

# Heteronormativity: Questioning Normal



# Gender / Sex

**Gender is a fluid category**

**Gender is a perpetual performance?**

**Male/Female have anatomical-  
biological correlates...**

**Masculinity/femininity are culturally  
constructed, and subject to social  
negotiation.**

# Gender / Sex

**Sex: term denoting the role of an individual in the biological reproductive process.**

**Gender: term denoting how one relates to society.**

# Gender / Sex

Sex: *biological* femaleness or maleness

Gender: *cultural* femaleness or maleness (or other, such as transsexual or intersexual)

# Gender /// Sex

Sex: term  
individual  
reproduct

Gender: to  
relates to

**These don't  
always agree.**

# Gender /// Sex

**Body**

**Identity**

# Gender /// Sex

## Systems of differentiation

“Others” are made static and finite.

“Others” are bounded by their bodies.

Whereas *you* are allowed to be dynamic and contingent.

# Gender // Sex

## Systems of differentiation

**Is any system of differentiation inherently a system of prestige establishment?**

**Meaning lies in differentiation?**

**“Gender is itself a prestige system—a system of discourses and practices that constructs male and female not only in terms of differential roles and meanings but also in terms of differential value...”**



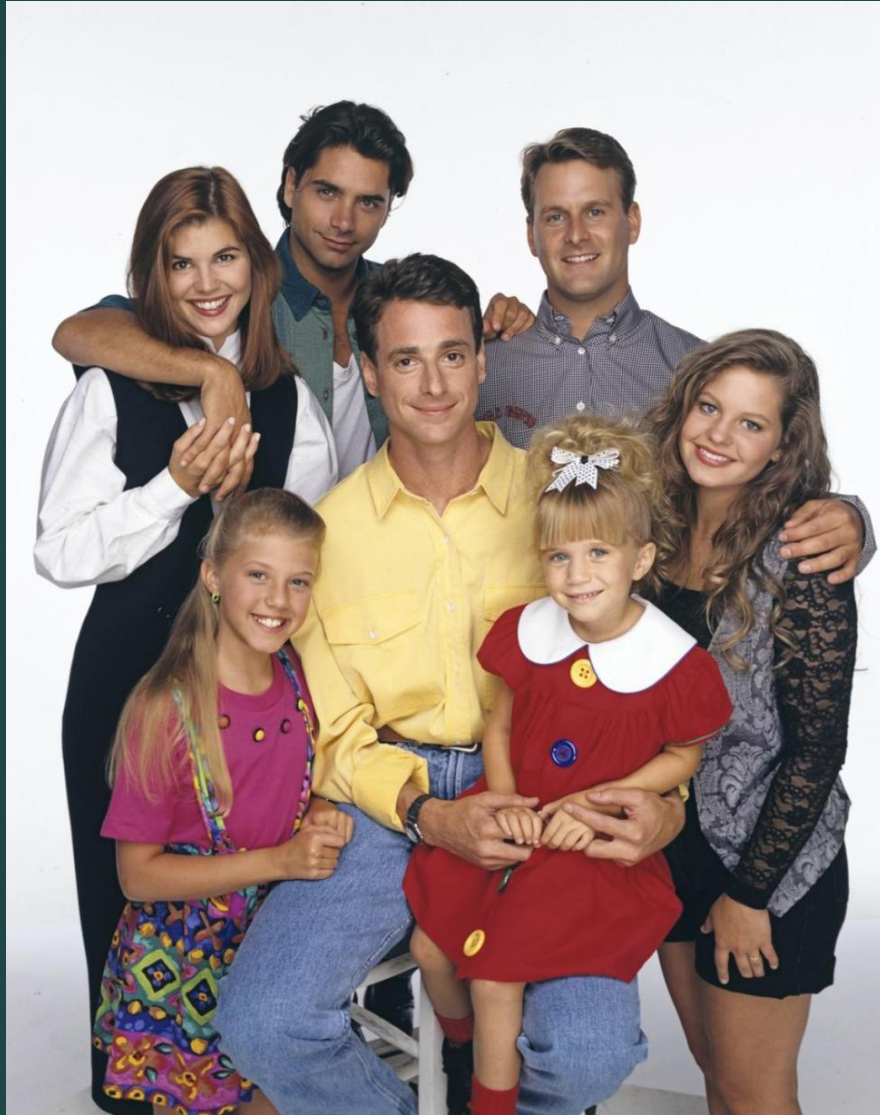
# NORMAL?



# NORMAL?



# NORMAL?





# NORMAL?



# NORMAL?

## Normative

*Dictionary says:* establishing, relating to, or deriving from a standard of behavior.

