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*Asexuality and Sexualization: A Panel on Asexuality*  
[with Ela Przybylo & Mark Carrigan]

# **Notes on Compulsory Sexuality and Asexual Existence**

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“[I]n this sexist society, for a woman to be independent means she can't be a woman - she must be a dyke [...] - which is to say, when you strip off all the packaging, you must finally realize that the essence of being a "woman" is to get fucked by men.”

-- Radicalesbians (1970)

# Sex as Heterosexuality's Tool

- Women given a stake in their own oppression
  - Benefit from the male privilege of their male partners (Bunch, 1975)
- Compulsory Heterosexuality (Rich, 1980)
- Characteristics of male power (p. 638)
  - 1) “to deny women [our own] sexuality”
  - 2) “or to force it [male sexuality] upon them”

# Women's Mandated Sexuality: Critiques

- Note: US focus
- “The 'sexual revolution' of the twentieth century liberated men's sexual access to women”
  - Jeffrey
- Older discourses: have/hold; male sexual drive
- Newer permissive sexual discourse
  - No longer legitimate for women to say “no”
    - Hollway, 1984

# Women's Mandated Sexuality: Responses

- Political celibacy & political lesbianism
- Women's chosen asexuality as a radical refusal of the sexual imperative (Fahs, 2010)
  - Out of touch with asexual (women) folk's realities
    - Unwanted consensual sex
    - Devaluing of asexuality and asexual relationships

# Women's consent to unwanted sex

- Unwanted consensual sex
  - Agreeing to sexual contact
  - No direct pressure from a partner
- Unwanted consensual *heterosex* is common
  - In the US, about twice as common for women

# Women's Unwanted Consensual Sex

Type of Sex	Time	Study	Prevalence	Country	
Oral, Vaginal, Anal intercourse	2 weeks	O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998	<b>50%</b>	US	
	1 month	Katz & Tirone 2010	<b>22%</b>	US	
	Current partner		<b>40%</b>	US	
		Katz & Tirone, 2009	<b>33%</b>	US	
Vaginal Intercourse	First Time	Houts, 2005	<b>28%*</b>	US	
	3 weeks	Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010	<b>46%</b>	Canada	
	Lifetime (non virgins)		Impett, 2002	<b>63%</b>	US
			Krahé, Scheinberg-Olwig, & Koplín, 2000	<b>33% &amp; 39%</b>	Germany
				<b>55%</b>	US
			Sprecher, Hatfield, Cortese, Potapova & Levitskaya, 1994	<b>32%</b>	Russia
				<b>25%</b>	Japan
			<b>65%</b>	US	

# Reasons and impact

- Women consent to unwanted sex
  - In order to please a partner
  - Out of obligation
  - (Out of fear or pressure)

(O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Walker, 2001; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010)

- Women's unwanted consensual sex
  - Relationship got better or stayed the same
  - Women felt neutral or actively distressed
  - (Self-blame)

(Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Walker, 2001)

# Sex for Asexuals

- “because I'm supposed to”
- “because maybe that will fix me”
- “because I wanted to get my friends off my back about being a virgin”
- “because my partner wants me to” or “because it's important to my partner”
- “because I want a romantic relationship”
- “because I wanted to know if I could”
- “because my partner forced me”
  - e.g., Carrigan, 2011; Scherrer, 2008

# Devaluing the non-sexual

- Romantic partnerships above friendships
    - Implicitly in talk
    - To distinguish romantic relationships & friendships
      - Binary categories (friend vs partner)-- not necessarily meaningful to asexual people
- Chasin, 2008
- Discussed in the asexual community and indirectly in qualitative asexuality research
    - e.g., Carrigan, 2011; Kim, 2011; Scherrer, 2008

# Sexuality above asexuality

- Caution against “too much acceptance”

Davidson, 2006

[discussed with Davidson's revised position: *Asexual Curiosities*, 2009]

- Legitimate(?) subjects for psychiatric intervention

- The distressed lifelong asexual
- The formerly sexual (distressed or not)

Chasin, forthcoming

# Sex = token of legitimacy

- Legal recognition
  - e.g., tax benefits, health insurance, etc.
- Social recognition
  - Relationship believed and understood by others
  - Relationship valued and accepted
    - Homophobic focus on sex
    - (i.e., “illegitimate” sex ==> fraudulent claim of legitimacy)
  - Passing/invisibility

A not-so-new take on “sex work”:

“A woman who has sold herself, even for a ring and a new name, need hold her skirt aside for no creature in the street. They both earn their bread in some way.”

-- Olive Schreiner (1968, p. 167)

# Under compulsory sexuality

- “Sex work”: *normal* part of hetero/sexuality
  - Price for privilege of associations with men
  - Price for privilege of associations with sexuals
- Unchallenged assumption of sexual superiority
- Being asexual is political
  - Not necessarily radical resistance
  - Question asexual “sex work” (violence?)
  - The necessity of being able to say “no”

# From Queer Secrets (Anonymous)

I'm pretty certain I'm asexual  
but my heterosexual boyfriend  
won't believe it

he says i'm reading into it too  
much and convincing myself  
for convenience

...it's anything **but** convenient

Thank you.  
Questions?

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