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Unwanted Consensual Sex - The Implications for Women

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Abstract

Unwanted consensual sex is an under-researched and under-theorised phenomenon despite its prevalence (Hayfield and Clarke, 2012; Katz and Tirone, 2009) and despite its relevance when considering the broader themes of gender-based sexual violence (Gavey, 2005) and sexual consent (Graf and Johnson, 2021). This article offers a critical review of literature in the areas of heterosexuality and sexual scripts that, according to Gavey (2005), provide the cultural scaffolding that supports the sexual victimisation of women. This critical review of literature serves to inform my proposed research that seeks to examine an overlooked area within sexual experience "…that falls uncomfortably into the cracks between …acts of rape and consensual, mutually desire heterosexual sex" (Gavey, 2) namely, women's engagement in unwanted, consensual sex, within long term, heterosexual relationships.

Keywords: heterosexuality; heteronormativity; traditional sexual scripts; unwanted consensual sex

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to review existing literature on heterosexuality and traditional sexual scripts to understand how they contribute to the experience of unwanted consensual sex, which is a common yet under-theorised phenomenon within heterosexual relationships (West, 2017). Decisions to engage in unwanted consensual sex can range from positive motivations, such as the desire to promote intimacy within the relationship (Impett and Peplau, 2003) to negative motivations, which include fear of violence (Basile, 1999). Similarly, the impact of engaging in unwanted sex ranges from sex that was initially unwanted becoming pleasurable (Basile, 1999), to poor outcomes for health and happiness (Katz and Tirone, 2009), reduced pleasure, and greater risk of sexual violence (Rittenhour and Sauder, 2024). In order to gain some insight into the context within which unwanted consensual sex occurs within heterosexual long-term relationships, it is important to locate this experience within the broader framework of heterosexuality and to examine the role of sexual scripts in the maintenance of gendered power differentials (Tolman, 2006) that perpetuate the sexual victimisation of women (Gavey, 2005) and contribute to the prevalence of unwanted consensual sex for women (Katz and Tirone, 2009) in long-term heterosexual relationships.

Heterosexuality

Literature on heterosexuality posits that it is a patriarchal institution that reinforces male domination and female submission (Butler, 1990; Rich, 1980; Rubin, 1985). While some theorists locate heterosexual sex as the locus of women's subordination (Rubin, 1985), others find that the controlling force of heterosexuality extends from the realms of labour, power, and access to resources, from which an androcentric sexuality emerges (Jackson, 1999). The literature holds that it is socially constructed through the control of gender, sexuality, and desire (Butler, 1990; Rubin, 1983) and is upheld through social ordering that is achieved through the process of socialisation that reinforces a dominant, limited discourse resulting in institutional heterosexuality (Jackson, 1999). These processes enshrine heterosexuality in heteronormativity, where it becomes the normative, taken-for-granted, default sexual orientation (Warner, 2000). Heterosexuality, or 'heteropatriarchy' as Rich (1980) describes it, is inherently patriarchal and masculine in its construction (Jackson, 1999). According to Holland *et al.* (1998), "Heterosexuality […] is masculinity" (p. 11).

Scholarship on heterosexuality challenges that it is a social construct upheld through the control of gender, sexuality, and desire, which intersect as heterosexuality, in the formation of a hierarchical, patriarchal social ordering (Butler, 1990; Rubin, 1983). According to Rubin (1983), sexuality is the nexus of heterosexual relationships, claiming the oppression of women comes from, is mediated through, and is constituted within the realm of sexuality. Heterosexual sex, or heterosex, represents a critical juncture that facilitates women's subordination through the eroticisation of power (Jeffreys, 1990) that serves to reinforce the gendered patterns of male domination and female submission inherent in patriarchal social structuring (Kappeler, 1986). Within the heteronormative framework, sexuality is a dominant, tradable category of commodity culture "through which a host of exchange relations and social priorities are established" (Ingraham, 1996, p. 3). An exchange that can be understood in terms of the provision of sexual pleasure by women to men in return for their protection and loyalty. Jackson (1999), contrarily, does not accord sexuality any causal priority in understanding women's subordination but argues instead that the hyper-focus on sexuality is part of the problem, claiming that sexuality must be understood in the broader context of heterosexuality and examined in tandem with labour, power, and access to resources where men and male experience are similarly privileged. Ingraham (1996) argues that to counter the destabilising fluidity of sexuality, categories (heterosexuality) and corresponding belief systems (heteronormativity) are created that produce an illusion of sexuality as fixed.

