific person. We can deduce that this differs from comments that have been removed. Obviously there

is no way to confirm what removed posts said; however, responses to deleted posts remain intact, allowing me to glean information. These comments contained phrases like “You can leave your homophobic name calling at home”. Thus, moderators seem to help facilitate conversations by not allowing homophobic practices to be directed at another Reddit member and that is not the same as banning people from having open discussions about being homophobic. Additionally, while moderators have the power to censor posts, a great deal of the moderating comes from r/sex ideology. It’s simply not cool to be blatantly homophobic. Individual Redditors on r/sex typically engaged conversations surrounding homophobia without directing hate.

r/pegging

Reddit has an entire subreddit dedicated to pegging; however, after careful examination I decided to exclude this subreddit from analysis. With hundreds of thousands of subscribers r/sex is one of the largest, most-well established forums on Reddit; by comparison, r/pegging consists of a few thousand members and is a kind of niche community. A primary difference between these two subreddits is that the discussions on r/pegging suggest an experienced pegging audience whereas the r/sex community is comprised of lay experts, novices, and those who have never even heard of pegging. Furthermore, r/sex is comprised by people of all sexual orientations whereas r/pegging is likely overrepresented by heterosexuals and bisexuals. Thus, r/sex allows for us to hear voices from the queer community as well. Another reason I decided to not sample r/pegging is that these conversations are more focused on technique than on identity struggles, making it less preferable for this analysis. Additionally, preliminary observations on r/pegging revealed that original posts often exclusively contained videos

with no text. I limited my analysis to r/sex to focus on the ways in which a large group of people, with diverse sexual histories, communicate with each other about pegging.

Selecting Cases and Data Analysis

Karma

Every original post (OP) on Reddit is voted up or down by its readers, giving it a “karma score”. I rely on OP karma to determine which posts are most popular through one of four search return organization options known as “top”. In this search process, returns are listed in descending order based on OP karma. Thus, the most popular conversations appear first. A post with a very high karma indicates it was very popular with readers. However, this is the extent to which I rely upon karma scores. I do not perform an analysis of scores for primary and secondary comments as there are complicating factors which make it unreasonable to base my overall analysis on karma scores. For example, in effort to prevent members from using spambots that artificially vote on a post and inflate karma, Reddit “fuzzes” the karma while still giving a real score. That is, if 5 people vote up and 3 people vote down, the score would be 2. However, the “fuzzed” score that appears next to the post may indicate that 23 voted up and 21 down, again reporting a real score of 2. Thus, though the number is real I cannot say how many people actually voted. Therefore, I used karma scores to determine the most popular conversations but not the most popular statement within a conversation.

Selecting Cases and Open Coding

Pegging data were collected between September and November 2014. On six separate occasions I collected the top five posts in response to my search term, “pegging,” giving me a sample size of 3,485 comments and 30 original posts. If a thread

was captured at a previous data collection point then it was skipped in the counting of the top five. This allowed me to capture threads that showed years’ worth of popularity as well as those that were new and highly popular. This reiterative process, in addition to my exploratory research, allowed me to confirm that many of the threads I analyzed appeared on the first page of the search return consistently for over one year.

All data were downloaded and then uploaded into the qualitative software Atlas.ti. Open coding was performed on a sample of threads, producing a coding frame used throughout analysis, while remaining open to the possibility of new codes. Related codes were then compiled through the Atlas.ti functions “Supercodes” and “Code Families”. For example, I coded all statements providing an explanation as to why men did not consent to pegging as “Discourse No Peg_Explanation” where *explanation* contained a more concise summary of the reason men did not consent to sex. If more than one discourse was relied upon to give non-consent then it was marked with multiple codes. For a clearer example of this coding process refer to Table 1.

Table 1 Why People Do Not Consent to Pegging: Selected Codes

Code Family	Code	Count
Discourse No Peg	Disgust	24
Discourse No Peg	Complex Homophobia	33
Discourse No Peg	Closed Minded	13
Discourse No Peg	Don’t Trust Women	16
Discourse No Peg	Gender Identity	38
Discourse No Peg	No Explanation	53

Discourse No Peg	No One to Peg	38
Discourse No Peg	Pegging Is Gay	28
Discourse No Peg	Stigma/Taboo/Weird	61

The “code family” function was the primary tool used to gather related codes. In the above example, all statements explaining why people do not consent to pegging were grouped by the family code “Discourse No Peg”. Thus, code families was an efficient way to group multiple related codes for analysis.

Though open coding directed my analysis toward the most common themes that arose, I do not base my analysis on a quantitative understanding of how frequently a given topic was mentioned. This is a qualitative analysis and while I am interested in themes that frequently arise, I am more interested in providing a thick description of topics relevant for sociological analysis than reporting how frequently something occurred. Some of the themes most interesting for sociological analysis were mentioned less frequently than those which are not relevant for this project. For example, as Table 1 indicates, 16 men discussed not trusting women as a primary reason they were not pegging. In comparison, there were over 100 comments providing links to dildos. Thus, suggestions for dildos were more common than men’s distrust of women, yet this distrust is much more relevant to my topic than what kinds of dildos people are using. Further, if I had asked every man on r/sex whether or not they trust women to peg, that figure may have been much higher. Since I did not get to ask this question, it is not accurate to say that only 16 men on Reddit do not trust women enough to peg. It is accurate to say that 16 men brought this up without being prompted.

Analysis allowed me to see what kinds of things people had to say about pegging. This method allowed themes surrounding people's emotions and hesitations toward pegging to arise. In the following chapters, I present data gathered from r/sex and analyzed using Atlas.ti.

CHAPTER III

HAVING SEX: A HETERONORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

This chapter examines Judith Butler's idea of "cultural intelligibility" alongside the work of Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex". Rubin describes a negative sexual culture where many sexual desires and practices are restricted. Butler's notion of "cultural intelligibility" adds depth to Rubin's theory by considering the ways this restrictive sexual culture informs our individual psyches and interactions. Both Rubin and Butler argue that sex practices and identities associated with homosexuality lie outside the boundaries of culturally acceptable sex. However, both of these works are theoretical essays and in this chapter I provide empirical evidence for their claims. In doing so I address a primary paradox that arose in the data: how can people use discourse to turn a gay sex act into a straight one? Pegging is a culturally unintelligible sex practice. Examining the discourses people use to make sense of an unrecognized sex practice both (1) highlights the implicit assumptions of intelligible sex practices and (2) reveals how sex practices transition from unintelligibility to cultural recognition.

The case of pegging exemplifies the relationship between bodies, language, power, and cultural intelligibility. First, pegging requires challenging gendered divisions of heterosexual sex, namely gendered expectations of penetration. Second, the act of anal penetration has been associated with male homosexuality to such an extent that when a straight man receives anal penetration, even from a woman, his heterosexual identity may be called into question. Third, pegging allows access to a man's prostate which, as my data suggests, often contributes to an intensely pleasurable orgasm. However, pleasure

does not exist outside of culture and the cultural mandates of heterosexual masculinity make pegging a risky endeavor to straight men's gender and sexual identities. Pegging highlights the ways in which sexual pleasure itself is constrained by constructions of what constitutes appropriate sex and expectations of gender.

Through examining the case of pegging, this chapter argues that sex itself is socially constructed; furthermore, this construction is heteronormative, relying on (often) unspoken assumptions of appropriate masculine and feminine practices.

Heteronormativity refers to the ubiquitous institutional and individual practices and assumptions upholding the beliefs that there are only two, mutually exclusive and complimentary genders and that heterosexuality is the only natural and normal sexual expression (Warner 1999; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Heteronormativity renders some sexual practices and desires disgusting, forbidden, and even unimaginable by society's members (Butler 1993; Nussbaum 2010).

I argue that heteronormativity functions as an *unspoken* rule book for sex. This rulebook helps maintain the constructed reality of sex in its current conception and it is perhaps best understood in opposition to Bondage, Domination, and Sadomasochism (BDSM) ideology. BDSM is a land of *explicit* rules and the ideology suggests that, as long as everyone consents to the rules, anything is possible (Landridge and Butt 2004; Bauer 2014). Alternatively, when it comes to the ideology of sex practices, heteronormativity is based on *implicit* rules of a gender binary culture. The understanding here is that no one needs to vocally articulate a gender binary as a sex practice nor consent to upholding it during heteronormative sex. The binary is already agreed upon as natural and normal, as "just the way it is". This is *not* to deny that the cultural

expectations of heteronormativity are often times made explicit. Perhaps an example will best illustrate this distinction. While BDSM leads one party to ask “will you dress up as the devil because you are so tempting, tie me up and then flog me?”, heteronormativity ensures that, generally speaking, no individual asks “can I dress up as a man because I have a penis, lie on top of you, and penetrate your vagina with my penis until I ejaculate?” These are general expectations of heterosexual sex. Heteronormativity is both an articulated and an unspoken rulebook that structures the cultural intelligibility of sex.

In this chapter I argue that heteronormativity structures heterosexual sex, in part, through gendered expectations of penetration. This structuring happens through habitual and compulsory performances of gender normativity and heterosexuality where cisgender men’s penetration of cisgender women’s vaginas is constructed as normal, natural, and the sole distinguishing act of what is culturally recognized as “having sex”. Pegging requires challenging gendered expectations of penetration and ultimately calls into question assumptions and practices grounded in gender and sexual identities.

My data also suggest that pegging leads to confusion for men and women. When cisgender men and women “show up” for heterosexual sex, they have an unspoken, general template in mind for what to expect. This general template is a gender binary. Heterosexual sex includes the possibility of numerous desires and fantasies; however, the dominant ways our culture thinks about sex and gender ensures that not all sexual possibilities will be recognized. Gendered expectations surround a host of sexual behaviors (e.g. lingerie, initiating sex), but my data suggests nothing compares to the gendered expectation that men penetrate and women are penetrated. Again, pegging challenges this expectation and causes confusion for both men and women. I find that

individuals resolve this confusion and engage in pegging through the discursive work of redefinition. Specifically, I find that a “gender role reversal” is constructed as kinky sex allowing men and women to playfully transgress a gender binary. This kinky sex play, however, does not necessarily threaten the pervasive power of a gender binary and may actually work to strengthen it.

“Regular” Sex and a Gender Role Reversal

Data show that heteronormativity is the primary framework structuring the ways heterosexuals on r/sex¹ have sex. Discussions of pegging make visible the unspoken rules of heteronormativity, namely the gendered expectations of penetration. The most common pattern identified throughout this data was that pegging causes confusion for everyone involved. Importantly, this confusion does not only apply to negative experiences. Rather, this emotion also captures the inability to make sense of pleasures and desires that contradict culturally intelligible sex.

The confusion pegging engenders allows us to see what is culturally recognized as “regular sex”. The two most common forms of confusion concerned gender and sexual identities. My data suggest that when gender and sexual identities are jeopardized by engaging or even thinking about pegging, discursive work must be carried out to redefine practices and identities to fit within their heteronormative template.

Pegging was often seen as a deviation from “regular” sex. Rarely was “regular” sex defined by explicitly citing its characteristics. More commonly “regular” sex was

¹ I use the phrase “heterosexuals on r/sex” as a shorthand for referring to heterosexuals who participate in pegging discussions on r/sex. It is inaccurate to refer to those in my data set as “participants” as no one volunteered to participate in this study. Though my data does not speak to all heterosexuals participating on the r/sex subreddit, this phrasing is used to help place a boundary around who is represented in my data set.

conveyed through confusion brought on by pegging, thus allowing us to piece together what is meant by this phrase.

Initial penetration is a rush...It's that feeling of vulnerability that as a man you just don't get from "regular" sex. It's really hard to describe something with so many facets to it. The change of dynamic, the physical sensation, just the taboo feeling of it all. All a great rush for me.

~ Padawanbater

According to this post, vulnerability is not something straight men get to experience during “regular” sex. While he never defines what he means by “regular” sex, it is clear his definition does not include men receiving penetration. Furthermore, the nature of his post is one of advice. He is explaining to other men the pleasurable possibilities of pegging and it is clear from his statements that he expects other men, not just himself, to be inexperienced at receiving penetration. The assumption that men penetrate and women are penetrated is the most implicit expectation within heteronormative sex. Further, his use of quotes surrounding “regular sex” without definition indicates his assumption that everyone else has a general idea of what this phrase means. The ubiquitous nature of heteronormativity ensures that everyone lives within this constructed reality of sex and has a shared understanding of the phrase “regular sex” as penis in vagina intercourse.

“Regular” sex discussions frequently contained a “role reversal” discourse, indicating this was a common solution in responding to the confusion brought on by transgressing “regular” sex. Like *Padawanbater’s* quote, these comments frequently included strong emotions and people often struggled to find language to convey the intensity of pegging and of experiencing sex through a gender “role reversal”.

omg the emotional reaction of being penetrated... wow. It's such a whole different world from being the penetrator. You really have to submit and accept something foreign into your body and it is SUCH a radical concept for a hetero person like me. Just wow.

~FellKnight

The best reason to try pegging, of course, is that one or both partners are turned on by it. However, even if that's not quite the case, the penetration reversal can be a real eye-opener (as well as ass-opener, obviously) for both parties in your standard heterosexual relationship. I feel like it's a great way to fuck a mile in your partner's shoes.

~Pooperslooper

It turned me on to know he would like it if I "flipped the script" on him one day, pulled HIS hair and told him to bury his face in my pussy.

~ AngelSaysNo

A common thread throughout all of these quotes is that pegging is often made intelligible, and therefore permissible, through a “role reversal” discourse. A “role reversal” discourse illuminates how the cultural intelligibility of sex is influenced by heteronormativity. In a heteronormative culture such as ours, sexual behavior is understood through binary gendered expectations. This is most readily seen through gendered assumptions of penetration. When these assumptions and practices are challenged there is no readily available discourse for conceptualizing this act. As *FellKnight* says, “this is such a radical concept for a hetero person like me”. Therefore, the existing binary frame is relied upon and a “role reversal” discourse is used to make sense of the deviation, thus allowing

heterosexuals to “fuck a mile in their partner’s shoes,” as *Pooperslooper* writes.

Importantly, a “role reversal” of “regular” sex can be understood as a kind of gender play within heteronormativity. In this sense a gender binary is understood as something kinky to transgress. However, it should also be understood that this allows heterosexuals on r/sex to transgress a gender binary without questioning its restrictive nature and without making precarious their own gender and sexual identities. The transgression is seen as erotic deviation, a kinky performance, and not a critique of gender.

Although pegging may not encourage heterosexuals on r/sex to critique gender, pegging does seem to offer an opportunity for men and women to experience gender differently during sex. The role reversal discourse allowed men and women to experience sex “from the other side” and this may significantly alter heterosexual sex.

Holy crap, even for those of us who like to take control and ride our men into sweet, moaning bliss, fucking with a dick is so different than fucking with a vagina. You’ll come to appreciate the stamina that goes into swordplay a lot more once you’ve acted as the penetrating party.

~ ms.pegger

Thank you, so many women don’t realize the stamina involved with longer sex sessions.

~bringindabacon

Agreed. My SO laughs when I need my inhaler during intercourse. It’s not easy thrusting for 15-20 minutes, I’ll black out and no one wants to see that.

~Reddstarrx

Our first time I was sore for days. I couldn't stand up out of a chair without thinking of him. It was awesome :)

~deleted12

As the above exchange reveals, some women gained a greater appreciation for the stamina involved in being the penetrated party. Men seemed validated that women had a better understanding of what it takes to be the penetrating party. Stamina was most cited in these discussions, but more generally women's comments reveal that men typically perform a more active role during sex, and pegging allows for an opportunity to transgress this expectation.

My husband (M56) has had a hard time maintaining an erection this last year and does not like the side effects (stuffy nose, headaches, flushing) from Viagra, Cialis, etc. so last month I suggested we try pegging. I told him he had been doing all the work for the last 20 years and suggested we switch roles. So far it's worked out great. I have fucked him just about every night since we started and multiple times a day on weekends.

~throwaway453321

While women typically gained a better understanding of the “work” involved in being the penetrating party, men and women often wrote about pegging leading to men having a better understanding of the emotions and physical sensations women often experience by being penetrated.

Yeah dude, pegging will teach you first hand that you can't just ram something into a vagina or an asshole. Hard to fully imagine that until you've been

penetrated.

~throwaway191768

I, too was into my bottomy side for a while, or rather, I let people into my bottomy side. Turns out it was just a phase though, I went back to vagina. But yea, it's very effective in teaching empathy for that kind of thing [penetration].

~ masterdebater25

Some teenage boys tend to laugh and make fun of girls who cry after their first time [having intercourse]. Well lets have you on your back, staring at someone who's about to stick something inside of you, you have no idea what will happen or how it will feel or anything, and let's just see how you react. [his emphasis]

~ ThrewYouAway1

The above comments suggest that pegging allows some men a greater understanding of the emotional and physical work involved in being penetrated. *masterdebater25* articulates what many others suggest, pegging can lead to sexual empathy. The quote from *ThrewYouAway1* comes from a longer discussion where he writes that he has never tried pegging; yet, recently he has given it a lot of thought. Simply contemplating pegging led to a deeper appreciation for what some women may experience during sex, as well as a critique of men's behavior in response to women's penetration fears.

In addition to empathy building for both men and women, pegging encouraged some people to experience their bodies in very different ways. The following is an original post titled "Phantom Penis?"

In the last couple of years, I [f/23] have gotten into strapons/pegging, and I've been having feelings of penis envy and being more excited by being dominant. But

in the past few months, when I start getting horny, I feel like I want to stick my penis in something, wanting to hump something, but I don't have one. Also sometimes I'll wake up from a sex dream and actually feel like I have a penis, but then I reach down, and get really sad when I don't actually have anything down there. I don't have any body dysmorphia about my vulva or vagina, I just feel disappointed I don't have a real penis. I've also noticed that I can get off extremely quickly while my SO is going down on me if I ask him to suck my clit like sucking gently on the tip of a penis, and then close my eyes and pretend he's sucking my dick. I guess I just want to know if I'm alone in this.

~sistercrepemyrtle

The above post reveals that after getting into pegging, this woman started to feel as though she had a penis. She thought about having a penis during sex and this led to her “getting off extremely quickly.” She is also worried that this is not normal. Many Redditors, men and women, assured her that it was. All of the following quotes are in response to this post.

When masturbating focusing on the clit, I can climax the easiest when imagining that I am a man fucking a woman. I wouldn't say I have any problems with my gender or sexuality, don't even think I am extremely bi-curious. It just enhances the feelings if I imagine to have a huge throbbing organ instead of my tiny, highly sensitive clit. I also have trouble getting “over the hump” to orgasm frequently, and imagining being a man who is more overwhelmed by the physical sensations when he's just about to cum, even “helpless” in a sense, really helps me to let go. Shrug.

~ IA MA GermanGirl

Funny, picturing yourself being the opposite sex must be pretty normal. I am a man with zero attraction to men, but when masturbating I do imagine how good it would be to be a girl when she's fully turned on and being penetrated.

~ throwsexpower

This is much more common than I thought.

~ destructold17

I also think of this.

~ TheotheTheo

I can relate.

~ mlranasaurus

I can't speak for other women, but I do know that there are many men, who are turned on by the thought of having female genitalia. This kink, which is the male equivalent of what you are saying, sometimes goes by the term autogynephilia. I'm not sure what it is about this concept, but it's just one of the many ways people are turned on by the opposite sex, despite how convoluted it may seem. So I wouldn't worry about it, pretty normal if you think about it. You're likely not alone.

~ hidoklmo

The original post from *sistercrepemyrtle* and the subsequent responses reveal that both men and women relate to imaging sex with genitals different from their own. For *sistercrepemyrtle* this causes her to worry whether she is "alone in this." That is, *sistercrepemyrtle* wants to know if this is normal. As this dissertation will continue to

show, pegging often leads to conversations where people want to know if something is normal or not. Heterosexuals on r/sex have a hard time determining how they feel about something until they decide if it is normal. *Sistercrepemyrtle* has no shortage of responses telling her this is indeed normal. That people experience sex while imagining that they embody different genitalia is in and of itself interesting, but what is most important for this dissertation is the way in which Reddit is used to normalize nontraditional experiences of gender and sexuality. Constructing an act as normal is a critical component in the cultural intelligibility of a sex practice.

