

11

HETEROSEXUAL MALE SEXUALITY

A Positive Vision

Shaun Miller

Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being related to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.

(World Health Organization 2002)

In contemporary debates, male sexuality, especially heterosexual male sexuality, is often discussed negatively: as something that is potentially toxic, harmful to women, and inconsistent with gender equality. We often hear about the worst of men's sexual behavior—harassment, rape, and other forms of abuse—but less often about the best of men's sexual behavior. What does good male sexuality even look like? What is a positive vision we might hold up as an example or an ideal toward which men ought to strive? We know something about what men should avoid; but what should they develop, foster, cultivate, or pursue?

That is the question we will be exploring in this chapter. To fully understand why a positive vision for male sexuality is needed, we need to start with a solid grasp of what is not working with the status quo. It has been argued that the prevailing norms governing male sexuality in the Western world—not to mention other contexts—are rooted in patriarchy (sociopolitical dominance by men), misogyny (oppression of women), and heteronormativity (unjustly devaluing or punishing non-heterosexuality). An early expression of this thesis can be found in R.W. Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).¹ Hegemonic masculinity is the normative position that males should showcase a masculinity—roughly, a socially prescribed gender role for males—that reinforces male domination (Levy 2007: 253). In other words, it is a type of masculinity that endorses a power dynamic whereby sexuality, gender, and the relations between men and women reflect and reinforce an ideology that systematically and unfairly advantages men. According to this ideology, to be a "real man" is to be powerful, to exercise control over women—and other, "inferior" men—and to exhibit certain corresponding temperaments and behaviors (e.g., aggression, dominance, physical strength, independence, and lack of emotional expression). Feminine traits are then framed as the opposite: passivity, submissiveness, weakness, dependency on others, and expressive emotionality.

The above traits or capacities, both “masculine” and “feminine,” are not necessarily objectionable in and of themselves. Rather, it can be virtuous for people of all sexes and genders to cultivate many of them and exhibit them judiciously: for example, strength and aggressiveness in defending one’s child from an assault; peaceful submission to circumstances one cannot change; expressing sadness and accepting help when one is in need, yet also managing one’s emotions (Táíwò 2020) and exercising agency and independence—all of these are skills or behaviors that anyone might commendably pursue. The problem with hegemonic masculinity, then, is not that (all) “traditionally masculine” traits are inherently toxic. Rather, it is the gender-based relational hierarchy of traits (e.g., dominance for males, submissiveness for females); the devaluing of feminine-coded qualities (especially for men), and the employment of masculine-coded qualities in the oppression of others.

A major barrier to addressing these problems is that alternative ways of being, behaving, and relating as a male may be considered to violate the norm for what a “real man” should be. Indeed, the normative expectations of hegemonic masculinity are socially upheld in such a manner that to question them is to challenge manhood, manliness, “being a man,” and masculinity overall. Consequently, men are incentivized to seek social dominance over other men (Flood 2013) while also monitoring and, if necessary, punishing women who appear to challenge or threaten their dominance—so as to keep them in “in their place” according to the patriarchal order (Manne 2017: Chap. 3).

Sexually, hegemonic masculinity entails that “real men” have (preferably large) penises, have sex with heterosexual, cisgender (non-transgender) women, do not form strong emotional ties (since this is associated with femininity), are entitled to women’s bodies, are expected to be regularly sexually engaged and desiring sex, and are permitted to be aggressive and dominant to achieve their sexual goals. Women, thereby, learn that their sexuality is not their own but something to which men are entitled (Manne 2020) and must withstand male aggression against their bodies (Bartky 1990; MacKinnon 1989).

This dynamic is then cast as “natural” and inevitable: men are unable to control their sexual urges and women must acquiesce (Hlavka 2014).² If men are considered, “by nature,” aggressive and powerful, then their violent behavior and their supposed overwhelming desires to engage in sex are also to be expected.

Hegemonic masculinity often involves exaggerated and destructive behavior patterns—which may rightly be called *toxic masculinity*—to demonstrate that one is not feminine. Journalist Peggy Orenstein argues that the three legs of toxic masculinity are (1) disparagement of the feminine, (2) unhealthy emotional suppression, and (3) bragging about sexual conquest (Orenstein 2020: 27). In short, toxic masculinity requires men to constantly be physically strong because being weak equates to being feminine, “stoical”³ in their emotions (except for anger), and boasting about having sex to others, usually attempting to humiliate or shame women whom they have sex with.

Not all men exhibit such overt toxicity. But nor do men as a rule openly resist or seek to undermine the norms from which such toxicity flows. Connell—the theorist behind the concept of hegemonic masculinity, mentioned above—proposes that most men fall within what Connell calls *complicit* masculinity. These men, more or less passively, accept and participate in the system of hegemonic masculinity so as to enjoy the material, physical, and symbolic benefits of the subordination of women (Levy 2007: 254). Thus, individual men need not consciously support patriarchy nor actively uphold its tenets through open displays of toxic masculinity. Rather, men can simply reap the benefits that patriarchy bestows on men. As Connell puts it, individual men need not be “frontline troops for patriarchy,” but they may still exhibit “slacker versions of hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 2005: 79). Thus, in complicit masculinity, many men feel that they have to act hegemonically—or not openly act against hegemonic behavior—to fit in. The first element of toxic masculinity from Orenstein, disparaging the feminine, is one means by which this may be done.