Heterosexual Discourse

One process through which heterosexual ordering is achieved is that of socialisation, which inscribes onto individuals the cultural behaviours and norms that are essential to heterosexuality (Gagnon and Simon, 2005). According to Jackson (1999), the institutionalisation of heterosexuality through legal, state, and social convention ensures its perpetuation. One such social convention through which heterosexuality is consolidated is the 'white wedding' that reinforces heteronormativity through the powerful mechanisms of ritual and symbolism (Ingraham, 2005). Interwoven through the socialisation process, discourse provides a complex system of control. Heterosexual discourse supports the construction of heterosexuality through the circulation of a dominant and limiting discourse that reinforces and privileges heterosexuality and constraints and stigmatises non-conforming sexual identities and practices. This limiting discourse includes the production of 'myths', that Wittig (1998) claims have been systematically circulated through formal systems such as anthropology, social sciences and psychoanalysis. Such myths include

the myth of the vaginal orgasm (Koedt, 2010) and Freud's theory of sexuality, which refers implicitly to heterosexuality as the 'norm' (Wittig, 1992). A further limiting aspect of the heterosexual discourse is the assumption that heterosexuality is the default 'normal' sexual identity (Warner, 2000) through the promotion of an essentialist view that claims that heterosexuality is biologically ordained through the natural reproductive complementarity of women and men. Butler (1990) posits that the asymmetrical positions of 'feminine' and 'masculine' are essential to the hetero-sexualisation of desire. These binaries are then understood to reflect the natural essentialist attributes of 'male' and 'female' that are critical to the heteronormative discourse. Highlighting the necessity of such binarisms, Butler argues that in the context of the 'heterosexual matrix', as she describes the social framework that both enforces and naturalises heterosexuality, the category of 'woman' may, in fact, depend upon this matrix to become stable and coherent in the first instance. Jackson (1999) posits that at its most basic level, heterosexual discourse defines what is female, what is male, and consequently, what is normal. Such thinking supports the belief that women and men are 'made for each other', which reinforces 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980). According to Tolman (2006), "rather than being opposites, these gender constructs fit together, complementing one another, as two cogs in the machine of compulsory heterosexuality" (p. 79).

A further element within the heteronormative discourse is the justification of certain heterosexual sexual practices and the othering and stigmatising of 'non-normative' sexual identities and behaviour (Rubin, 1983). Included in normalised and accepted sexuality, or the 'charmed circle' as Rubin (1983) describes it, are heterosexual sex, monogamy, and reproductive sex, relegating all other forms of sexual expression to the 'outer limits', thereby elevating heterosexuality to the position of privilege, at the top of the 'erotic pyramid'. Fine (1998) analogously claims that within sex education, there exists an authorised discourse that privileges married heterosexuality while suppressing a discourse of female desire and subjectivity.

Ingraham (2005) argues that the pervasive nature of heterosexuality results in 'thinking straight' or the inability to think outside of a heterosexual normative framework. This obscures the operation of heterosexuality and shuts down critical analysis of it as a socially constructed organising institution. The impact of this obscuration of reality is that "heterosexuality circulates as taken for granted, naturally occurring, and unquestioned" (p. 4). This normalisation, known as 'heteronormativity', situates heterosexuality as a silent set of identities and practices that are assumed to be universal yet rarely examined or

