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Crossing the Border: Locating heterosexuality as a boundary for lesbian and disabled women

By Clare Beckett¹

Abstract

This article draws on my personal experience, and on the separate experiences of 'leaving heterosexuality' and of 'being disabled'. I have attempted to find common ground for action between these two groups by interrogating the experience of being sexual. I argue that heterosexuality functions as a social matrix, with exclusionary practices that operate in similar ways towards both groups. Mechanisms may be different, but the experience of exclusion is similar, and is based on similar practices. This article focuses on specific points in the exclusionary process, and illustrates similarities.

Key words: heterosexuality, disability, lesbian

Introduction

This article has developed from the juxtaposition of two tasks. I was working on understanding the process that led women research partners in my doctoral research sample to make a 'coming out' declaration, and also trying to arrange a weekend away for myself and my woman lover who is a wheelchair user. I was seeing evidence in my research that leaving heterosexuality created need for a statement not necessarily linked to sexual acts, and I was ringing hotel after hotel, only to find that none were willing to provide two women with a disabled room with a double bed. (Actually, they rarely provided disabled rooms with double beds!). Both tasks required me to make sexuality visible, without linking that visibility to heterosexual *social* assumptions. In creating visibility, I was negotiating a hidden boundary that divided individual action from social recognition. So, this article interrogates heterosexuality as a social institution that masks, de-values and trivializes difference. That masking, de-valuing and trivializing creates a boundary that must be negotiated in order to gain entry to social value and respect. In this paper I explore the experience of negotiating that boundary.

I draw on the experience of women who identify themselves as disabled, and of women who identify themselves as lesbian. I also draw on my own experience of both locations. There are three reasons for locating disabled women and lesbians in relationship to heterosexuality. Firstly, both feminist political action and disability politics share identification that the 'personal is the political'. Personal border skirmishes illuminate and potentially change the nature of the border. Secondly, feminist voices can be hidden from the disability movement, and disabled women are sometimes missing from feminist thought and action. While I do not minimise differences and oppressions that stem from sexuality and disability, I think that commonality should also be stressed. Thirdly, I am situated with experience in both groups.

Jenny Morris writes that

The fact that dependence is a key part of the social construction of gender for women *and* of the social construction of disability means that women's

powerlessness is confirmed by disability.(Morris, 1993:89 original emphasis)

and, in so doing argues that disability becomes a 'double disadvantage'. My argument is slightly different. It seems to me that *both* disabled women and non-heterosexual women are disadvantaged by mechanisms of heterosexuality, as well as by mechanisms of gender. In this sense, heterosexuality becomes the sphere of the adult, or normal. Not to be part of that sphere is to be powerless and dependant. Entry to that sphere is through recognition of heterosexual social sexuality.

I am not attempting to conflate the experience of being lesbian with the experience of being disabled. I am trying to identify commonality in the experience of locating women's action. Beth Ferri and Noel Gregg (1998) begin their article by stating

Gender and Disability are both social constructs, understandable only within the contexts and relationships that give meaning to the terms' (Ferri and Gregg 1998:429)

Here, I am using common experience of heterosexuality to give meaning to the experience of lesbian and of disabled women. I recognise that all groupings, women, lesbian and disabled, also exist in location to institutional locators of class, or race, or age. For the purposes of this article, I interrogate only heterosexuality, lesbian, and disabled.

A Note On Terms Used

My understanding of disability has developed from the theoretical to the practical, as the partner of a mobility impaired woman. As feminists and political activists, my partner and I develop and teach awareness of the rights inherent in a social model of disability as presented definitively by Colin Barnes (1990). Jenny Morris (1991) among others has developed this argument in tune with personal politics, and Barbara Fawcett (2000) has interrogated links between feminist perspectives and disability. I do not associate disability with specific impairments. So, although I describe my partner as a wheelchair user or as having impaired mobility, it is inaccessible locations and lack of awareness that disable her rather than her embodied impairment. This standpoint can conflict with those feminist theorists that foreground issues of care. I do not intend to contribute directly to conversation between the disabled people's movement and the feminist movement about contested locations and uses of 'care'. I have not engaged in a rights 'dualism', where one perspective can be prioritized. I am looking for common experience in negotiating (hetero) sexuality.

