

The word 'heterosexism' derives directly from the feminist creation of the term 'sexism' during the late 1960s. The first usage of the term heterosexism is given as 1979 by the Oxford English Dictionary and it is defined as 'prejudice and antagonism shown by heterosexual persons towards homosexuals; discrimination against homosexuals' (*OED* online). The felt necessity for the addition 'hetero' to sexism indicated the increasing tendency within feminism to see gendered inequalities in society as equally informed by the oppressive structures of racism and homophobia. It also indicates that lesbian feminists in particular still felt that much of feminist discourse accepted the centrality of 'heteroreality'. Gay and lesbian groups within and outside feminism began to feel the need to distinguish between sexism – directed at all women – and heterosexism, which indicates the prejudicial treatment of [gay](#) and [lesbian](#) individuals and the assumption that heterosexuality is the sexual choice of all people. The latter point, which takes us beyond the basic *OED* definition, is crucial to understanding why heterosexism is such an important concept. The concern, particularly from gay and lesbian groups, was that even if a patriarchal ideology could be successfully challenged, such a revolution in consciousness would not necessarily alter deeply entrenched homophobic prejudices.

As [Diane Richardson](#) states, 'heterosexuality infuses the social realm; it represents the idea of normal behaviour which is central to the concept of the social and the process of socialisation into the social realm' (1996: 13). She goes on to acknowledge that heterosexuality is gendered and also acts principally to socialise women into acceptance of monogamous nuclear family life. In other words, the social institutions that endorse heterosexuality – marriage and family – come to define it. This is in contrast to the way 'homosexuality' is generally defined, which is primarily in terms of sexual identification – sexual practices, age of consent (for gay men) and intimate relationships. From this it is clear that heterosexuality, rather than being regarded as a set of sexual practices or preferences expressed by a clearly defined group, is simply related to 'normality', whereas homosexuality is expressed in terms of deviance, as if an individual's life is defined by their sexuality. This demonstrates that the opposite sides of this binary are perceived in entirely different ways – one where sexuality is incidental, a part of the wider picture, the other where it comes to define everything and informs negative discourses about gays and lesbians.

One of the most controversial essays on this theme is [Adrienne Rich's](#) (1980) *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. The intention behind the essay was, as she says in her preface, 'for feminists to find it less possible to read, write, or teach from a perspective of unexamined heterocentricity' (Rich 1986: 24) At the heart of [Rich's](#) argument lies the desire to show that heterosexuality or lesbianism are not 'choices' made equally available but that heterosexuality carries with it the assurance of normality. Unless an individual 'comes out' and asserts their homosexuality, they are assumed to be heterosexual. In this way [Rich](#) shows the extent to which heterosexuality acts as an institution rather than a sexual choice or practice. For women in particular Rich asserts that heterosexuality is an instrument of patriarchal power, which shapes their lives in ways that are perhaps yet to be analysed and means that heterosexuality is seen not only as the most desirable, but the inevitable journey in a woman's life.

In this way [Rich](#) implies that practices that entail or have historically entailed physical force, such as rape, beating, [clitorodectomy](#), and those which rely on the shaping and control of consciousness of the self – such as the perpetuation of romance narratives in literature, art and film – shore up the institution of heterosexuality, either by the promise of happiness or implied threat of punishment. The popular portrayal of the male sex drive as all-consuming and in need of satisfaction once triggered is, [Rich](#) asserts, a contributory factor in the ways women are led to accept different sexual identities and controls for themselves than for men. For [Rich](#), 'the failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system of racism is maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness' (1986: 51).

Crucially [Rich](#) implies that compulsory heterosexuality infects [feminist](#) scholarship and that, until it is subjected to further critical scrutiny, feminist discourse remains predominantly heterosexist. At key points and most controversially she seems to suggest that becoming a lesbian is politically superior to remaining heterosexual because there is 'a *nascent* feminist political content in the act of choosing a woman lover or life partner in the face of institutionalised heterosexuality' (Rich 1986: 66).

For some [radical feminists](#) it is implied that heterosexism delegitimises heterosexual intercourse altogether. Writers such as [Andrea Dworkin](#) and [Sheila Jeffreys](#) see all acts of penile penetration of the vagina as re-enactments of men's power, because they regard the act as ineluctably imbued with the symbolic meanings it has taken on in the past. [Jeffreys](#) finds it 'difficult to imagine what shape a woman's desire for a man would take in the absence of eroticised power difference since it is precisely this which provides the excitement of heterosexuality today' (Jeffreys 1990: 316). However, to suggest that heterosexual women can only enjoy penetrative sex by eroticisation of their subordination is to affirm that it is not possible to resist or subvert these dominant meanings and establish more egalitarian principles to sexual practices.

Of course the lack of definition of heterosexual practices allows heterosexuality's unquestioned dominance as an institution since it encompasses the very fabric of life. As [Carol Smart](#) suggests, '[h]eterosexual identity is therefore

akin to a white colonial identity. It entails an effortless superiority, a moral rectitude, a defeat of the emotional and the neurotic by the power of the unconscious struggle and, of course, the certain knowledge of masculine superiority' (Smart in Richardson 1996: 173).

As the above discussion demonstrates, it is impossible to define heterosexism without looking at some of the debates around heterosexuality within feminism. Rich's pathbreaking essay prompted straight feminists to analyse what heterosexual identity for women means and [Kitzinger and Wilkinson](#)'s collection tried to get straight women to articulate exactly what 'being' heterosexual was like. From this perspective, combating heterosexism wasn't just about acknowledging its hegemony, but was about being honest about the possible tensions between heterosexuality and feminism. As Fuss says, '[f]or heterosexuality to achieve the status of the "compulsory", it must present itself as a practice governed by some internal necessity. The language and law that regulate the establishment of heterosexuality as both an identity and an institution, both a practice and a system, are the language and law of defense and protection' (1991: 2). As Fuss implies, the 'homo' is always exterior and marginal to the 'hetero', but yet necessary to its very definition and existence. Looking at lesbian identity, [Judith Butler](#) reflects that 'compulsory heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic; the norm that determines the real implies that "being" lesbian is always a kind of miming, a vain effort to participate in the phantasmatic plenitude of naturalised heterosexuality which will always and only fail' (Butler in Fuss 1991: 20–1). So nervous were early radical lesbian feminists of 'miming' heterosexuality in any way, there was a virtual taboo until the late 1980s on the discussion of practices or identities which reflected back to heterosexuality – for example, butch and femme or SM (sadoomasochism).

Heterosexism is a term that is now used more broadly to show how the discourses of public life assume the norm of a certain kind of life-style and endorse it morally and materially. More and more in opposition to this, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered groups are fighting for equal rights 'in relation to age of consent laws, to healthcare, rights associated with legal recognition of domestic partnerships, including the right to marry, immigration rights, parenting rights and so on' (Richardson 2000: 9). It is also likely to be the case that a large number of heterosexuals themselves do not actively subscribe or profit from the institutions which support heterosexuality and may actually feel suffocated by the normative behaviours and values it assumes.