Disparaging the feminine does not need to be explicit. One can complicitly endorse such disparagement, which is an element of sexism. I follow Manne (2017: Chap. 3) and conceive of sexism as the “justification” branch of patriarchy, that is, the claims that the difference between men and women are natural, and the social order must be kept in place. Consistent with this, a study by Christopher Kilmartin and colleagues (2008) revealed that many men overestimate their peers’ sexism, making them reluctant to challenge those attitudes. In the study, participants reported their own attitudes toward women and then estimated the attitudes of the other men present. They rated the other men as having more sexist attitudes than themselves but overestimated the extent to which the other men did indeed have more sexist attitudes. This leads to an unfortunate situation: many men misconstrue other men’s expected norms of masculinity and are actually uncomfortable when other men act in overtly hegemonic ways. But at the same time, they believe that they are in the minority feeling such discomfort, so they do not speak out against the hegemonic actions.

The sociologist of gender Michael Kimmel (2008: 47) notes that many men “subscribe to [hegemonic] ideals not because they want to impress women [..but] because they want to be positively evaluated by other men [even though] most of them are actually quite uncomfortable with hegemonic masculinity.” As Orenstein argues: “Masculinity isn’t about what [men] can do and say, but about what they *can’t* do or say when they wish they could. Being silent around sexism is how they become men” (Orenstein 2020: 34). Consequently, they either engage in sexist behavior or fail to intervene “for fear of ostracization” (Kimmel 2008: 47) and may feel shame that they are not living up to the masculine ideal. In other words, what is important to many men is their perceived manhood in the eyes of other men, not women (Berkowitz 2011: 164; Fabiano et al. 2003).

If male sexuality is currently characterized by hegemonic and/or toxic masculinity, this suggests that a positive vision for male sexuality should, in part, be oriented around undermining such hegemony and toxicity. One way to pursue this would be to endorse and elevate an alternative conception of masculinity. To formulate this alternative conception, it will not be enough to recite such bland exhortations as “respect women” or “see others as equal,” or “don’t commit rape.” Instead, it will be necessary to provide a robust, compelling, and substantive alternative model for male sexuality. After all, by not actively engaging nor participating in heteronormativity, men may remain bystanders and exhibit complicit masculinity. To undermine complicit masculinity is to challenge these hegemonic masculine prescriptions.

Here I must reiterate that critiquing hegemonic masculinity is not critiquing all of masculinity or masculinity as such. When men engage in positive behaviors and cultivate and express desires that dismantle hegemonic masculinity, it gives us a new outlook for what masculinity, and thereby men’s sexuality, could look like.⁴ We often hear, men ought to “be a better man.” But what, exactly, does that look like? In what follows, I offer a humble sketch of what “being a better man” could look like in the sexual realm.

This project necessarily rests on both epistemic and moral claims. In Section “‘Men Ought to Respect Women’—Deontological Perspectives,” I briefly outline what “respecting women”—a baseline requirement for moral male heterosexuality—consists of and conclude that such respect carries higher epistemic and moral responsibilities than is implied by the above “bland” exhortation. In Section “‘Sex Must Aim for Pleasurable’—Consequentialist Perspectives,” I investigate a pleasure imbalance between men and women and offer normative prescriptions for men that mitigates that imbalance. Needless to say, positive (moral or virtuous) sexual experiences must be consensual, and they are paradigmatically (highly) pleasurable. However, even if consent and pleasure are present, it does not challenge the problems of the status quo—hegemonic and/or toxic masculinity—since those values can still be present in pleasurable, consensual sex. Therefore, an added feature is needed. In Section “‘Promoting an Ethical Sexual Character’—Virtue Perspectives,” I suggest that developing an ethical sexual character is necessary which will require a moral education, both individually and structurally, to dismantle the negative system of hegemonic male sexuality.

One last note. Because hegemonic masculinity is prescriptive for non-transgender (cisgender) heterosexual males, my focus will be on them. Thus, when I say “men,” I mean cisgender heterosexual males unless otherwise specified.

“Men Ought to Respect Women”—Deontological Perspectives

We often hear that “men ought to respect women” but we do not get the same message that “women ought to respect men” except for, perhaps, women ought to respect man’s power. This asymmetry is telling: respecting others is, typically, understood and taught differently to each gender. “Respecting others” has been codified in the sexual realm in that it has been reduced to sexual consent, often with an implicit script: the man initiates or tries to “get” sex, while the woman decides whether to consent. If she does, the sex is deemed permissible. One traditional model of sexual consent is the “no means no” model: if the potential partner—again, presumed to be a woman—says “no” to sex, that should be the end of it. But insofar as men are either hegemonic or complicit in hegemonic masculinity, they may feel entitled to sex or expect sex as a given, which presents a “yes” to sex as the default. Any “no” disrupts the default so that these men may see their goal as undermining or getting around the “no.” Thus, under conditions of hegemonic masculinity, “no means no” teaches men to continuously pursue women until there is no more “no.”⁵ In other words, the worry is that this overly simple “no means no” paradigm does not challenge the normative script of hegemonic masculinity. The scholar of rape law Michelle J. Anderson (2005) points out that the requirement of a “no,” in practice, places the imperative on women. The actor/pursuer (assumed to be male) is not required to say anything; he can continue if there is silence because there was no explicit resistance.

In response to these kinds of concerns, a new model—the affirmation model, sometimes known as the “yes means yes” model⁶—has gained traction. According to this model, sexual consent is only ethically valid if it is actively affirmative. In other words, the default is changed so that a “yes,” rather than a “no” or silence, is necessary for sex to be permissible. However, the “yes means yes” model has its problems, too. If women need to be convinced to give a “yes,” then we may fall back into the problem we had before: women need to be “won over” whereby men “work a yes out” to change the “no” or silence to a “yes.” Thus, obtaining a “yes” becomes “merely a more administrable, sanitized, and legalistic form of the ‘traditional’ sex script in which men are sexual proponents and women are gatekeepers” (Gruber 2015: 692).