even named (Johnson, 2005). Using Foucault's framework, Gavey (2005) argues that to understand the power of heterosexuality as a normative framework, we must move beyond reductive individualistic ways of understanding human behaviour and rather focus on "how culturally saturated our own conceptions of ourselves are; how culturally shared patterns of meaning and normative practices limit us in various ways" (p. 8). Ingraham's (2005) work is similarly helpful in challenging the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality at an ideological level, arguing that it is highly questionable based on the understanding that to objectively access the 'natural' world requires the impossible - that we step outside of our cultural bias and meaning systems. She argues it is therefore critical to acknowledge that social phenomena are socially produced, citing the concept of 'the opposite sex' as a product of straight thinking that is indicative of the heterosexual imaginary. Such binarisms, she claims, are a social priority as opposed to a biological reality. Gavey (2005) claims that research on the history of sexuality supports the social constructionist perspective, indicating that many of the fundamental assumptions upon which heterosexuality is structured, which crucially limit our choices and behaviours, are neither universal nor constant but are fluid, social constructions, specific to our cultural and historical context and location. According to Rubin (1983), the essentialist assumption within heterosexuality discourse is so deeply embedded in Western society that it is deemed eternal, transhistorical and asocial, and therefore elevated to the position of a fundamental axiom, never to be challenged.

In confronting the heterosexual discourse, Wittig (1992) challenges the straight mind for its tendency to universalise heterosexual concepts that are then produced into general laws that claim false truth. She argues that heterosexuality orders not only the production of concepts but correspondingly "all the processes which escape consciousness" (p. 107), thereby disabling the straight mind from conceiving of a culture outside the norms of heterosexuality, demonstrating how heterosexual discourse functions as a tool of domination through which social ordering is realised (Wittig, 1992). Positing that the most oppressive form of discourse is that which is taken for granted, Wittig claims that heterosexuality is one such discourse that is founding in terms of societies and social structures the world over and therefore, unquestioned. She argues that heterosexuality is unrelenting and tyrannical in its control over the minds and bodies of women and men and operates by silencing them unless they speak in its terms. Warning of the risk involved within the scholarship of abstracting dominant discourses such as heterosexuality as ideas, thereby obscuring the actual violence they generate on oppressed groups, Wittig insists on the direct link between discourse and material oppression, claiming that

regardless of how abstract a concept may be, it nonetheless has the power to act materially on our minds and bodies (1992).

Wittig's argument is upheld within much feminist research that highlights the harms that are caused to women that are justified within a heterosexual framework (Carpenter, 1998; Fine, 1988; Koedt, 2010; Hayfield and Clarke, 2012; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 1993; Rittenhour and Sauder, 2024; Seabrook *et al.*, 2017; Thomas, Stelzl and Lafrance, 2017; Thompson, 1990; Thome, 2023; Ward, Rosenscruggs and Aguinaldo, 2022) including the sexual victimisation of women. According to Gavey (2005), one such prevalent harm is rape, which she describes as 'culturally scaffolded' by heteronormative discourse, claiming that "normative heterosex is patterned or scripted in ways that permit far too much ambiguity over distinctions between what is rape and what is just sex" (2005, p. 2). Gavey claims that a dimensional view of rape links it to other, less extreme forms of heterosexual coercion and correspondingly that the prevalence of rape within heterosexual relationships (dating, long-term, married) illuminates the intrinsic connections between heterosexuality and women's sexual victimisation. To this end, Gavey argues for an increased critique of heterosexuality, refusing to accept that all normative heterosex is beyond reproach (2005).

An aspect of this normative heterosex that Gavey refers to is the patterned and scripted roles within heterosexuality, which serve to support gender-based power differentials that can leave women vulnerable to sexual victimisation by men (2005). Such scripting can be understood in terms of sexual script theory, which was developed by Gagnon and Simon (1973) as a social constructionist perspective on sexuality.