Heterosexuality is also both an embodied experience and a specific social relationship. Like Gillian Dunne (2000), I do not think that heterosexual sex is any more, or less, natural or right than any other kind of sex. Nor do I think that heterosexual women individually 'sleep with the enemy'. Dunne (2000) looks for examination of implicit assumptions about heterosexuality and lesbianism that work against interrogation of heterosexuality as a constructed category, and identifies the following elements of a 'theoretical heterosexism'

that heterosexuality is natural/desirable, or that lesbians replicate heterosexual (male/female) practices, or that a too vocal critique of heterosexuality undermines the popularity of feminism (like the New Labour view that socialism loses votes). (Dunne: 2000:134)

Creating a category not only marks the boundaries of that category, but also reflects the parameters of other categories. Janet Halley (1993) explores this process as a way of exploring boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality. In her analysis, homosexuality not only constructs the border of heterosexuality, but also becomes the only exit from heterosexuality. In other words people are perceived to be, and are treated as, heterosexual unless they are differentiated by functions of heterosexuality or differentiate themselves. As early as 1984, Gayle Rubin described a 'wall' of expectation, based on social reward, between valued sexual interaction (heterosexual, married, reproductive) and sanctioned sexual interaction. While she described the wall as being made up of hegemonic social values and fears, I would like to use the concept of the wall as being heterosexuality itself.

Drawing on my own research project, I argue that to be lesbian is also to be part of a constructed category, and identification is only partly centered around sexual activity. As one research response was phrased

At the time, I just thought I was sleeping with a woman. It was only later I realised I was lesbian now!

Harte (1994) traces the visibility and invisibility of 'lesbian' as a social category, separate from individual action, drawing analyses from social control and policing. Jan Lofstrom (1997) presents an overview of interrogation of connections between social processes and the creation of 'the homosexual'. His account does not necessarily reflect lesbian experience, but does place 'homosexual' and by inference 'lesbian' in relationship to social interpretation and social structure.

Border Crossings

If heterosexuality is a border, then there will be crossing points and frontier skirmishes. My argument is that for lesbians and for disabled women, these crossing points and skirmishes share aspects of meaning and purpose. Locating those points is a subjective process, dependant on individual location. Different women will identify different moments of conflict. I have highlighted three points of skirmish here, because they are points that are common to both research partners accounts and disabled women's accounts. Firstly, there is a point of entry. At some time, some tangible or intangible goods or services are sought from the public world. I reached such a point in arranging our weekend away, but they are not unusual. Secondly, I identify a 'maintenance' border, where locating as (un)problematic requires constant vigilance. Lastly, I look at the position of the outlaw in relation to the heterosexual boundary.

Entry

Perhaps a very obvious point is raised by this comment from a research partner-

- We're still the girls. I'm 40, she's 50, we've lived here twenty years and we've paid off our mortgage. But we're 'the girls'!

I mentioned this quotation to friend, who said with instant recognition 'Oh yes- we are, aren't we!'.

In one sense, this is unimportant. In another, it is a constant and unobtrusive reminder of 'otherness', where sexuality is undeveloped or trivialized. What stops a

girl being a woman? Perhaps it is 'badges of office', like opposite gender sexual partners. And what are girls excluded from? Adult informal social relationships.

Research partners felt invisibility, and described it as a reason for making public acts of identification. 'Coming Out', claiming identification, is a process that requires constant attention. The following story is again from research partners-

I told my brother Sue was living with me. He asked where she slept, and I said in my bed, with me. I thought I'd done it! A few months later Sue left, and I was really miserable. He asked me why I was so down, and I told him she'd left. He said 'but why are you so upset?' He really hadn't realized that I MEANT slept in my bed with me! He thought I was being generous, and the house was crowded. (Name changed).

This is not the only story, or the only indication that avoiding heterosexuality requires constant action. What is clear from the accounts is that sex is described as different from identity in a way that is not paralleled for heterosexual people. For example-

At the time I did not consider that I was 'coming out' but rather naively that I was moving on to a new relationship. It is only more recently that I have realized the full consequences of living with another woman in terms of the reactions from other people.

It is hard to imagine a heterosexual relationship where the sex act would be seen as so independent from the relationship. Rather, expectations could be summed up by the instructions rumoured to have been given to Department of Social Security inspectors in pre- 1986 Income Support Guidelines, to assume a sexual relationship and therefore a relationship of financial support between men and women but to assume no relationship of support between men and men or women and women whatever the circumstances.

There is also the pronoun minefield, familiar to lesbian women. A simple description of 'what I did at the weekend' is complicated if I cannot state openly that I did it with a female partner. If I make the partnership and the pronoun explicit, I have effectively 'come out'. A heterosexual woman is in exactly the same position, in that her discussion of 'him' situates her as heterosexual. The difference is that her action promotes little reaction, whereas mine can be seen as provocative.