The gender role reversal present in many people's comments suggest that a primary way people reconcile the confusing feelings pegging engenders is to think of it as a kinky transgression of a gender binary. This allows a gender binary to stay intact without questioning its naturalness. However, this understanding of a gender role reversal also led to some men and women having more empathy for their partner's during sex. It also led to some people experiencing their bodies in ways that do not correspond to a corporeal reality. These understandings may suggest that pegging can lead to radically different understandings of sex and power relations within heterosexuality and to one's understanding of their own bodies.

Gender Confusion and Cultural Intelligibility

Sexual pleasure is complicated when it contradicts a gender binary. The most common experience my data speaks to is that of confusion and this finding is therefore discussed throughout this dissertation. In this section I will introduce findings of gender confusion specifically as it pertains to cultural intelligibility and heteronormative structures of sexual ideology.

Both men and women expressed panic that men's penetration will emasculate them. The quote below follows one man's experience of asking his partner to peg him repeatedly for months. When she did, it was angry and forceful, or what several commenters referred to as getting "hate fucked".

Strange thing is, i was so shocked at the time, it never occurred to me to tell her to slow down or be more gentle. I just had this feeling that it was something she needed to get out of her system and i needed to take to prove to her i was still a man even though i was letting her fuck me. It was almost like some kind of test. Kind of like i'm going to do this and depending on how you take it will determine if i still think you are a man after i'm done.

~ *Hubby453*

What is most significant about this post is not simply that *Hubby453* has gendered ideas about sex, but that he understands pegging as a *test* of his masculinity. Similarly, Ward (2015) found sex between straight White men was often considered feats of masculinity and that a "man enough" discourse was relied upon to reframe this practice. *Hubby453* specifies that he considers this a test because of gendered associations of penetration, "I needed to take [aggressive penetration] to prove to her I was still a man even though I was letting her fuck me." Paradoxically, penetration is *so* feminine that one must be man enough to do it. This "man enough" discourse parallels other researchers' findings such as Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) work on "hybrid masculinities" and Bridges (2013) research on straight men who are perceived as gay. Once again we see a "role reversal" discourse of "letting her fuck me". Yet, this also highlights that the discursive work alone cannot assuage his fears entirely. He still feels the need to receive penetration in a way

that others consider manly. This means not asking for gentle penetration. Gender normativity encourages people to police their own and others' behaviors through a gender binary (Butler 1990; West and Zimmerman 1987). There is no way to definitely prove gender or sexual identification; thus, these categories must be continually expressed for an individual to maintain power afforded to these groupings (Pascoe 2007). This man's post suggests that pegging is a risky practice that he must navigate with "manly" behavior in effort to not threaten his status as a "real man".

The majority of threads analyzed followed a basic pattern of someone seeking advice and the Reddit community giving advice. Those seeking advice often told stories of sexual experiences or conversations that left them confused, at times avoiding conversation with their lover. An overwhelming response was that communication is necessary and that they needed to talk with their partner. However, advice comments often speculated as to what the confusion was about and their assumptions are telling. Emasculation was the most cited speculation as what men are "risking" by engaging in pegging.

I would definitely suggest talking about it! By both of you ignoring the subject, it might be making him feel uncomfortable and insecure about the experience, as well. There is a lot of stigma in society around guys enjoying butt play, and I strongly believe that this has an effect on the way this type of sex act is perceived by both guys and girls. For heterosexual males, they might believe this type of insertion isn't "manly." Girls might perceive it this way, too, since it's not something we're used to, having the roles reversed, per se.

~jesswallz

Please talk to him about what happened... I think he may be a bit confused and insecure because that type of thing, like you said, is often seen as a more submissive role, which males typically aren't thought to be. He shouldn't consider it emasculating, though - it's a pretty normal thing that plenty of guys are into

~ KurayamiShikaku

The ways in which people make sense of others' confusion is as telling about our sexual culture as are personal accounts addressing the source(s) of confusion. The most frequent assumption for why men or women might experience confusion was that it emasculates men. Paradoxically, a "role reversal" discourse is cited here as the source of gender confusion. That is, while a "role reversal" was at times a solution to heteronormative confusion, it was also the source of confusion. This can be understood as an issue of framing. A "role reversal" can be framed as a problem in that it violates gender expectations or it can be framed as an erotic game in which there are no long-term consequences to gender and sexual identities. Framing gender play as an erotic game is one way that straight people use discourse to turn a gay sex act into a straight one.

KurayamiShikaku offers another discursive strategy alongside redefinition which is to assure the original poster that pegging is "a pretty normal thing that plenty of guys are into." The normalizing claim that many people engage in this act is one framing strategy for transforming a deviant sexual practice into a culturally acceptable sex act. While the majority of these advice comments suggested pegging should not be seen as emasculating, these comments reveal (1) our culture has historically aligned receiving penetration with passivity and femininity and (2) the gendered expectations of penetration may be changing.

“Cross-Dressing”

My data suggests that men receiving penetration poses the greatest threat to the gender binary expectations of heterosexual sex; however, like Burke’s (2014) findings, men “acting like women”, specifically through “cross-dressing” was also discussed as a significant threat. A handful of women suggested this transgression was more of a threat than penetration. Though my data suggest this is not as frequent a fear, research focused on drag or “cross-dressing” would likely yield different results. The quote below is in response to an original post where a woman writes about her boyfriend’s desire to wear a corset during sex. She writes, “I don't know if I want my boyfriend to act like a woman during sex. Help me please, I don't know what to do.”

I am absolutely fine with pegging. I could get into that. But the second my bf tried to wear women's clothes or act like a woman I'd be done. I find the masculinity of a man attractive and women to be completely unattractive. So if I lost that masculinity it would make me not into the situation anymore. Not that I am not dominant occasionally, but dressing up in women's clothes is not super masculine, in my mind anyway.

~ deleted²

Similar to Burke’s (2014) research, this post suggests that men wearing women’s clothes during sex is outside of this woman’s comfortability. This post also suggests that cross-dressing, for some, is more of a threat than pegging. Burke considers this is largely the result of increased visibility and normalization of prostate pleasure. While the above

² When people delete their Reddit account their posts remain and “deleted” appears in lieu of a username.

quote does not contain this scientific discourse, I did find considerable evidence of this throughout my research. At times men and women justified the pleasure of pegging through “facts” about science and the “nerves” that make up the corporeal body. There is no similarly “scientific” justification for cross dressing. Thus, while men receiving penetration might still be on the boundaries of culturally intelligible sex, men dressing “like women” seems, for now, outside the boundaries of normalcy.

Sexual Confusion

Because heterosexuality is, in some ways, a matter of perception, one solution to heteronormative confusion is to redefine heterosexuality as something that allows for practices such as pegging (Ward 2015; Burke 2015). One of the most consistent questions heterosexuals on r/sex addressed was how participants define sexuality. For heterosexuals on r/sex , the power afforded to their identities and practices means not having to answer things like “what does my sexuality entail?” Just like the expectations of heteronormativity are implicit, the expectations of identities are as well. Pegging changes that and encourages reflection, which does not necessarily inspire progressive ideas about identity and desire. Similar to Burke’s (2014) findings, heterosexuals on r/sex often avoided contemplation of any homophobic attitudes and/or refused considering their own queer possibilities by defining heterosexuality in its most simplistic, yet powerful definition possible:

Someone else posted this in /r/sex that sums it up really well. “Anything you do with a women is completely “heterosexual”.

~ sm753

*And if it worries you, it doesn't make you gay to like having a dildo in your ass.
Nothing between a man and a woman can be gay. Nothing.*

~ Ezalias

This framing reveals that, for some people, a gender binary is *the* foundation of heterosexuality. This definition of sexuality was frequently made and generally accepted by others. This definition is the most effective strategy to both incorporate new sexual practices into the realm of normalcy without weakening the power afforded to cisgender heterosexuality. This definition allows anything to be constructed as legitimate and normal if it happens between a cisgender man and woman.

As previously mentioned, scientific discourses were frequently relied upon to justify prostate pleasure. At times these included conversations about evolution and nerves, but more commonly the work of sexologist Alfred Kinsey was engaged. Kinsey's work was often presented in a calculated way that, while perhaps useful (or perhaps not) for research and empirical typologies, seems troubling for identities. The response that follows is representative of many posts. In these comments a lay expertise is used to establish a psychosexual discourse, as well as their own subjectivity.

A lot of sex psychologists (my prof being one) believe people identify on a sexual and romantic preferences, mapped out on an (x, y) graph. Say x is sexuality, with heterosexual on the left and homosexual on the right. Y is romanticism, with heteroromantic on the top and homoromantic on the bottom. You can be in several places on the graph. I'm heterosexual/heteroromantic, but I'm not purely heterosexual. I can admit when a guy looks pretty, but I have no sexual desire for

males. Likewise, I have a friend who is homosexual/hetero and homoromantic. She fell in love with a guy but had no sexual desire whatsoever for him. You sound like you're hetero&homosexual(bisexual)/heteroromantic. You feel sexual desire for the penis, but not the man, while also feeling both sexual desire and emotional attachment for women.

~ Izzi_Skyy

This quote is representative of many attempts relying on Kinsey's continuum to redefine sexuality. The frequent references to Kinsey are both troubling and promising. While acknowledging that the hetero/homo binary was insufficient, the idea that identities themselves might be a problem was not as frequently articulated. Not a single gender theorist was mentioned by heterosexuals on r/sex, though Kinsey was discussed dozens of times. Although the identity model is problematic, some people argued that they found the proliferation of identities useful in understanding their desires. The comfort that identities offer must be acknowledged.

Those who articulated the limitations of identity rarely suggested to forego identities, arguing that even if one rejects labels, "society" will force them on individuals anyway.

Even though labels are bullshit, society will still treat you differently based on that label, which makes it meaningful, even if it's never going to be totally accurate. So for your own sake, in the utilitarian sense, it makes the most sense to just pick a label.

~ admiral_snugglebut

Redditors making these kinds of responses suggest that when sexual identity is recognized as restrictive, the best course of action is to acknowledge it and proceed with this identity model anyway. It is easier to go along with society than to change it. However, these statements also suggest that reflecting upon sexual identities is a contemporary facet of changing sexual norms.

“Getting Over the Gayness”

Both men and women had strong associations between anal penetration and male homosexuality. Men and women often claimed that in order for them to enjoy pegging they had to “get over the gayness.” Like the people in Burke’s (2014) research, one solution to confusion was to redefine pegging. As with redefining sexuality (Ward 2015), redefining pegging does not ensure progressive ideas. In order for heterosexual men and women on r/sex to dismantle this association they did not need to confront any of their own homophobic attitudes or preconceived notions. They had to reframe pegging as not gay.

When my girl first talked about pounding me all I could think was this sounds super gay. I let her try it anyway and now I'm totally over it being gay. If it happens with a guy and a girl it's straight. And it feels damn good. Don't knock it til you try it.

~ showtime711

My partner and I have been pegging for the past couple of years and it really took me a while to get into it. He was the one who brought it up and I was the one who had to "get over the gayness" as you put it. I'm all for it now because I can

see how much pleasure it gives him!

~ *smoxyroxy*

Heterosexuals on r/sex expressed worry over initial thoughts of homosexuality, and then relief upon reframing it as straight. The relief comes from transforming pegging from a culturally unintelligible desire into a normal sex act. In both cases, the normalcy of this sex is secured by associating pegging with pleasure, while both simultaneously rejecting an association with homosexuality.

“Getting over the gayness” was one of many discourses surrounding the gay nature of men’s anal penetration. This will be taken up at greater length in chapter five, “I’m Not Homophobic, but...”. For now I include these comments to show that part of why pegging is culturally unintelligible is because of its associations with homosexuality, which lie outside the imaginations of many heterosexuals on r/sex. Pleasure seems to be an acceptable motivator for men desiring anal penetration, unlike queer curiosity.

Peggers Wanted

Some people discussed finding the “right person” as a solution to their pegging troubles. The “right person” was someone who could understand this kind of desire. The “right person” included cisgender women, queers, transgender people, and bisexual individuals, as well as those in the BDSM community. The descriptions of transgender and queer people and bisexual women stand in contrast to descriptions of cisgender women. When cisgender women were discussed it often included language about finding someone who shares their desires or loves to indulge her partner’s desires. That is, when cisgender straight women were discussed, they were constructed as having at least *some* aspect of autonomy.

Hopefully OP [original poster] can find an awesomely open-minded lady who is into what he's into and not threatened by it.

~ peasnthx

You just need to find an open-minded woman who shares your kink. It'll be smooth sailing after that.

~ livinthehighlife

By contrast, no one ever mentioned finding an “open-minded” transgender, queer, or bisexual woman.

Maybe try dating a super passable tranny? Should be the best of both worlds for you.

~LIFTED

Maybe find other bi girls who I promise will totally get this desire of yours.

~GuildedCasket

These comments were worded in ways that implied queers, in general, will be open to the idea of pegging and having sex with cisgender straight men. The objectifying and arrogant language obscures their sentiment, that there are individuals and sexual communities who will not consider you and your desires as strange. The communities most cited in the data were the Queer and BDSM communities.

Gender and sexual non-conforming individuals and communities were offered as people to turn to because they are understood as doing gender and/or sexuality differently, in more expansive ways than heteronormativity, which allows for acts such as

pegging. Some people on Reddit, typically queers, recognized queerness is a solution to the confusion.

Don't get hung up on whether you're straight, bi, or gay ... sexuality is too complex to be described by three words; they merely provide a framework for discussion and exploration. I know quite a few straight guys who love to get ass fucked by their girlfriends, and not all are submissive to them either. As a gay man, I have often joked that if straight guys all knew how great it felt to get fucked, everyone would "be gay" ...

~ scumboi

Queerness can be understood as a rejection of identities based on the understanding that binaries and identities fail to capture the diversity of sexual experiences and desires.

Heteronormativity is a problem for pleasure, and queerness might be an answer.

The various confusions expressed in these data indicate that pegging puts sexual and gender identities in jeopardy. While both men and women experienced sexual and gender confusion, men articulated this more frequently. This likely reflects that Reddit is a male-dominated website. However, it is unlikely that this is the sole explanation, as women were much more concerned about men's identities than their own. That is, most confusion on Reddit is focused men's sexual and gender identities, while little attention is given to women's. Many people worried that men who wanted to peg were secretly gay; yet, women who wanted to peg were not suspected to be lesbians or transmen. Pegging was addressed as a potentially emasculating act for cisgender men; yet, rarely was pegging discussed as too masculine for cisgender women. This may suggest that men's

identities are critical to upholding dominant cultural ideas about sex and gender. It may also suggest that men's precarious relationship to gender means that they have more to lose. This is not to say women's identities are unimportant. Quite the contrary. It is to expose the long standing claim that women's sexuality is typically afforded more flexibility than men's, and that culturally appropriate masculine heterosexual desire is heavily policed by ideas of a gender binary. It is to consider that those with the most power in society, cisgender heterosexual men, often exist under restrictive rules. This is a phenomenon that we can understand as sexual restriction and not oppression.

Discussion

This chapter examined the cultural intelligibility and acceptability of sex by analyzing pegging, a sex act that contradicts gendered expectations within heterosexuality. Discussions of pegging reveal contemporary expectations of gender normativity that structure heterosexual sex, namely gendered assumptions of penetration. Additionally, pegging reveals that language is fundamental in constructing "regular sex".

In this chapter I addressed a primary paradox: how can people use discourse to turn a gay sex act into a straight one? One explanation is that people construct pegging as normal and within the boundaries of heterosexual sex. This was primarily accomplished through discussions of a gender role reversal, where normalcy is made possible because the redefinition allows a gender binary to stay in place, albeit one that allows for a "role reversal". The role reversal is considered kinky for some Redditors. Kink, it seems, is not as threatening to the cultural intelligibility of sex as rejecting a binary all together.

CHAPTER IV

I'VE GOT YOU PEGGED: GENDER AND SEXUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

To peg or not to peg? That is the question. Statements that reveal hesitancy and ambivalence are more relevant and interesting to a qualitative sociological analysis than answers summarized with an enthusiastic “yes” or “no”. In this chapter I analyze people’s comments about why they do not participate in pegging. Importantly, these comments are not limited to those who do not want to peg, but also includes those who want to but for a variety of factors are not doing so, as well as those who now peg but commented about past experiences with ambivalence over pegging.

According to data, the primary reasons heterosexuals on r/sex do not peg are the cultural narratives surrounding masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality. We might expect physiological factors such as experiencing pain to be a primary explanation, yet, social factors were overwhelmingly identified. Biologically speaking, pegging should be able to contribute to one of the most intensely pleasurable orgasms those with a prostate can experience (Morin 2012; Taormino 2006). Sexual pleasure, however, does not exist outside of culture and is not determined solely by what biology suggests. As Foucault (1978), Rubin (1984), and Butler (1990) argue, the ways in which we “have sex” are confined by discourse and this narrows the options for sexual acts in which people are willing to engage. In order to best explain why people do not peg, I examine the tension pegging arouses between individual pleasure and societal expectations of normative gender and heterosexuality. I analyze discourses people rely on to explain why they are not pegging. I find West and Zimmerman’s (1987) theory of gender accountability best

explains the ambivalence straight men experience around pegging. However, I build upon this theory to suggest that sexual category may at times be as relevant to gender accountability as sex category.

Again, the primary reasons men report not pegging are accountability to gender and sexual expectations. This was expressed in numerous ways. In this chapter I discuss three of the most common themes that surfaced in people's explanations for why they weren't pegging: pegging is a taboo sex act, pegging creates a stigmatized individual, and pegging creates privacy concerns. I also use these themes to introduce a discussion of homophobia. Homophobia will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter but I include an analysis of homophobia here as it is relevant to understanding gender and sexual accountability.

Gender and Sexual Accountability

I rely on literature addressing gender accountability to further my analysis of men's ambivalence surrounding pegging. West and Zimmerman's (1987) work on "doing gender" highlights that gender is better understood as something one does rather than something one has. Importantly, the individual's doing of gender is influenced by the notion of "accountability". "The key to understanding gender's doing is...accountability to sex category membership" (West and Zimmerman 2009: 116). "Sex category" refers to one's perceived status during social interactions as a man or a woman³. West and Zimmerman argue that people "do gender" because they expect to have their behavior interpreted through hegemonic understandings of gender. "Accountability" refers to an

³ This is not to erase the experiences of non-binary individuals. Rather, it is to suggest that in a gender binary culture, we all experience binary perceptions during interaction. Non-binary individuals make categorization difficult, which is part of their political power.

individual anticipating their behavior to be evaluated based on gender expectations, therefore, allowing them to alter their behavior so that it will be in accord, or not, with normative gender expectations. Hollander (2013) writes, “Because people anticipate assessments of their behavior, and imagine the interactional outcomes that may follow, they manage their behavior in an attempt to influence these outcomes” (7). Importantly, much of this work happens at the subconscious level. The expectations of gender are so deeply embodied by most people that we often anticipate others’ evaluations before we even act (Hollander 2013).

While accountability is fundamental to West and Zimmerman’s theory, it has not received the same attention from other researchers as has the concept of “doing” gender (Hollander 2013; 2018). For West and Zimmerman, sex category anchors the notion of accountability. In this chapter I argue that sexual orientation also serves as a primary anchor. As Hollander (2013; 2018) and Schwalbe (2005) argue, accountability is highly dependent on situation. Cottingham, Johnson, and Taylor (2016) found that men in the field of nursing not only reconcile accountability to gender stereotypes but also to heteronormative expectations. In this research I examine gender accountability within sexual situations. I have evidence that, when it comes to having sex, sexual orientation is as significant for accountability as sex category. I do not argue that sex category is less relevant; rather, it is the intersection of gender expectations (sex category) and sexual expectations (sexual identity/orientation) that seems to serve as the anchor point for accountability during heterosexual sex.