Yet another option, the “communicative model,” has been advanced by Louis Pineau, whereby she reinterprets the Kantian imperative never to treat others merely as a means to an end. Influenced by Onora O’Neill, Pineau argues that “we have an obligation to take the ends of others as our own” in intimate situations (Pineau 2013: 473).

Assuming that each person enters the encounter in order to seek sexual satisfaction, each person engaging in the encounter has an obligation to help the other seek his or her ends. To do otherwise is to risk acting in opposition to what the other desires, and hence to risk acting without the other’s consent.

(Pineau 2013: 473)

According to Pineau’s model,

if a man wants to be sure that he is not forcing himself on a woman, he has an obligation either to ensure that the encounter really is mutually enjoyable, or to know the reasons why she would want to continue the encounter in spite of her lack of enjoyment.

(Pineau 2013: 473)

Notably, this view implies an epistemic responsibility to know what the other's ends are, how to obtain those ends, and how to reciprocally communicate our own ends as well. This is an entirely different approach to simply coaxing a "yes" out of someone with whom one wishes to have a sexual experience. Rather, it imbues the injunction to "respect women" with a robust responsibility to communicate: to identify and try to promote one another's ends.

Of course, we may not always know what our "ends" are regarding sex. Often, sex involves a kind of exploration, a teasing-out of desire, a testing of waters. How should one "communicate" in light of this? A compelling way of communicating sexual negotiations comes from Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla, 2018). Kukla argues that consent-based models are unsuitable to sexual initiations since consent implies acquiescing to—rather than refusing—a request. And yet, the possibilities for initiating and enjoying a good sexual encounter are not adequately captured by such concepts. Instead, Kukla argues, *invitations* and *gift offers* are better ways to conceptualize the preliminary stages of good sex than "mere" consent. For example, a sexual encounter might—appropriately—begin by inviting someone to engage more intimately: "Would you like to come to my place?" Or perhaps: "This feels really nice: Should we move to the bed?" Such invitations open a door since they express interest and desire. But they are not *requests*. So, one does not "consent" to an invitation; one either accepts it or turns it down.

Sex can also be offered as a gift. Kukla states:

I may offer my partner sex because she is leaving for a trip, as a way of saying goodbye. I might offer to role-play or indulge a fetish that both of us know is their 'thing,' not mine. There is nothing inherently problematic about offering to have sex out of generosity rather than direct desire. Not all sex or all parts of sex have to be enthusiastically desired by all parties in order to be ethical and worthwhile.

(Kukla 2018: 84)

On Kukla's conception, sexual gifts are given from generosity; they are not a set-up for someone to accept or refuse a proposition. So, we do not "consent" to gifts, either. We appreciate them or humbly state that we cannot accept them but still consider the gift thoughtful.

Kukla's framework helps us see that *good* sex is not sex that is merely consented to. After all, a person might say "yes" to sex for any number of reasons apart from really wanting it, or even despite actively not wanting it. To put it bluntly, consent is what makes sex *not rape*, legally. It does not guarantee that sex will be ethical or respectful, much less good. So thinking about sexual initiations in terms of potentially accepting—or turning down—an invitation or gift opens up the conversation in a healthy way.

Under the logic of hegemonic masculinity, however, even Kukla's proposal hits a snag. This is because, insofar as men feel entitled to sex and women's bodies, a "turned down invitation" is no more likely to be respected than a "no" expressing lack of consent. It becomes just another obstacle to overcome or invokes anger from a declined "offer." Moreover, such men may not see sex as a gift offer—except perhaps in a crude way (e.g., "I'm God's gift to women," "She'll be so pleased once she gets a load of me"), but more as a way to satisfy their own desires. Indeed, they may feel entitled to sexual "gifts" from women (which rather undermines the point of gifts). The concept of an invitation or gift offer, refracted through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, becomes little more than a disguised demand. Moreover, "respecting women" becomes a form of entitlement: if an invitation or gift offer is not accepted, this may lead not only to disappointment but to a feeling of being wronged.⁷

This sort of entitlement blocks the sort of mutual respect required by Pineau's "communicative" model, and it makes a mockery of invitations and gift offers for navigating sexual initiations. The sexual education of young people, therefore, should aim to address such entitlement directly.

In other words, it is not enough to teach about consent, whether of the “no means no” or the “yes means yes” variety. Consent is a basic condition for avoiding sexual assault. It is not sufficient for ethical sex, let alone good sex. Rather, good sex involves: (1) an epistemic responsibility to learn about our partners’ sexual desires and concerns to the best of our abilities; (2) learning how to communicate our own desires in a way that does not put pressure on the other person to fulfill them; and (3) initiating sex in a way that leaves the door open—for example, through invitations or gift offers—but that does not compel or coerce. I will expand on the first of these requirements in the following section.

“Sex must aim for Pleasurable”—Consequentialist Perspectives

To fully appreciate another’s sexual desires and concerns, it is useful to have a general sense of why people engage in sex. It may seem too obvious to state, but, in many cases, the reason is simple: people are attracted to someone and they anticipate that by having a sexual experience with the person, they will experience physical (and perhaps other kinds of) pleasure (Meston and Buss 2007). There can be many other reasons, including negative reasons (such as a desire to avoid upsetting someone who feels entitled to sex), and those reasons may be no less weighty. However, since pleasure is high on the list of positive reasons for sex among men and women alike, I will focus on sexual pleasure in this section.