For disabled women, this reminder of otherness, of not having gained entry to an adult, public world, also revolves around an assumption of sexlessness. The generic term disabled, used to describe both facilities (disabled toilet) and people, hides both gender and sexuality. Jenny Morris identifies implications of trivialized or made invisible sexuality in her list of assumptions made about disabled women:-

That we are naïve and lead sheltered lives
That we are asexual or at best sexually inadequate
That we cannot ovulate, menstruate, conceive or give birth, have orgasms,
That if we are not married or in a long term relationship it is because no-one wants us and not through our personal choice to remain single or live alone
That our only true scale of merit and success is to judge ourselves by the standard of their world

That we are sweet, deprived little souls who need to be compensated with treats, presents and praise.
(Morris 1991:20 part).

Her observation of disability for women being equated with childhood is also present in Patrick White's discussion of ways in which the discourse of, in his case specifically, blindness becomes equated with heterosexuality.

The options available to lesbian women are limited by the social nature of heterosexuality. They are to become invisible, or to lose credibility by raising their profile. The options available to disabled women are limited by their lack of access to sexual heterosexuality, which is in itself mediated by social heterosexuality. The similarity in the skirmishes for lesbian and for disabled women lies in the positioning of sex, not sexual identification. In both instances, women are seen as a-sexual, or sexually immature. To counter this assumption is to make a statement about sex. This is itself problematic. There is ample theoretical and empirical evidence to indicate that claiming an explicitly sexual identity can be a dangerous location for women. Beverley Skeggs (1997:ch.7) links the theoretical and the empirical evidence by describing the choices of working class women through the lens of 'shame'. In her analysis, she makes very clear that being sexual is opposed to being respectable.

Maintaining One's Self As (Un)problematic

This is the area that my partner and I refer to as 'fitting in'. We have lost count of the number of times we have said 'Don't worry, we'll sort ourselves out'. This phrase has been used to negotiate both physical entry and sexual entry. For instance, it covers both the need to manage physical space where adaptations are not suitable, and the requirement for our sexuality to be invisible where heterosexual assumptions have been made.

Research partners also describe the need to make their sexuality visible at different points, and that borders between visibility and invisibility are twisty and uncertain. In each case, there is a complicated decision to be made. Is crossing the border possible? is it worthwhile? is it necessary, in that this particular frontier represents 'a bridge too far'? Or, did I mean to do it? It is possible to become visibly non-heterosexual without intention, as the following account shows-

When we left the park we were so up and close! and then we got near home and I suddenly realised I was walking down the street holding the hand of a woman who wasn't my mother or my sister- and everyone could see! It kind of jumped out at me then.

Her action did not provoke an obvious reaction from passers by, although it did clearly cue that woman to re-assess her public identity. The following woman also felt 'caught out'-

I worked for a debt collectors, and went to work in a skirt suit and heels. I'd been lesbian for years, but no-one knew. I used to go to the gay club on a Friday night. This night, a whole raft of them from work came in- and me in my leathers! They just thought it was funny, but I had to go back to work on Monday.

The follow up to that story indicates that the woman radically lost face in her public life because of the recognition of her non-heterosexuality.

After that I couldn't get the young kids to do anything I needed them to do. They weren't nasty, they just kind of asked someone else. In the end I left.

Eve Sedgwick (1991) describes the need to identify oneself, to 'come out of the closet' continuously and in different situations, as fundamental to gay oppression. She presents the dualism between public knowledge and ignorance (of category) as specific to sexual identities and as delineating both experience within the category and the location of political action for the category-

Vibrantly resonant as the image of the closet is for many modern oppressions, it is indicative for homophobia in a way it cannot be for other oppressions. Racism, for instance, is based on a stigma that is visible in all but exceptional cases. (Sedgwick 1991:75)

While her work is most clearly relevant to gay men, many women in my research study talked about 'coming out' as a continuous process. Any action that must be continuously repeated carries the possibility of inaction. At some point, and for some reason, any lesbian may choose to allow herself to be seen as heterosexual.

If visibility for lesbians can be a problematic, and evidence of borderlands, for disabled women it is a constant aspect of daily life. Consider the following story from a disabled research partner-

I love swimming- I can move around in the water fine. To go swimming, I must negotiate changing rooms, toilets, doorways- all with the chair, and all in the public arena. Finally, I will be hoisted out over the pool – a bit like a witch on a ducking stool!

The constant need to cross the boundary of disabling access and attitude means that disabled women are always in the position of negotiating visibility. It is almost impossible to enter a room unobtrusively in a wheelchair or with crutches, and impairment that does not effect movement also carries its share of visibility. What is visible is an impaired person, not a woman taking up equal space with other women. The border lies in the invisibility of disabled women as women, and as sexual.

Outlaws

It is important to recognise that the issue is not the need to be seen as sexual in order to negotiate sex on an individual level (although that helps). The issue is that respect, status, and recognition depend on recognition of heterosexuality.

