

'This reads like a conspiracy theory', or; Mundane heterosexism hurts too!

Damien W. Riggs

THE TITLE OF THIS PAPER REFERS to a number of experiences I have had in regards to the academic peer-review process, and in particular quotes one reviewer who felt that my work on lesbian and gay foster parenting read somewhat 'like a conspiracy theory'. Whilst the peer-review system is accorded significant value within academia, my suggestion within this paper is that it acts as a form of gate-keeping that reinforces the often heterosexist assumptions of reviewers, and which provides little space for the challenging of such assumptions. Using Peel's (2001) paper on 'mundane heterosexism', I explore one example from my own experience of how heterosexism in the peer-review process worked to reinforce the normative status of heterosexuality, an outcome that may be understood as contributing to the marginalisation of research on non-heterosexual identities and experiences. As a result, I suggest that 'mundane heterosexism hurts too': contrary to the old chestnut that would have us believe that 'sticks and stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me', the power dynamics that adhere to the peer-review process (as located within a context of institutional heterosexism) hold great potential for perpetuating the exclusion of those of us who identify as non-heterosexual.

Mundane heterosexism

In her paper, *Mundane heterosexism: Understanding incidents of the everyday*, Elizabeth Peel (2001) outlines an approach to understanding the subtle ways in which heterosexism is enacted. In doing so, Peel does not intend to create a taxonomy of 'different

heterosexisms', nor to locate heterosexism within individual people, but rather to examine the flexible ways in which heterosexism continues to shape the everyday experiences of same-sex attracted individuals. She suggests that a focus on explicit acts of heterosexism (such as denying lesbians and gay men access to reproductive technologies or marriage rights) is often prioritised within research, yet more commonplace acts of heterosexism are often ignored. Celia Kitzinger (1996, p.11) illustrates this point well, where she asks the question:

'When there is *no* anti-lesbian explosion from your parents, because you have de-dyked your apartment before their visit; when there is *no* queer-bashing after the gay disco, because you anticipated trouble and booked a cab to get home; when you are *not* dismissed from work, because you stayed in the closet; when you are *not* subjected to prurient or disgusted questions, because you talked about your weekend activities in sentences that meticulously avoided the use of any pronouns – when these non-events slip by as part of many gay men and lesbians' daily routine, has *nothing* really happened?' (Original emphases)

The concept of 'mundane heterosexism' may thus be particularly useful for examining statements made in the context of peer-review, which is promoted as being 'objective, non-discriminatory', and above all, a 'fair process'. I would suggest that in a context where heterosexuality is considered the norm, all research on non-heterosexual identities and experiences will automatically be positioned as different. Whilst in some

instances this may be positively promoted (for example, in journals that primarily publish research on non-heterosexual people and cultures), there is a far greater potential for research on non-heterosexual people and cultures to be reviewed and published in journals that do not take such people and cultures as their primary focus.

One problem that may arise from this generalised focus of academic journals, is that reviewers may not have appropriate experience or knowledge in relevant areas, and may bring their own biases to the review process. Mundane heterosexism in the context of the peer review process may thus result in authors of papers or texts on lesbians and gay men (for example) being requested to: (a) provide comparisons with heterosexual people; (b) speak for all lesbians and gay men (rather than just those represented within the research or by the author); or (c) claim a less political position in regards to sexual politics, one that will 'sit more comfortably with readers'. These types of responses to research on lesbians and gay men, whilst often intended as supportive of such research, may instead be seen as examples of mundane heterosexism.

Heterosexism and the logic of entrapment

The extracts that follow are taken from a publication that I submitted with a colleague for peer review (Riggs & Choi, 2005), and one reviewer's response to the paper. Following the two extracts I briefly elaborate how mundane heterosexism appears to be at work within the reviewer's response.

This extract from our paper is a vignette of my own experience of heterosexism as a white, gay, middle-class male.

'Over the past two years, my partner and I had been fortunate enough to provide foster care to a young child. In amongst all of the upheavals that a new child presents, we have been faced with having to negotiate a health care and social welfare system that is premised upon the experiences of heterosexual (most often

married) parents. One particular example of this was when I took our foster child, who was unwell, to see a GP. As we had not been to that particular surgery before, the GP asked for some demographic details. He first asked me about my 'son'. He then asked me 'what his mother does'. When I explained the situation (that he was my foster child), the GP then asked what my partner does. When I reported this (in gender neutral terms), the GP then asked if 'she' had any significant medical concerns. When I clarified this by using my partner's name (and thus indicating that my partner is a male), the GP appeared quite flustered, and then went on to ask about 'mental health issues', when this was not an issue that I had raised, nor was it something the GP had asked about in regards to myself (in the earlier demographic details).'