According to the World Health Organization—as seen in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter—sexual health includes not only what to avoid, but also “a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences.” Sexual pleasure, however, is often gendered, both conceptually and in terms of experience. Conceptually, this relates to what people even count as “sex” in the first place. Unsurprisingly, studies show that penis-in-vagina (or PIV) sex is what most people “count” as sex (Byers et al. 2009; Pitts and Rahman 2001; Randall and Byers 2003). (See also Gupta, Grunt-Mejer, this volume.) PIV sex with the penis ejaculating is considered the gold standard, whereas other forms of sex (e.g., oral sex, manual stimulation) rank lower on what “counts” as sex for most people. However, these “lower-ranking” sex acts are usually more conducive to female orgasm. Moreover, what “counts” as sex is heteronormative in that gays and lesbians who have only had same-sex partners would not have had “real” sex and are still “virgins.” Of course, vaginal intercourse can be enjoyed by both partners and sex without orgasm can still be good sex; but if people consider PIV sex with the outcome of the male orgasm as essential, then female orgasms are considered non-essential for sex or simply a nice side effect (Friedrichs 2019: 69–70). In practice, this leads to a gendered asymmetry in the experience of sexual pleasure.

As a case study, consider the so-called “orgasm gap” between men and women. Partnered heterosexual men achieve an orgasm 95% of the time whereas partnered heterosexual women achieve an orgasm 65% of the time (Frederick et al. 2018). Part of the reason for this is that most women do not achieve orgasm unless there is (manual and/or oral) clitoral stimulation, which is not a part of PIV intercourse. But if thrusting a penis is how men obtain the most pleasure and eventually reach orgasm, they may erroneously conclude that penetration is the greatest pleasure for all concerned. They may think, “if I’m getting pleasure or orgasm through penetration, then the same probably goes for her.” To return to Pineau’s “communicative” model of sexual ethics, this kind of thinking likely reflects an insufficient investment in learning about, much less aiming to fulfill, a sexual partner’s “ends.”

Not only do men and women have different conceptions of what “counts” as (pleasurable) sex, but they also have different descriptions of what counts as “good sex.” Debby Herbenick, a well-known sexologist and leader of the National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior, notes that, “When it comes to ‘good sex,’ women often mean without pain, men often mean they had

orgasms” (Loofbourow 2018). Echoing this result, Sara McClelland’s research finds that “women imagined the low end to include the potential for extremely negative feelings and the potential for pain, men imagined the low end to represent the potential for less satisfying sexual outcomes, but they never imagined harmful or damaging outcomes for themselves” (2010: 674). In other words, female participants described “bad sex” in extremely negative terms such as “depressed,” “emotionally sad,” “pain,” and “degrading” whereas “good sex” is not being in a painful state. Male participants, on the other hand, never used these terms describing “bad sex.” Instead, their descriptions referred to loneliness, having an unattractive sexual partner, and insufficient sexual stimulation. “Good sex,” for men, was a heightened sensation of orgasm. Based on this study, we can see how men and women conceptualize and describe “good sex” and “bad sex” differently leading to further gender inequality when it comes to sexual pleasure.

There are different strategies to mitigate this problem. One is that counter-hegemonic sexual education should stress that mutually satisfying sexual pleasure is necessary for good sex. As a part of this, men need to understand that there are typically very different thresholds for “good sex” and “bad sex” between men and women. At the very least, men should ensure that their partners are comfortable and enjoy the experience beyond the mere avoidance of pain. But they should not settle for the very least; they should be equally invested in maximizing pleasure for their partners as they are in meeting their own sexual needs. Individual men can mitigate this problem.

One way of understanding these lessons is to use the acronym of Dan Savage, a well-known sex columnist: “GGG.” That is, sexual partners should be good, giving, and game (quoted in Oppenheimer 2011). “Good” in this context means “skilled,” or “being good at” something. As the relationship develops, the partners get to know each other’s idiosyncrasies and different dynamics to give each other pleasure. Or as Dan Savage crudely puts it, “you have to be good in bed.” If one wants a sexual desire fulfilled, partners must be good at the activity to help achieve each other’s desires.⁸ are filtered through hegemonic masculine prescriptions. For example, men focusing on their pleasures despite their partner, pursuing orgasm quickly, or being in control such that they are less likely to explore contexts in which they are open to new forms of pleasure led by their partner. Such prescriptions likely limit men’s own potential for expanded pleasure, giving another reason to try to resist them. In other words, it is not only the case that men should strive to learn what their partners find pleasurable; they should also *unlearn* hegemonic constraints on mutual sexual fulfillment, such as obtaining one-sided pleasure for him, non-consensual dominance and aggression, and acting out of a sense of sexual entitlement. Unlearning hegemonic sexual prescriptions helps men recognize that their sexual desires and interests may be shaped by narrow—and unjust—expectations of what men should normatively desire. It may also leave a vacuum for non-hegemonic sexual pleasures, desires, and interests to expand men’s sexual scripts. This expansion would allow them to challenge and even transcend traditional male sexual norms about what is considered desirable or pleasurable.

Due to cultural upbringing of what is considered manly or not, many cisgender heterosexual men have been discouraged from trying alternative activities beyond PIV sex that are considered pleasurable. They may not even have had the opportunity to explore these alternative activities. One remedy is to set up a context where people are nonjudgmental toward other possible pleasures such that cisgender heterosexual men may find pleasure in these activities. On a basic level, other people influence how we react to other people’s reactions and they inform our emotions, including how we are supposed to feel. For example, as children grew up, they gathered clues about the appropriate emotional responses that correspond to their gender. Sexual pleasures are like this too. We do not merely learn what is sexually pleasurable from self-reflection; we learn from others, especially our partners. When we engage in sexual activities, others’ responses reinforce or disengage those actions in the future. By associating pleasure or pain with those actions, various sexual pleasures become normative. Moreover, men learn what should be considered manly

sexual activities from their environment, such as other men, porn, and the media. Because people generally want to fit in and not be an outsider, they will learn socially appropriate actions and expressions, including sexual ones. However, these structures push men away from possible sexual and pleasurable pursuits, all for the sake of fitting in as “a man.” Thus, men are boxed into various sexual activities and sexual pleasures that are permissible without venturing to other possibilities.