The relevance of sexual orientation to the theory of gender accountability may represent a shift in American culture, specifically the growing tolerance of LGBTQ+

individuals and communities, and not necessarily an omission on the part of West and Zimmerman (1987). Some masculinity scholars argue homophobia is decreasing in significance for straight men (Anderson 2009; Anderson and McCormick 2015; McCormick and Anderson 2014). My data reject this argument and mirror other masculinity research that argues homophobia is transforming, not disappearing (Pascoe 2007; Ward 2015; Ward 2008; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Johnson 2004). Heteronormative and homophobic ideologies posit that gay men, not straight men, receive anal penetration. Receiving anal penetration has been so effectively aligned with male homosexuality that when a straight man receives anal penetration, even from a woman, his sexual and gender identity are treated with suspicion and judgement. In this sense gender accountability is not solely determined by gendered expectations but also expectations of sexual orientation.

This is characteristic of both a homophobic society and one with essentialist notions of sexuality. Essentialist notions of sexuality argue that we all have a sexual self that is inherently marked by a given form of sexual desire and identity. Heteronormative institutions such as Science and Christianity have historically argued essentialist notions of gender normativity and sexuality, claiming heterosexuality is the only natural form of sexual expression (Foucault 1978; Katz 1995). However, the modern Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender movements also rely upon a “born this way” discourse that essentializes gender and sexual identities. Discourses that argue an essentialist perspective help construct ideas that sexual orientations represent different kinds of people with different kinds of desires and practices. When coupled with homophobia, essentialist perspectives on sexuality argue that those desires and practices of homosexuals are strange, disgusting,

and above all else, not what normal, heterosexual people do.

Whether or not straight men find gay men disgusting, there is still the tendency to treat homosexuals as “other” (Johnson 2004). Emerging cultural understandings of gender and sexual identity suggest that homosexuality is becoming more legitimate, but also as its own category of human (Foucault 1978). The process of documenting how “the homosexual” came to be is a common discussion within Queer theory. As Foucault famously wrote, “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (1978; 43). Queer theory dedicates considerable focus to science, medicine, and the legal system as it was here that we see the creation and institutionalized sanctioning of the category “homosexual” (Foucault 1978; Somerville 1994; Katz 1995; Nussbaum 2010). Scholars such as Nagel (2000) and Sedgwick (1990) argue that any investigation into the social world that does not fully interrogate the homosexual/heterosexual binary is fundamentally flawed as it is a primary organizing principle for society, much like a gender binary.

A century after the emergence of this new category of human, “the homosexual”, we can see its effects on interaction. The category of male homosexual plays a critical role in boys’ and men’s relationships with each other and with women. Pascoe (2007) documents the “specter of the fag” as a profoundly unmasculine man that haunts teenage boys’ interactions. Ward (2015) finds that “the homosexual” is fundamental to White, heterosexual, males’ self-identification as straight men and to homosocial male bonding. Bridges (2013) found that straight men engaged in practices that might be perceived as gay relied upon “sexual aesthetics” or “cultural and stylistic distinctions used to delineate boundaries between gay and straight cultures and individuals” (59). My research

considers how “the specter of the fag” and the desire to be seen as a distinctly heterosexual man influence heterosexual men’s and women’s decisions to not peg.

Taboo Sex

In the previous chapter I outlined discourses explaining how heterosexuals on r/sex understood “regular sex”. It is clear from my analysis that some consider pegging to not be “regular sex,” but instead view it as “taboo” or at least “weird”. Again, pegging is a sex act that transgresses a fundamental assumption of heterosexual masculinity – straight men do not receive penetration. The following statements indicate that heterosexuals on r/sex acknowledge a societal perception of pegging and prostate stimulation as strange. Men expect to be judged and sanctioned for transgressing this boundary.

One way straight men on r/sex who view pegging as taboo, or fear their partner views pegging as taboo, is to respond by opting out of pegging entirely:

However there's still a part of me that would say no out of fear that they would judge me/tell other people, oh trust issues :/ i know there's nothing actually weird about it, but it's still a big taboo.

~ throwawaysexx1t

Sad thing is I would be even curious about a finger up there but I feel too weird to ask the wife. And don't get me wrong we are brave, but I just feel too odd to ask.

~ deleted

In both cases we see men consider pegging, consider the repercussions, and then alter their behavior as to avoid anticipated social sanction. Thus, these are prime examples of accountability. As was the case during many comments, and much to my frustration, people did not generally articulate why they felt various emotions and this project did not allow for me to ask follow up questions. We are left to speculate as to what *throwawaysexx1t* specifically associates with this taboo act (e.g. homophobia, non-normative heterosexual sex, feces, etc.). The second comment is also sparse and it is difficult to tell what motivates his ambivalence. He claims that he feels too weird to ask, but also assures others Redditors “don’t get me wrong we are brave”. He seems to think feeling odd is in opposition to feeling brave. This may reflect a gendered paradox. It isn’t manly for him to be anally penetrated, but it isn’t manly to not be brave enough to ask for what he wants either.

Taboo sex comments reveal the experiences of people negotiating their own desires to view pegging as normal in a culture that views it as strange:

I've been very curious about pegging for a while, but I don't know how to bring it up without making my gf feel uncomfortable. We've done some anal play in the past, but nothing like pegging. Any advice on how to introduce the idea without seeming like a lunatic?

~ *zcook925*

zcook925's statement further highlights accountability. He has been interested in pegging for a while but anticipates his girlfriend will be uncomfortable and so he does not ask. From this we can see that the process of turning to Reddit is itself a kind of gender and sexual accountability work. Based on my data heterosexuals who participate in pegging

discussions primarily come to r/sex for advice. *zcook925* is looking for a way to discuss with his girlfriend his desire to peg without “seeming like a lunatic”. He is attempting to alter his behavior so that he may ultimately alter hers and not receive any social sanction, such as his sexual desires being met with her discomfort and/or negative judgement. He is also coming to Reddit to normalize his desires, to find a community that supports him. Coming to understand his own sexual desires as normal for his sexual and gender identity will greatly influence how he presents his desires to his girlfriend, how he anticipates her reaction, and how he interprets her actual reaction should the topic ever be broached.

Some men viewed pegging as taboo and decided not to peg. Yet, many people told stories of overcoming these thoughts and ultimately giving pegging a try. These stories illuminate the experiential process of coming to transgress this sexual taboo:

For the longest time I have been resisting. My gf is interested in my asshole and sometimes brushes it with her finger during 69 when we are both drunk. She denies being interested and is coy about it. However over our two year relationship I have decided to now let her finger my prostate as I now feel comfortable crossing that last “taboo” in my mind

~ hornybutchallenged

Taboo sex, by definition, is not something that most people feel comfortable discussing on a first date. It has taken the course of a two year relationship for this couple to decide to engage in prostate stimulation. He speaks of both of their desires to engage in anal play as being marked with silences. Neither of them feel comfortable discussing it with each other. While he doesn't feel comfortable talking to her, he does seem at ease talking to the Reddit community. This again suggests that the process of coming to Reddit is a kind

of accountability work where men attempt to understand and normalize their desires and find community. Reddit, and the Internet more broadly, may also be a place where some people feel free, or at least freer, from accountability constraints, since no one knows who they are. Thus, enforcing accountability online is sometimes impossible and/or is limited to this specific interaction and does not affect other areas of their life.

His comment also reflects another common strategy for overcoming pegging fears identified in the data – alcohol. Many people mentioned that their early anal experiences were accompanied by alcohol. Many others suggested alcohol in their advice comments as a way to help others calm down and “get into the mood”.

First time was awkward as hell. Had to convince the girl I wasn't gay. We split a bottle of wine (read: she drank most of it), when the deed was done she let out a "GET THIS THING OFF OF ME" and we passed out. A few days later she mentioned she "kinda sorta wanted to try it again." Next time she was half as drunk and had twice as much fun. The third time she was all grins. The fourth time the grin had turned evil and she was ordering on my knees. It's pretty awesome to see a transformation like that honestly. I've converted a few to the dark side in my day =p

~ poopersloopee

take it like a man - have her start with her finger while blowing you. If she can do that and you don't freak out - let her try something like a small dildo. Oh, and get a little drunk first too - it will relax you some and make it more kinky, less scary as hell .

~ deleted2

The above comments suggest that initial pegging experiences can be “awkward” and “scary as hell”. Alcohol was identified as a common strategy that people may use to lower their inhibitions and begin their pegging adventures. Additionally, alcohol allows people to avoid the accountability consequences of doing something taboo. If alcohol is used and others assess them and their desires negatively, the use of alcohol allows people to say “it wasn’t me, it was the alcohol”. While “ecstasy” was also mentioned as a recreational drug that could lower inhibitions and make pegging less anxiety producing, no drug was suggested as frequently as alcohol. I include this in a discussion of accountability because alcohol and drugs are a fascinating excuse in this regard. Men feel as though they won’t be judged for participating in anal play, or even a discussion of anal play, if everyone is a little tipsy.

These comments also suggest the two largest factors contributing to men’s ambivalence, gender and sexual accountability. *Poopersloopee* said he had to first convince the girl he was not gay for wanting to be pegged. This highlights the strong correlation between men’s desire to be anally penetrated and the likelihood of them being associated with male homosexuality. *deleted2* suggests to another Redditor that he needs to “take it like a man” suggesting that, although this isn’t typical behavior of men, if you act man enough while it is happening you will not be judged. However, he never actually says what it means to take pegging “like a man”. Both of these sentiments, men’s fears that participating in pegging would lead them to be perceived as gay and/or emasculated, were identified frequently in the data. The desire to peg calls into question men’s status as both heterosexual and as a man, thus anxieties surface around both of these identities. Straight men on r/sex expect their behavior to be judged in accord with both gender and

sexual expectations.

Stigma

What many heterosexuals on r/sex make sense of through discourses of “taboos” and “stigma,” I make sense of through queer theory and gender accountability. Theorizing “stigma” has a rich sociological history (Goffman 1963) and is significant to this research. Goffman defines stigma as “an attribute, behavior, or reputation which is socially discrediting in a particular way.” Critical to my research is *why* and *how* pegging is a discrediting act and theories of gender accountability are most useful in this regard. Goffman may not have theorized pegging, but he did theorize “the homosexual” as a key example of a stigmatized individual. It seems a primary reason heterosexual men on r/sex have ambivalence over pegging is that accountability suggests pegging will lead to association with a stigmatized group, male homosexuals, a point which will be taken up throughout this dissertation.

Heterosexuals on r/sex identified pegging as a taboo sex act within American culture. It follows that Redditors anticipated a stigmatized identity would accompany this act.

There is a lot of stigma in society around guys enjoying butt play, and I strongly believe that this has an effect on the way this type of sex act is perceived by both guys and girls. For heterosexual males, they might believe this type of insertion isn't “manly”. Girls might perceive it this way, too, since it's not something we're use to, having the roles reversed, per se

~ jesswalz

The above quote, like many comments discussing stigma, actually provides a sociological

analysis of the individual and society. I agree with *jesswalz* in that negative cultural understandings of men's reception of anal stimulation influences the ways in which heterosexual, cisgender, men and women make sense of this desire. His quote also highlights the heteronormative underpinnings of anal pleasure as taboo. "For heterosexual males, they might believe this type of insertion isn't "manly"". Here we see accountability to sexual and gender expectations. A gay man's sexual partners might view his reception of anal penetration as "manly", but according to *jesswalz*, that is not the case within heterosexual interactions.

Anal sex was itself acknowledged as a weird and/or taboo set of sex practices. However, data reveal that this is a gendered and sexualized construction which stigmatizes men differently than women. The following quote offers one man's perspective of why we see different experiences of anal play for men and women within heterosexuality.

It [penetration] creates a far greater sense of vulnerability than what men normally encounter in the bedroom. Which is something very different and anxiety producing. Beyond that there is a greater social stigma attached to him receiving anal sex than what women have.

~ Nikoli_Delphinki

Nikoli_Delphinki contends that penetration creates a feeling of vulnerability that he isn't used to. This sentiment was echoed by other men. However, the claim that penetration made someone vulnerable was met with fierce resistance by women. Nonetheless, men seemed to disagree. *Nikoli_Delphinki* also identifies feelings of anxiety, which was one

of the most common themes throughout my research. The anxiety straight men on r/sex experience can be understood through a framework of accountability by recognizing this complicated emotion may in part arise due to ambiguity over how he thinks he is supposed to act and/or fears of how he expects others will react. Gendered and sexual expectations make the desire to peg confusing and for some this engenders anxiety.

Heterosexuals on r/sex also identified other negative emotions such as shame, guilt, and confusion for their pegging desires. There were numerous accounts of the painful ways the desire to peg and the fear of stigma played out in people's lives and relationships.

I was with a man for 8 years before he told me he was into pegging. I'm open minded but the thought that he kept that from me for 8 years (and 2 children) made me feel there had to be bigger problems and that he didn't trust me. That's my personal experience. And don't be so afraid of what everyone thinks. My ex was certainly not gay. He was also eaten up by the shame and guilt he felt from what he enjoyed. Do not let you destroy yourself. Accept yourself. Love yourself and you will find people with like minds and understanding who will love you as well. Don't give up.

~ don't_callmewhite

The above quote shows how devastating men's emotions around pegging can be.

don't_callmewhite is hurt that her partner didn't trust her enough to talk to her about his desires. She says she is "open-minded," implying that his fears were unwarranted from her perspective, and suggests she wanted the opportunity to respond to his desires. Yet,

her partner made the decision to not talk to her, perhaps anticipating his worst fears.

While we do not have his side of the story, from her partner's perspective he was "eaten up by the shame and guilt he felt from what he enjoyed".

don't_callmewhite writes "my ex was certainly not gay" to assuage the fears of someone else on the forum concerned that their desire to peg was going to be interpreted as gay. Her comment also suggests this was a fear of her partner's. Sexual preference is often thought to be reflective of a sexual identity, a point that will be discussed at length in the next chapter. But for now it is important to note that the stigma of men's reception of anal pleasure is not singularly a gender expectation. It is an expectation of heterosexual masculinity.

Seeking advice is a primary reason people come to the pegging discussions on r/sex. This is itself a kind of accountability work. In some ways men and women are testing the water around pegging. They come to Reddit to find out if pegging is strange, if others are pegging, how to talk to one's partner about pegging, and how others may react if they bring it up. However, my analysis reveals that the advice given on r/sex may not absolve people from their confusion and anxiety. First, there is no shortage of statements clearly expressing that pegging is not socially acceptable for straight men. The quote below from *urection* argues that anal sex, in addition to ear play, are both forbidden practices for "male culture".

Ears are so forbidden in male culture. also being screwed in the ass.

~ urection

Your concerns about privacy and the costs to losing it seem reasonable. Stigmas

exist and its not on you to be a piece of activism.

~ Sabu113

These quotes suggest that transgressing this sexual/gender norm, or even considering transgressing it, carries risk including emotional stress, isolation, loss of privacy and disappointment. Like *don't_callmewhite*, *Sabu113*'s quote is in response to privacy concerns another Redditor fears for being perceived as a gay man should his desires to peg be made public, again suggesting the salience of accountability to sexual and gender categories.

Second, the advice statements that did try to normalize pegging often simultaneously contained messages that pegging would be perceived as weird, such as the above comment from *don't_callmewhite* and those below.

I think a lot of straight men are actually into anal play and there is just this stigma that makes them feel like they should be ashamed or confused with their sexuality, when there's really nothing wrong with it. Prostate stimulation feels good and would on the vast majority of men if they were open to it.

~ gotyoupegged

You're worried about a truly legitimate thing: stigma. The straight truth is that a lot of women are going to find your kink strange. Nearly everyone with kinks has this fear of not being accepted by a partner. It leads to sleepless nights, feeling alone, feeling worried, feeling ashamed, and sometimes being really really let down.

~ sdaciuk

Both of these comments suggest, to varying extents, that the desire to peg is okay, but society will judge you, ultimately making it not okay. Thus, the advice itself may not diminish anxiety and may sometimes fuel it. *sdaciuk* claims that a lot of women will find the desire to peg strange. There is perhaps no greater anxiety producing comment that can be made in this situation than telling this man (and others reading it) “the straight truth is that a lot of women are going to find your kink strange.” This is the exact opposite of what they’re presumably hoping for.

gotyoupegged claims that a lot of men are actually into anal pleasure and it is the stigma that makes them feel shame and confusion. His recognition that a lot of men are “into anal play” and that prostate stimulation is pleasurable are attempts to normalize the practice. Understandably, his comment may go further in reducing anxiety than others. Yet he too acknowledges the social stigma at work and he doesn’t offer any advice for overcoming this. Many people on r/sex shared the paradoxical view that individual desires to peg were normal yet society would judge you. The negative emotions such as shame, guilt, confusion, and isolation that arise are a result of gender and sexual accountability work. If men harbor a desire to peg yet act in ways that denounce or show disinterest in the practice there is frustration from this contradiction .

Privacy and Homophobia

The frustration that straight men on r/sex experienced over pegging and accountability to gender and sexual expectations was frequently directed at women. As several of the above comments indicate, men expect women to negatively judge their desire to peg. Another common theme that arose in the data was that straight men on r/sex anticipate that straight women will gossip about their desire to peg. The first post

from *throwaway2324141415* is an original post and the two that follow are in direct response:

I want my Girlfriend to 'Peg me' but worried she will tell friends or be grossed out by it.

~ throwaway2324141415

You are worried about a 'yolk ass bitch' moment. You are right to do so.

~TheThingsIThink

Do not expect that she will keep this a secret. I don't know your GF but from experience, women talk to each other about what goes on with BFs."

~JAYDEA

The idea that straight women gossip, especially about their sexual encounters, was mentioned two dozen times by men identifying as straight, bi, and gay. Focusing on stereotypical constructions of straight women's homosocial behavior obscures the reality that straight men's fear is not simply that straight women talk to each other. Rather, their fear is fueled by what they assume other people will think about their gendered and sexual self upon hearing their sexual desires. It is a fear of being marked, as being abnormal, as embodying a desire that stands in contrast to the expectation of desires of heterosexual masculinity (Ward 2015).

But *why* does pegging mark an individual? This question cannot adequately be addressed by having gender as our singular and primary axis of analysis. We must

consider the organizing effects of sexuality as well. We must take seriously the profoundly anti-gay culture in which we reside. That is, we have interrogate what is commonly referred to as *homophobia*. These ideas are further highlighted in *TransparentHedonist's* post and the subsequent discussion:

I feel like I can't tell anyone my kinks without being labeled as a gay in denial. I can't tell a girl what I like sexually because I feel like it would be too much of a risk to be an abrupt end of the relationship. The ending of a relationship is fine, I can deal with that. What bothers me is the thought of the word getting out and everyone assuming I'm a gay in denial. There's nothing anyone can say that will convince me that 90% of people that hear that a dude that likes to be penetrated isn't gay and there's definitely nothing anyone can say that will make me believe that a girl will keep the reason for her most recent break up a secret. If my parents caught wind of this and thought I was gay I'd seriously consider suicide.

TransparentHedonist, and many others, fear their heterosexual reputation is at risk should this desire ever be practiced and, perhaps more importantly, be made public. He is convinced he will be perceived as “a gay in denial” for wanting to be anally penetrated. The above quote is an excerpt from a much longer post that generated lengthy discussion in which *TransparentHedonist* continued expressing himself. He lived in a small rural town in the middle of America. He feared that, due to assumptions that he was gay, he could potentially lose his job, his friends, his family, and his religious community. He has such fear of being associated with homosexuality that he vows to “seriously consider suicide” if his parents thought he might be gay. His fears resemble what many gays and lesbians have feared for a very long time and, in some ways, his experience can be

understood through our understanding of living in “the closet” (Seidman 2002). Thus, this comment reveals sexual power at work. He is afraid of others’ perceptions of his behavior due to accountability to sexual category. He identifies material resources, social support systems, and indeed his very life, as being in jeopardy as a result of this power.

Ironically, *TransparentHedonist* went on to say that he was so fearful others would assume he was gay if a woman pegged him that in order to fulfill his desires he “found the only other kind of person who’s got a reason good enough to keep a secret.” He began an affair with a married, cisgender man. Thus, he is not afraid of having sex with men. He is afraid of being perceived as gay. He feels an illicit affair with a man is the only way to keep his desires a secret. He sees it less likely that he will be identified as gay for having a homosexual affair than for having heterosexual sex that includes a sex act constructed as gay. He specifies the risk is greater within straight sex because he thinks women will gossip and because he thinks a married man will have more to lose and will, therefore, keep his secret. He fears that others will make an unwanted character assessment of him as gay. Not only does he fear being misunderstood, he fears what this judgement will mean for his future romantic relationships. He worried that this stigma would only allow him to attract “pathetic” women.