Sexual Scripts

Sexual script theory provides a framework to understand how sexual scripts are constructed, how they function and how they are maintained and negotiated in society. The three levels of sexual script theory are firstly, interpersonal scripts, which can be understood as functioning within the subjective experiences of individuals within a sexual encounter. Secondly, intrapsychic scripts, which can be understood as our internalised beliefs around sexuality, and lastly, cultural level scripts, which operate at the highest hierarchal level and function in a variety of ways to influence all other levels directly (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). Regarding sexual scripts themselves, the traditional sexual script that upholds heteronormative sexual standards remains the dominant script within Western culture (Ward *et al.*, 2022).

Sexual script theory was posited by Gagnon and Simon (1973) as a way of understanding the factors that cause differences in female and male sexuality. The intellectual history and past from which sexual script theory was developed, includes an overarching connection to social constructionism. The two general explanatory camps that propose the causes of differences in female and male sexuality can be described as existing on a continuum, with essentialism on one end of the spectrum and constructionism on the other (Wiederman, 2005). Sexual script theory as developed by Gagnon and Simon (1973) is deeply rooted within the constructionist perspective. The ideas underlying sexual script theory were built on the concept of symbolic interactionism, which focuses on the meanings that humans attach to verbal and non-verbal interactions and symbols and how such interactions shape their perceptions and by implication, their behaviour. In the context of sexuality, symbolic interactionism posits that sexual attitudes and behaviours are not inherent but are constructed through a process of interpreting symbols and through the process of social interaction (Wiederman, 2015). Social scripting theory posits that a large part of social behaviour follows a script, and not unlike the scripts that actors on stage use to guide and coordinate their performance with other actors, social scripts instruct individuals as to the appropriate behaviour and the meanings attached to such behaviours (Wiederman, 2005).

Simon and Gagnon (1973) further developed the theory of social interactions as socially scripted performances with a specific focus on sexuality. They questioned the causal factors of differences in female and male sexuality and challenged the idea that sexuality is instinctual and argued that rather, it is shaped and influenced by cultural and social expectations. They argued that collective blindness or "ineptitude in locating and defining these scripts" (p. 13) has allowed the biological mandate to dominate in the explanation of sexual behaviour, a mandate that sees biological essentialism as an inherent aspect of sexual scripts within Western culture. Rejecting essentialist ideas of sexuality that were based on evolutionary and biological determinism, they argued firstly, for the inclusion of the manifold manifestations of sexuality, and secondly, posited that the erotic was an aspect of ordinary social life. Lastly, and most importantly, they refocused attention away from the idea of sexual drives and acts and onto the construction of sexuality through social and cultural expectations. Through their theorising on sexuality as a social construct, they illuminated the mechanisms through which sexual norms and expectations are learned and the way these behaviours are integrated into large social scripts and social arrangements "where meaning and sexual behaviour come together to create sexual conduct" (p. 5). In providing an analysis of the social construction of sexuality, they coined

the term 'sexual script' to describe the cultural behaviours and norms that are essential to heterosexuality and in so doing, made a major contribution to sexuality scholarship (Simon and Gagnon, 2003).

While sexual scripting does not provide a comprehensive theory of human sexuality, it does provide a broad theoretical framework for examining sexual attitudes and behaviours (Sakaluk *et al.,* 2014). According to Gagnon and Simon (1973), in the absence of a sexual script that "defines the situation, arms the actors, and plots the behaviour" (p. 13), it is highly unlikely that anything sexual will happen. Sexual scripting can be understood as the fusion of "the social and historical construction of sex with individual psychology and the negotiation of daily experience" (Irvine, 1994, p. 10). According to Simon and Gagnon (1986), "for behaviour to occur, something resembling scripting must occur on three distinct levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts" (p. 99). The scripts that exist at each level are described as hierarchal, with the cultural level scripts extending an overarching influence. They govern the broader norms and expectations around sexuality, including heteronormative beliefs regarding gender roles and sexual practices (Irvine, 1994).