# NORMAL?

## Normative

*Dictionary says:* establishing, relating to, or deriving from a standard of behavior.

**What does this mean?**

# NORMAL?

## Normative

*Dictionary says:* establishing, relating to, or deriving from a standard of behavior.

**Normality is constructed.  
Nothing is “naturally” normal.  
Nothing is “essentially” normal.  
Normality must be established through social  
practices.**

# NORMAL?

## Normative

Dictionary says: establishing, relating to, or deriving from a standard of behavior.

So, HETERONORMATIVITY is the social practice through which heterosexuality is constructed to appear normal, natural, or what is “supposed to be”.

Taking for granted opposite-sex preference in individuals.

The cultural norm whereby heterosexual practices are considered essential to the moral health of society.



# NORMAL?

Is heterosexuality the default of our society?

Who gets to decide these defaults?

No one?

Defaults are defaults because they are good at perpetuating the status quo.

And who benefits from the perpetuation of the status quo?

# NORMAL?

Is heterosexuality the default of our society?

Who gets to decide that?

**People currently in  
positions of power**

Defaults are defaults because they are good at perpetuating the status quo.

And who benefits from the perpetuation of the status quo?

# **NORMAL?**

**And who is hurt by the perpetuation of the status quo?**

# NORMAL?

And who is hurt by the perpetuation of the status quo?

**People currently  
disempowered.**

# **NORMAL?**

**And who is hurt by the perpetuation of the status quo?**

**There are people who are discriminated against today.**

**If the status quo and social “defaults” don’t change, they will continue to be discriminated against in the future.**

# NORMAL?

Can the social “defaults” be changed?

**YES!**

But there is often resistance to change.

Change = uncertainty?

Change = instability?

Uncertainty & Instability for who?

# NORMAL?

Can the social “defaults” be changed?

**People currently in  
positions of power**

**YES!**

Change = uncertainty?

Change = instability?

Uncertainty & Instability for who?

# NORMAL?

What is Natural?





# NORMAL?

**What is Natural?**

**An idea, practice, or thing that would  
exist independent of humans  
(and their culture).**

# NORMAL?

**What kind of sexuality does “nature” want or prefer?**

**None. Nature doesn't want or prefer anything.**

# **NORMAL?**

**Homosexuality is not exclusive to humans.**

**So, it's not the corruptive result of culture.**

**Evolution works on the level of species.**

**NOT INDIVIDUALS.**

# NORMAL?

If it benefits the perpetuation of a population to have exclusively opposite-sex partners, then it's "good" for evolution.

If it inhibits the perpetuation of a population to oppress the range of sexual practices available to its members, then it is "bad" for evolution.

**But there is no way we are  
"supposed to be."**

# NORMAL?

If it benefits the perpetuation of a population to have exclusively opposite-sex partners, then it's "good" for evolution.

**Norm violations are necessary!**

If a population has alternative sexual practices available to its members, then it is "bad" for evolution.

**But there is no way we are "supposed to be."**

# NORMAL?

How does heteronormativity work?

One of heteronormativity's strengths is its invisibility.



Is it institutionalized?

# **N O R M A L ?**

**Is there institutionalized  
heteronormativity?**

**...Just as there is institutionalized  
racism?**

**Is there hetero privilege?**

**...Just as there is white privilege?**

# NORMAL?

Is there institutionalized heteronormativity?

Sure seems like it.

Is there hetero privilege?

...Just as there is white privilege?



# **N O R M A L ?**

**Hetero privilege or institutionalized heterosexuality (like its racial correlates) is often about what you DON'T GET more than what you DO GET.**

**No one is getting a prize for being a heterosexual, but...**

# NORMAL?

## Being hetero means you don't...

- Have any problem marrying a loved one.
- Get denied promotions or jobs based on your sexuality.
- Get targeted for hate crimes based on your sexuality.
- Have people say you're an evil sinner bound for Hell and damnation based on your sexual practices.
- Have people be suspicious of your motives.
- Have people assume you had a troubled childhood.
- Have people jump to conclusions about your tastes, beliefs, and habits based on your sexual preference.

# NORMAL?

Being hetero means...

You're allowed to be a full person.



And not a caricature.

# NORMAL?

People get scared when things don't fit nicely in boxes...

Some people get so scared of something not fitting into their ready-made boxes that they will violently assault things outside the box.



# NORMAL?

Our brains are lazy...

And deconstructing boxes can be hard...



# NORMAL?

The normalization of heterosexuality requires perpetual upkeep...

