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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF HETEROSEXUAL CASUAL SEX

Panteá Farvid

A doctoral thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology
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Abstract

Representations and talk of casual sex have become commonplace in contemporary western culture. However, research has rarely approached casual sex as an ‘object’ of analysis in its own right. In this thesis, I report on an in-depth critical analysis of heterosexual casual sex from a feminist social constructionist theoretical perspective. Much of the previous research on casual sex has been conducted from a positivist epistemology, taken a ‘risk-reduction’ approach to, and often deployed quantitative methods that do not allow for a more critical and contextualised account of casual sex. My research aims to provide an in-depth exploration of heterosexual casual sex that is historically cogent, contextually situated, as well as psychologically informed. I take into consideration sociocultural accounts of casual sex alongside people’s personal narratives of casual sex. This thesis is divided into three parts. In Part One, I conduct two extensive literature reviews ‘locating’ heterosexual casual sex. Initially, I examine the historical emergence of casual sex by conducting a review of literature pertaining to heterosexualities in history. Then, I conduct a critical thematic review of the scientific literature regarding casual sex that has been produced since the 1980s. I not only review, but analyse, the way in which such inquiries have constructed the ‘nature’ of heterosexual casual sex. In Part Two, I explore the sociocultural representations of casual sex by analysing data gathered from the internet as well as self-help books pertaining to casual sex ‘rules’ and ‘advice’. I demonstrate the varied (and gendered) heterosexual subjectivities offered to women and men in relation to casual sex in that context. In Part Three, I analyse the personal narratives of thirty participants (15 women and 15 men) who were interviewed about their experiences and impressions of heterosexual casual sex. Analysis of this talk reinforced, as well as challenged, some of the ways casual sex was constructed with scientific and sociocultural accounts. In the final chapter, I discuss how casual sex can be theorised from a feminist perspective, explore how casual sex is positioned within the institution of ‘heterosexuality’ and whether casual sex reinforces or disrupts conventional heteronormative (sexual and relational) practices.
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