Social scripts are first encountered within the context of the family and community through the behaviours and norms of those who have already learned and adopted them (Wiederman, 2005). They are further maintained and developed by a diversity of social systems, such as educators and schools, religious leaders and teachings, medical institutions, and folklore. In more recent decades, mass media has grown to become a primary influence on sexual level scripts in contemporary Western culture (Kistler, 2011; Ward, 2022) with higher exposure to gendered sexual scripts through this medium correlating to greater adherence (Giaccardi *et al.*, 2016; Seabrook *et al.*, 2016). Aside from the influence of mass media, the structures and institutions of a particular society contribute significantly to the maintenance and formation of social scripts. At this systemic level, judicial, medical and educational policies and practices reinforce and legislate in favour of heteronormative sexual scripts through laws such as those governing marriage and legislation against certain sexual acts or specific sexual partners (Wiederman, 2005). These social structures represent institutions of sociosexual control that perpetuate heteronormativity as defined within the dominant culture (Irvine, 1994).

Cultural level scripts have been proven to have a direct influence on real-life sexual behaviour (Rittenhour and Sauder, 2024; Seabrook *et al.*, 2016) and are at their most potent during adolescence when young

women and men often encounter them for the first time (Carpenter, 1998; Fine, 1988; Thompson, 1990; Tolman, 1994; Tolman, 2006). According to Wiederman (2005), it is within the social framework that individuals are socialised into heteronormative sexual conduct. Social scripts determine "the appropriate object, aims, and desirable qualities of sexual interactions" (p. 496). They correspondingly provide a set of instructions to the individual actors as to the appropriate sexual context, sequence and behaviours and thereby moderate anxiety by reducing uncertainty and increasing predictability in sexual encounters.

According to Simon and Gagnon, interpersonal scripts, which are the second level of sexual scripts, describe the set of normative behaviours that individuals adopt in specific social contexts with others, such as first dates, casual encounters or long-term relationships (1974; 1986). These scripts are heavily influenced by the cultural scripts within which they are encountered but are correspondingly shaped by an individual's history and experiences. Here the individual reconstructs the applicable or appropriate aspects of cultural scripts into interpersonal scripts that facilitate their ability to function in a specific social situation, thereby enabling coherent sexual interaction (Irvine, 1994). According to Simon and Gagnon (1986), they represent the "ordering of representations of self and other that facilitate the occurrence of a sexual act" (p. 97). They articulate the process through which couples, as social actors, "become partial scriptwriters, negotiating appropriate conduct and making it congruent with desired expectation" (Sakaluk *et al.,* 2014*,* p. 518). According to Simon and Gagnon (1986), they represent the process through which "appropriate identities are made congruent with desired expectations" (p. 99).

Intrapsychic scripts stem from within and describe the internalised beliefs, drives, desires and fantasies that are determined by both the cultural and intrapersonal scripts and are influenced by personalities and personal histories (Sakaluk *et al.*, 2014). They represent the fusion of individual desires and social meanings and thereby "facilitate sexual expression through the management and ordering of sexual desires and fantasies" (Irvine, 1994, p. 10). In so doing, they elicit and sustain sexual arousal (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). Intrapsychic sexual scripts are a historical necessity as the internal world of fantasies and desires that are experienced as originating from deep within the self must be negotiated within the social context (Simon and Gagnon, 1986).

While all sexual conduct and engagement requires all three levels of scripting, each level is not necessarily relevant in each or all contexts and situations (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Simon and Gagnon, 1986). Each of

the three levels interacts with and influences each other, resulting in the formation of sexual identities and corresponding sexual practices within their given cultural contexts (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). This complex relationship "between intrapsychic experience, interpersonal relationships and the intersubjective cultural surround" (Simon and Gagnon, 2003, p. 291) was foundational in terms of understanding sexuality as socially 'learned'.