What can be done? Recall the study by Kilmartin and his colleagues: men rated the other men as having more sexist attitudes than themselves but overestimated the extent to which the other men did indeed have more sexist attitudes. The study also grouped men into a control group and an experimental group. The experimental group attended brief interventions that included feedback on discrepancies between actual and perceived norms within their groups. At a follow-up, there was a significant decrease in the perception of peers’ sexism in the experimental group, suggesting that the brief interventions could be useful to reduce sexism. What is important is that men do not want to feel as if they are not manly when around other men.

Extrapolating from this data, men will forgo possible pleasurable explorations because it does not fit with the norms of manly behavior. Generally, pleasure conditions people toward expected outcomes of certain stimuli. The conditioning can be direct through personal experience or indirectly, such as porn or environmental influences. If, however, men saw other men like themselves (i.e., cisgender, heterosexual) enjoying other types of pleasures, it can result in reframing masculinity, and expanding their pleasure repertoire, depending on how rigid his framework of masculinity was. The surrounding environment must be conducive to that pleasurable, positive experience. For example, porn eroticizes things that are not *inherently* pleasurable (such as facials). Perhaps showing cisgender, heterosexual men in porn with expanded masculine play could help men reframe masculinity such as porn that ensures pleasure for both partners, male anal stimulation, and anything that goes outside the dominant porn trope. Showing expanded masculine play could allow a shift of a new flexibility in the ideas of masculinity.

Another example is a heterosexual cisman may not find prostate play acceptable due to the social message telling him that prostate play is not meant for men like him (i.e., heterosexual, cisgender). However, if he is receiving stimuli, such as videos of other men like him, or if he is in a community or social group talking about their own discovery of anal and prostate play and this message is continuously displayed, it could disrupt the standard received a message that anal play is meant for non-heterosexuals. Over time, he may eventually open up to feeling pleasure there and trying it out. The key is that the surrounding environment is nonjudgmental and positive toward possible pleasures of other sexual activities beyond the typical masculine trope. Men may initially avoid these activities because they do not fit into the currently normative picture of what men (should) enjoy. Of course, this will require first developing an awareness of how one’s current desires are in fact shaped by hegemonic norms, followed by an open-minded investigation of alternative ways of experiencing and promoting sexual pleasure (for oneself and one’s partner), and practice, all of which will take time. Doing so could free them to have more comprehensive, better, and more enjoyable experiences with their partners. Perhaps men may enjoy incorporating sex toys into their sexual encounters. They may find that they enjoy getting a prostate massage without worrying whether anal penetration might be considered unmanly. They may enjoy kink activities that our society has considered either feminine or perverse. They may enjoy autoeroticism over partnered sex, an activity that goes against the grain of trying to get more “notches on their bedpost,” as required by hegemonic norms. And in relational styles, they may find that they enjoy and prefer polyamory, open relationships, or other forms of ethical non-monogamy.

This analysis suggests that at least one key to changing heterosexual men’s toxic relationships toward sex and their sexual partners is to destigmatize non-dominant forms of sexual expression *and* disconnect desire from the need to dominate. Broadening our view toward traditionally non-masculine pleasures, through the unlearning process, allows heterosexual men to realize that

they do not need to embrace hegemonic forms of sexual domination, and disconnecting desire from the need to dominate gives us the norm that men *should not* find hegemonic forms of sexual domination desirable.⁹

The Process of Unlearning: Taking a Cue from Queer, Gay, and Ethnic Minority Men

In the previous section, I discussed the need for men to “unlearn” various hegemonic expectations for sexual experience and expression. But what does that process of unlearning look like? And how are new skills—for example, communication skills—developed? Orenstein (2020) notes that queer men—men who are gay, bisexual, trans, or men who reject gender and sexual binaries—have different approaches to sex than their heterosexual counterparts. For example, sex advice columnist Dan Savage notes that queer men begin sex with the question “what are you into?” as their defaulted approach to sex (Mindvalley Talks 2017; Orenstein 2020: 121; Savage 2015). Thus, many gay couples are forced to communicate in ways that are different from their straight counterparts. “Who is going to do what with whom cannot be assumed,” he says. For many heterosexual men, sex-as-penetration is a primary default goal for sexual activity.

According to Savage, queer men were better able to negotiate sexual consent where a “yes” begins the conversation because they do not follow the heteronormative script. Once heterosexual couples say “yes,” the defaulted script is PIV sex. But if queer men say yes, they have no particular script to follow, so they are compelled to communicate by asking, “what are you into?” Here, we can see this question fitting with the epistemic requirement to learn about our partners’ sexual desires. If heterosexual men could take a cue from queer men, their and their partner’s pleasure palette could have richer content by expanding what is pleasurable possible rather than confining themselves to the default goal of sex-as-penetration—with the stipulation that the sex is consensual and good, as argued in previous sections.

Heteronormativity not only creates men’s thinking on how they ought to act, but it also reinforces how they ought to *look* (Nikkelen and Kreukels 2018).

Subordinate forms of masculinity or ‘devalued’ bodies vary according to many factors, such as physical capability (disabled men as ‘weak’), body size (timid body as ‘passive’ or smooth body as ‘feminine’), age (old men as ‘dependent’), race and ethnicity (Asian men as ‘asexual,’ black men as ‘hypersexual’), sexual orientation (homosexual as ‘feminine’), and so on and so forth.

