

## **The Concept of 'Heteronormativity' and its Methodological Implications**

Birgit Hofstätter

Alpen-Adria Universität Klagenfurt | Wien | Graz, IFZ/IFF

Schlögelgasse 2, 8010 Graz, Austria

Torsten Wöllmann

TU Dortmund, Germany

On the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> IAS-STC Conference "Critical Issues in Science and Technology Studies" researchers and students dealing with gender aspects in their work and studies came together for a workshop to discuss the concept of heteronormativity and how to deal with it. This paper will first provide a brief introduction given at the beginning of the workshop, followed by review of the discussion among the participants who previously were asked to prepare for the workshop by reading Stevi Jackson's article "Interchanges: Gender, sexuality and heterosexuality: The complexity (and limits) of heteronormativity" (2006) and thinking about three questions:

- How have you come across the concept of heteronormativity (in your studies, your research or private life)?
- How has heteronormativity affected your research/studies methodologically, i.e. where have you experienced limits caused by heteronormativity in your studies and/or fields of research?
- If you have found a way to deal with heteronormativity in your research/studies, what kind of strategies could you recommend?

### **What is heteronormativity?**

The concept of heteronormativity refers to an interdependence of gender and sexuality (Ingraham 1996; Wagenknecht 2007) which defines gender as a binary category and naturalizes sexual attraction as directed at the oppositional gender. Non-heterosexual structures of desire (homo- and bisexuality, transgender, trans-, inter-, asexuality etc.) are marginalized as deviating from the heterosexual norm, but are also regulated by it: They are always seen in relation to the heterosexual norm – there is no homo-, bi-, trans-, intersexuality etc. without the reference to heterosexuality and gender as a binary category (Jackson 2006). However, when we talk about 'the heterosexual norm' we talk about a hegemonic form of heterosexuality which can be described as "traditional gender arrangements and lifelong monogamy" (ibid., 105; referring to Seidman 2005, 59-60), in its modernized forms also including serial monogamy. Thus, not all heterosexual relations necessarily represent a norm, e.g. non-monogamous relationships that are socially connoted with immorality. Apart from the erotic and intimate dimension of heterosexuality, the concept of heteronormativity describes heterosexuality as structure of power throughout social and cultural spheres (Hartmann & Klesse 2007), i.e. it defines hierarchical gender relations also in

various non-sexually connoted contexts. Heteronormativity expresses a basic structure of social units and institutions such as kinship, marriage and family relations as well as relations of friends, people at work, etc.

The concept of heteronormativity originates from queer theory as a critique of feminist movements and theories reproducing and reifying gender as binary category and a heterosexual norm. The term was first used by Michael Warner in the introduction to a special edition of the journal *Social Text* (1991) titled *Fear of a Queer Planet*. In this article he demands to make sexuality a category of social analysis and to explore heteronormativity itself, i.e. the underlying power structure (Wagenknecht 2007, Klappeer 2010).

Similar and related approaches to heteronormativity come from feminist lesbian theories. Adrienne Rich called the phenomenon “compulsory heterosexuality”: a “political institution” which is the basis of “male domination” (1980; reception by Klappeer 2010, 26). Monique Wittig coined the term “heterosexual contract”, describing patriarchal gender relations as heterosexually structured and consequently gender and sexuality as inseparably intertwined (1989; reception by Klappeer 2010, 26). Another famous concept preceding Warner’s heteronormativity is Judith Butler’s “heterosexual matrix” (1990) which represents a

social and cultural system of order, thinking and perception, forcing humans into the form of physically and socially binary and clearly distinct genders (bipolar gender system) which are hierarchically and complementarily positioned, the desire of which is targeted at the oppositional gender and is thus forming gender and sexual identity (reception by Klappeer 2010, 26; translation by B.H.).

### **How does heteronormativity manifest itself in science, technology, medicine and in STS?**

Heteronormativity has an impact on the way the world is interpreted, the way research is conducted. In this workshop we wanted to raise the question of how heteronormativity affects us as researchers and how we can deal with it in order not to reproduce it. Since most of the workshop participants study or work in the field of science, technology and medicine, these were the foremost areas of interest: How are science, technology and medicine entangled with heteronormativity? How does heteronormativity structure science, technology and medicine (e.g. the classical concept of male and female roles in sociology or the reifying effects of gender medicine)? And how do science, technology and medicine construct heteronormativity (e.g. technological artifacts gendering and heterosexualizing its users)?

