RETHINKING HETERONORMATIVITY

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# Introduction

Heterosexual roles are culturally determined. Enforcing the compliance of these heterosexual roles with the assumption that only heterosexuality is the normal attitude called heteronormativity (Habarth, 2015). Heteronormativity encompasses all those institutions and practical orientations that see or make heterosexuality seem the only normal, acceptable and privileged orientation of sex. Consequently, the negative attitudes towards non-heterosexuals (bisexuals, homosexuals, queer) indirectly require that only heterosexuality be regarded as normal. This phenomenon is called heteronormativity. This social construct is one of the biggest factors responsible for hatred and prejudice against non-heterosexuals.

Heteronormativity regards heterosexuality as the default sexual orientation and considers it a norm. Moreover, it sees sexual and marital relations only between opposite sexes as normal. This view is also called a heteronormative view, which aims at aligning biological sex and sexuality. However, in the process, it also perpetuates gender roles and constructs expectations about identities. The term heteronormativity was popularized by Michael Warner in 1991. The concept evolved from the notion of sex or gender system presented by Gayle Rubin and the notion of compulsory heterosexuality presented by Adrienne Rich.

***Measuring Heteronormativity***

Although the impact of heteronormativity is immense, the tools to quantitatively measure heteronormative attitudes are limited. One technique is to correlate heteronormative beliefs with overall inflexibility of a person's or a community's beliefs. Investigating the psychological make-up of people with this perspective has produced consistent results about explaining how heteronormativity categorizes people into normal vs. ‘other' (Hegarty & Prato, 2001). Another contribution in this regard was made by Massey in 2009 when he introduced a multidimensional measure called heteronormative resistance factor.

***Compulsory heterosexuality***

This term was popularized by poet Adrienne Rich. This cultural phenomenon, related to heteronormativity, explains how heterosexuals dominate culture by creating beliefs that only heterosexuality is the normal and acceptable orientation of sexuality and the rest are all deviant. One example of compulsory sexuality pertains to sex education that discusses only sex between opposite sex and thereby helps create a social construct and a perceived norm that sees only heterosexuality as acceptable. This also explains how almost everyone contributes towards compulsory heterosexuality in one way or the other, usually without even knowing it. Some thinkers of gender studies argue that even the terms such as “LGBTQ acceptance” in a way imply that that the “inferior” category needs to be accepted (Barker, 2011).

In 1980 Adrienne Rich wrote an essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". In the essay, she argues against the belief that heterosexuality is natural or intrinsic. She sees it as an institution imposed upon people that particularly relegates women to a position of subordination. She also highlighted the removal of lesbian related literature from the feminist scholarship. One of the primary objectives of this essay was to present heterosexuality as a political institution that harms women by providing men with default access to women. Rich sees it as a tool of making women psychically, psychologically and economically dependent on men, and therefore advances the idea of lesbianism as an extension of feminism.

***The Search for Roots of Heteronormativity***

Michael Foucault, the author of the book “History of Sexuality”, argues that sexuality is not something natural. Desires and drives, usually considered natural, are shaped by social institutions (Foucalt, 1976). He puts forth his theory on the discourse of sexuality and explains the "hypothesis of repression". He observes that the history of sexuality is generally read in terms of the repressive hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, modern society is still struggling with the sexual repression of the 19th century and that it is striving to liberate itself from this repression imposed in the name of morals. Foucault argues that rather the opposite of the hypothesis of repression is true. He explains how there has been an explosion of novel ways of thinking and expressing feelings related to sex. He traces these expressions back to the 17th century. Foucault also highlights that these expressions and the new forms of discourse about sex are the consequence of the changing capitalist landscape of power relations. In order to deal with the repression, he pointed to other outlets such as prostitution and psychiatry.

***The social construction of Gender and sexuality***

Simone de Beauvoir, The author of “The Second Sex”, said in her book that a person is not born feminine. A person becomes feminine and the whole civilization plays its part in creating this creature which is called feminine (Beauvoir, 1949). Everything seen or known as reality is regarded as partially, if not entirely, socially situated. The example of money may be used here to explain how realities are construction. Although paper is worth nothing, when it is printed like money, value is ascribed to it, depending on the colour and digits written on it. The value is thus not inherent in money. It is rather socially constructed.

