

Straight Identity Power

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Abstract: By adapting Miranda Fricker's concept of identity power, I develop the concept of Straight Identity Power, which is available to persons who are perceived as heterosexual and cisgender. Although it is possible for queer and feminist activists to use Straight Identity Power to further some political ends, doing so is ultimately detrimental, as it necessarily reinforces heterosexist and patriarchal mores. Queer feminists should instead challenge core heterosexist ideals holistically, by employing Queer Identity Power.

In her book, *Epistemic Injustice*, Miranda Fricker defines *identity power* as a “form of social power” which requires “imaginative social co-ordination” relating to social identity.¹ Using a modified version of this concept, I will propose the concept of Straight Identity Power (SIP), or identity power which is available to certain people because of the perception that they are heterosexual and cisgender. I will demonstrate that access to SIP² is contingent not on a stable sexual or gender identity, but on a person's ability to *perform* cisheterosexuality in a given context. Although cautiously relying on SIP may aid some queer or feminist activists in achieving their most immediate political goals, doing so is necessarily detrimental to the advancement of gender equality. To oppose heteropatriarchy successfully, activists must target heteropatriarchal mores without relying on SIP.

Part I. Terms

SIP is social power which is available to a person because of the perception that they are heterosexual and cisgender. Rather than conferring any particular goods onto those who possess it, SIP grants a limited range of power to enforce cisheterosexual mores, and also to improve one's own standing within a heterosexist framework. The more a person is perceived as straight, the more power they have to decide which behaviors are compatible with attaining SIP, and in what ways society should punish aberrant behavior. Excluded from the definition of SIP are any *positive* applications of straight identity. If a straight person defends queer people from their position of relative safety, it's more helpful to describe this as an extension of straight *privilege*, and to reserve the term SIP for nefarious exercises of the same. Innocuous expressions of heterosexuality (e.g. holding hands with one's partner in public) should likewise not be regarded as exercises of SIP.

SIP is neither synonymous with nor inherent to heterosexuality. SIP may be completely unavailable to heterosexuals who are read as queer (typically, straight trans people who don't “pass” as cis),³ and it may be available to non-heterosexual

¹ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

² “Sip.”

³ “Pass” is in quotes because it's a flawed term which we should ultimately phase out.

people in certain contexts. It's at least theoretically possible for a "perfectly gendered"⁴ cisheterosexual person to completely abstain from exercising SIP, although this would be difficult, since they may exercise power over queer people unintentionally, through their presentation alone.⁵ It is both possible and necessary for heterosexuals to reject SIP, and understanding SIP as separate from heterosexuality itself is useful toward this end. Additionally, *heterosexism* and *heterosexist ideology* will refer interchangeably to cultural beliefs and practices which privilege cisheterosexuals over others.

I will refer to certain behaviors as having a masculine, feminine, heterosexual, or queer "valence," meaning that these behaviors increase the probability that someone will be perceived as a man, a woman, a straight person, etc. Wearing lipstick has a feminine valence; having a beard has a masculine valence; wearing lipstick while having a beard has a queer valence, and so on. I will say that a person "performs" (e.g.) masculinity to the extent that they have attributes or engage in behaviors that have a positive valence toward masculinity, and refrain from activities which have a negative valence toward masculinity.⁶ The boundaries of heterosexual expression are ever-changing and historically contingent; as of now, in the United States, wearing a purse has a queer valence for men, but if the perception of purses changed, so that a large majority of nonqueer men started wearing them, this would cease to be true.

For the purposes of this paper, *performance* refers not only to deliberately chosen actions, but also to some involuntary features which affect how a person is perceived, such as their voice and height. We will consider the nature and formation of performance in more depth in the next section.

Part II. Straight Power and Performance

Heterosexist ideology does not pass judgment on people's innate experiences of sexuality and gender, but is rather concerned with the behavior that results from these experiences. Although cisheterosexual performance may be detrimental to queer people's mental health, it is, in some sense, broadly accessible; if a pansexual trans woman lives like a straight cis man, she hasn't broken any rules which would cause society to punish her. Although heterosexist ideology targets people for abuse on the basis of innate properties which have a queer valence, the mechanism by which it does this is punishing *performance* toward which such people are inclined.

Since it is rooted in performance (as I've defined the term), rather than in innate characteristics, SIP is not limited to straight people, nor are its victims universally queer. Queer people who are capable of performing heterosexuality may have access to many of the same privileges and powers as actual straight people, and nonqueer people

⁴ This is Kate Bornstein's term for a person with max privilege relating to their gender. Kate Bornstein, *My Gender Workbook*, (New York, Routledge, 2013).

⁵ For instance, a gay man might feel uncomfortable revealing his sexual orientation to another man who seems identifiably heterosexual, even if the seemingly straight man would never intend to silence him, and is morally blameless. This concept of "passive" exercises of power also comes from Fricker. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 9.

