

## Gender and Sexuality as Systems of Power

Amanda Udis-Kessler, material excerpted and modified from an unpublished essay, “Meaning and Demeaning, Values and Devaluation: Thinking Sociologically about Christian Sexism and Heterosexism,” originally written for a sociology of religion guest lecture. Modified February 1, 2022.

The general education learning outcome for [Colorado College’s] Equity and Power-designated courses reads,

“Explain how systems of power (such as white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, ableism, classism, capitalism, or colonialism) produce forms of inequality related to race, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, class, or nation, etc.”

In this essay, I provide a way of thinking about “systems of power” and indicate how they produce inequality at individual, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels, as well as how they reproduce inequality over time. I focus on sexism and heterosexism, or what the above learning outcome refers to as “heteropatriarchy.” As this term suggests, sexism and heterosexism are deeply interconnected.

We can think of power in two, related ways: as capacity (the power *to* do something) and as authority (power *over* someone else). Capacity and authority are related because (a) authority is a kind of capacity, the capacity to impact other people, and (b) authority can be used to either enable or constrain capacity, to provide resources (or experiences or opportunities) or take them away. When we have power, either over our own lives or over other people’s lives, our options are expanded; when other people have authority over us, their options about how to treat us are expanded. They may choose to treat us well or badly, to grant us access or withhold access, to leave us alone or make our lives harder.

A system of power, such as heteropatriarchy, is primarily driven by how authority (the power of some people over other people) works to limit or enable the capacity of the people who are not in authority. Authority can take various forms; some people maintain power over others through violence, for example (a common and important component of both sexism and heterosexism), but in a discussion of science we are focused on socially legitimated, institutionalized authority and on cultural authority.

The main kind of institutionalized authority is decision-making authority. Having decision-making authority means being granted the capacity to make decisions about other people’s lives that will enhance or limit the well-being of those people. Those with decision-making authority have the discretion to share or withhold social, cultural, political, and/or economic resources from others. They have the discretion to restrict, punish, or scapegoat people or to choose not to restrict, punish, or scapegoat them. When someone with decision-making authority uses that authority to welcome someone else or to reject them, to benefit them or harm them, the impact of this authority can have a powerful impact on the other person’s life, for good or ill. (In the case of racism in the criminal justice system, for example, police authority has legitimated the killing

of many people from BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] communities, often in situations where the police officer was not in danger.)

It's extremely important to understand that society largely accepts the decisions authorized people make as appropriate because they are (or are seen as) acting on behalf of the organizations or institutions they represent. If Larry says that men outperform women in science for biological reasons and Larry is just a guy who lives on my street, I might be skeptical (to say the least); if Larry is Lawrence Summers, economist and President of Harvard University (and it's 2005), I may hear the claim as coming not from a random individual but as an academic and a representative of higher education, and therefore as someone with a legitimate claim about the truth in these matters.

Similarly, if an academic biologist claims that homosexuality is the result of a genetic mutation and I am not informed about the historical fluidity and social construction of sexuality, I may be inclined to believe the biologist and see homosexuality as a genetic mutation. Both examples are important because, by attributing complex phenomena to "biology" in a reductionistic way, they legitimate and justify social inequality that harms members of devalued groups (women and lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB) people) and harms society more broadly when the effect of the harms of inequality is to limit the capacity of women and LGB people to contribute – to biology, to science, or to society more broadly. Scientific reductionism that ignores history and culture cannot help a society address past or present wrongs against a devalued group or teach the next generation how to treat that group better.

These two examples lead to the second kind of authority, cultural authority. Cultural authority is the socially legitimated authority to say what (and who) is good or bad, what (and who) is right or wrong, and what can (or cannot) and should (or should not) be done – and to have other people take those opinions seriously. Everyone has an opinion about who or what is good or bad, of course, but when someone without cultural authority has an opinion, it is just that: their own opinion. They cannot necessarily make other people agree with it. In contrast, when someone with cultural authority has an opinion, they also have the capacity to make other people take their opinion seriously, to take it on themselves and to act on it.

As my examples above suggest, cultural authority and decision-making authority can be tightly interwoven. The actual decisions made by those with decision-making authority often rest on the already-existing perspectives and values of those with cultural authority. To pick the better-documented of the two examples: When the President of Harvard University can say publicly that men are biologically better than women at science, his cultural authority intersects with and informs the decision-making authority of men throughout the institution of science. These men have the discretion to grade male and female students differently, to accept new doctoral students and post-docs or not accept them, to hire a new assistant professor or not, to support tenure and promotion or not. Their actions are likely to have the effect of continuing to empower men in science while disempowering women. If I have been influenced to believe certain things proclaimed by someone with cultural authority, I am more likely to support decisions made by those with decision-making authority when those decisions are based on the same beliefs and values.

To describe heteropatriarchy as a system of power (or sexism and heterosexism as systems of power) is to make the following claims:

- Decision-making and cultural authority is exclusively or overwhelmingly in the hands of members of certain groups (men, heterosexuals, cisgender people).
- Those with decision-making and cultural authority use that authority to produce and reproduce inequality through the production and reproduction of ideas, values, norms, materials, rules, practices, and resource distribution that benefit their groups while penalizing women, lesbian/gay/bisexual people and those of other non-heterosexual sexualities, and trans/nonbinary/genderqueer people (to whom I refer below as “trans+ people”).
- One effect of ideas, values, norms, materials, rules, practices, and resource distributions that benefit men, heterosexuals, and cisgender people is to naturalize and normalize the inequality – to justify it, to make it unquestionable, to make it seem like “just how things are.”
- Another effect is to enable men, heterosexuals, and cisgender people to hoard valued resources, opportunities and experiences for themselves, which (among other things) enables them to maintain their decision-making and cultural authority over time and across different places.
- The decisions and cultural values of men, heterosexuals, and cisgender people produce inequality at individual, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels; the multiple levels at which the inequality is produced interact with each other and strengthen both the cultural justifications for inequality and the decisions made to maintain it.
- The decisions and cultural values of men, heterosexuals, and cisgender people also reproduce inequality over time in three ways. First, every cultural claim or formal decision that continues heteropatriarchal patterns reinforces the beliefs, rules, and apparent naturalness of the inequality. Second, each instance of reproduction further empowers men, heterosexual people, and cisgender people while further disempowering women, LGB people and trans+ people. Third, there is a certain accretion of weight and inertia that goes with taken-for-granted values and practices, and particularly in complex or challenging times, it can simply be easier to go with what one already “knows” or how things already are.

The specifics of how these processes play out in the sciences is well-documented and, therefore, not covered here.

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