

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN FEMINIST STUDIES AND
INTERSECTIONALITY

Heterosexuality in Theory and Practice

Chris Beasley, Heather Brook
and Mary Holmes



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Routledge Advances in Feminist Studies and Intersectionality

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Chris Beasley, Heather Brook, and Mary Holmes, December 2011

Introduction

‘There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.’

Leonard Cohen, ‘Anthem’

Heterosexuality is traditionally defined as involving attraction, interest, or desire between persons of the ‘opposite’ sex (understood as men and women), and sexual relations between them (OED online). This dictionary definition is commonly interpreted to mean that heterosexuality involves a complementarity between the sexes, whereby men actively pursue women, and women succumb to their advances (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Bogle 2008). Heterosex is more specifically understood in terms of the ‘coital imperative’ rooted in the idea of a biological drive towards reproduction, necessitating penis-in-vagina intercourse, and with male orgasm as the goal (Jackson and Scott 2010: 74–100; Gavey 2005; Tiefer 2000). This volume departs from such a starting point by engaging in a range of debates in order to redefine and re-imagine heterosexuality. In our view, heterosexuality is fissured in its everyday complexity; it is fractured, grainy, layered. However, scholarly attempts to understand heterosexuality have overwhelmingly focused on its more negative and disturbing aspects. At the same time, it is also thought to be uninteresting; it is supposed that heterosexuality is always normative. Such presumptions play out the antagonisms of the ‘sex wars’, which raged in the 1980s but continue to be both implicitly and explicitly deployed in sexuality debates. The sex wars involve a dispute over whether sex is primarily dangerous or should be embraced as pleasurable (Duggan and Hunter [1995] 2006). However, in this dispute, pleasure is routinely constituted as residing in queer—meaning non-heterosexual—sex. The oppositional stances of the sex wars thus leave heterosexuality in a dark, dull corner, its potential for joy and excitement virtually unacknowledged and unexplored (but see Meah et al 2011; Jackson and Scott 2007, 2001).

In this volume an alternative view will be presented, one that recognises the many problematic and difficult elements of heterosexuality but that nevertheless turns our attention to its positive possibilities, including rarely analysed considerations of heterosexual pleasure within everyday contexts. This alternative view is intended to contribute to a more rounded discussion of heterosexuality in current scholarship about gender and sexuality. While we readily acknowledge that sexual relations are not power-free spaces for