⁶ This will serve us for the narrow purposes of this discussion; in general, we need not concede that, say, a feminine man is performing masculinity to a *lesser extent* than a masculine man.

who are perceived as queer, or who have attributes which are understood as having a queer valence, may suffer because of homophobia and transphobia. If several middle school boys ridicule a peer because his voice is at a high pitch, we don't need to know their sexual orientations to understand that the power they hold over him derives from normative ideas about sexuality and gender. A group of people, unified by an attribute with a heterosexual valence (deep voices), targets someone specifically because he has an attribute with a queer valence (high voice), and in this way the bullies can align themselves with heterosexist ideology regardless of their actual sexual orientations. Heterosexist ideology motivates people to enforce heterosexist norms by incentivizing straight performance; in our example, the bullies might be motivated to engage in homophobic cruelty (an activity with a powerful heterosexual valence) to feel powerful, to convince others that they are powerful, or to avoid being perceived as queer themselves. Heterosexist ideology motivates people to perpetuate itself by promising safety from the abuse that heterosexism, itself, inspires.

The average person understands heterosexuality, masculinity, and femininity as having *gradations rooted in performance*, where one's performance determines the degree to which they function as a woman or man.⁷ On this view, some heterosexuals are more heterosexual, some men more male, some women more female than others, based on their conformity with gender stereotypes and ideals. The average person also understands the highest gradations, those men and women who most perfectly embody heterosexist ideals, as having the most value, and may consider as personal failings traits which hold someone back from these ideals. A man might be concerned that his new backpack looks like a purse; that people will think he's dating his male friend; that getting a vasectomy will diminish his sexual potency, etc. A woman might feel distressed about her height or the size of her hands, if she fears these will cause her to be perceived as masculine. If someone says an experience made him feel like "less of a man," we understand his meaning; the transitive verb emasculate even allows us to communicate the idea of one person *forcing* this feeling onto another, although there is no common English-language equivalent for women. The extreme prevalence of this mindset supports my claim that people commonly understand gender as having better and worse gradations, and that heterosexual performance yields rewards on a sliding scale. To the extent that these rewards include power over others, it is useful to conceive of this as SIP.

One component of SIP is the ability to define the limits of heterosexual performance within a community. Suppose there is a men's football team whose members generally agree that they should exclude gay men; theoretically, no gay man is welcome in the group, regardless of his behavior. One day, their quarterback comes out as gay, and the rule shifts to accommodate him. He is physically powerful, he has a deep voice, and he has no difficulty socializing with his straight male teammates; he has performed heterosexuality perfectly in every way except one, and this grants him the limited power to make room for himself in a homophobic space. His teammates compare him favorably to effeminate gay men, and he agrees, saying things like, "Guys like that make the rest of us look bad." Because the quarterback performs heterosexuality well, he has some authority to determine which behaviors are acceptable, and which are worthy of ridicule. Since his

⁷ It should be clear that this is not really similar to, say, queer feminist models which understand gender as performative.

acceptance hinges on the distinction between masculine and effeminate gay men, he has a strong incentive to use his power to perpetuate heterosexist ideals.⁸

SIP shapes society at the highest level, but there are limitations on its power. In the final sections, we'll consider these limitations, as well as the surpassing might of Queer Identity Power.

Part III. The Impotence of Straight Identity Power

SIP allows some people to exert tremendous power over others; for the individual struggling to survive under these conditions, SIP is terrifying and great. Despite this, there is an important sense in which SIP is impotent, for although it motivates a broad range of actions, SIP cannot oppose heterosexist mores *in principle*. On the contrary, attempts to seize power through heterosexual performance will necessarily reinforce the central concepts of heterosexism, and will thus inevitably harm some of the people to whom they are most attractive.

Recall the quarterback, whose SIP allowed him to secure a measure of acceptance in a group of homophobic straight men. Although he successfully changed the outer limits of acceptable behavior, he didn't change the underlying ideology, which privileges "straight" behaviors over queer ones. In making room for himself, he supports an ideology that is not only cruel to others, but destructive to him personally, as it forces him to concede, indirectly, that he is lesser. In addition to this spiritual harm, he sets himself at an uneasy peace with his community; the tools that others might use to subjugate him are still available, even if straight people choose not to use them against him for the time being. By supporting homophobic ridicule when it is directed at other people, he exposes himself to risk, even though he seems to be accruing power in the short term.

There are countless similar examples in discussions of social justice. Cis women exclude trans women from feminist circles out of ostensible concern that they will threaten the movement's gains; straight-passing gay people distance themselves from people with queer gender expression; cis-passing trans people may be cruel to trans people who do not appear to be cisgender, or who don't seek surgery and hormones as a part of their transition. All of these strategies, adopted in the hopes of securing acceptance for one oppressed group at the expense of others, are noxious even to their own ends, because their meager power lies in the strength of the enemies' tools.