(Kong 2007)

Here we can also include trans men as a subordinated form of masculinity. Bodies that follow heteronormative scripts put trans people in a double bind where they may find themselves trying to fit heteronormative standards to be socially ‘readable’ as a member of the gender category they aspire to or consider themselves a member of, but at the cost of their well-being (Iantaffi and Bockting 2011). Trans men’s narrations about their bodies are complex: these narrations range from accepting heteronormative bodies so that they can fit in, to non-heteronormative appearances, where they view their sexual bodies, sexual activities, and their overall sexuality in a positive light (Latham 2016).

A third part of the unlearning process requires an awareness of white supremacy, specifically what Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman (2013) has called “sexual racism.” Since sexuality is culturally informed, the way that people think about different aspects of their sexuality is liable to be shaped by prevailing power structures and their social standing since the dominant cultural forms and benefits from masculine and sexual norms (Orenstein 2020: 149–150). I want to focus on two groups that have are opposite ends of the sexual male spectrum: Asian

men and Black men, especially as it is expressed in many English-speaking cultures. Specifically, Southeast Asian people are stereotypically regarded as compliant, passive, and acquiescent, which are typically considered feminine traits. These stereotypes encourage men to value Asian females as sexual or romantic partners since they are seen as sexually agreeable and docile. However, these same characteristics are attributed to Asian men as well. Thus, they are considered *unattractive* under hegemonic norms since they are considered not sexually virulent, less masculine, and simply sexually and romantically less appealing than their counterparts from other racial groups (Wong et al. 2013). Indeed, the higher an Asian man's phenotypic prototypicality, the more these prejudices kick in (Wilkins et al. 2011).¹⁰ Orenstein relates that a young Asian man told her about matching with a white woman on a dating site. The woman told him, "we could be friends if you want, but, no offense, I don't date Asian guys."

If Asian men are considered hyposexual, effeminate, and as having small penises, then Black men are the flip side of the racialized coin. Such men are commonly stereotyped as hypersexual, overly masculine, and having large penises. Like their Asian counterparts, Black men's sexuality is largely defined by white culture: hypersexual, excessive, deviant, and threatening. These myths become powerful when people expect black men to endorse these stereotypes. Franz Fanon, a black philosopher who focuses on race and colonization, declares, "[a] man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man" (Fanon 1967: 114). In other words, men are expected to behave like "a man" at all times in all situations. The expectation of masculine behavior comes from various stereotypes. Expectations also include racial stereotypes, so people expect black men to behave like "a black man." Going further than Fanon, once men endorse these stereotypes, men act them out because that is people's expectations of them. Sex educator and professor Herbert Samuels notes:

I think some black men have bought into the myth that they are hypersexual, that their sexual prowess and the size, the physicality is greater than others. And it's sort of a false identity that sets up, and you buy into that myth yourself rather than discovering who you are as an individual.

(Sex Stereotypes of African Americans Have Long History 2007)

Like Samuels, bell hooks notes that many black men follow the racialized patriarchal scripts because there is no blueprint for a positive black male sexuality (hooks 2003: 70) and that they are caught up in this lie that they do not know how to break out of this blueprint (hooks 2004: 4). Until white supremacy is dismantled, hooks recommends creating subcultures and sanctuaries where boys can be their unique selves instead of conforming to patriarchal versions (hooks 2004: 54). While hooks' recommendations are laudable, creating a new sexual map to reclaim the body is one thing, but would the dominant white culture allow them to exercise this newly created map to let go of these stereotypes? Black bodies may need healing, but what if others will not allow them to heal? Of course, hooks realizes that the structures are difficult to break down. Nevertheless, it is

[w]hen he is able to come out of the shadows and subterranean cultures where he already resides and everyone collectively acknowledges his presence, all black males will be able to chart a redemptive sexuality, one that is life-affirming and life-sustaining, a sexuality that no one can give and no one can take away. When he is able to openly choose a healthy sexuality, all black men will claim and celebrate their unalienable rights to know sexual healing, erotic self-expression, and liberated sexual agency.

(hooks 2003: 78–79)

As mentioned before, consent and pleasure are not sufficient to develop a positive male sexuality since the values of the status quo—which are white supremacy and heteronormativity—are still locked in place. While our sexual ethics regard consent as necessary and sexual pleasure needed for sexual fulfillment, we also consider sexual autonomy—which includes individual freedom and choices—as a prominent value. However, sexual autonomy may have been influenced by heteronormativity and white supremacy, as we have seen above. Therefore, without challenging the status quo and disrupting heteronormative and white supremacist values and structures, men’s sexuality will still be within the framework of what the dominant cultural forms. What is required is both a structural overhaul of our institutions and culture and individual moral education. Since the latter is something that individuals and communities can plausibly pursue concretely, I will focus on it in the following section.

“Promoting an Ethical Sexual Character”—Virtue Perspectives

While deontological ethics generally focus on intentions, and consequentialist ethics generally focus on bringing about positive consequences, virtue ethics focus on forming a good character such that the good character will engage in good actions habitually. These habits are known as “virtues” in virtue ethics, and the goal is to develop good habits to form a good character. In this case, I am analyzing how to form good sexual habits to form a good sexual character. How do we develop that? First, Kimmel (2017) suggests that having positive role models can help young men learn by example how to “be a better man.” In a university context, such role models might include: the intervening bystander (i.e., seeing a harmful interaction and responding to reduce the harm, or positively influence the outcome),¹¹ “the coach who suspends a player — even his star quarterback — when allegations of sexual assault surface,” a college president who kicks a fraternity off campus for hazing, and alumni who refuse to donate unless sexual, gender, and racial inequalities are addressed.

