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## **Sex advice books and self-help**

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For *Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality*, edited by Clarissa Smith, Feona Attwood, R. Danielle Egan, and Brian McNair

### **Introduction**

Sex advice is a rapidly growing media genre spanning newspaper problem pages, magazine articles, TV shows and a multiplicity of online forums, blogs and videos. In this chapter we examine the ways in which sex and sexuality are currently constructed and contested within one particular medium: sex advice books. After locating sex advice books within the wider context of self-help culture, sex therapy, and sexual subjectification, we provide a brief history of the genre, and then draw together the existing literature with our own analysis of books published over the last two decades (Barker, Gill & Harvey, forthcoming 2015).

As we will demonstrate, the basis on which sex advice books are sold is generally the perceived 'problem' of ensuring consistent levels of sex throughout relationships. This 'problem' is grounded in assumptions: that sex is imperative, that it must take place within the context of monogamous coupledness, and that it must follow a normative sexual script. Thus the 'solutions' proposed in the books generally limit themselves to varying, or 'spicing up', the normative sexual script in ways which erase the diversity of erotic possibilities and individualise what could be more accurately conceptualised as social struggles. However, as we will see, there are also pockets of resistance which exist, in both mainstream and 'alterative' sex advice books, to such constructions, as well as mediums other than written books which may offer potentials for more 'sex critical' forms of sex advice (Downing, 2012).

### **Contextualising sex advice books**

Sex advice books are part of the wider genre of self-help books, being sold in the same sections of bookshops, and having a similar style and tone to other such books which might focus, for example, upon confidence and assertiveness, planning a career, dieting, or various other ways to become 'a new, improved you'

The multi-billion dollar self-help industry, and the therapeutic culture in which it is embedded, have been criticised for individualising people's experiences in ways which create – or at least exacerbate – the very problems which they claim to address (Illouz, 2008; Barker, 2013a). Solutions are located in the atomised individual who is responsible for determining the future course of their lives through taking on board the expert advice being offered (Vanderkam, 2012). Thus such books perpetuate a consumer capitalist model whereby people are encouraged to scrutinise and monitor themselves in order to determine the ways in which they are lacking, and to engage in processes of self-transformation in order to address these lacks (Foucault, 1975; Rose, 1990). Happiness and success are presented as equally available to all people, as long as they work hard enough at change. There is no recognition of the numerous ways in which people are interconnected, of the historical patterns of structural privilege and oppression on which such happiness and success is grounded, nor of the normative ideologies which are perpetuated about what constitutes a happy or successful life (Ahmed, 2010; Barker, 2013b).

In addition to self-help culture, sex advice books can also be located within the wider arena of sexology and sex therapy, drawing - as they do - on sexological classifications, research and therapeutic techniques (Barker, 2011; Barker & Richards, 2013). Just as therapeutic culture in general has been accused of contributing to the very problems that it aims to address, so too has sex therapy been implicated in 'disordering' people (Barker & Iantaffi, 2013). This occurs through the categorisation of those who deviate from the normative sexual script - of penis-in-vagina (PIV)

intercourse leading to orgasm - as dysfunctional or paraphilic (Irvine, 2005), as well as through individualising sexual difficulties which are actually highly social (Tiefer, 1995) and providing universalising explanations for sexual experiences which have multiple meanings (Kleinplatz, 2012).

The distinct genre of sex advice books emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in North America, Europe and other 'western' countries. Prior to this, such advice was contained within marriage manuals and generally focused purely on sex for procreation, presenting other forms of sex as dangerous (Gordon & Bernstein, 1970). Messages shifted with early 20<sup>th</sup> century sex manuals which presented sexual pleasure as vital for the happiness of middle class marriage (Weeks, 2003). Sex advice became more focused on the importance of knowledge and skill, reflecting the growing scientific fields of sex research and sex therapy. Drawing upon prevailing psychoanalytic theory, emphasis was placed on women reaching orgasm through PIV intercourse, and inability to do this was frequently blamed on their perceived deficiencies (Neuhaus, 2000).

A further shift occurred in the 1960s and 70s when sex advice books began to draw on more humanistic models of the self and to present sex as a means towards personal growth (Teifer, 1995). Despite a move away from the reproductive focus, sex advice was still largely heteronormative, and only in the late 1970s did sex advice emerge which was aimed at lesbians or gay men (Klesse, 2013). Even today, as we will see, few books are inclusive of multiple sexual identities, and most are clearly aimed at heterosexual audiences.

Following the HIV/AIDs pandemic in the 1980s, sex advice books put greater emphasis on safety and health, and discourses of health remained key in the 1990s as sex became (re)medicalised (Gupta & Cacchioni, 2013) alongside the sexological shift towards 'treating' sexual dysfunctions with pharmaceuticals such as Viagra. Sex advice books increasingly drew on the medicalized language of function and dysfunction (rather than pleasure and fulfilment, for example), as well as presenting sex as necessary for health (Gupta, 2011).

The recent societal turn towards a neoliberal, postfeminist sensibility has also meant a shift towards a lexicon of choice, empowerment, rights, and pleasure in sex advice, at the same time as a highly individualised move which encourages people – particularly women - to work at sex through processes of self-transformation and consumption (Gill, 2009).