In order to answer these questions, critical research on heteronormativity in science, technology and medicine is required.

Why is heteronormativity so difficult to handle? Heterosexuality and gender as a binary category appears to be 'naturally' given and 'normal'. All individuals are forced to position themselves within this matrix – either as conforming to the norm or as 'the other' (homo-, bi-, a-, trans-, intersexual etc.). Its normative power is not limited to the level of sexuality but spreads through many social and cultural areas including scientific, technological and medical fields (e.g. division of labour, family relations, codes of gender representation etc.). It seems that we cannot escape from it, nor is it explicitly accessible to us.

Although we cannot escape from heteronormativity (whatever it exactly is in various entanglements) – how about subverting it within scientific, technological and medical fields, discourses, practices and artefacts? Although heteronormativity is not explicitly accessible to us – how about becoming aware and beady-eyed about it doing our own work?

How to bear this burden? And what does it mean for doing STS? Dealing with issues of heteronormativity has indeed implications on a meta-level: How does the field of STS *itself* reproduce and stabilize heteronormativity on various levels (e.g. construction of objects, design and process of research, exclusive dynamics of staff, blind spots and hegemonic discourses)? These implications are also pretty practical, making it necessary to do critical research on heteronormativity *in* STS and to look for ways, strategies and tactics to develop and to link potentials for counter-heteronormative reflexivity and practice in doing STS. In order to undermine, deconstruct and destabilize heteronormativity *in* STS, it is necessary to look for starting points, for bases, resources and networks for doing this task.

### **Review of the workshop discussion**

The goal of the workshop was to collect ideas on how to improve the quality of our research by avoiding heteronormatively biased interpretations of data and conclusions. In order to start a first discussion, the participants were previously asked to reflect on three questions and bring their thoughts with them to the workshop. The starting question was to get an overview of how everyone came across the issues of heteronormativity – be it in a professional, educational or private context. The majority of the participants reported to have learned about the concept by reading relevant literature for (further) education. Some were also confronted with it in research projects, for example in dealing with heteronormative views of informants or in methodological issues like the assembly of a questionnaire inquiring data such as gender and family status. Besides the work place, where heteronormativity is seemingly often intertwined with homosociality (e.g. old boy networks), it seems that the (heterosexually structured nuclear) family is one of the most common topics repeatedly appearing in the studies – either as a central category of interest or as a side aspect revealed by the data.

The question emerging from this first overview was where heteronormativity as a structural phenomenon has been experienced as limiting in research and affecting methodological considerations. However, in talking about the effect heteronormative perspectives have on research, simultaneously the third question was addressed: What kind of solutions, if any, were found to deal with these issues. The discussion first led to the conclusion that in gender studies topics and efforts seem contradicting: On the one hand, gender as well as sexuality are seen and have to be treated as social constructions that have to be deconstructed (or at least de-dramatized) in order not to reproduce and reify them along with related inequalities and marginalizations. On the other hand, 'in the field' we have to deal with a society which is fundamentally structured according to this gender binary (across class, ethnicity, sexuality, handicap and other categories constructing difference) – ignoring gender would mean to ignore one of the crucial dimensions along which social inequality is emergent. One workshop participant raised the question of how to deconstruct the dimension we at the same time are to analyze? Now that gender has to be incorporated in almost all fields of research we ask for its deconstruction? This again leads to one of the most fundamental questions in gender studies: If we want to deconstruct gender as a binary and heterosexuality as norm, how can we talk about these concepts emphasizing their constructedness? One suggestion was to talk about "ascribed genders/sexualities" instead of simply using the terms "gender" and "sexuality". Another question related to this problem was about alternatives we have to solely focusing on gender. One conclusion of the discussion was that since we all deal with issues of inequality, marginalization and discrimination, we consequently have to take a closer look at power relations in concretely situated contexts. We definitely will find that gender and sexuality are not be the only lines along which hierarchies are constructed, but that they are intrinsically interwoven with other structures, technologies and relations of power and dominance.

One effort repeatedly mentioned in the collection of ideas for how to deal with heteronormativity in our research is self-reflexivity and reflecting the issue in the interaction with peers and colleagues. Some workshop participants reported to be part of groups which discuss various topics, heteronormativity being one of them. One of these groups, for example, is a reading circle that meets every other month to discuss relevant literature and articles written by its members. Self-reflexivity also involves to position oneself as a researcher and to point out to one's approach to gender and sexuality and explain how these terms (and related ones) are to be understood by the audience.