Other posts confirmed that privacy was of top concern to men and a discourse of “trust” was deployed as the answer. Not all of these comments explicitly mentioned “homophobia” as a primary motivating factor for wanting to keep their desires hidden, though several did. However, as this dissertation will continue to show, homophobia often operates in lurking fashion. It is present in many discussions though not always explicit. This makes analysis difficult. Still, to consider the ways in which homophobia

might be operating, we cannot rely solely on those overtly homophobic statements. To do so treats homophobia as an individual mental struggle. It does not acknowledge that we are all enmeshed in a society with a long and painful history of queer oppression, and this has embodied implications for everyone.

Therefore, we must approach the patterns of “privacy concerns” with both empiricism and educated assumptions and questions. The data suggest two things. First, privacy is clearly a big issue for straight men on r/sex. However, they don’t always explain why. Second, when explanation was provided, it directs us toward a discussion of homophobia.

I get you. That is the biggest fear of most men is the fear of being outed as enjoying pegging if they ever split up with their partner. All I have to say to that is you have to be able to trust her and only you can make that decision. Tell her how important it is to you that no one can know. This speaks to that.

~ RubyRyder

Guys me included can be very uncomfortable about it bc we would die if our friends knew. Homophobia runs deep. But if you really trust each other it is possible he will open up pun intended.

~ hornybutchallenged

RubyRyder is the most well-known lay-expert of pegging in the Reddit community. She is mentioned frequently in other Redditor’s comments in response to the help she has given them through pegging tutorials and Ask Me Anything posts. Thus, her observation that privacy concerns are straight men’s biggest fear carries significance beyond individual experience. *Hornybutchallenged* is concerned that his friends will find out that

he likes pegging and this is no small point. We might expect men to brag about their heterosexual adventures. While he does not specify what he fears, he does articulate that his concern is motivated by homophobia that “runs deep”.

Men and women identified men’s fear that women will tell others about their partner’s desires as a barrier to anal play. Many women on r/sex shared their own experiences to try and calm men’s fears.

My ex was very into pegging and after we broke up, I never told anyone out of respect for him and so not every pathetic asshole would torture him for being gay. He was anything but gay, and I think it's a shame people that live around here are like that even if he was. My best friend ended up telling me that her husband enjoyed it as well after one drunken night.

~ gotyoupegged

gotyoupegged’s comment further reveals that straight men’s privacy fears are fueled with the assumption that the desire to peg will lead others to assume you are gay. The fears of being associated with “gay” can only be understood in a discussion of homophobia. If it weren’t for the profoundly anti-gay culture in which we reside, then why carry such guilt, shame, and worry about being misidentified? *gotyoupegged* says she did not tell anyone about pegging her partner, even after breaking up, because she did not want “every pathetic asshole [to] torture him for being gay.” She both recognizes the likelihood of this happening while also acknowledging the overall unfairness of homophobia. She says it’s “a shame” that people would mistreat someone who is gay. This sentiment was rarely acknowledged in these conversations. That is, many people did not draw the parallels

between their own fears of ill treatment and the homophobia gays and lesbians experience.

In response to these privacy concerns, many comments mirrored the advice above that “trust” was crucial in order to have a pleasurable pegging experience. Importantly, while “trust” was commonly talked about on Reddit, when addressing men’s trust concerns, like *RubyRyder’s* and *hornybutchallenged’s* posts, it was always used to assuage fears surrounding privacy and judgement. “Trust” was not discussed in terms of consent or pegging technique, such as “I do not trust her to gently penetrate my ass.” When addressing women’s trust concerns, however, technique and consent were addressed. Thus, the trust issues straight men on r/sex describe seem to reflect their emotions around others finding out that they transgressed heteronormativity and not the physical act itself.

Homophobia is a primary factor influencing straight men’s accountability norms. As *hornybutchallenged* notes, “homophobia runs deep”. It is therefore no surprise that the strategies men rely upon while negotiating transgressive desire and accountability, such as “women gossip”, reflects larger, deeper, social structures such as homophobia. However, these posts demonstrate that homophobia is a complex phenomenon. The next chapter provides a more thorough examination of contemporary homophobia. However, I introduce a discussion of homophobia here to further a discussion of accountability.

Homophobia

One of the most common themes in this data is that straight men and women often rely on discourses of gender and sexual identities to articulate and approve of sexual pleasure. That is, men and women seem compelled to negotiate the challenge “I can’t

decide if I like pegging until I decide if this is appropriate for straight men”. This is in some ways not surprising as American culture organizes sexuality through identities (Sedgwick 1990; Foucault 1978; Butler 1990). What is revealing in this data are the ways in which straight men’s individual presentations of self are informed and interpreted through larger organizing principles such as hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995), heteronormativity (Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Warner 1999) and homophobia (Pharr 1997). That is, straight men on r/sex make sense of their pleasures and desires by negotiating with themselves and others as to whether this is appropriate behavior for straight men and not on the physical sensations of pegging.

Importantly, this negotiation is happening during a time of great social flux surrounding ideas of gender and sexuality (Weeks 2000; Giddens 1992; D’Emilio and Freedman 2012; Ward 2016; Bridges 2013). Research shows that straight men are increasingly in favor of structural supports for sexual minorities, such as gay marriage (Anderson 2009; McCormick and Anderson 2014); however, straight men rely on homophobic discourse as a form of gender boundary setting and policing (Pascoe 2007; Ward 2015; Johnson 2004). Popular culture is full of phrases such as #nohomo and #notgay, and “faggot” has been tweeted over 35 million times since 2012 (www.nohomophobes.com). Paradoxically, it is not trendy to actually be homophobic in ways that could cause fear or harm to a homosexual. Furthermore, as Weinberg’s (1972) original conceptualization of “homophobia” detailed, it is no longer as socially acceptable, certainly in this r/sex Reddit community, for heterosexuals to fear being in close quarters with homosexuals. Lastly, not only is homophobic language not cool in the Reddit community, it is banned by the website. This ultimately means that explicitly

homophobic remarks are censored. Yet, those remarks are not the most relevant to my analysis. I am interested in a particular predicament for straight men: It's not cool to be homophobic, but it's also not cool to be misread as gay.

Pegging does not have to conjure up a discussion of homophobia or gay sex; however, the overwhelming amount of data on r/sex implying a relationship between pegging and gayness suggests that, in our given cultural moment, these associations are at the forefront. As straight men on r/sex struggled to articulate why they did not want to be pegged it was often assumed that others would read their preference and/or lack of consent to pegging as homophobic and Redditors tried to disrupt this assumption.

I hate it when people say that a man who does not rate anal stimulation is closed-minded. It's petty peer pressure that asserts that if he cannot somehow overcome the social hurdles and permit objects to enter his waste disposal unit, he is a wrong'un. The only time I would grant that a man is in the wrong for objecting is when he associates the act with homophobia. Then he deserves a good scolding, but on different grounds besides his own sexual taboos and limitations, which are entirely his business and his alone... I feel that based off of experience, there is a slowly growing notion that men must be able to achieve sexual gratification from prostate play, and those who can't are closed-minded. I would compare it to the belief that all women are naturals at experiencing blissful multiple orgasms simply from strumming the clitoris for fifteen minutes. It is a crude generalisation and forces undue pressure on individuals with different needs and slightly variant anatomies to experience the joys of others. I just wish that the awareness of this issue was spread further than it is. Not all men who refuse entry are

homophobes.

~ erased

Many men's comments mirrored that of the above post. Men discussed their perception of an increased social pressure to be pegged or else be read as homophobic or "vanilla". Neither of these are desirable descriptions within the r/sex community. Once again we see straight men in a paradox. Much of this project has addressed the struggle of men's curiosity in pegging as it is hampered by gender and sexual expectations of heterosexual masculinity. Yet, now we see that those men who do not want to be pegged risk being labeled as a homophobe. Thus, if you peg you are thought to be gay and if you don't peg you are thought to be homophobic. As the above quote from *erased* and the two below indicate, these comments were marked by obvious frustration and sometimes anger:

*Jesus...**Just because a guy doesn't like anal play doesn't mean he's homophobic!** Seriously... like, if it makes him uncomfortable for whatever reason, then that's fine. Judging a guy for his inhibitions about a certain sexual act is just as hypocritical as "homophobia" is. (his emphasis)*

~ deleted3

Anytime something unconventional is touted as something that only close-minded people reject, there are inevitably a few people who will feel pressured to try again and again at it, even if they hate it, because they want to think of themselves as "sex positive". The contradiction here is of course that being sex positive means doing things you like, never out of obligation or fear of being mocked. What's worse is this is an attitude people use to manipulate others into doing things they aren't comfortable with, as well. Trying new things is awesome, but

everyone is different. Don't force it.

~ buggerbees

The above three comments are representative of dozens of comments that indicate some men feel an increased societal pressure to be pegged or else be labeled homophobic, closed-minded, and/or vanilla, all of which are insulting within the r/sex community. Many of these statements rely upon a discourse of “preference” while firmly rejecting the idea they are homophobic. These comments further highlight what many of the comments in this chapter reveal: sexual culture carries implications for the individual. In a time of immense social flux around gender and sexual categories, it seems that individuals may experience a range of emotions and feel great social pressure toward their sex practices.

It is important to note that both the subreddit guidelines and the subcultural norms of r/sex promote sexual liberation. It is a sex positive website. However, the attitudes expressed by heterosexuals on r/sex means it doesn't always look and feel sex positive. Sex positivity without a deep understanding of gender power, that is, sex positivity without feminism, is not sexual liberation. Trying to incorporate sex positivity without feminism may just provide another set of rules and not liberation. As *buggerbees* notes, an ideology of sex positivity may (1) pressure an individual to engage in sex practices they don't really like and (2) permit others to interpret lack of engagement in a sex act as indication of closed-mindedness. In the next chapter I discuss sex positivity as a useful strategy for pegging desires. But it is important to note that some people's interpretation of sex positivity proves more restrictive than liberating.

Discussion: Peggy is Risky Business

Pegging is a confusing phenomenon to study. Pegging itself is a culturally unintelligible sex act (Butler 1990) and it provokes a discussion of straight men's consent for gender transgressive sex for which there isn't much of a framework. Gender and sexual binaries posit that straight women and gay men receive anal penetration, not straight men. Thus, pegging challenges a fundamental assumption of heterosexual masculinity. Data suggest that, due to gender and sexuality accountability norms, pegging is a risky practice for straight men. This was identified through three of the most common themes that arose in the data: pegging is a taboo sex act, pegging creates a stigmatized individual, and privacy concerns. All of these themes contain a discussion of the individual in relation to a profoundly sex negative and anti-gay culture. Straight men used these themes to navigate ambivalence around a gender and sexually transgressive sex act while also maintaining their boundary as straight men (Bridges 2013).

Straight men on r/sex expect to be sanctioned for transgressing this norm due to a particular intersection of identity, gender and sexuality, not just gender. This can be understood through the feminist and queer frameworks of intersectionality. Gender and sexuality are intertwined at the institutional, ideological, and interactional levels. I build upon West and Zimmerman's (1987) theory that perceived sex category anchors gender accountability during social interaction, by suggesting that sexual orientation also anchors expectations. This mirrors the findings of Cottingham, Johnson and Taylor (2016) that men in nontraditional gender settings, whether it be nursing or pegging, must reconcile contradictions between their behaviors and accountability to heteronormative expectations. Much of men's deployment of "sexual aesthetics" (Bridges 2013) is an attempt to maintain a boundary between gay men and straight men, a boundary that is

increasingly difficult to articulate without homophobic language.

As this dissertation will continue to show, straight men on r/sex seem to articulate their own personal corporeal boundaries through discussions of “straight men” as a group’s identity and behaviors. To recognize accountability to sexual orientation in a discussion of gender accountability is to incorporate queer theory’s claim that sexuality is not simply a component of gender. If we interpret men’s ambivalence over pegging as exclusively a gender insecurity then we obscure the accountability work of sexuality and ultimately the organizing effects of heterosexuality.

The process of turning to Reddit for pegging advice is itself a kind of accountability work. Anticipating how others will perceive you and then altering your behavior so that it is in accord with social expectations lies at the heart of accountability. Some straight men on r/sex anticipate being judged for their desires and so they come to Reddit. The anonymous possibilities of Reddit mean that people can ask any questions and/or own up to any desires and practices without risk of being identified and ostracized in their offline communities. The process of coming to Reddit allows men to find out if their kink is as strange as they fear it is and how to ask their partner to peg them in such a way that will not lead to them being identified as gay and/or weird.

Pegging requires transgressing norms of heterosexual masculinity. Yet, as both men and women on Reddit described, it also holds potential for immense sexual pleasure for men and women. This paradox of cultural expectations and individual corporeal pleasure is at the heart of straight men’s ambivalence over pegging. Additionally, societal ideas about gender and sexuality are in flux and while straight men posting about pegging on r/sex still seem unable to transgress this sexual boundary easily, they also feel

compelled to try and like it or else be labeled homophobic or vanilla. Thus, regardless of if men decide to peg or not, just considering it becomes risky. Straight men on r/sex seem unable to consent to pegging because of the expectations of heterosexual masculinity, not simply because of individual somatic pleasure (“preference”). It seems central to the identities of straight men who participate on r/sex that their behavior closely align with expectations of group behavior.

Men’s discursive negotiation around pegging is influenced by a lack of cultural discourse surrounding straight men’s sexual desires that transgress heteronormativity (Ward 2015), including sex positivity. Further, straight men’s compulsion on r/sex to draw strict boundaries between gay and straight culture through the use of sexual aesthetics (Bridges 2013) is compelled by a culture where these two groups increasingly overlap, yet homophobia pervades. Additionally, there is a lack of discourse surrounding straight men’s consent as a tenet of heteronormative masculinity is the assumption that straight men always want sex (Connell 1995); thus, their consent is thought always implicit. Not only is this a destructive ideology for men and their partners, it is also founded on a heteronormative assumption about what sex looks like. The idea that men always want sex does not anticipate pegging or other gender transgressive sex acts.

So why do some straight men say no to pegging? It’s not simply that they don’t want to experience anal pleasure. They don’t want society to peg them as a gay man. The next chapter continues to explore the complexities of modern homophobia and how this informs people’s pegging experiences.

CHAPTER V

“I’M NOT HOMOPHOBIC, BUT...”

In this chapter I expand upon discussions presented in previous chapters to add complexity to our understanding of homophobia. In doing so I argue that homophobia is not as straight forward as it seems. More specifically, I argue that we must not limit our understanding of homophobia to hate speech or physical violence. We must consider that homophobia informs people’s embodiment of desire and the ways in which people talk about their sex practices. My findings reveal homophobia to be a deeply internalized anti-gay ideology that embeds itself in heterosexuals’ identities and desires. Further, homophobia is a pervasive discourse encouraging heterosexuals’ treatment of homosexuals as “other”.

Researchers have identified different types of homophobia, suggesting that homophobia may operate in multiple ways and lead to different kinds of social accomplishments. Gendered homophobia is a predominant form of homophobia identified by sociological research. This line of inquiry argues that homophobic epithets are not simply a reflection of disdain toward homosexuality; rather, homophobic epithets work to regulate gender (Kehler 2007; Levy et al. 2012; Pascoe 2007; Poteat, Kimmel, and Wilchins 2011; Thorne and Luria 1986). More specifically, this kind of homophobia is central to masculine socialization. Research shows that homophobia plays a critical role in shaping how boys come to understand themselves as men (Kehily and Nayak 1997, Kimmel 1994; Lehne 1998; Pascoe 2011; Shrock and Schwalbe 2009). Phrases such as “no homo”, “that’s so gay”, and “dude, you’re a fag” are frequently used by boys

as insult for behavior deemed stupid or overly affectionate (Pascoe 2011). Men's use of gendered homophobia reveals that these kinds of statements work to enforce masculine socialization more than to actively oppress homosexuals. I draw heavily from this sociological research. However, I build upon and complicate this process by showing that homophobia is more than a loss of masculine social capital. Homophobia works to powerfully shape how men and women understand men's gender and sexual identities and desires.

In addition to the empirical evidence put forth by sociologists, feminist theory has identified homophobia as a tool for sexism and for maintaining "gender roles" (Pharr 1997; Rich 1980). Homophobia as sexism is rooted in essentialist understandings of gender and heterosexuality. This line of work argues that homophobia is a critical discourse for those seeking to gain and/or maintain social power through normative gender displays, especially men. Homophobia as sexism upholds the unequal power relations between heterosexuals/homosexuals and men/women. Men direct homophobic slurs at women when they are perceived as "stepping out of line" with the social prescription that women be docile. Similar to the sociological research on gendered homophobia, these theoretical essays suggests that homophobic discourses are often used to regulate gender. Additionally, more so than the sociological research on gendered homophobia, these theoretical works reveal "heterosexual supremacy" (Pharr 1997) and "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 1980). That is, this line of theory considers homophobia as the ways in which institutions and people embody ideas that "the world is and must be heterosexual and its display of power and privilege as the norm" (Pharr 16-17, 1997). Rich's work on compulsory heterosexuality suggests that, given the power

disparities between men and women, heterosexuality is the only viable option for women's sexuality. Theories of heteronormativity build upon Rich's work to show that, while heterosexuality may be compulsory for women's survival, heterosexuality may be compulsory for men as well (Warner 1999; Warner and Berlant 1998). I also draw heavily from feminist and queer theory's understanding of power and homophobia to consider that heteronormativity is compulsory for men and women in the sense that homophobia and heteronormativity are both deeply internalized ideologies that shape the way people understand gender and sexual identities and desires.

Both of these perspectives allow us to consider that homophobia accomplishes gender regulation. I use both of these perspectives to make sense of the homophobic language that appears on r/sex. Importantly, r/sex is a "hate free" space:

- r/sex is for civil discussions about all facets of sexuality and sexual relationships. It is a sex-positive community and a safe space for people of all genders and orientations.
- Absolutely no hate-speak, derogatory or disrespectful comments will be tolerated. This includes sexist and rape jokes.
- Personal attacks or name-calling of any kind will not be tolerated.

www.reddit.com/r/sex

While r/sex does not specifically ban "homophobic" speech in the way that it does sexist language, it is clear from the above guidelines that people are not allowed to use hateful or derogatory language and this presumably entails homophobic slurs. Yet, my findings suggest that homophobia is still present in Reddit discussions. This begs the questions,

what does homophobia look like in the absence of hate speech? How does homophobia operate in a space that is clearly labeled “sex positive”? How does homophobia inform the thoughts of those who understand themselves as “not homophobic”? Existing research on homophobia has not looked to these kinds of spaces to explore how homophobia operates.

Again, this research is interested in exploring homophobia outside of explicit hate speech, which makes Reddit an ideal site for analysis. Further, Reddit is ideal for studying the ways in which homophobia may operate throughout other areas of society, even those not labeled “sex positive.” On Reddit and in American culture at large, it is increasingly unacceptable to articulate homophobic beliefs, yet many people still embody them and are influenced by them. After analyzing over 3,000 comments, it appears that 11 comments were censored by moderators. This is much smaller than we might expect. As this chapter will argue, however, the omission of explicit hate speech does not mean this community is not influenced by deeply held homophobic beliefs. Many people are unaware of their homophobic beliefs, perhaps because they sincerely do not want to accept that they participate in homophobia. Perhaps they’ve never even given it much thought. Yet, homophobia is there, like an open computer program running in the background, influencing peoples’ interactions, their sense of desire, and their understanding of their self and others. Again, my goal is not to determine if any individual or their comment “is homophobic”. My questions are concerned with what heterosexual interactions and heterosexual desires sound like in a culture with deeply held psychic and embodied ideas of gender binaries and heterosexuality as natural and normal.