This perspective of social constructionism can be applied elsewhere as well including gender. It can, therefore, be said that it is society and culture that create gender roles. The stronger versions of this view argue that all the major differences in the behaviour of men and women are socially constructed. But the weaker versions of this theory that behaviour is shaped by biology and social convention together.

"Gender is a masquerade," said Judith Butler in her magnum opus Gender Trouble (1990). It is the repetition of performing the roles of male and female according to the social conventions that embolden the idea of gender (Butler, 1991). Therefore, all the participants of human society are "doing" gender. This concept was termed as gender performativity by Judith Butler. This repetition of gender roles reinforces gender roles by internalizing the belief in both men and women that they are essentially different. This process of gendering is omnipresent. Everybody has been doing gendering ever since birth.

Gendering is done from birth. The construction of gender starts as soon as a child is born. The child is subjected to male-female binary categorization. Then they are named accordingly. Dressing them differently also becomes a mark of identifying gender. As soon as a child begins to talks, they begin to repeat what they have been taught as their names. Although sexual orientation does not come into play until puberty, yet, by the time they reach puberty, their orientation has already been shaped by constant exposure to gendered expectations and norms. Parenting is also gendered in that there are different expectations for fathers and mothers. The duties they perform and mothers and fathers manifest socially constructed roles.

Here it pertinent to address the question of whether gender comes from physiology. Gender and sex are two different concepts. The former is a social construct whereas the latter is a biological reality. Sex corresponds to the physiological differences between males and females. Gender is not defined by sex because there are no two sexes only. Transsexuals and transvestites/cross-dressers also exist.

Another important phenomenon to observe nowadays is the changing roles of men and women. Father have increasingly begun to take care of little children, which was once the only feminine job. Boys and girls now wear unisex clothes and get educated in similar ways. Men and women are increasingly competing for similar jobs in the market. These changing roles substantiate the argument that gender roles are indeed socially constructed realities which have historically placed women at a position of disadvantage.

***Rejecting the categories of gender and sexuality: Queer Theory***

Sexuality can be defined as sexual orientation and identity of a person. Just like sex and gender do not always align, gender and sexuality may not always align either. Moreover, sexuality may not necessarily correspond to a person’s biological sex. This idea has been elucidated in Queer theory in Gender Studies. The categories of normative and deviant sexualities are socially constructed ideas (Butler, 1991).

Queer means peculiar, strange, odd or abnormal. Until the 1980s, this word had negative connotations for homosexuals or bisexuals. Queer theory primarily capitalizes on the mismatches between/among sex, gender and sexuality (Lauretis, 1991). Queer theory is a poststructuralist critical theory. It emerged out of the fields of queer studies in the early 1980s. A movement called the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was established in Britain in 1970. By 1972 it had become one of the largest British gay organizations. It campaigned ferociously for homosexual equality.

To understand Queer theory, some terms need to be defined first. Bisexual is a person having a sexual orientation towards both biological sexes. Gay is a person who is biologically male but is sexually attracted to other men. Lesbian is a biological female having a sexual orientation towards women. Transgender, on the other hand, is a person who does not identify with the gender that is expected for him on the basis of their biological sex. Such a person may have a sexual orientation towards either sex or both sexes or none. An intersex is a person whose biological sex cannot be determined on the basis of traditional standards of the external genitalia or reproductive organs. Such a person is regarded as abnormal according to societal standards and norms. Such a person may have a sexual orientation towards either sex or both or none.

The above categories clearly show that gender identity may not necessarily align with a person's biological sex. Nor is it essential that a person's sexual orientation is aligned with a person's biological sex or gender. Knowing this helps us understand that heteronormativity is also a social construct.

***Masculinities, Femininities and Sexual Orientation***

Biological sex is determined by physiological differences between men and women. These differences result in the categories of "male" and "female". Likewise, the characteristics that describe gender identities are called femininities and masculinities. Since gender is a social construct, these femininities and masculinities correspond to socially constructed roles of men and women. These behaviours are learned. However, they do not describe sexual orientation. Femininities and masculinities vary across cultures, religions, classes and regions. How they are valued also differ from place to place.'