This extract is a portion of the reviewer's comments, which pertain directly to this vignette (and which constitute 90 per cent of the reviewer's overall comments on the paper).

'In the interaction with the GP, he is implicitly portrayed as homophobic because he assumed that the author was in a heterosexual relationship. Surely given what we know about cognitive and social processes, it is obvious that the GP will assume that, and that had he not, it would have been unusual and warranted comment. Given this, I wonder whether the way in which the information was fed to the GP was almost a form of entrapment, i.e. the author brought about a self-fulfilling prophecy. Maybe the GP's reference to mental health problems was driven by his perception that the lack of the author's candor was trying to hide a more severe problem. Would his interactions been different if the author had stated the situation up front? While in no way denying the author's feelings of the encounter, all I am saying is that there are other

explanations of the interaction that need to be considered. Specifically, the author of that section should consider all aspects of his behaviour that may have contributed to the GP's responses rather than just assuming that the GP was responding to his sexual orientation.'

We may see mundane heterosexism at work here when the reviewer presumes that the GP's agenda should have become my agenda within the consultation. As the vignette suggests, I visited the GP in regards to my foster child's health, not for my own sexuality. Thus the reviewer's assumption that my 'lack of ... candor' suggested I was 'trying to hide a more severe problem' is only possible if my sexuality is made the focus of the reviewer's gaze, rather than the GP's own heterosexism, which was my focus within the vignette. Mundane heterosexism in this instance allows the reviewer to accuse me of 'entrapment' – that I brought my experience of heterosexism upon myself by not being up front about my sexuality. What this ignores is the fact that, as the previous quote from Kitlinger suggests, same-sex attracted people often feel compelled on a daily basis to hide our sexuality, or to talk in gender neutral terms (as I did in the vignette above). Contrary to the reviewer's assumption that I as a gay man was hiding something (as opposed to heterosexual people who the reviewer would appear to presume are always visible as such), my 'failure' to mention sexuality was a product of both the fact that in my opinion it was not relevant to the encounter, and that for me to speak in a public space as a gay man with a child is to place myself at risk for discrimination. Whilst the reviewer takes this as signalling a 'self-fulfilling prophecy', the concept of mundane heterosexism signals that, in a heterosexist society, same-sex attracted people are very much 'damned if you do and damned if you don't': mentioning (non-heterosexual) sexualities can be deemed inappropriate – a matter that should be 'kept private' – much the same as not mentioning sexuality can be taken as a form of secrecy or 'lack of candor'. Such

assumptions are perhaps a legacy of pathological constructions of non-heterosexual people, which have positioned sexual 'difference' as something to hide or be ashamed of.

One final point: mundane heterosexism is evident in the fact that this extract constitutes almost the entirety of the review. Our paper, which focused on both racism and heterosexism, and which also included a vignette by my co-author, is reduced to a primary focus on (my) sexuality, a form of heterosexism that our paper was critical of. In other words, our suggestion within the paper was that lesbians and gay men may feel oppressed or discrimination against within the health care setting when practitioners dismiss our own foci, and instead focus on their own agendas (that may often include an equation of same-sex attraction with mental health problems). This resulted in the review being primarily a personal response to my vignette, rather than an 'objective' engagement with the contents of the paper.

Conclusions

Whilst this paper provides but one example of mundane heterosexism at work within the peer review process, I am sure that many similar experiences occur on a regular basis. This suggests to me that the review process requires a greater focus on accountability, and a commitment to ensuring that reviewers are adequately equipped to review papers. Whilst in the experience reported here, the paper was eventually sent out for review again, and has since been accepted for publication, this has not always been my experience. The anonymity of the review process, and the (often dogmatic) focus on 'peer review guidelines', can result in an inquiry into a particular review being curtailed, or at the very least, not addressed in a transparent fashion. In contrast to this, I draw the readers' attention to the peer review guidelines adopted by the Dulwich Centre for their publications (www.dulwich-centre.com.au). Their commitment is to an open review process that allows for discus-

sions and debates over opinions on papers, and which includes the author in this process. The development of such processes within academia more broadly may help to counter the potential for heterosexism that exists within the peer review system, and may encourage reviewers to interrogate their own biases and values that they bring to the papers they review.

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Correspondence

Damien W. Riggs

School of Psychology,
University of Adelaide,
South Australia 5005,
Australia.

E-mail: damien.riggs@adelaide.edu.au.

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