Coming from the perspective of sociology, Gagnon and Simon (1973) posit that social learning and socialisation require the internalisation of sexual and gender scripts. Sexual scripts are learned through the process of socialisation within their given cultural context. Included in sexual convention and sexual scripts are both verbal and non-verbal gestures, language and a pre-determined sequence of events. These strategies that are described as culturally agreed with shared external routines are "concrete and continuous elements of what a culture agrees is sexual. They are assembled, learned over time" (p. 14) and most importantly, internalised. The stylised behaviour resulting from adherence to such scripts gives little indication of the meaning these events have for both different pairs of actors and importantly in this context, for participants in the same act (Gagnon and Simon, 1973).

The Traditional Sexual Script

According to Irvine (1994), sexual scripts are not static, they are fluid and ever-changing with a notable growth in the variety of sexual scripts available in more recent years (Rittenhour and Sauder, 2024). Sexual scripts also vary across cultures, with different imperatives and sets of normative behaviours at play within different cultural contexts. The more homogenous the setting, the more coherent the sexual scripts. Correspondingly, the more heterogeneous the cultural context, the greater divergences, resulting in a broader variety of sexual scripts that are available to the social actors, such as the more recent emergence of sexual scripts from queer, polyamorous and kink communities (Rittenhour and Sauder, 2024). Cultural sexual scripts are also changeable through cultural shifts and directly through changes in sex education curricula, changes in religious doctrine and shifts in attitudes that are reflected in mass media (Gavey, 2005). Interpersonal scripts are changing consistently as they are negotiated in each new sexual encounter through adoption and integration of former experiences, though this process is less evident in long-term relationships, where norms and patterns become customary (Sakaluk *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, intrapsychic sexual scripts are also changeable at this subjective level, as individuals negotiate the

various scripts they encounter through new partners, with their formerly internalised scripts (Laumann *et al*., 1994).

Though despite the emergence of a variety of sexual scripts and increasing levels of change, the traditional sexual script is the most widely available script for heterosexual relationships in the Western world (Ward *et al.*, 2022) and follows a heteronormative narrative where women and men are expected to adhere to specific gendered behaviours during sexual engagement (Gavey, 2005). The widespread glamorisation of the traditional sexual script in popular culture ensures its continued prevalence and, thus, it remains the most popular script that is espoused in mass media (Kitsler, 2011, Ward, 2022), sex education (Fine, 1998) teen magazines(Carpenter, 1996), dating relationships and casual encounters (Seabrook *et al.*, 2016). The traditional sexual script is inherently heterosexual, deeply gendered and plays a crucial role in the formation of heterosexualised gender norms (Kimmel, 2013). The use of a gender binary framework that determines differential socialisation of girls and boys is foundational in terms of the development of dichotomous sexual scripts for women and men that are posited as oppositional yet complementary (Wiederman, 2005). Also referred to as the heterosexual script (Tolman, 1994), it maintains that men are directed to be sexually aggressive and women sexually passive which, according to Kistler (2011), determines that "women serve as objects to be sought after" (p. 6).

Key to the traditional sexual script is the inclusion of specific ideals. According to Byres (1996), these can be categorised into six interconnected and distinctly gendered themes. The first theme is 'the sexual double standard', which sees women's perceived worth and social status decreasing in tandem with their sexual experience, in contrast to men's social standing, which increases with sexual prowess (Kistler, 2011). Intrinsically linked, the second theme positions men as initiators of sex and women as recipients of their sexual endeavours (Bonell *et al.*, 2022; Sakaluk *et al.*, 2014). This theme places men as ardent and vigorous pursuers of sex who push for increasingly intimate sexual activities within any given sexual encounter, where they are encouraged to "initiate sex; to be always ready, willing, and able to have sex; and to control all aspects of sexual activity" (Bowleg, 2015, p. 2). The third theme focuses on sexual drive, positing that men are obsessed with sex, motivated to have sex at every given opportunity and willing to "exploit or pursue any sexual opportunity made available by a woman" (Byers, 1996, p. 9). The fourth theme sees men as predacious and women as the gatekeepers to sex, who must take responsibility for whether sex will take place or not. As the gatekeepers of sex, women are "expected to succumb