It is often vigorously enforced through painful stigmatization of norm violators.

Why is there such a fear of being considered gay?

Probably because gay people DO NOT receive equal treatment from this society.

# NORMAL?

Why does the phrase “No homo” exist?

Why does the phrase “That’s so gay” imply something bad or unpleasant?

**Is this Homophobia?**

**heteronormativity = homophobia**

**?????**

# NORMAL?

Heteronormativity makes homosexuality out to be something peculiar, strange, against the norm...

... And this can certainly lead to fear of homosexuality.

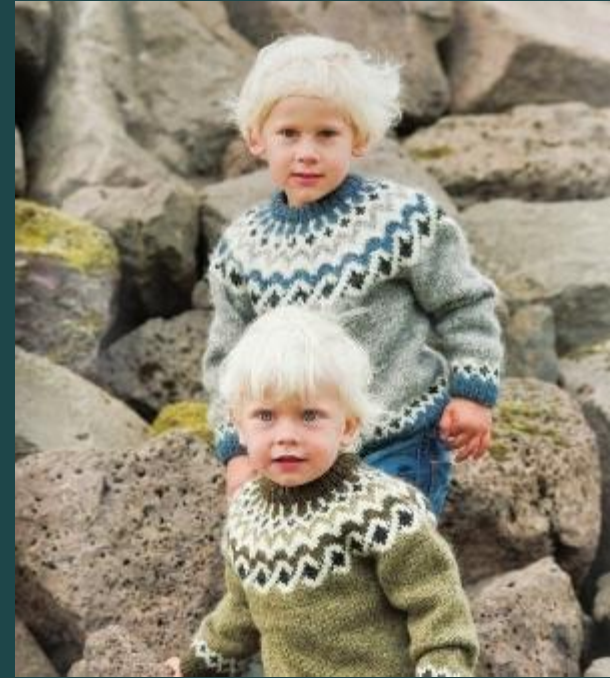


# What is a heterosexual?

“Heterosexual” is an invented category.

Remember: groups need counter groups to exist.

The group “White Iclander” doesn’t really exist, it doesn’t need to, there’s not a counter group from which it needs to distinguish itself.



# What is a heterosexual?

The practices of same-sex and different-sex relationships have existed forever.

But the terms homosexual and heterosexual are historical products of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (early efforts of psychologists).

Historically in our society, there was a need to distinguish oneself from people with same-sex preference.

# What is a heterosexual?

Our culture is probably not the only one in the history of the species to cultivate this distinction for whatever political or ideological reason.

But there are cultures in which the practice of same-sex relations isn't distinguished from different sex relations. There's not a distinction between homo and heterosexuality, there is just sexuality.

# Raising heterosexuals...

Do 3 to 6 year olds have sexual preference?

Highly doubtful.

Why then do the majority of mothers assume their children are heterosexual?

# Raising heterosexuals...

When asked if they worry about their (3 to 6 year old) son being gay what evidence do mothers base their response on?

Different sex friends/relationships? Maybe.

But more often counter-normative gender behavior, such as wearing dresses and playing with Barbie dolls.

# Raising heterosexuals...

Can parenting “prevent” (or influence) a child’s sexual preferences later in life?

Why does violating gender norms that are not overtly sexual (like a boy playing with dolls or a girl who likes hunting) interpreted as signs of same-sex preference?