As sociological, feminist, and queer theories and research suggest, homophobia is more than a hatred of homosexuals. If homophobia is more than just hate speech, then what is it? If homophobia is not best described as a hatred of homosexuals, then what is it? As my data will show, homophobia is a pervasive ideology that encourages the treatment of homosexuals as “other”, which may or may not lead to hate. Relatedly, homophobia is a driving force encouraging heterosexuals to distance themselves from practices associated with homosexuality. This is largely carried out through boundary work, as people struggle to clearly define what is gay and what is straight. This is seen through perfunctory announcements of heterosexual identification, and boundary setting between what is gay and what is straight. In American culture at large, this boundary work is carried out through hateful language and physical violence, but more often than this, perhaps, are the seemingly mundane statements treating homosexuals as “other”. Yet, queer theory encourages us to explore what is typically considered mundane as it is here that we may find unexplored power at work.

Confronting Homophobia

When people on r/sex said they did not want to peg without having tried it, they were often met with accusations from other Redditors of “being homophobic”. We can learn a lot from these discussions. First, we see that determining whether or not someone “is homophobic” is a dominant discourse people rely upon. This discourse describes homophobia in individualistic and psychological terms. Second, we see that some heterosexuals on r/sex are intervening in discussions containing negative attitudes toward homosexuals. Third, the homophobic discourses that do arise, typically do so as a way to make sense of gender and sexual identities.

The following discussion is in response to a deleted post. Without confirmation in the responses that hate speech occurred, it is unclear whether moderators removed the post or if the person deleted their own comment. Regardless, based on the responses that are present, we can infer that the original comment was made by a woman whose male partner had strict boundaries around his anus, to the extent that he would not even let her stroke his butt cheek. The first statement below from *pooperslooper* is in direct response to the deleted comment. The statements that follow are in discussion with both the deleted comment and with *pooperslooper*.

Sounds mildly draconian, but I won't judge people for knowing what they don't want. I've had a few partners who let me finger their assholes, but found it invasive. Some people just don't like it. Your SO [significant other] strictly forbidding you to even play around down there sounds like he's worried you'll think he's gay for allowing (or--gasp!--liking) it. Maybe talk about that with him?

~ pooperslooper

Please don't assume people who want zero anal contact are worried about gay implications. While it might sometimes be the case, I feel like this is a stereotype that gets perpetuated on /r/sex too often. I've never eaten cat but know I don't want to. That doesn't make me immature.

~ basiden

You basically said "I don't judge people, but he sounds homophobic", please don't be that person. It's like saying "I'm not racist, but..."

~ Throwawaycush

I'm commenting based on experience. Many people who strictly forbid some essentially harmless activity (read above: as innocent as touching the buttocks) have a hang-up. I don't expect everyone to enjoy pegging or want to try it. But someone who wants to perform anal sex when he won't even let his gf stroke his butt for fear of a curious finger slipping in is pretty paranoid."

~ pooperslooper

And you don't have to know, even less be willing to admit that your aversion to anal play is homophobic for it to be homophobic. There's some pretty deep social conditioning at play.

~ Riffler

In all honesty, I'm pretty homophobic - seriously. Dudes together is repellent to me. (Don't downvote to oblivion, I'm not a jerk about it & I'm entitled to live my lifestyle too.) With my girl though, everything is "up for grabs." Stimulation is a good thing, I love some finger in the exit zone while getting head or pretty much any time my lady feels like teasing it back there. Guy+girl= not gay.

~ Scarrzz

This conversation allows us to see homophobia operating in a “hate free” space. In these discussions homophobia looks and sounds different than the common epithets of “no homo” and “that’s so gay”. In this conversation, homophobia works to delineate a boundary between gay and straight. Further, this delineation treats homosexuality as a stigmatized identity. *Scarzz* describes male homosexuality as “repellent” and draws a boundary between his anal pleasure and that of gay men’s by arguing that any sexual experience between a man and a woman is not gay.

Conversations questioning whether homophobia was at work tended to get fairly heated in comparison to all of the other discussions sampled from *r/sex*. *pooperslooper* and *Riffler* both argue that homophobia is likely informing some men’s fierce rejection of anal play. In some ways they both offer an analysis of homophobia that corresponds with my argument to broaden our understanding of homophobia. Specifically, they both direct us to the implicit nature of homophobia to reveal the complexity of this ideology. As *Riffler* writes, “you don't have to know, even less be willing to admit that your aversion to anal play is homophobic for it to be homophobic. There's some pretty deep social conditioning at play.” Both of these sentiments are rejected by *basiden* and *Throwawaycush*. At first glance these two comments may not appear to have much in common; yet, a deeper analysis shows otherwise. Both of their comments reflect a sentiment that they do not want the rejection of pegging to be judged as homophobic. They do so with defensive language that invoke powerful ideas of another rapidly transforming cultural ideology, racism. Yet, they engage racial discourses in very different ways. *basiden* relies upon a discourse of disgust that is informed by racist ideology surrounding American perception of Asian food. The comment from

Throwawaycush does not rely on implicit racist ideology; rather, he accuses *pooperslooper* of participating in hypocritical behavior that he associates with racism. The association I draw between their statements is not an analysis of their own ideas about race, but that both turn to powerful discussions of race in order to shut down an accusation of homophobia. As this chapter will continue to argue, men who do not want to peg often turn to other powerful conversations that tends to leave little room to discuss anal pleasure or homophobia.

The defensiveness around being labeled homophobic expressed by straight men on r/sex cannot be understated. Few people were as aware of and/or open about their own homophobia as was *Scarrzz*. I assume *Scarrzz*'s comment was not removed as his homophobia was not directed at anyone, but is instead presented as a matter of fact description of himself. However, we must acknowledge that the language he uses in his post mirrors other themes identified in the data and discussed throughout this dissertation. He, like many other men on Reddit, writes that "With my girl though, everything is up for grabs... Guy+girl= not gay." In the third chapter, "Having Sex", I identified a common strategy of redefining pegging as heterosexual, often with the rigid definition that anything between a man and a woman must be heterosexual. Although *Scarrzz* is one of a few who openly admits his homophobia on r/sex, we should take note that the rest of his language is very similar to that of other men.

The following is an original post and subsequent responses suggesting that homophobia informs the ways in which heterosexuals on r/sex understand their own bodies and desires. Again, we see a boundary articulated between gay and straight, this time through a discussion of dildos. This discussion also reveals how people intervene in

what they perceive as homophobia. The post was titled “my girlfriend wants to plunder my ass with a dildo I bought her for her birthday, anyone been through something similar?”

I find it kind of hilarious, and at the same time, im confused as shit. i know all about prostate induced orgasms but there is no way i want the analogue of a dick in my ass. i would love to hear similar stories and experiences. im open to the idea of assplay but not having a dildo rammed up there, surely im not the only one?

EDIT im fine with the gay notion people are mentioning, i don't see it as gay to have my girlfriend play with my ass but I don't want a penis shaped dildo inside me.”*

~HisNamesDoom

The edit offered above is in response to numerous Redditors questioning whether homophobia was informing this man’s reluctance to be pegged with a penis shaped dildo, a claim in which he denies. The following is an exchange, after the edit was made, between *HisNamesDoom* and several others.

Anal play with your gf doesn't make you gay. It makes you curious about ass play while with your gf. And there's nothing wrong with that!

~ sh0nuff

I've never understood why people have the perception of anal play with being gay, especially if a girl does it. Next time if this ever comes up in a conversation I

want to ask does that make a girl a lesbian if she sucks/licks/kiss on a guys nipple out of curiosity what they will think as well. It's like if you wear an earring in your right ear, that makes you gay. Well I thought it was when you had another guys cock in your ass.

~ NijjoN

How about if a lesbian fucks another lesbian with a strap-on will it turn her straight?

~ RubyRyder

Come on. You have to at least see how some people can associate ass play with homosexuality. Not everyone is equally as sexually enlightened (or whatever you want to call it) and it depends a lot on how you grew up.

~ U2_Is_Gay

Associating ass play with homosexuality is like associating raisins with wine. Sure I get the logic but it doesn't make it any less stupid.

~ Warpedme

Apparently you associate U2 with homosexuality, so we can see how you'd be sticking up for the unenlightened in this debate.

~ fmota

I never really understood the whole "anal play makes you gay" thing. A female couple using strap-ons and dildos on each other doesn't make them want cock all

of a sudden.

~ mistergookey

You'll find that there are people who would call those "not real lesbians". :(

~ PositivelyClueless

You'll find that those people would be fucking idiots.

~ jameskelsey

See the edit at the top of my post, I don't see it as gay in any way

~ HisNamesDoom

To be fair, your statement of "but there is no way i want the analogue of a dick in my ass" implies you do. Would it make a difference if it wasn't an "analogue of a dick"? If so, then it would seem that the fact it's supposed to be male genitalia that you have an issue with. If not, and you just don't want anything up there at all, then why make the point about it specifically?

~_C3_

because i mean what i said, you and your inferences are wrong. what you said barely even addresses what i mentioned in a relevant manner."

~ HisNamesDoom

How is what I said irrelevant? It seems like you are just trying to dodge my questions. "because i mean what i said" What you said says you don't want something penis shaped inside of you, which is why I'm trying to get at why would that matter unless you thought there was some stigma against it "being gay". I get

it if you just don't want anything up there at all, but if you wouldn't mind other things and just don't want something "penis shaped", what is your reason if it has nothing to do with it being perceived as gay?

EDIT: And if it is just that you don't want anything up there at all, I reiterate, why specifically say penis shaped objects rather than just saying you don't want anything? It comes across as if you are trying to convince us that you especially don't want anything shaped like a penis up there. You can say my inferences are wrong all you want, but you said what you said and I am not the only person in this thread who took it that way.

~ _C3_

i don't mind a finger or an androgynous implement, to an extent, being used in foreplay etc. i do draw the line at using a dick shaped dildo when there are other options available. it's not homophobic to not have something similar to a penis fuck you, it's just not homo-phillic.

~ HisNamesDoom

Lol okay, whatever you need to say to convince yourself.

~ _C3_

The above exchange is representative of the kinds of conversations that happen in response to someone being perceived as homophobic. There are many factors in the above exchange that deserve attention. First, there is considerable focus on the embodiment of homophobia pertaining to straight men. Many Redditors did not believe *HisNamesDoom*'s claim to not be homophobic when he specifies he does not want the

“analogue of a dick in my ass.” People pointed out inconsistent logic to show that this particular kind of ambivalence has something to do with homophobia and heterosexual masculinity. Several of these comments point to lesbian sex to argue that the use of a dildo does not equate to desiring a penis, that a dildo is not a substitute penis, nor does the use of sex toys necessarily alter one’s understanding of their own sexual identity. These kinds of comments are used in attempt to portray this fear as illogical.

Second, we can gather from this exchange what frequently happens when men make implicit or explicit homophobic remarks on r/sex. Generally, men are quickly engaged and then dismissed as being illogical. It does not help *HisNamesDoom*’s case that the only person in this exchange to also make associations between homosexuality and men’s reception of anal penetration with a dildo was a person with a screenname of *U2_Is_Gay*. U2 is an internationally acclaimed music group. While there are no openly homosexual band members, the group, and lead singer Bono in particular, has long been culturally associated as having a “softer” masculinity than what our culture typically expects from straight male rock stars. This engagement with homophobic discourse mirrors Pascoe’s (2007) findings that straight men often deploy the “fag discourse” to patrol other men’s taste in things like clothing and music. This man’s screenname allows other Redditors to dismiss his opinion as someone who they see as clearly influenced by homophobia. Dismissal was typically what happened when someone was identified as being homophobic. In the exchange with *HisNamesDoom* he too is often dismissed with “proof” of lesbian sex to show his fears and associations are illogical. All of these interactions suggest some heterosexuals’ on r/sex are frustrated with homophobic attitudes.

While most people typically offered their “two cents” and then left the conversation, *_C3_* actually pushes *HisNamesDoom* for further explanation. *_C3_* asks the kinds of questions I would have liked to ask some Redditors. *_C3_* wants to know if it is not homophobia informing his preferences, they why specify that the penetrating object must not look like a penis? He pushes *HisNamesDoom* a couple of times but never gets an answer that he finds satisfying. *HisNamesDoom* just assures him that it is not homophobia but never sincerely engages the possibility that homophobia might be informing what he sees as preference. *HisNamesDoom* writes, “it's not homophobic to not have something similar to a penis fuck you, it's just not homo-phillic.” The exchange ends soon after this comment. *_C3_* dismisses, through laughter, at what he sees as an illogical response by writing, “Lol okay, whatever you need to say to convince yourself”. What *_C3_* finds illogical is also revealing about the complexity of contemporary homophobia. Homophobia is often perpetuated, not through explicit hate, but through heterosexuals’ continual boundary setting and distancing of their selves from homosexuality. *HisNamesDoom* sees his attitude to be the result of a preference that is not informed by power. He argues it is not homophobic to not want to be penetrated by a dildo, it is simply a reflection of the fact that he does not sexually desire men.

The multiple statements questioning the logic in this exchange reveal that some men interpret a dildo as a desire to be penetrated by a penis. Redditors attempted to disrupt this association by showing that lesbians who use dildos do not understand this desire as actually wanting to be penetrated with a penis. So why should straight men? This conversation also reveals that heterosexuals on r/sex who are fed up with homophobia often try to confront it through “logic”, that is, by pointing out the

inconsistent logic present in homophobic ideology. Yet, we must remember that homophobia itself is not “logical”. It is full of contradictions and inconsistencies.

The above interactions reveal that when people announce to r/sex that they do not want to peg or that they have hesitations about pegging without having tried it, they were often met with questions and, at times, accusations from other Redditors of “being homophobic”. Determining whether or not someone “is homophobic” is a dominant discourse people rely upon. This discourse describes homophobia in individualistic and psychological terms and mirrors the dominant cultural understanding of homophobia. We also see from these comments that some heterosexuals are intervening in discussions containing negative attitudes toward homosexuals. Comments reveal that many heterosexuals are frustrated with homophobic remarks. Lastly, the homophobic discourses that do arise did not typically show evidence of hatred or disgust of gays, though that did appear once. More commonly, these comments reveal people making sense of gender and sexual identities through the use of homophobic and heteronormative discourses and drawing boundaries between what they see as gay and straight sex practices.

Homophobia, Heteronormativity, and Essentialist Discourse

Homophobia informs the way gender and sexual identities, bodies, and desires are understood within heterosexual relations. Essentialist discourses of gender and sexuality have been identified as frequently used in conjunction with discourses of homophobia and heteronormativity (Pharr 1997; Rubin 1984; Butler 1993; Warner and Berlant 1998). Heteronormative discourses of sexuality leave many people feeling as though their sexuality is coherent and fixed (Warner and Berlant 1998; Schilt and Westbrook 2009).

Essentialist understandings of both gender and sexuality leave many people feeling as though there is an actual “truth” of their gender and sexual self. It is this “truth” that inspires straight men’s defensive discourse on r/sex of “totally false” assumptions between gayness and anal penetration.

The prevalence of homophobia is underscored by the homophobic discourses evident in many of the pegging “success stories” on Reddit. We might expect homophobia to appear in those statements rejecting the desire to peg, but for them to appear in success stories illuminates the pervasiveness of homophobia.

Long story....⁴'but' the 'bottom' line is...my wife did it to me and it felt great ! I didn't hold back thinking she might think I was gay or something like that, I made sure she understood I was loving it, I got such a fantastic hard-on and eventually ended up cumming while she was doing it...It only happened once yet but I can't wait for the next time... :D She loved every minute of it, before we did it she was super excited with the idea, after, she was thrilled that I had enjoyed it so much and said we had to do it more...she was thinking of buying a strap-on :D

~ FlyingBunnyHopper

This comment reveals homophobia informs the way desire is understood within heterosexual relations. In the above quote *FlyingBunnyHopper* describes his first pegging experience. He says that “I didn’t hold back thinking she might think I was gay or something like that, I made sure she understood I was loving it.” Despite having sex with a female partner, *FlyingBunnyHopper* considered that his desire to peg may leave his

⁴ This is the entire text. The ellipses are part of his original post.

partner worried that he “was gay or something like that”. This shows that gender transgressive desire within heterosexual sex is informed by questions of “is this gay?”

FlyingBunnyHopper might be trying to articulate his pleasure more so than distance himself from homosexuality, yet, as his comment reveals, these are not entirely separate processes. Why does he articulate his pleasure through any kind of discussion of gayness? Why is this a relevant contribution to his success story? Homophobia influences the ways in which heterosexuals make sense of desires, and this includes the way people talk about their sexual practices. While reporting his pegging success story to the r/sex community, *FlyingBunnyHopper* engages a discussion of the associations between homosexuality and pegging, perhaps suggesting that he thinks the r/sex community and/or his partner might make this assumption. This is an example of “accountability” described in the previous chapter. *FlyingBunnyHopper* anticipates that others might interpret his behavior as gay and so his solution is to let his partner, and the r/sex community, know that he found pegging pleasurable. One could easily argue that enjoying pegging too much could be read as gay, but not for *FlyingBunnyHopper*. This parallels the “man enough” to receive penetration discourse identified in the third chapter and that other researchers have identified (Bridges 2013). Whether or not it is a logical argument, some acts, such as being penetrated, are considered so feminine and so gay, that some men feel it is a test of masculinity that only those who are “man enough” can accomplish.

The following quote from *deleted4* reveals that homophobia influences the way straight people on r/sex make sense of their bodies, identities, and desires.

Discovering that I had erogenous zones other than my penis was mind blowing and amazing! Anus, prostate, and (on a side note) also my nipples are all highly sensitive and feel great to be stimulated. But as a straight male I had to overcome cultural, religious, and peer training that seems to think that if you like anything in your ass, you must be gay or bisexual. Which has all sorts of totally false negative connotations.

~deleted4

The above comment reveals that heteronormativity and homophobia influence this man's understanding of his own body. He writes that "discovering I had erogenous zones other than my penis was mind blowing and amazing!" He also writes that "as a straight male" he had to "overcome cultural, religious, and peer training" inhibiting his ability to understand his own anal pleasure outside of associations with homosexuality.

This comment also shows a clear link between associations of pegging and homosexuality; furthermore, his comment reveals that homosexuality is imbued with negative cultural associations. As I will continue to argue, the distancing from homosexuality is, in part, a result of homosexuality being viewed negatively. Heterosexuals' desires to not be read as gay is not value free. It is, at times, informed by a culture that has deeply held negative beliefs about homosexuality. Homophobia informs his understandings of pegging; yet, there is nothing overtly derogatory in his language. In fact, he seems to be critiquing unfair socialization. The lack of derogatory language helps reveal that homophobia is more than disdain of homosexuals. Homophobia also informs his thoughts and understanding of his own body and desire. His post shows that homophobia and masculine socialization informed his understanding of men receiving

anal penetration, a perspective in which he had to “overcome”. Perhaps unintentionally, this also treats being perceived as gay as a tragedy, as a hardship in which he had to prevail. This is one of many examples suggesting that the desire to not be read as gay is not simply a matter of being perceived “incorrectly”. Simple misidentification does not present the individual with something to overcome.

The discourse of “totally false” assumptions was common in straight men’s discussions of pegging and gender and sexual identities. This discourse was relied upon when men felt as though their gender and sexual identities might be questioned. It is no small point that a discourse of “truth” is deployed. Truth, after all, implies objective fact that can withstand any questioning or argument.

Generally speaking, it is probably never a good idea to just out of the blue announce a sexual fantasy that is not at least foreshadowed by something else that you or she likes. Especially with something that messes with strict social gender classification, and involves facts she probably won't know (like, guys can derive pleasure from the prostate, which can be stimulated with a dildo). As a result, suggesting her pegging you is probably going to be a big surprise for her and she's not going to understand why you would like it - or else, she will make assumptions or get worries that will be totally false.

