

Gender and Heteronormativity in Romantic Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Gender and sexuality are two primary ways in which relationships are organized and experienced. Once considered immutable, gender and sexuality have proven to be highly volatile and contentious concepts, engaging scholars, politicians, parents, students, and many others over the Internet in critical debates about what is natural, what is socially constructed, and what is systemically enforced. Despite the volatile nature of the debates about gender and sexuality, in most societies, some vestige of gender essentialism – the belief in the immutable nature of maleness and femaleness – still dominates intimate relationships of all types. For example, we see the pervasiveness of a binary approach to gender in the popular and often dangerous practice of gender reveal parties as well as in current legislation across many US states restricting the rights of transgender youth and athletes. Gender inequities have also been prominent in the new research about the impact of COVID-19 on how women's lives from diverse backgrounds have been disrupted due to shouldering the responsibilities for homeschooling during lockdown (Collins et al., 2021), not having designated space in the home for their own work lives (Waismel-Manor et al., 2021), or having worries about childcare because they cannot afford to stay home (Chaney, 2020). Gender asymmetry continues to be present on the world stage, including the dismantling of state sponsored collectivist child, elder, and health care systems in China and thus forcing working mothers back home (Ji et al., 2017), and transnational carework for primarily female domestic workers from developing nations, who migrate from their home countries and families to work for wealthy families in developed countries (Allen & Henderson, 2023; Lutz, 2011).

In this chapter, we examine how social structures at the macro level and social constructions at the microlevel influence selected issues regarding relationship initiation, development, maintenance, and dissolution. We emphasize how relational scripts influence gender dynamics and gender expression

in romantic relationships at individual and interactional levels (Ogolsky et al., 2017). We review trends in the literature concerning diverse romantic relationships and how they adhere to or critique heteronormative ideologies.

We are guided by an intersectional feminist theoretical approach (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020), which we employ to critique heteronormativity and heterodominant discourses in relational and family science in order to examine the plethora of relationships formed in the context of gender, identity, and sexuality. An intersectional feminist approach brings a critical lens to this review of gender and romantic relationships. Our review of the changing landscape of romantic relationships will highlight “the social embeddedness ... of Western intellectual traditions fomented by political, cultural, and social norms that valorize androcentricity, heteronormativity, cisgenderism, and Whiteness over other identities and forms of social order (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020, p. 328). Critical perspectives disrupt majority discourses and give voice to the previously silenced and invisible experience of those whose experiences do not adhere to what is referred to as “normative” (Allen & Henderson, 2023; Few-Demo et al., 2022). Thus, in this review, we examine diverse heteronormative and cisnormative relationships as well as a variety of queer relationships. We include the romantic relationships of sexual minorities not only as an active critique of heteronormativity, but also to keep gender at the center of our analysis. We select examples of diverse relationships by race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation to examine recent literature on relationship initiation, development, maintenance, and dissolution.

MACRO LEVEL TRENDS AND GENDERED RELATIONSHIPS

Gender performance, relations, and display, much like romantic relationships, are influenced by shifts in cultural norms and legal consequences resulting from various sociopolitical trends. For example, the past two decades have witnessed a series of court rulings and federal and state laws in regard to the legitimacy of same-gender relationships and LGBTQ+ individuals as a protected class. Monk and Ogolsky (2019) theorized that “ambiguous sociopolitical contexts could create uncertainty about relational acceptance, recognition, norms, and future relationship status for individuals,” (p. 244) thereby impacting individuals’ commitment and engagement in intimate relationships. Monk and Ogolsky defined *sociopolitical uncertainty* as,

a state of (a) having doubts about legal recognition bestowed on individuals and families by outside systems, (b) being unsure about social acceptance of marginalized relationships, and (c) being unsure about how “traditional” social norms and roles pertain to marginalized relationships or how alternative scripts might unfold. (p. 244)

They further argued that sociopolitical uncertainty influences the value that people place on relationships that fall outside of heteronormative standards.