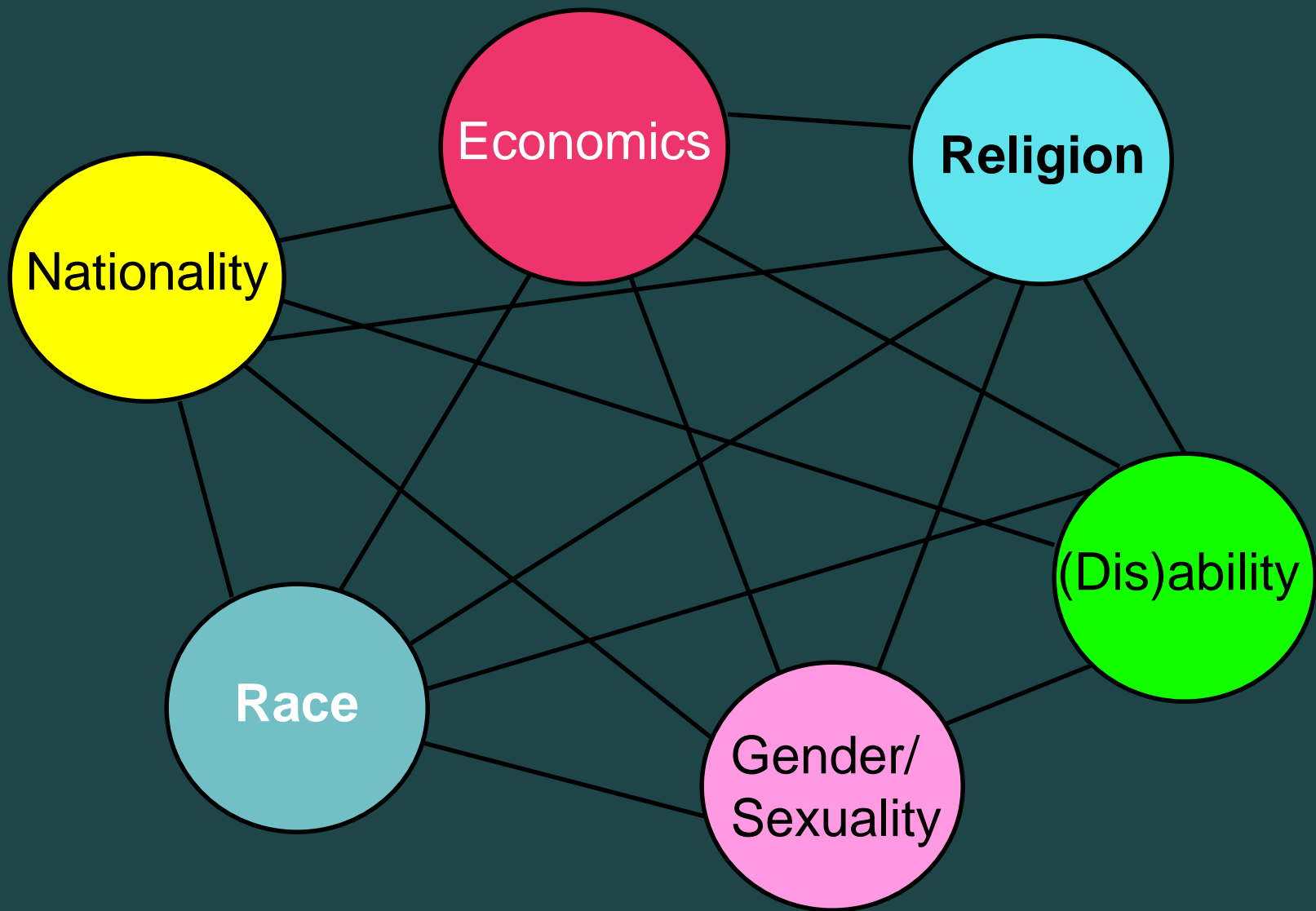
# Raising heterosexuals...

How can institutions reinforce heterosexuality and gender roles?



(Pamela Smith 2011)

# INTERCONNECTED





# Colonialized Sexuality

---



# Colonialized Sexuality

---

**How have ethnographers viewed the sexuality of the populations they study?**



# Colonialized Sexuality

---

How have ethnographers viewed the sexuality of the populations they study?

Through the “norms” of their own society.