Where women are both disabled and lesbian, the invisibility of non-heterosexual acts can be an advantage. My partner and I share a physical intimacy in public that is denied to most able bodied lesbian women. Hugs, kisses, even overtly sexual touch on breasts and other parts of the body are perceived by others as caring rather than sexual. However, even this contributes to the invisible barrier of heterosexual assumption. Since we are neither heterosexual nor both able bodied, our sexual expression holds no power. Where we do find hotels that offer double beds to disabled people, we catch ourselves retreating behind a smoke screen of misinformation around her care needs rather than our conjugal needs. Unless we act, I am given status as her carer, her sister, and even on occasion her mother! On the other hand, the male carer who gives her personal assistance, is given status as my husband or her brother. (He is neither). Allocations of status to the carer undermine her ability to be received as an agent of her own actions. No

allocation of status to a carer contributes to the invisibility of the numbers of women who prioritise care, and who become financially and socially marginalised as a result.

Invisibility of both lesbians and disabled women as active women cannot be ignored, however. Entry into lesbian space is often mediated by ability, as entry into disabled women's groups is often mediated by sexuality. In other words, the assumption that lesbians and disabled women are both different from the heterosexual majority *and* different from each other is deeply rooted.

What is on the other side of the boundary?

Heterosexuality in this role is undertheorised. Connections between heterosexuality and social privilege are often assumed or silent. One possible reason for this is that heterosexuality intersects privilege between men and women. It offers a different experience and implication dependent on the gender of the persona occupying the category. To argue, as many second wave feminists were forced to do, that heterosexual women are privileged through their connection with masculinity, but de-valued through their gender, can create a divided political action.

Ruth Frankenberg (1993) identifies three linked dimensions of 'whiteness'.

First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a 'standpoint', a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, 'whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. (Frankenberg 1993:1)

These three dimensions are also useful as a way to consider the production and reproduction of heterosexuality. However, this dimension of privilege and ease, and the implication of category membership, is often not recognised by those women who are self or socially identified as heterosexual. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1993) describe in some detail the difficulty of identifying women who would write from a heterosexual position. As a category, it appears to be largely 'unchosen'. In some ways, it can be seen to be a default category, where women who do not actively remove themselves are placed.

In this sense of hegemonic and discursive action, formal boundaries are perhaps less pervasive than informal ones. Formal sites are, to some extent, bounded by formal process. So, it is often possible to use state action to support crossing a heterosexual boundary in places that are subject to law or policy. It would be unusual to be refused access to work or access to social institutions purely on the grounds of lack of membership of a social heterosexuality. There is movement in current United Kingdom policy to make some protection against discrimination against lesbians in employment explicit in law. Where explicit law is not helpful there are often codes of practice and formal methods of complaint to support explicit boundary crossing.

The coffee morning, the neighbours, the women at the supermarket till, all take on a role of power in creating and recreating social norms. It is this area in which unquestioned exclusion from social heterosexuality flourishes. It is exactly this hidden quality of the exclusion that makes it both hard to recognise and hard to locate. It is this, in itself, that makes the boundary both all pervasive and invisible. It also means that border skirmishes are deeply divisive, and very

personal. The following research partner is both lesbian and disabled, and is talking about the process of joining her local residents association-

First they had meetings off the scheme, and I asked them not to because I couldn't get there. Then they had meetings at a local house. They used to go in cars, but they were all in couples and cars only have four seats, so there wasn't room for me. Then they stopped asking me to meetings because I never went. Then they went to Blackpool, but they didn't ask me because they were talking about it at a meeting I wasn't at- and anyway, they thought I wouldn't like it because I was on my own. Then something went wrong on the scheme, and all the husbands went to the pub to discuss it, and I never knew what happened. The husbands never come into my house, you see- I don't need little jobs doing.

Her position as excluded outsider is not formalized, and would probably not be recognised when verbalized in that way. She goes on to say-

They don't seem to know what to do with me if they don't have to help me or feel sorry for me.

What action can we take?

Sue Clegg (1996) argues that much of the work of the formal women's movement in the 1960s was foregrounded, grounded, and disseminated by the informal friendship networks that link women. It is this area that is the strongest defense against border skirmishes. Recognition of exclusion based on social heterosexuality re-doubles the work of women's studies and women's networks to build safe passages for all women.

How this is done will depend, to some extent, on the theoretical standpoint of the analysts. From an 'identity politics' standpoint, it is difficult to see how women who have actively left heterosexuality can find common ground with women who are disabled, who may or may not also want heterosexual relationships. (Here, I mean *common* action rather than supportive action for one or other group). It is only by taking the steps in this article, separating social heterosexuality from sex action, and by recognising the impact of heterosexuality on women, that commonality makes sense.

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