Another consideration impacting individuals' timing and pursuit of romantic relationships at the macrosystemic level is downward economic trends and changes in women's access to wealth and education. For instance, the gender wage gap is growing narrower among younger workers nationally. According to the Pew Research Center, women under the age of 30 are earning the same amount as or more than men in 22 of 250 US metropolitan areas (Fry, 2022). Moreover, women have increased their presence in the housing market, with their homeownership rate of households increasing while the homeownership rate of households led by men continued to drop (Goodman et al., 2021). Goodman and colleagues (2021) also reported that since the COVID-19 pandemic, single men were more likely to be unemployed, financially insecure, and lack a college degree than men who had a partner. They also noted that by 2019, households headed by women accounted for 50 percent of all households and that this homeownership trend held across all racial and ethnic groups. Of special note, households led by African American women were the highest share of households led by women (i.e., 60 percent; Goodman et al., 2021). Women are owning and having more access to resources and assets than ever before, impacting their decisions to enter or leave relationships, the timing of relationship formation and dissolution, as well as their decisions to delay marriage.

Furthermore, gender does not operate in a vacuum. The overarching context of intimate relationships occurs under the dominating lens of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers to the beliefs, rules, privileges, and sanctions that are derived from heterosexuality and cisnormativity that dictate the nature and experience of gendered intimacy between romantic partners (Allen et al., 2009; Oswald et al., 2009; Reczek, 2020). Heteronormativity not only presumes the compulsory preference for a fixed gender binary to ensure biological procreation, but it also encourages serial monogamy between partners over the life span. Under this ideology, sexuality and sexual orientation are fixed identities; sexual fluidity and pansexual eroticism are deemed unnatural and do not occur within committed relationships or families (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Reczek, 2020).

THEORIZING ABOUT GENDER

Gender is a ubiquitous concept in personal identity, intimate relationships, family systems, and social institutions, present across history and all societies. Long considered one of the building blocks of social organization, gender ideologies, and gendered behaviors are found at all levels of society (Lorber, 2012). The traditional conceptualization of gender as either male or female permeates our understanding of gender as a master status, an individual identity, an interactional context, and an institutional system (Allen et al., 2022). In recent years, however, challenges to the gender binary, gender hierarchy,

and gender system have sought to dismantle, and even purge, the very idea of gender as relevant (Risman, 2018). How can we understand these tremendous swings in gender ideologies, the performance of gender, and gender as part of an intersectional matrix, along with race, class, sexuality, and other systems of domination (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Few-Demo et al., 2022)? We ask, if gender no longer matters, then why is it at the front and center of so many political and identity debates, particularly among youth (Allen, 2022; Chamberlain, 2017; Jackson et al., 2020)? In light of this controversy, we share some of the history of how gender has been theorized in recent decades, setting the stage for the uncertainty and volatility, as well as the possibilities that characterize the current moment.

From Gender Differences to Gender Roles to Gender Theory

The presumption of gender differences is a primary way of organizing knowledge, experience, and power (Rhode, 1990). Even before a child is born, the question of gender is so primary that it is emblazoned in the popular imagination. The foundation of the gender structure can be linked to the belief that gender is a biological certainty, where maleness and femaleness result from the predetermined nature of sexual differentiation (Fausto-Sterling, 1985). Genetics and biological sex characteristics (e.g., the nature of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal reproductive systems, and external genitalia; Lips, 2018) are offered as proof of the immutability of gender and justification for its deterministic quality.

Over time, and given feminist critiques of the presumption of biological differences, thinking in the social and behavioral sciences has evolved beyond a simplistic belief in gender as biological given, in which “sex roles” are pre-ordained, to a reconceptualization now defined as gender theory (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). That is, a pure linkage between biological sex and socialized behavior (e.g., as in the belief that women are natural caregivers, and men are natural protectors) has been dismantled (Allen et al., 2009). We now understand that gender is a social construction, where people are taught to perform in gendered ways. That is, we are taught to “do gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987). For example, when social attitudes or technological advances inspire, expand, or contradict cultural notions about gender and sexuality, the processual performativity of how we do relationships may shift (Cherlin, 2020; Sassler & Lichter, 2020). In other words, the scripts for how we initiate, maintain, and dissolve close relationships may shift to follow alternative, but accessible, scripts. For example, a shift in how relationships are done may include adult partners who choose to establish non-marital committed romantic relationships, which may or may not include the “blending of families” and choose to reside in different and separate households. Another example of how contemporary adults are redefining gender and familial expectations

are those adults who voluntarily choose singlehood and/or to be childfree. Risman (2004) further elaborated on gender theory as a system of social stratification, similar to the economic system and the political system, in which the ideologies and behavioral rules about how people perform gender are structured from the top down and thus infiltrate individual and family experience.