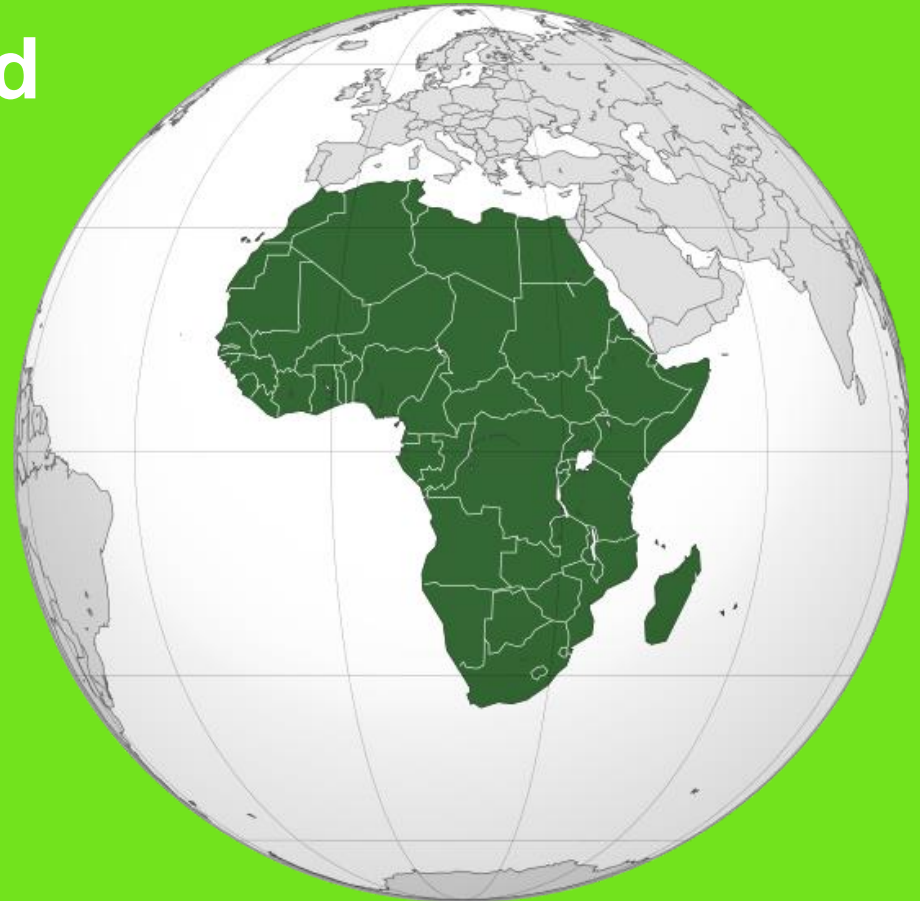


# Colonialized Sexuality

---

When it was *useful* for colonial subjects to savage... they practiced homosexuality.

When it was *useful* for them to be more 'natural'... they were exclusively heterosexual.



# Colonialized Sexuality

---

**In reality...**

**Sexuality is a complex performance that doesn't neatly fit into categories.**

**“Deviant” is relative?**



# Colonialized Sexuality

---

## Reasons for same-sex relations:

- Healing magic
- To remain faithful to spouse
- Avoid prostitutes when away
- To purposefully break taboos
- Maintain virile purity
- Certain days of week husband is not allowed to touch wife, so takes male partner
- Corruptive influence of Orient or Europe

# Colonialized Sexuality

---

Reasons for same-sex relations:

**ALL FUNCTIONAL**

**NOTHING** about the possibility of  
enjoyment or attraction to someone of the  
same sex.

# Colonialized Sexuality

---

Europeans didn't make anyone gay or straight...

But they may have introduced 'shame' into how groups view their own practices...





# Colonialized Sexuality

**Contemporary Euro-American family/sexuality structure is simply the most efficient form for the (industrial) economy.**



# Raising heterosexuals...

How can institutions reinforce heterosexuality and gender roles?

By discouraging counter-normative behaviors.

# Raising heterosexuals...

A guest lecturer delivers two lectures. In one he mentions his partner Jason, in the other he mentions his partner Jennifer.

93% of students said they would unquestionably hire him when he identified as hetero.

8% said they would unquestionably hire him when he identified as gay.

# Raising heterosexuals...

A guest lecturer delivers two lectures. In one he mentions his partner Jason, in the other he mentions his partner Jennifer.

**Real life  
discrimination**

when he identified as gay.

# Raising heterosexuals...

What was the primary reason given?

Distrust.

Students feared the gay professor might have an “agenda.”

To what? Spread homosexuality?

# Raising heterosexuals...

Novelty attachment:

You don't notice the normal.

But something deviates from normal it stands out.

Say I were to tell a story about John and Andrew – a couple struggling to afford health care for John's epilepsy medication – you may not pay attention to the “lesson” about health care, and focus on the same-sex relationship.

# Raising heterosexuals...

Well, DON'T!

Be aware that, yes, as a human you too may be prone to this novelty attachment thing, but now that you're aware that it exists you can overcome it.

# Marriage Equality



(Katrina Kimport 2013)



# Marriage Equality

Are monogamous, child-rearing marriages normalized in our society?

Yes!

So, why are some couples not allowed to do it?

# Marriage Equality

Discriminating who is allowed to get married is a violent act of exclusion for many.

Getting married can reduce anxiety -- a person or couple can comfortably know their status, there's a feeling of safety... this is a privilege that has been legally denied same sex couples.

Discrimination of any kind can lead to higher levels of stress-sensitive mental health problems.

# Marriage Equality

“When people don’t challenge the ways in which their freedom is limited – when discrimination is just taken as the status quo it causes a perpetual wounding of dignity... to internalize that you are less than normal.”

# Marriage Equality

Some of the same mechanisms used to discriminate other minority groups are in place in the discrimination of same-sex couples.

Revealing these mechanisms of disempowerment is the main goal of this class.

Discrimination is simple – it has to be, because it is done by dumb and lazy people.

Like stereotyping, discrimination exists out of a lack creativity or originality.