~complexemotion

Complexemotion’s comment is an example of an essentialist discourse of sexuality frequent in straight men’s discussions of pegging. Straight men protect their heterosexual identity on Reddit by dismissing what they perceive as the “totally false” assumptions of

homosexuality that pegging engenders. *Complexemotion* identifies a culture with a “strict gender classification” as complicating the desire to peg. Yet, as his post implies, this is not the entire story. He suggests not surprising a woman with a pegging request because “she’s not going to understand why you would like it – or else, she will make assumptions or get worries that will be totally false.” He does not specify what he expects this hypothetical woman will assume. However, based on similar posts which do specify this assumption, it is reasonable to conclude he expects pegging to be read as indication of a gay identity. Relatedly, he may anticipate that women will read the desire to peg as rendering them irrelevant. *Complexemotion* writes that these assumptions “will be totally false” and “informed by facts she probably won’t know”. Here, he is referring to the possibilities of prostate pleasure as being the result of evolution. Many people discussed evolution, and nerves in particular, to argue that all men had the biological potential to experience anal pleasure. I am not concerned with determining whether or not prostate play feels good for all men. Rather, I highlight this discourse as it was used in a way to justify prostate pleasure through science, and in effort to not let others assume it is the result of homosexual desire.

The following comment is in response to a censored post which presumably entailed explicit homophobic hate speech. The censored comment reminds us that sometimes homophobia is a clearly articulated form of social sanctioning. However, more important for this discussion is the way in which the man who received the homophobic comment responds to explicit homophobia with statements informed by homophobic and heteronormative ideologies.

While you certainly have the right to your own beliefs, and I'm not trying to convince you otherwise. I'd encourage you broaden your understanding and concepts of what it means to be sexual. I'm a dominant man. And the fact that I get a lot of pleasure from my anus and prostate, whether via Aneros prostate massage, or pegging doesn't change my heterosexual orientation, nor my natural inclinations to be dominant.

deleted6

The above quote demonstrates that homophobia is a cultural ideology that men must engage, regardless of their politics of gender and sexuality. Homophobia is a pervasive ideology which influences how people interpret men's sexual behavior. The gender regulation men experience through the use of homophobia suggests that homophobia is a common framework for making determinations about men's gender and sexual identities.

Again, the above quote is in response to a post that was censored by Reddit moderators. Thus, there is no way to know specifically what *deleted6* is responding to. But we can be certain, based on his response, that the comment called into question his heterosexual masculine identification. Further, because it was removed by Reddit moderators, we can infer that it included language the community finds derogatory and/or hateful. Yet more telling for this analysis than what the original comment entailed is how this man responds. He is not insecure about the fact that he pegs and he encourages the poster to "broaden your understandings of what it means to be sexual." Yet, he too relies upon narrow and essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality by writing "I'm a dominant man. And the fact that I get a lot of pleasure from my anus and prostate... doesn't change my heterosexual orientation, nor my natural inclinations to be dominant."

This post highlights that when confronted with homophobic perceptions of pegging, even those who respond calmly and offer suggestions of sexual liberation, reinforce hegemonic and essentialist notions of gender and sexuality. The use of essentialist discourse and the distancing from gay men are workings of homophobia and heteronormativity.

We must recognize that straight men on r/sex are frustrated with being perceived as gay, and this is not apolitical. This is not simply a matter of being perceived “incorrectly”. This is a matter of straight men not wanting to be associated with gay men. In a culture that is *not* deeply informed by homophobia we might expect simple misidentification to be read as just that. As in, “oh you’re from Kansas? I thought it was Nebraska.” But that is not what we see happening. Data reveal straight men perform defensive distancing from gay men and rely on essentialist discourses of gender, sexuality, and the body (the prostate) to participate in pegging, while drawing a distinction between their selves and gay men. Straight men could see their experiences with pegging as an opportunity to bond with gay men, but that was rarely identified in the data. Overwhelmingly straight men rejected any association with gay men.

Comments on Reddit suggest that, within a homophobic society, straight men engaged in gender and sexually transgressive sex rely on essentialist discourses of gender, sexuality, and the body as fierce protections of self. Protecting one’s sense of self from homophobic ideology with homophobic ideology reveals one way in which homophobia is perpetuated in our culture. These comments reveal that homophobia relies upon essentialist discourses of gender and sexuality. The irony of essentialism being both the problem and the solution is actually well documented in queer theory. Both Judith Butler (1990) and Michel Foucault (1978) powerfully demonstrate a post-structuralist

understanding of power whereby we continually reinforce workings of power and oppression even as we try to combat them. Whether or not it is straight men's intention to distance one's self from gay men through essential discourse, this strategy allows straight men's desires and identities to be normalized, while still creating space for male homosexuality to be viewed as weird and as other. Thus, to broaden our understanding of homophobia we must look for those moments where heterosexuals distance their selves from homosexuals through discourses of essentialism.

Women's Homophobia

Another way we must broaden our understanding of homophobia is to look at heterosexual women. Within Sociology and Gender Studies we have become accustomed to linking displays of heterosexual masculinity with homophobia (Pascoe 2007, Kimmel 1994, Pharr 1997, Ward 2015). Yet, what do we know about straight women's participation in homophobia? My literature review revealed that no scholarly work has investigated this topic. However, my data indicate that, while straight women may not use the language typically associated with homophobia, it is still a pervasive ideology informing their understanding of gender and sexual identities, bodies, and desire.

Though straight men and women's enactment of homophobia may at times look and sound different, there are similarities. Like men, a common way homophobia is engaged in women's discourse was through women's association of pegging and gayness.

Okay Reddit. My boyfriend and I have been exploring more kinky areas of the bedroom. He has expressed an interest in pegging. At first I was worried that this meant that he was attracted to men, but he explained to me that it was the

domination and whatnot.

~ Natbgrubbs

Natbgrubbs, like many other straight women on r/sex, specified her fear was that the desire to peg was indication of a gay identity. *Natbgrubbs*' comment suggests that her fear is grounded in essentialist understandings of desire. She writes that her fears were assuaged when her boyfriend explained his pegging desires were about "domination". This explanation aligns more closely with her understandings of heterosexual masculinity than associations with homosexual desire. Many straight women on r/sex worried that their partner was secretly gay and that this equates to their male partners no longer finding them attractive. In these cases, women may engage in language associated with homophobia as a response to wondering what this means for them and their relationships. Again, my objective in this research is not to determine whether or not any individual is homophobic. Rather, I am revealing that data show that questions surrounding "is this gay" frequent the minds of heterosexuals on r/sex during gender transgressive sex. It is, therefore, a common framework for making sense of identity and desire.

Men and women wrote about women's initial reactions to pegging requests as being marked with homophobic assumptions. Many of these comments revealed that women were able to "get over the gayness" they initially associated with pegging.

My partner and I have been pegging for the past couple of years and it really took me a while to get into it. He was the one who brought it up and I was the one who had to "get over the gayness" as you put it. I'm all for it now because I can see

how much pleasure it gives him!

~ *smoxyroxy*

Comments like those from *smoxyroxy* indicate that sometimes it is women's homophobia, not men's, prohibiting pegging. *Smoxyroxy* does not explain what "getting over the gayness" entailed for her, and future research should look to these experiences of sexual transformation to reveal further explanation. Yet, it is noteworthy that once again we see gayness presented as something to overcome. Many of the pegging "success stories" frame pegging this way, as an individual triumph over assumptions of homosexuality.

We can also learn a great deal about women's homophobia from comments that do not reveal success stories, but rather speak to negative experiences with pegging.

Like the reason I'm posting this is I saw someone got pegged for his first time (Congrats!) and loved it and I've loved watching porn of pegging and I always wanted to try it. I told my fiancé this a couple years ago when she asked what's the dirtiest fantasy I have, immediately the gay comment came out and she locked down and I got told how creepy I am (I know it's not gay, you have a girl do it and it's straight, I use a prostate massager sometimes, because it's just pleasurable).

~*Xemnos*

The above comment speaks to some straight men's experiences with explicit homophobic policing from their female partners. This post is also an example of the accountability work described in chapter four. *Xemnos* writes that he is posting on Reddit because he wants to peg, but had a negative interaction with a previous woman. *Xemnos*' desire to peg was met with "the gay comment" and being told he was a creep. There were only a handful of stories that revealed explicit homophobic policing on Reddit. However, while

stories like that of *Xemnos* were not common, this kind of scenario is a general characterization of the exact scenario that a large number of men on r/sex fear. Further, enforcement of gender and sexual expectations does not have to actually happen. West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "gender accountability" suggests that imagining this enforcement can be equally powerful.

As the previous chapters argued, straight men on r/sex fear that women will be suspicious of the desire to peg, that they will read the desire to peg as proof of gayness, or that women will now think he is now less of a man. While some of these fears may be unfounded, in that their worries are not grounded in actual experience but rather the anticipation of experience, and while some of their frustration might be unfairly directed through misogynistic viewpoints (e.g. women's gossip), it would be irresponsible as a researcher to not give credence to men's fears. One of the most persistent themes throughout this project is that straight men on r/sex fear talking to women about pegging. Certainly some of this is informed by men's own embodiment of homophobia, but some of this may also be grounded in men's history of sexual interactions with women, which may also be marked with homophobia. Data reveal that women's policing of men's gender behavior within heterosexual relationships is something men expect.

She may have been a bit freaked out by the idea initially. Many women go into the "is my SO gay" thoughts because he's requested anal, and are also really uncertain of how to proceed. If I had to guess I would say that she was getting angry because of a lot of uncertainty and anxiety that she had to overcome to do it. Two of the women I have gotten to peg me went through a bit of that initially, though they didn't get into rage mode. (The others had done it before and were

into it.)

~Tucatz

That's why I would caution buffering this idea with something that takes baby steps into this arena, like rimming, prostate massage, or even external prostate massage. You have to understand what her potential hesitations would be and address them. In the mean time, taking baby steps into these areas normalizes the outlier objections to pegging (man-butt stuff is gay, will he stop desiring women, it's humiliating to me to do this to a man).

~ altaccountthree

The above quotes reveal a great deal about these men's own experiences of women's homophobia. But what I most want to draw attention to at this point, is that these comments, like many others, suggest women's homophobia in response to men's desire to peg is expected. Women's homophobic policing of men's gender and sexual behavior is so commonplace within heterosexual interactions for straight men on r/sex that men have become accustomed to it. In fact, *altaccountthree* writes that "you have to understand what her potential hesitations would be and address them." This in and of itself is not bad advice for having sex. But when it comes to addressing potential hesitations she may have, like numerous other comments made by men and women on Reddit, he identifies "man-butt stuff is gay, will he stop desiring women, it's humiliating to me to do this to a man" as the kinds of issues women will have with initial pegging requests. *altaccountthree* advises another man to be sympathetic to these hesitations; yet, we must stop and ask why men feel as though women's homophobia is something they have to endure.

This chapter argues that homophobia influences the ways in which gender and sexual identities and desires are understood within heterosexual interactions for straight men and women on r/sex. Unlike men's public displays of homophobic discourse (Pascoe 2007; Kimmel 1994), women's homophobia may largely operate "behind the scenes" through the enforcement of heteronormativity in their partner's presentation of self. Several women wrote of pegging and anal penetration more broadly as altering the way they viewed their male partners.

I could never look at my husband the same again if he let me do this. Its not even I a fear of him being gay. I'm not sure I just couldn't feel the same after something like this. Is that wrong?

~prettyraver

Like many people with some opposition to pegging, *prettyraver* assures other Redditors that her fear is not about him being gay. Yet, her comments fit with homophobic discourse. She may have included this statement as she anticipates being read as homophobic by other Redditors and/or she truly does not think of herself as homophobic. This is difficult to determine as she seems unable to articulate why she feels the way she does. It could be that her fears are grounded in expectations of heteronormativity, and heterosexual masculinity in particular, which she sees as different than a fear that he is gay. However, the expectations of heteronormativity cannot easily be separated from homophobic ideology. While she is unable to articulate her fear, there is something about pegging that leads her to feel as though she "could never look at [her] husband the same again". The severity of this statement cannot be understated. In "Having Sex" I discussed the taboo and stigmatized nature of pegging. This is a clear example of these constructs

being actualized. For some reason *prettyraver* cannot articulate, she views pegging as something so unthinkable that it will forever change her understanding of her husband. Perhaps her fear is more about gender and about seeing her husband as less than dominant. Yet, this expectation of masculine gender identity is not separate from homophobic ideology. Gender is often expressed through sexual behavior. Men who express submissiveness and vulnerability during sex challenge expectations of heterosexual masculinity. Thus, non-traditional displays of masculinity that showcase vulnerability are often associated with homosexuality.

Other posts further suggest that women's expectations of masculinity lies at the heart of their homophobia. The following excerpt is from a much longer original post from a woman titled, "One time I got drunk with my boyfriend. Long story short, I stuck my finger up his butt."

A few months ago my long-term boyfriend (20m) and I (20f) got quite drunk and of course it led to sexy time. It started with me giving him a BJ with him on the couch and I was on my knees in front of him. He definitely likes ball play so I started to lick/suck them and he went from a sitting position, to a knees to chest position where I would obviously see his balls, gooch, ass. I figured he wanted me to go lower, like his gooch, so I did. As I got lower and lower, I could definitely tell he enjoyed it more and more. I got to his ass hole, but I wasn't comfortable with licking. I put my fingers at the bottom of his gooch... to make sure he liked it and to figure out if he wanted me to go to his ass. I finally put my finger to his ass hole and I could tell by his breathing/sounds he liked it... I kept it like this as I was going back and forth between a HJ and a BJ. I started to move my finger up

and down and I remember him saying "gentle" and all of a sudden, I felt weird. Maybe I had begun to sober up, or maybe I didn't like seeing my boyfriend being so vulnerable?

Shortly after that we just had sex for quite a while and just fell asleep. The next morning we talked about how great the night before was, just like how we normally do after drunk sex. And he kept asking what I remembered. I didn't want to bring it up so I acted like i didn't remember that certain 5 minutes. He didn't bring it up either. We both just ignored it. Its been 5+ months since this event and we haven't talked about it. I have done my research, I now know its normal for guys to like this kind of thing. I've even watched pegging a few times. I can't describe how I feel about it. I think it's so intriguing, but I don't know if I'd exactly want to do it. Something about touching booty still seems gross to me. I'm a clean freak and I honestly get grossed out when I think about sticking my fingers up someones butt. But at the same time, he seemed so pleased and I honestly didn't mind doing it when I did. Anyone have any advice?

~Jes94

The above description reveals a great deal about women's homophobia and the ways in which homophobia structures heterosexual interactions. *Jes94* considers that anally penetrating her male partner made her feel "weird" because he asked her to be "gentle" and she did not like "seeing [her] boyfriend being so vulnerable." She seems to have hesitancy over anal play in general; yet, it seems that being anally penetrated is not the only factor leading her to feel weird. She says these feelings for her came up after her boyfriend asked her to be "gentle". This request contradicts her expectations for

heterosexual masculinity. Several people made comments in response to this particular passage:

“maybe I didn't like seeing my boyfriend being so vulnerable?” this is why I refuse to do any butt stuff. Have yet to be with someone I connect well enough, to know she would still 'respect' me after.

~ SmilesLookGreatOnYou

Sometimes r/sex was an oasis of sex positive advice for people. Other times, like the quote above indicates, these conversations just confirmed men's worst fears around pegging. As *SmilesLookGreatOnYou* writes, the discomfort *Jes94* had with seeing her partner be vulnerable is exactly why he “refuse[s] to do any butt stuff.” He equates being viewed as vulnerable as being disrespected.

As discussed in the previous chapter, alcohol is a primary tool heterosexuals on r/sex rely upon to engage in non-normative sex. It was said that alcohol lowers inhibitions and makes pegging seem less weird. However, relying on alcohol also means that people are generally not discussing their sexual desires, and are hoping that being tipsy will make everything go smoothly. *Jes94* reveals that sometimes this strategy fails. The morning after she fingered her partner's anus she acted as though she did not remember doing so, despite her partner asking her repeatedly what she remembered. We cannot know for sure if her partner remembered the night's events, but it seems probable. First, being anally penetrated for the first time in a relationship is likely memorable to him. Second, he keeps asking her what she remembers, perhaps trying to get her to start the conversation. But neither of them were able to have this talk. She clearly relied upon manipulation to avoid the conversation, and he may have relied on manipulation to try

and start the conversation. Once again we see that men's reception of anal penetration engenders a conversation that many people desperately do not want to have. *Jes94* and her partner have now gone five months without discussing the incident. During this time her attitude shifted. She writes, "I have done my research, I now know its normal for guys to like this kind of thing." Throughout this research I have come to see heterosexuality as an orientation marked by desires of normalcy. Many heterosexual men and women seem unable to determine how they personally feel about a sex act until they figure out if it is normal with regard to both gender and sexuality. Now that *Jes94* thinks it is normal for her partner to want this, she is more willing to give it a try. Yet, she is still unable to talk to her partner about it.

Lastly, I present a discussion post from a woman who details pegging as something that challenges her own gender identity, in addition to highlighting the confusing nature of homophobia for heterosexuals on r/sex.

So my husband, he knows I am posting and looking for advice, told me the other day he would love to try pegging. I am fairly tame when it comes to the bedroom so this is not something I have ever considered and honestly am not real comfortable with. I feel horrible not being able to provide my husband all the pleasure he wants but some things are way out of my comfort zone and I worry about how I would feel during and after. What are the things I am uncomfortable with? Well, firstly, I am not comfortable taking on the role of a guy....I know it isn't necessarily taking on the role of a guy but that is what it feels like to me. Throughout my life I have been made fun of for being a tomboy or when I was younger mistaken for a guy and so I have worked hard to shed that image and

this kind of brings back a lot of history for me. Maybe that is a bit unreasonable but figure I might as well put it all out there so you all know where I am coming from. My other thing is, I am a girl, he is a guy, those were the parts we are given and well, I am not really wanting to role play two guys having sex. Don't get me wrong, I am not homophobic or anything, I support gay rights but, well I guess I am confused. When my husband says he supports gay rights but what they do in the bedroom he would rather not think about then to want to engage in an act such as this confuses me. I don't know, it just is not something that is sitting well with me or that I am jumping to try. However, like I said before, I don't know if I am being completely unreasonable in my feelings and should just do what pleases my husband or is it ok to just say no on this one and engage in other new sex acts we have talked about? My husband has said he is happy with our sex life but would like to try new things. I am just looking for some feedback here I guess. Thanks for reading my blabbing.

EDIT: Sorry, I forgot to put in a couple more details. Firstly, I do not think because he wants to do this he is gay....I know my husband is far from gay, I know this may be confusing because what I wrote but I think I am more just uncomfortable with it and have all these ideas coming into my head. Secondly, I do finger him sometimes, still not real comfortable with it but know it pleases him but do it as I enjoy him being pleased. Furthermore, I did suggest trying a butt plugg so thank you for that suggestion.

~unknown1124

There are many issues in the above comment that deserve attention. First, pegging challenges this woman's understanding of her own gender identity. She writes, "What are the things I am uncomfortable with? Well, firstly, I am not comfortable taking on the role of a guy....I know it isn't necessarily taking on the role of a guy but that is what it feels like to me." *Unknown1124* writes that her fear is influenced by a lifetime of being made fun of for being a "tomboy". *unknown1124* was one of a handful of women who expressed fears about their own gender identity. Overwhelmingly, men and women expressed anxiety that pegging challenges masculinity, yet the idea that pegging challenged femininity was rarely articulated. I do think the widespread anxieties over masculinity is one of the most significant findings in my data. However, I'm not convinced that all of the gendered anxiety is exclusively about men. *unknown1124* allows us to consider that some women feel less than feminine while penetrating their partner with a strapon. Future research should talk to straight women to flush out this gender identity anxiety. I am suspicious that some of women's anxiety that is directed at men may also be the result of the insecurities that arise regarding their own gendered self.