From Binary Thinking about Gender to Feminist Intersectional Theorizing

Feminist family scholars have been instrumental in naming the detrimental nature of binary thinking on individual development and family relationships (Allen et al., 2022; Oswald et al., 2009). The use of binaries is a heuristic strategy that divides the world into two mutually exclusive types, where one type is conceptualized and treated as better than the other and consequently afforded greater prestige, privilege, and power (Allen, 2022). For example, gender has been characterized as a binary of male and female. The gender binary means that gender consists of two categories that do not overlap, such that men's lives and women's lives are more dissimilar than androgynous. The gender binary is also linked to cultural beliefs and practices, where children are socialized and indoctrinated into gendered roles according to biological sex. Further, the gender binary is linked to social organization and institutional structures that delimit educational and occupational opportunities according to gender.

Other heuristic uses of binary include white/black, straight/gay, cisgender/transgender, rich/poor, young/old, and able-bodied/disabled. Indeed, in her classic essay titled, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Audre Lorde (1984) described the origin and dehumanizing consequences of binary categories by explaining:

Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior. In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working class people, older people, and women. (p. 114)

Taking Lorde's (1984) lead, dismantling binary thinking has led to intersectional feminist theorizing, which Crenshaw (1991) pointed out is rooted in the intertwined experiences of violence that Black women confront, where racism and sexism intersect to reinforce the structures of social inequality. Bringing critical social theory to bear upon intersectionality, (Collins, 2019) identified the core constructs of relationality, power, social inequality, social context, complexity, and social justice, and the four guiding premises of intersectionality as theory and practice:

- (1) Race, class, gender, and similar systems of power are interdependent and mutually construct one another.
- (2) Intersecting power relations produce complex, interdependent social inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, ability, and age.
- (3) The social location of individuals and groups within intersection power relations shapes their experiences within and perspectives on the social world.
- (4) Solving social problems within a given local, regional, national, or global context requires intersectional analyses. (p. 44)

Queering Gender: Beyond the Male/Female Binary

Another critique of binary categorization is to dismantle the presumption that individuals are straight *or* gay. Instead, we queer gender *and* sexuality, which means to utilize both critical and constructivist paradigms to show the intersection of gender and sexuality, as performance, relational, and socially constructed (Allen & Henderson, 2023; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). Using a queer perspective, gender can be liberated from the male/female binary (Oswald et al., 2005), which promotes a homonormative stance that privileges the “right” kind of gay male as married and cisgender, for example (as opposed to nonbinary, consensually nonmonogamous, or trans; Allen & Mendez, 2018). These pathways open up a variety of new perspectives for featuring gender, revisioning gender, and muting gender.

ANALYZING GENDER AND HETERONORMATIVITY: RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Our intersectional feminist design aims to be inclusive of a variety of relationships in our brief review of highlighting how gender unfolds and heteronormativity is rejected or embraced in contemporary romantic relationships. In this section, we provide selected examples (rather than an exhaustive array) of recent literature regarding dyadic relationships and multi-partner relationships.

Gender-as-Relational

Contemporary research on romantic relationships more often than not is framed by a *gender-as-relational* theoretical approach (Thomeer et al., 2020), with its roots in feminist theorizing as described above. This is a model that extends theorizing about relational dynamics beyond the siloed notions of Bernard’s (1972) “her and his marriage” to viewing relationship dynamics as interactional at multiple levels. A *gender-as-relational* approach assumes that within close relationships, the ways in which gender is enacted is determined by the interaction of one’s own understanding of gender, the partner’s

enactment of gender, and the gendered relational context, or rather how dynamic gender relations unfold (Thomeer et al., 2020). Thus, one's understanding and enactment of gender is contingent upon the interpretation of gender beliefs, values, and roles for partners.