Another strategy comprises suggestions to explicitly and critically point out to heteronormative perspectives in literature and data used in research. One participant asked what her data would look like if she confronted her informants in interviews with their assumptions being based on heteronormative views. This of course depends on the research question and the approach

pursued in the study. Related to methodology, another participant suggested to rather use open questions instead of given categories, referring to the construction of questionnaires.

## **Conclusion**

In the discussion it became obvious that heteronormativity has multiple layers and meanings – it can be seen as a theoretical approach for the analysis of data (not only as explicit part of the research question but also as one aspect among others to be considered when dealing with data, e.g. interview material, texts etc.), but it can as well be considered as a quality criterion in research. This means we have to reflect on whether heteronormative perspectives are hidden in the choice of the research objects, the research questions, their operationalization and the methodology we use (e.g. what information do we inquire in interviews or questionnaires) and the conclusions we draw from our analyses. Nevertheless, we have to be aware of the limits of the concept of heteronormativity and maybe even of its dangers: Namely, in how far may our own critical discourses about heteronormativity itself be a symptom of an emerging hegemony of “flexibly normalized” sexualities (Engel 2002: 77-78, 204), of new hegemonic norms constructing and regulating sexualities in more pluralized, standardized and commodified ways – in ways that are convenient for the gender order of late capitalism (Hennessy 2000)?

After the workshop we concluded that the discussion could only be a first reflection and a first encounter of researchers and students with a common interest in avoiding the reproduction of traditional gender relations and gender as a binary category. Thus we suggested creating a blog for further discussion and exchange of thoughts and ideas. Further information can be found here: <http://inviewofheteronormativity.blogspot.com/>

## **Acknowledgments**

We want to thank all the participants of the workshop for their interest and valuable contributions to the discussion: Julian Anslinger, Silvia Bruzzone, Malin Henrikson, Susanne Kink, Andreas Klaura, Nena Kuckenberger, Bianca Prietl, Lisa Romanienko, Lisa Scheer, and Anita Thaler.

## **References**

Butler, Judith (1990), *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York & London: Routledge.

Engel, Antke (2002): *Wider die Eindeutigkeit. Sexualität und Geschlecht im Fokus queerer Politik der Repräsentation*, Frankfurt/Main: Campus.

Hartmann, Jutta & Kleese, Christian (2007), Heteronormativität. Empirische Studien zu Geschlecht, Sexualität und Macht – eine Einführung, in Hartmann, J. et al. (eds.). *Heteronormativität. Empirische Studien zu Geschlecht, Sexualität und Macht*, Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften: 9-15.

Hennessy, Rosemary (2000): *Profit And Pleasure: Sexual Identities In Late Capitalism*, New York &

London: Routledge.

Ingraham, Chrys (1996), 'The Heterosexual Imaginary: Feminist Sociology and Theories of Gender', in Seidman, S. (ed.), *Queer Theory/Sociology*, Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell: 168-193.

Jackson, Stevi (2006), Interchanges: Gender, sexuality and heterosexuality: The complexity (and limits) of heteronormativity, in: *Feminist Theory*, No. 7: 105-121.

Klapeer, Christine (2010), Die Verunsicherung des Selbstverständlichen. Zur Bedeutung des Konzepts der Heteronormativität für eine feministische Gesellschaftsanalyse und -politik, in: *AEP Informationen*, No. 4: 25-28.

Rich, Adrienne (1989/1980), Zwangsheterosexualität und lesbische Existenz, in List, E. & Studer, H. (eds.), *Denkverhältnisse. Feminismus und Kritik*, Frankfurt/Main: 244-278.

Seidman, Steven (2005), From Polluted Homosexual to the Normal Gay: Changing Patterns of Sexual Regulation in America, in Ingraham, C. (ed.) *Thinking Straight: New Work in Critical Heterosexuality Studies*, New York: Routledge: 39-62.

Wagenknecht, Peter (2007), Was ist Heteronormativität? Zu Geschichte und Gehalt des Begriffs. In: Hartmann, J. et al. (eds.), *Heteronormativität. Heteronormativität. Empirische Studien zu Geschlecht, Sexualität und Macht*, Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften:17-34.

Warner, Michael (1991), Introduction. Fear of a Queer Planet, in *Social Text*, No. 29: 3-17.

Wittig, Monique (1992/1989), On the Social Contract, in Wittig, M. (ed.), *The straight mind and other essays*, Boston: Beacon Press: 9-20.