to men's sexual urges by expressing initial reluctance and subsequent submission" (Bonnel, 2022, p. 3064). Against this resistance, the traditional sexual scripts "legitimise men's use of a variety of coercive and noncoercive influences and strategies in attempting to overcome the woman's reluctance" (Byers, 1996, p. 10). According to Wiederman (2005), "women's dominant 'gatekeeper' sexual script represents a boundary that men are required to overcome" (p. 498). The fifth theme focuses on men as physical and sexual and women as emotional and romantic, suggesting that men engage in sex to fulfil their sexual desires, whereas women engage in sex as a route to emotional and romantic fulfilment (Bonnel, 2022). This theme posits that women are "expected to delay sexual activity until emotional intimacy has been established" (Sakaluk, 2000, p. 517). The final theme, according to Byers (1996), expects women to be nurturers in interpersonal relationships, prioritising men's needs over their own, such as feigning desire to show a partner that he is sexually attractive or feigning orgasm to demonstrate his sexual skill (Thomas *et al.*, 2017). This type of engagement, defined as 'gender labour', encourages both women and men to work to make gender differences within their sexual relationship appear natural while simultaneously reproducing inequalities and power differentials (Andrejek, Fetner and Heath, 2022).

All of the above themes intersect in the act of sex itself, through the coital imperative or the assumption that sex culminates with coitus. According to Braun and Gavey (2003), the coital imperative is a cornerstone of the traditional sexual script. They highlight this through semantics, whereby the word 'sex' is regularly conflated with the word 'intercourse', claiming that coitus "is still seen as a crucial or inevitable feature in sex – the 'logical conclusion'" (2003, p. 243).

Adherence to Traditional Scripts

Traditional sexual scripts are the culmination of intersecting heteropatriarchal themes, all of which subjugate and disempower women. Women's role in the traditional sexual script is that of being desired but not desiring, of gatekeeping sex and being the willing recipient of men's sexual work. While research indicates a growing move away from the traditional sexual script towards a more egalitarian sexual script, the traditional sexual script continues to dominate in Western culture (Emmers-Sommer, 2023; Kistler, 2011), where it maintains a stronghold in the formulation of emerging sexual identities (Rittenhour and Sauder, 2024) which sustains a prioritisation of male sexual pleasure (Thome, 2023) and masks the intimate labour that women perform in heterosex (Braun *et al*., 2003).

Included in the compelling cultural guidelines of the traditional sexual script are two key elements that are infused within popular culture, the 'male sexual drive discourse' and 'the coital imperative'. Such gendered polarisation of roles and practices within the traditional sexual script sets up the preconditions through which "women's passive, acquiescing (a)sexuality and men's forthright, urgent pursuit of sexual 'release', serve to disempower women and arguably, reproduce women's sexual victimisation" (Gavey, p. 9). Such victimisation is articulated well in feminist research, whereby adherence to traditional sexual scripts is found to have problematic outcomes, including increased risk of psychological distress, diminished sexual agency (Ward, 2022), fewer sexual protection behaviours (Seabrook *et al.* 2016) and increased risk of sexual violence (Gavey, 2005).

Conclusion

This review of literature illustrates how heterosexuality is upheld through the circulation of a dominant constraining discourse that posits that heterosexuality is the natural, default social norm. According to Jackson (1999), the process of critiquing heterosexuality entails making it visible and "divesting it of its cloak of neutrality and normality" (p. 3). Jackson points here to the taken-for-granted norms and assumptions that are inherent in heterosexuality. These taken-for-granted expectations, which are reified through the traditional sexual script, support women's engagement in sex they neither want nor desire. The literature illustrates how women are socialised and indoctrinated into heterosexual norms that make them feel duty-bound to be sexually available to their male partners. This duty involves the prioritisation of their male partners' sexual needs over and above their own needs. While the terms and conditions around this duty are negotiable and differ across social regimes, cultures, historical periods, cohorts and, importantly, within each heterosexual relationship, the literature indicates that these expectations are nonetheless ubiquitous and implicate women's engagement in unwanted, consensual sex.

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