The gender-as-relational approach can be interpreted as an inherently feminist tool in that it can be applied to highlight how privilege and oppression manifest in romantic relationships. For example, researchers can utilize this approach to examine how heteronormativity, homophobia, sexism, white supremacy, ageism, and ableism may influence interactions and reactions between romantic partners. This framework posits the aforementioned discriminating and marginalizing systems of oppression and privilege have specific implications for how one performs gender within a romantic relationship regardless of the gender and sexual identities of the partners (Thomeer et al., 2020). Moreover, gender roles may evolve over the life course due to changes in and exchanges of relational power that occur during different events (e.g., childrearing, empty nest), changes within state and federal policies and regulation (e.g., same gender marriage recognition; anti-trans legislation) as well as changes in structural compositions (e.g., dating, divorce, remarriage) over the life course. This conceptualization is mindful of not only how couples involving diverse gender and sexual minority identities may experience these relational shifts over time but also differential levels of institutional regulation regarding couple identity, access, and legal protections (e.g., full faith and credit clauses). Finally, the gender-as-relational approach requires the dyadic collection and analysis of relationship data, such that all romantic partners involved in the targeted relationship are informants in the study.

It is no longer sufficient to make inferences about behaviors and motivations in romantic relationships using data from one partner alone. The empirical literature over the past twenty+ years has shifted toward dyadic analyses in order to capture nuances in motivations, perceptions, and behaviors that are grounded in/reflect heteronormative, cisnormative, and or queer ideologies regarding relationship enactment. For example, the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM, Kenny & Kashy, 2014) is a model of dyadic relationships that considers interdependence in two-person relationships while using actor and partner variables as predictors of relationship outcomes. When APIM is applied to heterosexual couples, the models typically distinguish dyad members based on the gender of a partner, examining "female partner effects" and "male partner effects." In analyzing multilevel models that involve same-gender couples, a factorial method must be deployed to discern gender effects (Kroeger & Powers, 2019; West et al., 2008).

However, it is important to note that contemporary relationship researchers push social science beyond the typical accounting of female/male differences by using a gender-as-relational lens to interpret nuance in how different-sex partners influence the behavior of one another in relationships. To illustrate,

Curran et al. (2015) examined how daily fluctuations in emotion work for both relational partners predicted individuals' relationship quality. Seventy-four different-sex couples in dating, cohabiting, or married relationships were recruited, with over 750 days of diary entries collected. Using APIM, Curran et al. (2015) examined actor and partner effects of emotion work and tested for gender differences. This approach allowed predictability on three features of relationship quality: average levels, daily fluctuations, and volatility. They included six types of daily relationship quality as outcomes: love, commitment, satisfaction, closeness, ambivalence, and conflict. The study revealed three patterns. First, emotion work predicted relationship quality for different-sex people in dating, cohabiting, or married relationships. Second, gender differences were actually minimal for fixed effects in that trait and state emotion work predicted higher average scores on, and positive daily increases in, individuals' own positive relationship quality and lower average ambivalence. Finally, the volatility outcome was where gender differences were most distinct. For actor effects, they found that having a partner who reported higher average emotion work predicted lower volatility in love, satisfaction, and closeness for women versus greater volatility in love and commitment for men. Curran et al. (2015) inferred that this difference could be for men whose partners overperformed emotion work; they might feel they are receiving more support than they wanted or needed and/or experienced feelings of demasculinization given a perception of a loss in relational power in the relationship. Later, Pollitt and Curran (2022) reflected upon the study's results, stating that this study provided "evidence of how relationship satisfaction can be enhanced when both partners perform emotion work ... [as well as] ... the gendered ways in which women and men interact with one another can have nuanced impacts on their romantic relationships." This contemporary study is an example not only of the ways in which some partners in different-sex couples were adhering to heteronormative expectations toward the management of emotionality and linking those expectations to perceptions of relationship quality, but it also provided snapshot insights into how couples "do" relationship maintenance on a weekly basis.

We would be remiss if we did not present debates about whether to use single-partner versus dyadic designs to conduct relationship research. For instance, Barton et al. (2020) provided multiple considerations for researchers who are studying relationships and trying to decide about whether collecting single-partner or dyadic data. They suggested that if questions of partner effects, or discrepancies between partners, are of central focus of the study, then dyadic data collection efforts are perhaps best. They also advised that if the nature of the romantic relationships being studied were those that were "at risk" or otherwise unstable, then single-partner data collection is recommended. Of course, Barton et al. (2020) also briefly mentioned having both data collection designs. In addition, they cautioned, just as many other

scholars have done, that *participation bias* cannot be overlooked. They argued that participation bias may occur more among two-partner studies than single-partner studies due to a disproportionate number of high-functioning couples and individuals who are very satisfied with their relationship being drawn to and willing to participate in studies (e.g., Yucel & Gassanov, 2010).