Second, we ought to promote good masculine traits as virtues and avoid hegemonic traits. While there are many virtues that we could discuss such as truthfulness, temperance, and justice, the virtue that I will focus on is the virtue of care, although it is not meant to do *all* the work. Developing other virtues would also be necessary.

Stephanie Collins considers care broadly “as appreciating someone else’s situation from their perspective, and being moved to help them because of what one sees from that perspective.” As she notes, having that perspective requires people to see the world as *others* see it and not merely sympathizing with that perspective, which requires attentive listening and receptivity (Collins 2015: 24). From her description, I take the virtue of care to consist of two types. The first type is *acting* in a caring way, which is going beyond respect mentioned in Section “‘Men Ought to Respect Women’—Deontological Perspectives.” Simply respecting another is to treat them as an end, to see them as another person. Minimally, it is to leave them alone. Caring for them, on the other hand, is where your involvement ensures a positive contribution to their well-being. Caring actions stem from caring dispositions founded in and developed from a caring character. One should develop a caring character so as to be able to display care without discomfort. In the sexual realm, to care is, minimally, to ensure that the other person does not regret the experience; but a better formation of care is to appreciate people’s situation from their perspective and want to help them based on their perspective. Part of the ethic of care applied to sex agrees with Pineau’s idea that men ought to know what the other’s sexual interests are and if it is not too costly to fulfill those interests, then one should pursue fulfilling those interests. However, notice that care includes fulfilling those interests in a generous mood, where it is not just fulfilling those interests but taking pleasure doing the activity because it is done with the perspective of what his partner wants.

This point leads to the second type of care: an internal emotional character where one *feels* care. It is knowing what the other person's values and desires are and *wanting* to uphold those goals or at least being open to fulfilling them. Depending on the context, care reveals other emotions such as sadness (because one cares), happiness (because one cares), anger (because one cares), and fear (because one cares). It is not to say that care is foundational for other emotions but developing the virtue of care is one way to feel appropriate emotions rather than being emotionless. To see someone sexually unfulfilled and feel nothing is to lack care. How do we develop this attitude of care and moral attention? Collins notes that it amounts to a long-term cultivation of our dispositions and capabilities. "You ought to care about suffering" translates to "you ought regularly to attend to others' suffering, do your best to ignore other demands on your attention, place yourself in environments where suffering presents itself, remember or imagine yourself suffering . . ." and so on (Collins 2015: 61–62). Having a good sexual character not only means to respect consent and to promote other people's sexual pleasure, but to want to do so. In short, a good sexual character is happy to constitute their own and their partner's sexual well-being for the sake of the partnership. It is giving a sympathetic ear, being sensitive and attuned to their partner's needs, respecting the limits and boundaries of others, and offering genuine invitations and gifts to sex (*à la* Kukla) rather than feigning care by giving inconsiderate invitations and thoughtless gifts. It is unjust for one person to get his share of the sexual bargain where as the partner does not.

Part of displaying the virtue of care is properly displaying emotions rather than being emotionally detached. Care has traditionally been associated as a feminine virtue since women are traditionally considered as caring and men are not. But this characteristic is part of the rubric of hegemonic masculinity. Going back to Orenstein's three elements of toxic masculinity, another one to cover is not to show emotions except anger. Men are expected to "toughen up," which is another way of saying "don't care." Thus, not only is autonomy and consent gendered, as discussed in Section "'Men Ought to Respect Women'—Deontological Perspectives," but so is caring or any emotional display. For example, consider how men conceive of their bodies during sex. Men who are ashamed of their bodies may be apprehensive during sex. We would think that shame would prevent them from displaying vulnerability, such as sexual encounters. However, hegemonic masculinity prescribes that men ought to be regularly sexually driven, that

anything other than a rock-hard erection and a mind-blowing performance as a failure. And any single failure raises the possibility in men's minds that they are total failures. Avoiding being soft—physically, emotionally, or in this case physiologically—is avoiding being perceived as lacking some part of manhood.

(Melzer 2018: 105)

As Melzer notes, many men are consumed with penis size and sexual performance that they have difficulty seeing sex as a pleasurable act or relationships as an opportunity for growth. Through performance anxiety, men are alienated from their own bodies, which factors into withdrawing physically and emotionally to avoid potential shame (Melzer 2018: 106). While there is little research, we can imagine that acknowledging rather than withdrawing from their emotions would be one remedy.

So far, our discussions of men caring for their sexual partners might seem to fit long-term relationships. But what about short-term intimacies? How does care fit? I submit people can still show care in one-night stands, casual encounters, or hookups. Caring people must still know what the other sexually desires and try their best to fulfill those desires—within what people are comfortable with.¹² However short the duration, sex is still a mutual, relational activity. Without the relational aspect of sex present, the sexual activity becomes one-sided and the care collapses

into egoism or negligence. Care brings out features of generosity, kindness, loyalty, and trust in various degrees. Trust is formed through a long-standing connection such that it is developed over time and the people involved have built a rapport. Long-term relationships are conducive to building trust; however, short-term relationships generally do not due to the short duration. Given how hegemonic masculinity has predominated, the challenge for men is to show that they are trustworthy and capable of giving care in casual encounters. After all, usually in those encounters, people hardly know their partners and building trust generally takes time. One-night stands hardly have rapport-building, or at least not to the extent that long-term relationships often do.