Transphobic and homophobic feminism is doomed to failure because it cannot sufficiently undermine the conceptual basis of patriarchy. By endorsing homophobia and transphobia, queer-exclusionary feminism concedes several claims that are noxious to its fundamental aims, as it affirms that one's gender should rigidly define the course of their life, that it is reasonable to enforce conformity with gender roles, and that a person's happiness and well-being are less important than the role assigned to them because of their (perceived) gender. Anti-queer feminism is thus not merely hypocritical, but self-defeating, and it will thus inevitably fail to liberate even cisheterosexual women from the evils of patriarchy. Although queer-exclusionary feminism may make substantial political gains, there is an inherent limit to what it can accomplish, because it cannot dismantle the

⁸ If we instead imagine that he uses his power for good, e.g. to defend effeminate gay men, we could call this an exercise of *straight-passing privilege*, rather than SIP.

tools which men use to attack women's rights. Queer activists who seek to gain acceptance for some queer people at the expense of others face a nearly identical problem. Any ideology that seeks to end homophobia, transphobia, or misogyny must oppose all three, or it is doomed to fail. In the next section, I'll explain the concept of Queer Identity Power, which lays a sustainable path to achieve justice in all three of these spheres.

Part IV. Queer Identity Power

Queer Identity Power (QIP) is available to anyone who functions as a queer person in a given context. Although it does not confer power on individual people in the way that SIP does, QIP⁹ enables actors to deal harm to heteropatriarchal concepts of gender, and as such is essential to efforts to dismantle homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny.

Like SIP, QIP may be available to both queer and nonqueer people. While SIP is available to those who are able to perform heterosexuality in at least some contexts, QIP is available to those who *sincerely desire to transgress gender norms*. This distinction results from a fundamental difference between heterosexist ideology and queer feminism: Whereas the former is concerned only with behavior, and has no regard for the subjective experience of agents, queer feminism values the well-being of subjects intrinsically. On a heterosexist worldview, there's no meaningful difference between a contented heterosexual housewife and a miserable asexual aromantic woman who has been forced into marriage with a man, so long as they perform the same social function. Conversely, a queer feminist worldview should only value acts of transgression which actually improve the transgressor's welfare along some dimension of wellness.

Whereas SIP has gradations rooted in performance, QIP has gradations rooted in desire. The quarterback may access QIP to the extent that he has the transgressive desire to have sex (etc.) with other men, but he lacks the comparatively extensive QIP available to, say, a genderfluid person whose desires constantly motivate them to transgress various gender norms, even in public places.

A longer metaphysical treatment would be necessary to fully explicate the nature of QIP; this sketch should suffice, however, to demonstrate that such a concept is capable of unifying various social powers which are available to many queer people. In the remainder of this section, I will briefly enumerate three powers (out of many) which fall under this label.

People with QIP have the power to create useful discomfort relating to gender mores. When a male drag queen performs at a Pride event, the transgression isn't in what she's doing, but in *the fact that she enjoys it*. The act is able to advance gender equality in part because the performer is able to demonstrate that crossdressing makes her happy, when it should theoretically make her unhappy. By contrast, if another man wore the same outfit in a transphobic comedy film, his action would lack this power to challenge social expectations by producing discomfort, since viewers would know that the act of wearing the dress does not reflect his innate desires.

Persons with QIP are also able to offer valuable insights based on their personal experiences. The existence of nonbinary people tells us more about the nature of gender than philosophy by cisgender feminists ever could; the experiences of transgender people

⁹ "Kip."

in transition provide concrete foundations for conversations about the relationship between sex characteristics, gender identity, and social privilege that would otherwise be relegated to thought experiments. Queer experiences of desire pose an empirical threat to dominant conceptions of gender and sex, and acting on these desires allows queer people to threaten every axis of gender-based oppression at once.

Lastly, people with QIP have the power to expand social conceptions of gender by merely living, and by modeling successful lives within their marginalized identities. This option is not available to cisheterosexual allies, since it, too, must result from an innate personal desire.

Conclusion

Straight Identity Power is a capacity that is available to persons to the extent that they are perceived as straight. Although it grants such people the ability to use existing social institutions to control others, it does not empower them to effect more than surface-level social change. Regardless of its immediate effects, SIP necessarily reinforces heteropatriarchal ideals, and so cannot be an effective tool in advancing justice relating to gender.

Queer Identity Power grants subversive power to persons who fill the role of a queer person in a particular context. Although it grants any particular person less control over their immediate surroundings than does Straight Identity Power, it grants queer people more power to fundamentally change society. To produce the greatest good and the least harm, queer and feminist activists should seek to maximize their use of Queer Identity Power, and to minimize their reliance on Straight Identity Power.

References

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