Creative Approaches to Committed Relationships

Romantic couples who are involved in living apart together relationships, or LAT, present a radical example of not only how couples circumvent traditional ways of forming relationships and maintaining relationships, but also how they avoid or eliminate certain gendered obligations and expectations for how gender “should” unfold during midlife and later life. Initiating, forming, and maintaining a committed LAT relationship may be a particularly attractive choice for some single older adults who find themselves living alone for a variety of reasons (e.g., divorce, widowhood, empty nest, voluntary singlehood) and do not wish to cohabit or reside with a romantic partner, but still seek intimacy with another person. Reasons for embracing this type of living arrangement include preserving one’s autonomy; financial independence and privacy; avoiding long-term care partnering responsibilities; preferring aging in place instead of relocation; maintaining contact with adult children from previous unions; and housing security (e.g., owning a rent-controlled apartment; Carr & Utz, 2020; Strohm et al., 2009). These relationships are creatively radical in that different-sex and same-gender partners, but specifically, women, employ an agentic means to circumvent heteronormative and sociocultural expectations that women should care for others, and especially their partners, in later life. This type of non-residential committed relationship requires an ongoing negotiation of roles, responsibilities, emotions, boundaries, and intimacy. Moreover, cultural, economic, and institutional constraints influence how LAT couples navigate these complex negotiations and feelings resulting from these negotiations (e.g., ambivalence) throughout the relationship—its formation, stability, or dissolution (Connidis et al., 2017).

Multi-Partner Relationships and Consensual Non-Monogamy

Schippers (2020) argued that with the critical examination of polysexualities, researchers were afforded an opportunity to pivot or reorient our theorizing about the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality. Consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships are relationships in which romantic partners engage in sexual or emotional relationships with extradyadic partners other than their primary partners with the consent and knowledge of the primary partner (Cohen & Wilson, 2017). Other forms of CNM relationships

include triads or quads (i.e., three or four partners romantically linked), V-structures (i.e., one partner is equally involved with two partners), and poly “webs” or families (Barker & Langdridge, 2010).

Multi-partner relationships represent a rejection of heteronormative monogamy or ways of doing marriage or romantic pairings, complicating the structure and composition of family. As such, these relationships have been stigmatized and those engaged in CNM relationships have identified several ways in which they and their families have been marginalized and drawn discrimination. For instance, CNM couples who have disclosed their relationship arrangement to family, friends, and health care providers have experienced rejection from family members, criticisms about how they are raising their children, accusations of immorality (Moors et al., 2013), threats of losing custody of their children (Kimberly & Hans, 2017; Sheff, 2015), and warnings against living a risky sexual health lifestyle (Vaughan et al., 2019). Empirical studies on CNM relationships, however, reveal a different reality of relational dynamics. For example, several studies indicate that individuals engaged in CNM relationships report equal levels of relationship satisfaction, trust, commitment, and psychological health as individuals in monogamous relationships (Conley et al., 2017). People in these relationships also have reported low levels of jealousy and relationship insecurity (Conley et al., 2017) as well as getting a broader array of their needs fulfilled by diverse committed partners (Moors et al., 2017). CNM relationships queer and debunk notions supporting the superiority of heteronormative dyadic romantic relationships, eroticism, and relationship quality.

How Lesbians Queer Gender and Heteronormativity in Relationships

We now turn to examine gender in same-sex partnerships, focusing primarily on lesbian relationships, given the intensity of emotions found among them. Gay men in committed relationships typically have more money than lesbian couples, due to the privileging of male gender and the greater opportunities men have for financial success (Goldberg et al., 2020). As we know of middle-class marriages among heterosexuals, economic security contributes to marital stability (Cherlin, 2020). In contrast, lesbian relationships are often characterized by emotional intensity, perhaps linked to a double dose of gender socialization that promotes closeness, intimacy, and communication (Riggle et al., 2016; Rothblum, 2009). At the same time, lesbian relationships face particular challenges, in that two women in a relationship often means greater financial insecurity than if two male incomes were available (Allen & Goldberg, 2020). Cultural differences are part of the intersectional matrix for lesbian mothers. For example, Figueroa and Tasker (2020) found that lesbian mothers faced severe discrimination when religion and culture intersected with gender, sexuality, and family.