This project has illuminated an understanding of homophobia as something that is increasingly unacceptable yet still informs some heterosexuals' sense of their gendered and sexual self. I do think many people on r/sex, as in American culture more broadly, sincerely do not want to "be homophobic". However, the desire to not perpetuate homophobia may not be enough to end homophobia, especially as most people hold a simplistic understanding of homophobia. Therefore, the desire to not be homophobic, coupled with an embodiment of homophobia, is confusing. *unknown1124* writes, "My other thing is, I am a girl, he is a guy, those were the parts we are given and well, I am

not really wanting to role play two guys having sex. Don't get me wrong, I am not homophobic or anything, I support gay rights but, well I guess I am confused. When my husband says he supports gay rights but what they do in the bedroom he would rather not think about then to want to engage in an act such as this confuses me.” Some heterosexuals, like *unknown1124* and her partner, have a unidimensional understanding of gay acceptance. She assures us she is not homophobic because she supports gay rights. She fails to see that homophobia pervades the minds and bodies of individuals like herself, and not just our legal system. She has difficulty recognizing homophobia outside of displays of hatred or fear of homosexuals. She is confused because her husband also claims to support gay rights but would rather not think about what gay people do during sex, yet, he asks her to perform a sex act she considers gay. The confusion is the result of homophobia informing desires while simultaneously engaging in a discourse of “gay rights” which obscures a recognition of homophobia.

Discussion

This chapter argued that homophobia is a deeply internalized anti-gay ideology that embeds itself in some heterosexuals’ identities and desires. Further, homophobia is a pervasive discourse encouraging some heterosexuals’ treatment of homosexuals as “other”. Like previous sociological, feminist, and queer theories and research, I found that homophobia is often about regulating gender, and about regulating masculinity most specifically. Essentialist discourses of gender and sexuality were relied upon by heterosexual men and women on r/sex to distance themselves from male homosexuality. This chapter also argued that we must have a more complex understanding of contemporary homophobia than explicit hate speech or violent acts. Heterosexuals’ on

r/sex that engaged in distancing from homosexuals through the use of essentialist discourse is one way we can begin to see more implicit forms of homophobia.

The findings presented in this chapter also suggests that homophobia is more than just treating homosexuals as “other”. Homophobia also shapes how heterosexuals understand gender and sexual identities and desire. Many heterosexuals feel compelled to resolve the question “is this gay?” before deciding how they feel about pegging.

Heterosexuals on r/sex have anxiety over straight men’s sex practices that do not provide a clear distinction between what is gay and what is straight. We must stop and ask why heterosexuals feel compelled to have such rigid distinctions between gay and straight sex. Dominant cultural understandings of homophobia lead us to believe that this delineation is motivated by hatred of homosexuals. While this was evidenced a few times in my data, this was not the typical way boundary setting was articulated. I think more common than heterosexuals’ experience of hate is embodying an understanding of homosexuals as distinctly different kinds of people than heterosexuals tend to see themselves. Some heterosexuals view this as a separate but equal understanding of sexual identity, whereas others treat this relationship with heterosexual supremacy. These are very different approaches to understanding sexual identity, yet they both provide groundwork for understanding heterosexuals and homosexuals as distinctly different kinds of people.

Critiquing heterosexuals’ frequent discussions of homosexuals as distinctly different kinds of people does not equate to claims that homosexuals are “just the same” as heterosexuals. There are indeed cultural differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals, including the ways in which they tend to have sex. Yet, heterosexuals have considerable power over homosexuals, and so their distancing from homosexuals cannot

be separated from this power dynamic. The desire to not be read as gay cannot be fully separated from a homophobic culture. This is highlighted through statements that viewed homosexuality negatively and as something to overcome.

The absence of hate when (1) heterosexuals view homosexuals as distinctly different kinds of people and (2) when delineating boundaries between what is gay and what is straight leads us to question whether this is really about homophobia or about boundary setting. This is a complicated discussion. As nearly all research and theoretical essays reviewed for this project suggest, homophobia *is* more than just hate. The absence of hatred toward homosexuals does not equate to the absence of homophobia. If we understand homophobia in terms of an anti-gay culture in which everyone must find ways to participate, as opposed to individualistic understandings of “are you homophobic?” then we can begin to see that homophobia and heterosexual boundary setting are not entirely separate. The understanding of homosexuals and heterosexuals as different kinds of people may be better explained by theories of heteronormativity and essentialist discourses of gender and sexuality than by theories of homophobia. However, the negative constructs surrounding homosexuality that were frequently evidenced in heterosexuals’ boundary settings are best explained by a complex and historical understanding of homophobia. From this we see that heteronormativity and homophobia are mutually reinforcing and at times overlapping ideologies and sets of discourses.

The complexities of anti-gay ideology found throughout pegging discussions on r/sex suggests that we need more nuanced understandings of homophobia. Scholarly work on other forms of oppression are also attempting to explain the pervasiveness of oppressive ideologies in the absence of hate. Scholars of sexual violence have sought to

explain “rape culture” as a way to make sense of how some people perpetuate attitudes supporting sexual violence without committing rape (Buchwald, Roth, and Fletcher 1993; Boswell and Spade 1996). Similarly, work on racism has uncovered “colorblind racism” as an explanation for how racist ideologies and practices are furthered by those who are not violent racists (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Richeson and Nussbaum 2004). We need this kind of complex understanding of homophobia. Otherwise, our understanding of homophobia is limited to violent displays of sexual hate, and as my data suggest, our homophobic culture is more diffuse than this.

In addition to having a more complex understanding of homophobia, this perspective allows us to see how people who truly understand themselves to not be homophobic can still participate in and contribute to a homophobic culture. Again, the power differential between heterosexuals and homosexuals means that when straight people distance themselves from what they view as gay, it is not a value free claim. Heterosexuals have too much power for this to be value-free. Additionally, when heterosexuals are borrowing from gay culture, in this case exploring men’s anal penetration, yet still wanting to distance themselves from gayness, we should consider that homophobia is at work. If not, we might expect to see heterosexuals as being grateful to gay men for introducing the possibility of men’s anal penetration. Yet, the frequent desires of heterosexuals to not be read as homophobic is significant. It is entirely possible for heterosexuals to engage in tolerance and/or acceptance of homosexuals while still being informed by ideologies that encourage them to treat homosexuals as “other.”

In addition to many heterosexuals on r/sex not wanting to be viewed as homophobic, this chapter also revealed that many straight people confront other straight

people's homophobic statements. This suggests a cultural shift of greater acceptance of homosexuality and suggests that many straight people on r/sex want to live in a world they understand as "not homophobic". While we might be pleased to see these behaviors interrupted, we must also question whether confronting those perceived as "homophobic" with logic is a useful strategy. The anger and frustration men express over being labeled homophobic suggests this may not be an effective strategy for combatting the homophobic ideology. It may not be effective because accusing someone of homophobia is an act of judgement. No one likes to be judged. Therefore, men get defensive when they are accused of homophobia. They defend their sexual desires, or lack thereof, by offering up a range of other possible explanations. Further, it might not be an effective strategy because these accusations rarely lead to an actual conversation. This means that the kinds of complex conversations that need to be had around homophobia do not happen.

This chapter also draws attention to the prevalence of women's homophobia, a topic that has not received scrutiny from other researchers. As I presented the question of women's homophobia at conferences and presentations, I was often met with an audible "ah" from the crowd, as if to suggest a kind of disciplinary confirmation that, as scholars, we have not really talked about women's homophobia. After conducting this research, however, my hunch is that talking to straight men about their sexual experiences would reveal women's homophobia to be common. I do not think straight men would be as surprised by women's homophobia as some researchers.

Hegemonic masculinity is an institutionalized set of practices and assumptions allowing homophobia to thrive. Homophobia cannot be combatted without radically

different understandings of heterosexual masculinity. We know that boys and men are held accountable to displays of masculinity that showcase dominance. We know this accountability occurs in numerous institutions such as education, media, religion, sports, etc. We also know that much of this accountability happens through interactions with parents, peers, coaches, and teachers. We must also consider that some of this accountability happens in straight men's relationships with women. Through enforcing hegemonic understandings of masculinity in men's presentation of self, women not only place unfair restrictions on their male partners, but also reinforce a profoundly anti-gay culture.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Gender is a primary way we express and understand our sexuality. Yet, gender and sexuality are both socially constructed concepts. There is no essential gender or sexual self to express. The ways in which we understand our own gender and sexuality, and the ways in which others perceive our gender and sexuality, are informed by societal expectations of these categories, expectations which are always in flux. This project analyzed pegging, a sex act which contradicts traditional expectations of men, women, and heterosexual sex. Specifically, pegging involves the anal penetration of straight men, a practice generally thought reserved for women and gay men. To better understand how people experience pegging I posed the following research questions:

- (1) How does a sex practice transition from a culturally unintelligible sex act to one that is culturally recognized?
- (2) How do cisgender, heterosexual men and women negotiate gender normativity and homophobia alongside their desire, or their partner's desire, to peg?

To answer these questions I turned to the popular website, Reddit. I analyzed comments and conversations on r/sex, one of Reddit's most established and frequented subreddits. I collected a sample of 30 of the most popular pegging discussions on r/sex, including over 3,000 comments.

This dissertation was an empirical investigation of the theoretical insights put forth in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex" (1984). Rubin argues that we live in a sex negative culture that evaluates sex acts,

constructing some sex practices as normal and natural, while rendering others deviant and weird. Butler illuminates the implications of this sex negativity for individuals through her concept of “cultural intelligibility”. Sex practices that fall outside the realm of normal in our sexual culture are left culturally unintelligible, meaning that they are rendered weird, disgusting, and/or unimaginable by societies’ members. Butler argues that our culture’s sexual ideology becomes embodied by societies’ members through perfunctory and habitual displays of gender and sexual normativity. My data suggest that pegging, and straight men’s reception of anal penetration more broadly, is a kind of culturally unintelligible sex act, though that might be changing. Pegging may be on its way to the realm of normalcy.

A primary way pegging is transitioning from a culturally unintelligible sex act to one that is culturally recognized is through discursive work of redefinition. Men’s anal pleasure carries a host of connotations that straight men and women on r/sex tended to view as negative, including it being understood as weird, deviant, and/or associated with homosexuality. These understandings are not inherently negative, but many people on r/sex certainly approached it this way. The Queer and BDSM communities might love hearing their sex is weird. But this is generally not how weird sex was understood by people on r/sex.

Pegging was often redefined as something distinctly heterosexual and supported by biological “facts” of prostate pleasure. Pegging was redefined as heterosexual on r/sex through statements claiming anything between a man and a woman must be heterosexual. Pegging was also framed as normal and natural through a discussion of evolution, nerves, and prostate pleasure. Both of these types of discourses work to frame pegging as

heterosexual, normal, and natural. The only other empirical research examining pegging is Kristen Burke's (2014) "What Makes a Man: Gender and Sexual Boundaries on Evangelical Christian Sexuality Websites." Burke also found that men sought to redefine pegging as something that fits within their ideological views of masculinity, heterosexuality, and Christianity. Both Burke's and my research suggest that in order for many heterosexuals to feel comfortable with pegging, it must first be redefined as normal for straight men. It seems that many heterosexuals on r/sex feel compelled to understand sexual pleasure in terms of what is normal before they form an opinion on the act and attempt the practice for their self.

The ability to redefine a sex act that has historically been treated with disgust and persecution is made possible by the power afforded to masculinity and heterosexuality. Yet, to say that heterosexuals are engaged in redefining pegging as something normal, natural, and within the boundaries of heterosexuality is not to imply this is an easy process. Nor is it to suggest that pegging has been redefined in this way for most Redditors or American culture at large. My second research question - how do cisgender, heterosexual men and women negotiate gender normativity and homophobia alongside their desire, or their partner's desire, to peg - revealed that there is a great deal of confusion and anxiety surrounding pegging for heterosexuals. The embodiment of gender and sexual normativity makes pegging a perplexing act. Stated most simply – pegging confuses people. It confuses understandings of "having sex", gender and sexual identities, and sexual desire.

By naming the act of women anally penetrating men with a strap-on dildo as "pegging" we see that once sex practices are named they are, to some extent, brought into

the realm of cultural intelligibility. However, my data also suggest that once a sex act is named this may further open the possibilities for people to judge these sex acts. Simply naming an act does not construct it as legitimate or normal.

Having Sex

From a case study of pegging we can see that sex practices gain cultural recognition through discursive work of redefinition. People on Reddit redefined pegging as a socially acceptable sex act through conversations surrounding “regular sex” and a “gender role reversal”.

“Regular sex” discussions revealed two important, if contradictory, things about having sex. First, “regular sex” is synonymous with binary gender expectations of penetration. Many discussions framed pegging as weird, even by those who were interested in pegging, because it challenged hegemonic understandings of gender and, therefore, of “regular sex”. Specifically, pegging challenges the gendered assumptions of penetration that serve as the cultural framework for how to have sex. In chapter three, “Having Sex: A Heteronormative Template,” I argued that heteronormativity functions as an *unspoken* rule book for sex. Heteronormativity functions, in part, through the largely implicit and embodied assumptions of what the physical acts of having sex are to look like. That is, heteronormativity provides a template for how to have sex. This template is a gender binary. As Butler (1990) suggested, this structuring of sex happens, in part, through habitual and compulsory performances of gender normativity and heterosexuality, where cisgender men’s penetration of cisgender women’s vaginas is constructed as normal, natural, and the sole distinguishing act of what is culturally recognized as “having sex”. Pegging requires challenging gendered expectations of

penetration and ultimately calls into question assumptions and practices grounded in gender and sexual identities. From Reddit discussions it is clear that people on r/sex think pegging is weird because it challenges a pervasive gender binary that instills in everyone deeply embodied notions that men penetrate women. When this distinguishing feature of sexual interaction is absent in heterosexual sex, men and women experience a great deal of emotion over how to proceed.

Second, many of the comments framing pegging as a deviation from “regular sex” were met with claims of opposition that, paradoxically, also relied on understandings of a gender binary to argue pegging *is* “regular sex”. These discussions reveal discursive redefinition in its most powerful form. Many people on r/sex, men in particular, sought to legitimize pegging as “regular sex” through fiercely arguing that pegging upholds a critical component of heterosexuality – a gender binary. As one Redditor wrote, “Guy+Girl=NotGay”. Many straight men argued that, weird or not, pegging is still a sex act that occurs between men and women and is, therefore, fundamentally heterosexual. In order to legitimize pegging as a regular kind of sex, heterosexuals relied upon binary understandings of gender to argue things like “anything between a man and a woman is heterosexual”.

“Regular sex” discussions frequently contained a “gender role reversal” discourse. This discourse was a primary way pegging was made culturally intelligible and acceptable. This discourse frames pegging as a kinky transgression of a gender binary within heterosexuality. A “gender role reversal” discourse illuminates how the cultural intelligibility of sex is influenced by heteronormativity. In American culture, sexual behavior is understood through gender expectations, particularly in understandings of

penetration. When the gendered assumptions of penetration are challenged there is no readily available discourse to make sense of the act. It is confusing. Redditors attempted to make it less confusing by relying on the existing binary framework of gender. A “gender role reversal” of “regular sex” is a kind of gender play within heteronormativity. Pegging allows for men to say things like, “tonight you be the man, and I’ll take it like a woman.” In this sense, a gender binary is understood as something kinky to transgress. It is a kind of gendered sexual play. This also allows men and women to transgress a gender binary without challenging its naturalness and while minimizing the potential that an individual will be viewed as weird.

The “gender role reversal” discourse was one of the most salient findings in my data. From a critical theory perspective, this framing is problematic. If a gender binary is the fundamental reason that pegging is seen as weird, then the obvious solution is to take pegging as an opportunity to challenge the restrictive nature of gender binaries. Yet, the “gender role reversal” framing allows binary understandings of gender to remain, while allowing some space to transgress its assumptions.

Yet, I think it would be false to argue the “gender role reversal” functions exclusively to perpetuate binary understandings of gender. I do think there is radical potential in this discourse. In particular, this discourse has the potential to reshape deeply embodied power relations between men and women during sex. Both men and women who had pegged described it as an empathy building sex act. Pegging allowed both men and women to experience sex from the “other side” of the binary. Men learned a lot about sex after being penetrated. They learned that just because there is a body cavity, this does not mean penetrating it automatically leads to pleasure. They gained a more complex

understanding of penetration and pleasure than this. They learned that penetration can feel great, but it takes some finesse and it takes some time. From this, men gained a greater appreciation of women's experiences of being vaginally penetrated. In particular, those cultural conversations of why "foreplay" matters to women seemed to suddenly make sense to men. This mirrors a pop culture coverage of pegging by Hugo Schwyzer titled "If You Want a More Thoughtful Boyfriend, Try Pegging Him" (Jezebel.com, 2013). Once men experienced receiving penetration, they gained a deeper understanding of what it takes to feel comfortable enough to be penetrated and enjoy it. This can lead to much more thoughtful sexual behavior on the part of men when they are the penetrating party, and more pleasurable sexual experiences for women while being penetrated.

Women also learned a lot about sex after pegging. Women gained a greater appreciation for the full body workout involved when you are the penetrating party. Women were surprised at what "stamina" while penetrating really meant. Before pegging, they did not have experience topping someone, thrusting for long periods at a time. They described pegging as a sweaty experience and a serious abdominal exercise. They reported having greater appreciation at all the "work" that men do during sex.

More than with any other finding, the discourse of a "gender role reversal" allows for significant social change in that it creates opportunity for men and women to experience sex and gender differently. Second wave feminists such as Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin argued that the gendered nature of penetration is itself a function of patriarchy. Though I do not fully agree with their claims in that I do not see penetration as largely synonymous with patriarchal sex, I do agree that the gendered construction of penetration is critical to upholding hegemonic power relations between

men and women and heterosexuals and homosexuals. Disassociating gendered expectations of penetration from heterosexual sex can allow for more expansive understandings of gender itself.

Pegging in Private

It is noteworthy that this gender transgression takes place within one of the most secretive experiences in American culture – having sex. Heterosexuality and the ideology of sex as a private matter both serve as structures that legitimize heterosexuals' gender transgressions during sex. It is okay to be gender deviant within heterosexual sex because other factors, namely a male and female body interacting for sexual pleasure in private, make it, ultimately, normal.

Straight men on r/sex expressed a great deal of concern and anger that people would find out about their desire to peg and they would be viewed as weird, gay, and/or less of a man. In particular, men blamed women and their perceived tendency to gossip as a primary reason they were ambivalent over pegging. Straight men on r/sex do not want anyone to know they like being anally penetrated as they fear it will jeopardize their social power as a heterosexual man. Pegging reveals a distinction between backstage gender and sexual play and frontstage gender and sexual performance (Goffman 1959). When gender transgressions are restricted to private sex acts then the public understandings of gender and sexuality are slow to change.

The secretive nature of pegging is a critical component inhibiting the transformative potential of pegging. Again, this project revealed discrepancy between backstage and frontstage gender and sexual behavior. This led to a lot of anxiety as to whether other people would find out and what they would think. Yet, the secretive nature

of pegging may be changing. In some ways it feels as though we are nearing a tipping point where pegging is still not culturally acceptable but it is on its way there. I think it likely this tipping point will occur and perhaps mirror a history of oral sex. Within a matter of decades, from the 1950s to the 1990s, oral sex went from being illegal, to weird, to something entirely within the bounds of normal and healthy sexual behavior (DePierre 2017). Pegging may follow a similar trajectory and could mean radical things for the embodied power relations between men and women.

Gender Identity

According to these data, the primary reasons people on r/sex do not peg are the cultural narratives surrounding masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality. Pegging causes confusion over gender and sexual identities, but most specifically, it blurs traditional understandings of masculinity. As a result, pegging was framed as a sexual taboo that creates a stigmatized individual – a male homosexual. Here we see sociology's ability to illuminate the reciprocal relationship between individuals and society. Embodied cultural understandings of pegging as taboo and stigmatizing caused a great deal of emotional response from men and women on r/sex. Men expressed a great deal of worry that women will assume they are “less of a man” for wanting to be anally penetrated. Sometimes men were angry about this, other times they seemed contemplative, concerned, and sad. Most women on r/sex disagreed with this assumption. Most of the women who actually contributed to posts were strong supporters of pegging. This likely reflects a biased sample on Reddit. Most men on r/sex who expressed some kind of fear as to how their masculinity would be interpreted were imagining a specific woman in their life who was not a part of the Reddit conversation or they imagined

hypothetical women and how they might react.