How can men build that trust in such a small amount of time? Does the notion of trust make sense in these short encounters? For one, men must engage in the extra step of making sure that their partners not only do not regret the experience but also enjoy the experience. But it would be more practical, pleasurable, and reassuring that hegemonic masculinity is not in the background of many women's thoughts. Fear, risk, and predicting what an individual man will do have a profound impact on women. Instead, we must have a framework where anyone sexually engaging with men is not considered a risk nor a potential threat. It should not be normal that women just "got lucky" to have an enjoyable experience in short-term encounters.¹³ For this to happen systematically, there must be a deep dismantling of the current structures today. Because the structures of heteronormativity are ingrained in many people, they are considered the norm. Many do not either know the problematics of the structures or see how it is a problem when the issue has arisen. Thus, we need to develop an ethical sexual character beyond individual moral education. A profound moral education requires overhauling our institutions and having a radical change in our culture, which is a big task. Therefore, it is better to foster the virtue of care in institutional forms that aim toward a cultural change in these problematic systems.

There has been some work on developing care as a social and political project. Joan Tronto, for example, connects care to our democratic politics where

care can be tied to specific moral practices, and indeed might be a basis for how our democracy imagines a 'good citizen.' Because we become better at things as we do them more, care practices deepen certain moral and daily skills.

(Tronto 2013: 7, 2017)

If we live in a community where its values are not based on hegemony but care, people are inclined to do the right thing rather than following gendered norms; they are more likely to intervene in problematic behaviors rather than being a bystander due to a desire to fit in. The specific details on how to do this go well beyond the scope of this paper. However, I would imagine it would have to be a top-down approach whereby it is a combination of government policymakers changing our laws, businesses that change their personnel policies, and media representations that question, challenge, and change the problematic structures that support heteronormativity and white supremacy.

Conclusion

Since hegemonic masculinity contributes to gender inequality, we have reason to try to change it. One way to tackle the problem is to formulate a positive vision of men's sexuality. To make such a change, however, further developments are necessary, which should include men's moral perceptions in the realm of sexual relations, psychological ways to develop men's broader moral perceptions, and further inquiries in the epistemology of men's and women's

differing sexual attitudes. Accordingly, I have offered an ethical route to do so through differing ethical theories. I ended the chapter with a call toward a larger project that requires both structural changes and individual moral development, which will have to be a combination of educational reforms and changes in our current social structures. Challenging hegemonic masculinity and gender inequality can create betterment for all and give a clear path for a positive male sexuality.

Notes

- 1 Connell posits four types of masculinity that are understood as relational positions (that is, how men relate to others) rather than personality types. These positions are: hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, and marginalized. For our purposes, I will focus on hegemonic and complicit masculinities.
- 2 As an example from Hlavka's research, a thirteen-year-old woman described her interaction with her male classmates: "They grab you, touch your butt and try to, like, touch you in the front, and run away, but it's okay, I mean ... I never think it's a big thing because they do it to everyone" (344).
- 3 Not in the sense of the ancient Stoics, but the modern sense: ignoring, denying, or suppressing one's emotions. To see the connection between restricted emotional expression as a form of masculine-coded emotional labor and how it could be prosocial, see Táíwò (2020).
- 4 Is masculinity always negative, thereby negating the possibility of a "positive masculinity?" Is a positive masculinity the development of traits that have been disparaged but could be seen positively through a cultural shift? Or is a positive masculinity a new concept of masculinity whereby positive behaviors are gender-neutral, and these gender-neutral traits persuade men to change as men? These questions are beyond the scope of this paper. However, while this chapter develops a positive male sexuality, it does involve a positive masculinity. That task is vast, however. Thanks to Lori Watson for bringing this to my attention.
- 5 The "no" may also suggest that men are not permitted to pursue her further sexually, but he will disrespect her for snubbing him. Thus, either way, she is still disrespected.
- 6 Popularized by Friedman and Valenti (2008). However, see Gruber (2016) to see how the laws regarding "affirmative consent" and "yes means yes" are not strictly synonymous. Affirmative consent laws are a broad umbrella term that captures regulatory formulations which can range from prosecutorial (e.g., signing a contract) to lenient (e.g., words and conduct that, in context, convey agreement). "Yes means yes" is the median formulation between prosecutorial and leniency. It requires a "yes" to be stated, but even then, the permission script can vary from different college campuses.
- 7 There is scant literature investigating men refusing sex and how that is difficult due to how they perceive masculinity as men should not refuse since traditional normative masculinity always desires sex. However, my paper focuses more on men who feel they are entitled to sex due to hegemonic masculine norms. To see the relationship between men's difficulty refusing sex due to masculine norms and desire, see (Meenagh 2020; Montemurro 2020).
- 8 Some desires should not be fulfilled for ethical reasons: pedophilia, zoophilia, sexual assaults, necrophilia. Moreover, there are desires that people may not want to fulfill due to the action being against their own pleasures: golden showers, scat play, extremely risky kink, and urethral sounding to name a few.
- 9 I thank Clare Chambers for bringing this to my attention.
- 10 The dating site OkCupid found that Asian men were consistently rated as least attractive by women, even if women claimed they were open to dating someone of a different race. The pattern has grown stronger over the years (Orenstein 2020: 148; OkCupid 2018).
- 11 The example Kimmel gives is "the frat brother or teammate or just that random guy at a party who confronts another guy who is about to do something that is at best sketchy and at worst a felony assault. He's not about rescuing a damsel in distress; he's just doing the right thing."
- 12 Again, people may not want to do various sexual activities if the action conflicts with their values or undermine their own pleasures.
- 13 Anecdotally, the author has asked women who engage in short-term sexual intimacies (with other men) and have asked whether they have trusted the men and how they knew that the encounter would be safe, close to risk-free, or if the men would show care. Their responses were striking: "I didn't. I just got lucky." "I just took the risk hoping for the best." "I didn't really think about it." "I knew there was some risk but I didn't care."

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