Recent qualitative and quantitative research on the relational dissolution of lesbian mothers has found that breakups can be just as intense as the beginning of lesbian relationships, when the partners were first falling in love (Allen & Goldberg, 2020; Balsam et al., 2017; Farr, 2017). Now that the field has amassed several decades of research on lesbian relationships, we are seeing some forays into these more invisible aspects. Although there has been a reluctance to examine problems and difficulties in lesbian relationships for fear of further stigmatizing already marginalized relationships, this area of research has been maturing and numerous ways of more fully examining these relationships exist. For example, lesbian relationships are the most likely to break up, compared to heterosexual relationships and those of gay men (Farr, 2017; Goldberg & Garcia, 2015). In a qualitative study of lesbians who were in the process of relational dissolution, Allen and Goldberg (2020) found a variety of discourses in their explanations, which is evidence that lesbians do not have to abide by the “we’re perfect” scenario. These discourses disrupted the gendered, heteronormative narratives of marriage, motherhood, and divorce: (a) the ideology of the good mother; (b) divorce is bad for children; (c) marriage is the ideal way to live; (d) couples should stay together for the children; and (e) lesbian ex-lovers should be life-long friends. Yet, relational conflict among LGBTQ+ couples remains a relatively taboo topic. From an intersectional feminist perspective, any deviation from the mythic norm of “happy marriage/happy family” can open LGBTQ+ families to negative public scrutiny, a concern that divorcing lesbians mothers acknowledge (Allen & Goldberg, 2020). The research on relational formation, development, maintenance, and dissolution among lesbian partners, who have a double dose of gender socialization that both intensifies and challenges their interactions, is prescient for the field in general. Rather than centering heteronormative relationships as the standard bearer, it is wise to examine ways in which lesbians and others who queer family relationships experience and navigate the difficulties and the joys in their emotional connections.

FUTURE THEORIZING AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In this chapter, we have examined gender and heteronormativity in romantic relationships from micro to macro perspectives. Our intersectional feminist approach is derived from critical theorizing, in which the status quo is decentered so that previously invisible or neglected topics can be examined. We selectively reviewed several areas of current relationship research that challenge gender and sexuality norms, and instead examine ways in which relational partners are both queering and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about doing gender and sexuality in relationships.

The exemplars we provided, including gender-as-relational for heterosexual couples, long-term living together committed partnerships for mid-life and older couples, consensual nonmonogamous relationships, and lesbian

relationship intensity and dissolution are only the tip of the iceberg for studying gender and heteronormativity in relationships. For example, an emerging area of research and theorizing is what some might consider as the antithesis of romantic relationships: asexuality. Asexuality is an umbrella term to describe individuals who do not experience sexual attraction to any gender. Asexuality is thus one of the most misunderstood, invisible, and marginalized of all sexual and relational identities (Carroll, 2020). In terms of defining asexuality, it is more common to identify individuals by their absence of sexual attraction, and not by their absence of sexual behavior. Instead, those who do not engage in sexual relations are celibate (Carroll, 2020). Yet, asexuality does not preclude the establishment of romantic or other forms of intimate relationships in which gender is apparent. We simply need to understand more about how gender and sexuality operate for such evolving identities.

An intersectional feminist lens demands that future research move toward analyzing the fluidity of exchanges of relational power and disempowerment between and among partners over the course of a relationship – initiation, formation, maintenance, and dissolution. We see a need to disentangle sexuality, partnering, and parenting from normative understandings of gender in romantic relationships because heteronormative standards are inherently value-laden, prejudicial, and discriminatory.

We also suggest bringing in greater attention to social justice activist movements and the interface of the life of the scholar with activism, particularly given the urgent needs of contemporary society. A feature of contemporary intersectional feminist theorizing is the use of the Internet and all forms of social media to politicize new forms of intimacy and bringing personal and relational issues into political awareness and activism (Jackson et al., 2020). In addition, the reflexive, autoethnographic analysis of one's own life course – especially in terms of living outside the boundaries of society's norms – is a feature of the reflexive turn among scholar-activists who study intimate life (Allen, 2022). Indeed, Hoskin (2020) incorporates her lived experiences with critical femininity to challenge traditional conceptualizations of gender and sexuality. Intersectional feminist thinking began in the lived experience of sexism, racism, homophobia, and ageism (Lorde, 1984) and has much to teach scholars and activists who wish to challenge the status quo and promote justice and integrity for all.

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