The process of anticipating how women will respond to pegging and then altering one's behavior accordingly is an example of the gender accountability West and Zimmerman (1987) describe. Pegging allows us to see a connection between "doing gender" and "cultural intelligibility". Men want to be able to anticipate women's reactions to pegging before they make a pegging request; however, the unintelligibility of pegging means men cannot have much certainty in how women will respond. They cannot have as much certainty as they do, for example, in assuming most heterosexual women will be open to the idea of vaginal penetration. Of course not all heterosexual women are interested in being vaginally penetrated, but it is more of an embodied assumption of heterosexuality than men being anally penetrated.

Many of the men on Reddit participated in the pegging discussions because they feared talking to their partner and so they turned to the Internet to get ideas about how she might react and/or how to bring it up in such a way that men won't seem weird or gay. This reveals that turning to the Internet for advice is a kind of accountability work. Men are intentionally coming to a space which their female partners do not inhabit. They do so to collect information from other people about their pegging experiences to better anticipate how women may react to their pegging requests. Hearing other people's successes and failures with pegging requests allows men to alter their behavior when they do talk to their partners about pegging in ways that they anticipate will lead to the results they want. By coming to r/sex, men were told that alcohol was one way to lower everyone's inhibitions and make pegging seem less weird. Men were also advised to take "baby steps" with pegging, by foreshadowing their pegging request with related sex acts

that may seem less scary, such as fingering a man's anus. Men were also told that they should just expect women to be freaked out by their desire to peg. They were told this was an initial response and it might just take some time for her to come around to the idea of pegging.

Because men were coming to Reddit to have these conversations without their female partners finding out, I am unable to analyze how their partners actually feel about pegging. While this is a limitation of this project, much can still be learned. Regardless of how women actually feel about their partner's desire to be anally penetrated, findings reveal that men fear what women will think. Pegging conversations reveal that straight men on r/sex have a great deal of anxiety over talking to their female partners about sexual desires that lie outside the boundaries of traditional heterosexual masculinity.

Again, most women contributing to pegging discussions on r/sex did not write that a man was weird or less than a man for wanting to be pegged; however, there was a significant showing by women who did. In this sense, men's fears were not unfounded. However, these women rarely mirrored men's language of "less than a man". Women often used language of "this just doesn't feel right" but seemed dumbfounded and unable to articulate why. They were, at times, confused, "turned off", and sometimes repulsed.

Sexual Identity

For straight men on r/sex, pegging caused confusion for men's heterosexual identities. Both men and women expressed concern that men's desire to peg was indication of a gay identity. Much like gender identity, we see that some straight men on r/sex fear women will think they are not truly heterosexual whether or not there is actual confirmation women feel this way. However, more so than with gender identity, women

did articulate that they feared men's desire to peg meant they were gay or bisexual. This tapped into a great deal of insecurity for straight women on r/sex. It generally led to women wondering where they fit in the picture. Women feared that pegging was a kind of gateway sex act into full-on gayness that would eventually render them irrelevant. They feared they would no longer be attractive. I found no evidence from men on r/sex that this was the case.

Once again we see a considerable amount of fears by both straight men and women on r/sex. These fears are grounded in gender. Men are afraid that women will see them as freaks, as less than a man, or as gay if they want to be pegged. Women are afraid that their partner is gay if they want to be pegged. They fear that this means their partners will no longer find them attractive. They fear an end to their relationship. *Pegging anxiety is not just about pegging*. Pegging illuminates gender anxiety that is already deeply embodied by both men and women and structuring their sexual interactions.

Pegging conversations also reveal that this gender anxiety, for men and women, is a product of restrictive understandings of gender and sexuality and of a sex negative culture (Rubin 1984). Heteronormative discourses of sex and love do not create a space for most women to easily understand that their male partners can desire being vulnerable, submissive, and anally penetrated and still be in love with and attracted to women. Heteronormative discourses do not make it impossible to have this understanding, but it does seem to make it difficult. Heteronormative discourses of sex and love do not provide men with an easy understanding of these possibilities either. These possibilities of sex and love lie outside the imaginations of most people. When people think about pegging, it is often confusing and scary.

One of the most interesting findings of this research is that pegging causes a great deal of anxiety and confusion over men's gender and sexual identities, but does not do so to the same extent for women's. For example, both straight men and women on r/sex worry that pegging is associated with male homosexuality, but no one expressed concern that a woman's desire to penetrate was indication of lesbianism. I did not find a single example of this. Perhaps this is a result of Reddit bias, but I think it highly significant that I did not find a single mention of this association when the links between pegging, masculinity, and homosexuality were abundant. I think this reflects the idea that heterosexual masculinity is less flexible than heterosexual femininity. It may also be that women's fears are more grounded in their gender identity than their sexual identity. Several women did write about feeling less than feminine while pegging. But most women talked about feeling quite sexy while they pegged. Future research with a sample including more women would reveal much more about women's gender and sexual identity concerns brought on by pegging.

Gender and Sexual Accountability

Straight men on r/sex expressed a great deal of worry that they would be perceived as gay for wanting to peg. This was a primary reason men turned to Reddit. Turning to Reddit to figure out if and under what conditions women are likely to view them as gay or weird for asking to be pegged is another example of West and Zimmerman's (1987) notion of accountability. West and Zimmerman argue that "sex category", or the ways in which gender is perceived, anchors accountability. I argue that "perceived sexuality" also anchors the doing of gender. My research calls into question whether sex category is the primary anchor in accountability as I have evidence that

sexuality is also significant. I do not argue that perceived sex category is less relevant; rather, it is in the intersection of perceived sex category and sexuality that seems to serve as the anchor point for gender accountability during sex.

Sexuality Boundaries

The significance of sexuality in the doing and determination of gender may be the result of increasing visibility and, to some extent acceptance, of the LGBTQ community within mainstream American culture. Straight men and women on Reddit were generally accepting of the idea that gay men receive anal penetration. That itself is significant. The assumption that gay men receive anal penetration was generally not met with contempt or disgust, though this did appear at times. Yet, generally men receiving anal penetration was considered something that only gay men do. Thus, there was frequent refusal for straight men to partake in receiving anal penetration because it is aligned with male homosexuality. This distancing seems motivated by cultural understandings of sexualities as representative of fundamentally different kinds of people.

There seems to be a strong compulsion for heterosexual men and women to draw distinct boundaries between gay and straight men, even while promoting some notion of acceptance for homosexuality. That is, most straight people seemed less concerned with placing a value judgment on the sex acts of gay men than with delineating a boundary between gay and straight men based on the act of anal penetration.

This is not to suggest pegging did not confuse women's own sexual self. One of the most fascinating findings was a handful of women who, after they began pegging, started to experience sex through an embodied imaginary penis. Importantly, this was not limited to when women were pegging. These women discussed feeling as though they

could not have an orgasm from oral sex unless they imagined their clitoris was a penis. Women who reported this phenomenon did not seem particularly concerned that they were now imagining having a phallus in order to orgasm. They found it surprising and interesting. While only a handful of women mentioned this phenomenon I think it is important. First, when coupled with the fact that no one feared pegging was indication of lesbianism, these stories add support to the claim that women's sexual and gender identities are more flexible than men's. I can only imagine how the conversations would go if men reported that, after they started pegging, they could only orgasm by imagining their anus was a vagina.

Homophobia

This dissertation was an examination of homophobia in a hate free zone. Data revealed that, although explicit hate speech was rarely used, homophobia was still present. Homophobia informed heterosexuals' sense of gender and sexual identities, bodies, and desires. This finding is in keeping with both sociological and feminist understandings of homophobia as a primary way gender, and masculinity in particular, is regulated.

Men and women expressed a great deal of worry that the desire to peg was or would be perceived as indication of men's gayness. Straight men engaged this assumption through frequent claims that they were not gay, even when it was not suggested otherwise. Sometimes straight men engaged in fierce boundary setting between themselves and gay men, arguing that straight men's anal pleasure through pegging was distinctly different than gay men's anal pleasure. This boundary setting should not be read as apolitical. This is not simply a matter of misidentification; rather, these attempts

work to distance straight men from a group with which they want to have no similarities, gay men.

This distancing provokes the question: can heterosexual men declare they are not gay without sounding homophobic? When considering this alongside pegging, I think at least two points should be addressed. First, part of why these statements read as homophobic is the result of a kind of sexual cooptation. Gay men have long been aware of the pleasures of anal penetration. American culture has largely treated this as disgusting and/or as a joke. More so than with any other aspect of gay male existence, many Americans likely think of anal penetration when they think of gay men. Straight men now have interest in anal penetration, yet they continue to distance themselves from gay men. Straight men's reception of anal penetration could be a chance for straight men to bond with gay men. Straight men could approach gay men and their anal knowledge as sexual mentors. Yet, most men on Reddit refused any kind of association with gay men. When those in power take the practices of groups who are marginalized, and when those same practices have been cited by those in power as reasons to keep the marginalized group oppressed, this allows for cooptation of culture without much change in power relations. That is, pegging is an example of straight people taking sexual practices from gay culture without extending acceptance to the gay community and without acknowledging the ways in which this specific act, anal penetration, has been a catalyst for horrific treatment against gay men.

A second and related point that must be considered when thinking about why heterosexual men's declarations that they are not gay sound homophobic is to recognize the power imbalance between straight and gay men. The power imbalance means that

straight men's distancing from gay men is not politically neutral. Straight men have a long history of solidifying heterosexual supremacy through homophobic discourse. That is, when straight men declare they are not gay we must ask why make such a declaration. Often men make these statements not to ensure others understand their sexual identity in a way that corresponds to their own, but to shore up and/or to avoid losing the power afforded to them through the category of straight man. Saying "I am not gay" is not a value free statement in our culture. Thus, as we attempt a cultural transition that is accepting of homosexuality, we must be skeptical when straight men distance themselves from gay men. So can straight men declare they are not gay without sounding homophobic? The short answer is no. They have too much power. This is not to say men cannot have conversations about sexuality where they identify as straight men, but we must be skeptical about these public declarations of being "not gay".

Pegging conversations revealed that straight men on r/sex could have more thoughtful approaches to how they navigate the world, recognizing that their treatment of homosexuals as "other" reinforces oppressive notions of gender and sexuality. This is not to suggest that individual transformations of gender and sexuality will eliminate homophobia. Institutions and ideology must change as well. Yet, individual behavior does matter to social change. Two things straight men can do to work toward positive social change is to not be offended when others presume they are gay and to resist the urge to declare their heterosexuality while simultaneously treating homosexuality as weird and/or disgusting.

Both straight men and women treated associations with homosexuality as a tragedy to overcome. This understanding is critical to recognizing homophobia. We must

stop and ask why being associated with gayness is such a bad thing. Why do straight men and women on r/sex feel compelled to disassociate themselves from cultural associations about their identities that they view as inaccurate? They feel compelled to do so because homosexuality is still a stigmatized identity. It is doubtful that men would be so quick to distance themselves from associations they view as positive, even if they view them as false. For example, it is unlikely straight men on r/sex would work so hard to inform others that a rumor that they have a large penis is not true. They would not be quick to break this assumption because penis size is valued within masculinity and heterosexuality. Gayness, however, is not. Men and women could treat these associations as a compliment or as simple misidentification, but these were not dominant themes on Reddit. Instead we see frequent distancing from homosexuals and responding to assumptions of queerness as tragedy.

Homophobia, like capitalism, is a pervasive cultural ideology. Sociologists stand little to gain by asking *if* American's participate in capitalism. The capitalist system is ubiquitous, forcing those who staunchly oppose it to engage it. Therefore, sociologists focus their questions on *how* individuals participate in capitalism. Similarly, there is no way to avoid participating in homophobia. It is too deeply embedded in our discourses, ideologies, legal system, education, religions, media, and other institutions. Thus, my question is not *if* people on Reddit are homophobic; rather, I investigate how heterosexuals experience gender and sexually transgressive sex in a deeply homophobic society. From this research I found that homophobia is a pervasive ideology that influences the ways in which heterosexual men and women make sense of gender and sexual identities, bodies, and desires. Homophobia is the driving force encouraging

heterosexuals to treat homosexuals as “other”.

This project also revealed that we need a more nuanced discussion of homophobia. We need a framework for understanding the different workings of homophobia, including the ways in which this ideology informs people’s understanding of their own and others’ bodies, identities, and desires. A more complex understanding of homophobia might mirror recent discussions of “rape culture” and “implicit bias” of race to demonstrate the pervasive nature of homophobia.

Sex Positivity

One significant takeaway from this project is the lack of communication between straight men and women on r/sex surrounding desires that transgresses gender and sexual normativity. Straight men and women on r/sex are both very uncomfortable with these kinds of conversations. As a result, many people turn to places like Reddit, finding the anonymity of online spaces a better solution than talking to their partners. Many people on Reddit acknowledged this lack of communication and trust as problematic. Many people argued that without being able to openly communicate your desires and your fears with your partner, your sex life would never be all that you want.

The struggle to speak openly about sexual desires that lie outside the boundaries of cultural acceptability is a reflection of the sex negative culture Rubin (1984) describes. American culture socializes all of us into thinking and feeling that talking about sex is strange. We all struggle to some degree to talk openly about sex. Yet talking about our sexual experiences and desires may be one of the most important things we can do to encourage a more sex positive culture. Furthermore, addressing ways in which gender is implicated in sexual pleasure must be included in these discussions. Many people on

Reddit argued for elements of sex positivity, most specifically addressing the need for communication. Yet, these conversations also contained elements of a sex negative culture. For example, many people spoke of men's "need" to openly discuss pegging with a female partner and feel assured that no one else would ever find out. People claimed that straight women needed to do so out of recognition that if other people found out, their partners would be read as gay or as less than a man. Keeping pegging a secret so that others will not make a gender or sexual determination of your character is not sex positivity. It is a strategy for obtaining gender transgressive pleasure within a sex negative culture.

Pegging data revealed that heterosexuals have a hard time deciding if a sex act feels good to them until they determine if it is normal. This led to my analysis of heterosexuality as a sexual orientation marked with desires of gender and sexual normalcy. This finding is in keeping with Queer theory at large, and theories of heteronormativity in particular. Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (1999) documents how heterosexuals' ideas of normalcy contribute to the institutionalized measures that work to oppress queer life. In the case of pegging we see that heterosexuals' ideas of normalcy also work to inhibit their possibilities of sexual behavior.

Heteronormative discourse and ideologies encourage people to understand sexual behavior as normal or abnormal. This perspective must change in order for people to fully explore their sexual potentials. Evaluations of normal must be replaced with an ideology of enthusiastic consent, and the BDSM community serves as a wonderful template. Within BDSM ideology, any bodily pleasure is seen as acceptable as long as

everyone is a willing participant. There are no evaluations of normal.

While the BDSM community may serve as a useful resource to heterosexuals struggling with sex positivity, I am under no illusions that people can “shake off” these negative cultural constructs surrounding gender and sexual identities and behavior. The kinds of struggles people have around gender and sexual identities and desires are informed by a lifetime of gender socialization and accountability. Most people do not have the opportunity to sit in a Gender Studies or Sex and Society course and reflect upon the ways in which gender and sexuality are oppressive constructs. Most people do not have the opportunity to attend BDSM conferences. To say that people could simply choose to not be homophobic or to not subscribe to heteronormativity does not reflect the depth of the ways in which we embody culture. In this sense, we have to do more than police heterosexuals for their homophobic and heteronormative discourse if we want to see cultural change. We have to teach people how to not engage in such destructive ideologies and practices. A public sexual education curriculum that is focused on enthusiastic consent and sexual pleasure is a great place to start.

Limitations and Future Research

This project allowed for an investigation into one of the most private experiences in American life – having sex. People on Reddit have candid discussions with each other about their sexual experiences and fears in ways they generally do not in the offline world. This suggests that researching sexuality online is a fruitful site of analysis. However, this project contained significant limitations. A substantial barrier for this research was my inability to interact with Redditors, to ask them questions, or to probe them for clarification.

Another limitation is the nature of social media conversations. While studying sexuality online may be fruitful in that people may have candid conversations about their sex practices, social media conversations do not always provide the thick description that qualitative research is interested in. According to r/sex, a primary goal of this subreddit community is “for thought provoking self-posts that promote discussion” (www.reddit.com/r/sex). With the exception of two kinds of conversations, I did not find r/sex generated the kinds of lengthy discussions I had hoped for. Of the threads I analyzed, the two topics that did generate a considerable amount of discussion were those addressing whether or not someone was homophobic and pegging techniques. Analyzing pegging techniques was beyond the scope of this project. The conversations surrounding whether or not someone was homophobic, however, provided lengthy discussion relevant to this research. Yet most of the posts on r/sex did not really contribute to conversations. Instead they read as brief statements that did not seem to engage previous posts. It was as if people posted their two cents and left the thread. Much analysis in the “Having Sex” and “I’ve Got You Pegged” chapters reveals these comments. I was often left to analyze very brief statements for which I could not ask for clarification or for additional information. It would have been more ideal for analysis if more topics generated the kind of lengthy discussion that homophobia and pegging techniques led to.

This limitation was particularly problematic for analyzing comments that expressed disgust toward pegging . Comments suggesting pegging was disgusting were frequent, but often provided no indication whether disgust was related to feces, homosexuality, or something else. There was also a great deal of immature humor

surrounding these comments and it was impossible to determine what their disgust was actually about. Disgust is certainly an important factor in people's experiences of pegging, but I ultimately decided there was not enough information to conduct a thorough analysis. Future research on pegging should talk to men and women about the emotional experience of disgust.

Another limitation of this project was the anonymous possibilities that Reddit provides. The anonymity of the Internet is surely a factor in people being willing to discuss their experiences with pegging. However, anonymity also meant that I could not know much about who was posting. I could not obtain demographic information that is important for sociological analysis. While research shows the average Reddit user to be a 25-34 year old man living in a suburban or urban area, no research provides statistics on r/sex specifically. There are tens of thousands of subreddits and r/sex may have very different demographics than other subreddits or the Reddit community at large. Reddit does not require you provide any demographic information to register an account. Only a username and password is required. However, an interesting pattern occurred in original posts made by those seeking some kind of advice, which was the majority of posts. People almost always listed their age, gender, and relationship status, seeming to imply that this information was necessary in order to receive relevant feedback. No one, however, listed their race. This could represent that posters are overwhelmingly white and their race is not forefront in their minds the ways in which age, gender, and relationship status are. Or it could be that people do not think race is relevant to their sex practices. Both of these are speculations as it is impossible to determine. Knowing more about the racial background of who is posting would have been important to analysis,

especially given the links between white men and homophobia (Pascoe 2007; Ward 2015). Ultimately, without demographic information it was impossible to determine if people on r/sex are representative of larger groups.

Lastly, I found considerable evidence that sociologists should investigate women's homophobia. Most sociological research of homophobia and gender have looked to men's public displays of homophobic violence and language. But how do women contribute to a homophobic culture? My data suggest that women's homophobia may operate in private more so than men's public displays. Yet, just as the masculinity and homophobia literature suggest, women's homophobia might largely operate by enforcing traditional understandings of masculinity. Pegging discussions reveal that men anticipate being held accountable to women's homophobic ideas. Men talked to each other about women's homophobia as something they had to endure. Future research should interview men and their experience with women's homophobia.

Reddit did not serve as the most useful site for evaluating women's homophobia, but it certainly points us towards women's homophobia in future research. Interviewing women, conducting ethnographic research, or analyzing a website dominated by women's conversations would be more useful for understanding ways in which women perpetuate homophobic attitudes. As a starting point for understanding women's homophobia, researchers may look to the ways in which women enforce ideas of gender and sexual normativity onto their male partners during sex. To be certain, linking women's enforcement of gender and sexual normativity to men's displays of homophobia is not to excuse men's behavior. My data does not suggest that men are homophobic because of women. My data does suggest, however, that women's homophobia may be

present in their interactions with straight men.

Pegging Thoughts

The most generalized finding my study revealed is that pegging confuses people. Pegging pulls at a thread that can unravel what people think they know about gender and sexual identities. Masculinity is a fragile identity, one that requires constant maintenance to keep up the impression that it is anything but fragile. Yet, engaging in a sex act is enough to make both men and women worry men's gender. Pegging also confuses the assumptions heterosexuals embody about how to have sex. The confusion and anxiety people experience when presented with pegging is not simply about pegging, it is about gender. It is also about sexuality, but ultimately the confusion is about the sexual expectations of gender.

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