***Heterosexual imaginary***

Institutionalized heterosexuality structures gender in many ways. A theory which emerged in the 1990s that highlighted the ways of thinking that hide how dating, weddings and marriages structures gender. This theory studies a variety of social hierarchies including gender and race.

***Homosexuality and heteronormativity***

In the nature vs. nurture debate, homosexuality and gender play a central role. The debate on whether homosexuality is biological or socially constructed is inconclusive. Some advanced neuro-scans, comparing the brains of homosexuals and heterosexuals, have shown that there are some differences. For instance, the interstitial nuclei of the anterior hypothalamus are parts associated with behaviour and reproductive physiology, and the scans show that they are larger in heterosexual males and homosexual males. This make sits plausible that sexual orientation may be decided by biology, albeit not in the conventional fashion. Some researchers argue that homosexuality is a learned behaviour. However, there is significant evidence that children raised by homosexual parents are not necessarily homosexuals.

**The complexity of heteronormativity**

For the last couple of decades, feminists have been assessing how heterosexuality along with the belief and attitude of heteronormativity affects the lives of heterosexuals. They have been studying earlier feminists such as Monique Witting and Adrienne Rich, who endeavoured to relate, and quite successfully did relate, the institution of heteronormativity with the perpetuation of gendered roles such division of labour according to norms. They have also explained how it allows males to control women's productive and reproductive capacities. The concept of compulsory heterosexuality can be regarded as the predecessor of heteronormativity. By regulating the behaviour of heterosexuals and by stigmatizing non-heterosexuals, Heteronormativity, therefore, has far-reaching consequences. It is a double-sided social regulation institution (Jackson, 2006).

***Social consequences of heteronormativity***

The invisible force of heteronormativity dictates how relations should be carried out, how public spaces should be used. It shapes how women and men should behave. It forces women to serve men after marriage and promotes motherhood. It also creates an expectation for men's behaviour as hegemonic masculinity. Above all, it shapes a negative perception of sexual minorities (non-heterosexuals).

It is not uncommon that negative opinions are held about those who do not identify themselves as heterosexual. The sexual orientation of such people is often equated with harassment. This institutionalized bias is often termed as heterosexism (Peel, 2001). Heterosexism is pathologizing or stigmatizing non-heterosexuality whereas heteronormativity is normalizing heterosexuality.

Both in gender and queer theories, heteronormativity has been identified as one of the primary factors that promote prejudice against transgender and non-heterosexual identities (Kitzinger, 2005). Even welfare laws deny some normally available welfare services to sexual minorities (Lind, 2004)

Cathy J. Cohen and Michael Warner, the foremost critics of heteronormative behaviour, argue that heteronormativity stigmatizes and marginalizes deviant forms of sexuality and gender. In a heteronormative culture, heterosexuality is privileged whereas LGBTs are oppressed. Even in marriage, tax codes and workplaces, they are discriminated against.

Heteronormativity creates a “sex hierarchy” wherein sexual practices are graded as acceptable or not acceptable. It is a hierarchy in which only monogamous intercourse between two heterosexuals is labelled as good. Sexual acts outside the heterosexuality regime fall in the category of bad sex (Rubin, 1993). This hierarchy is partially responsible for stigmatizing gay or lesbians as deviant for even those practices which are considered acceptable when performed by straight people such as sex in public areas or even watching pornography.

***Conclusion***

Having substantiated that gender is a social construct, that sexuality may or may not align with a person’s gender or biological sex, and that sex is not binary, it can be concluded that heteronormativity is a socially constructed attitude. The various concepts of Gender Studies such as Queer Theory, Masculinities and Femininities, and the difference between sex and gender- the former being biological while the latter being socially constructed- help us understand how heteronormativity itself is a social construction. Its consequences are far-reaching. It perpetuates the socially constructed roles which result in an inequitable distribution of labour, thereby placing women in a disadvantaged position. Moreover, non-heterosexuals are stigmatized and considered outcast by people with a heteronormative attitude and belief. It has promoted prejudice against the LGBTs. With changing gender roles worldwide and increasing acceptance for non-heterosexuals, it can be hoped that the norms which evolved over centuries can be reversed, albeit gradually.

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