As we will see, aspects of all of these historical strands remain to some extent in current sex advice: sex for relationship success, sex for personal fulfilment, heteronormativity and rigid gender roles, medicalization and 'healthicization' (Gupta & Cacchioni, 2013), and neoliberal invocations to work at sex as a matter of personal choice and under the veneer of fun and pleasure.

### **Contemporary sex advice books**

Whilst there is a growing body of research on contemporary sex advice more generally, much of this has focused on the discourses to be found in newspapers and women's magazines (e.g. Jackson & Scott, 1997; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2009; Moran & Lee, 2011). Fewer researchers have focused specifically on sex advice books. However, there is a burgeoning body of knowledge on this starting with Potts's (1998, 2002) detailed examination of the – still bestselling – *Mars & Venus in the Bedroom* (Gray, 2003), Tyler's (2008) radical feminist analysis of five books most recommended by sex therapists to their clients, and Gupta and Cacchioni's (2013) discourse analysis of seventeen of the most popular sex manuals. We will weave their findings in here with those of our own analysis (Barker, Gill & Harvey, forthcoming 2015), returning briefly to other forms of sex advice towards the end of the chapter.

For our analysis we obtained sixty five sex advice books in total, using a combination of Gupta & Cacchioni's (2013) approach of finding the most popular books on Amazon.com (and Amazon.co.uk), in combination with Tyler's (2008) approach of selecting those frequently recommended by sex therapists and other professionals. We also endeavoured to obtain a selection of books which more explicitly 'sex critical' professionals (educators, advisors and therapists) recommended, by asking for suggestions from colleagues in these areas. We built up from this selection to the final data set by obtaining books which were recommended by other authors, and those which were aimed at specific groups or dealt with specific sexual practices. For the final analysis we had thirty mainstream books, around half of which were aimed at couples and half specifically at women or men readers. The rest of the books were either aimed at specific groups (e.g. lesbians, gay men, or kink practitioners) or were explicitly presented as in some way 'alternative' or 'critical'.

The final corpus of books also contained many different styles. Perhaps most common was the conventional sex-manual format (detailed below), but there were also several more explicitly therapeutic books (such as those addressing specific sexual problems), A-Z guides, books structured around busting various 'sex myths' and other formats.

This analysis involved a broad sweep of all of the books. We paid particular attention to how the book and its author were presented on the back cover blurb and in the introduction. We noted the structure and number of pages devoted to each topic within the book, and considered the images used for illustration. We then examined, in more detail, the ways in which key normativities were reproduced, or resisted, within, and across, the texts.

Taking a sex-critical approach to our analysis (Downing, 2012), we were mindful that sex advice is simultaneously both a vehicle for pleasure and a purveyor of oppressive ideology (Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer, & Hebron, 1991), and we recognised that the books we analysed are polysemic, contradictory and capable of being read in different ways by different audiences and at different times (Tasker, 1991). Therefore we attempted to attend to multiple possible meanings in the texts and to consider what was opened up and closed down, perpetuated and resisted, and included and excluded. We return specifically to points of resistance towards the end of the chapter, after presenting the general sense of the 'problem' which is constructed across the books and the most common proposed 'solutions' to this.

Please note that throughout our analysis we have italicised the references to the books which we analysed in order to distinguish them from citations to academic works.

### **Positioning of the authors**

The authors of the books are positioned in various different ways as (s)experts in terms of both professional and personal (s)expertise (Potts, 2002). Examining the 'blurbs' and biographies on the covers of the books, several emphasise the medical, psychological and/or counselling qualifications of the author/s, often referring to them with Dr prefixes, or letters after their names, on the cover (e.g. *Foley et al., 2011; Berman, 2011*). This implies that medicine and psychology are the appropriate realms for sex advice, something that we will say more about shortly. Many books foreground the 'best-selling' nature of the author and their experience and expertise as a sex advisor in addition to, or instead of, their qualifications (e.g. *Berman, 2011; Corn, 2013*).

Finally, several books include mention of the personal expertise of the author in terms of the longevity and 'success' of their relationships, or their sexual prowess, reinforcing some of the assumptions inherent in the books about the importance of sex in relationships, and of techniques (e.g. *Mintz, 2009; Gray, 2003*). Authors are even sometimes referred to in hyperbolic terms as a 'sex guru' (*Godson, 2002*) or 'one of the world's foremost (and hottest) writers on sex' (*Cox, 2011*).

However, there are some authors who implicitly or explicitly counter these common claims to (s)expertise, for example *de Botton (2012)* - a philosopher who challenges the assumption that the medical and psy disciplines are the appropriate realm for sex advice to take place in - or *Hancock (2013)* and other sex educator authors who seem to position themselves as fellow travellers struggling with the complex world of sex and relationships rather than as (s)experts.

### **The 'problem' set up by sex advice books: Sex in intimate relationships**

Reading through a large number of sex advice books it is striking how similar they are in tone, structure and content. The vast majority rest on an assumed problem. This is the basis on which most books are sold. The reader is hailed as someone who is struggling, or will struggle, to maintain a sexual intimate relationship (they have a 'problem'). According to the books, a relationship without sex will inevitably end, so the reader requires the expertise of the author to provide them with a simple set of 'solutions' which will solve the problem if they put the necessary time and effort into learning and practicing these. Thus, like other forms of self-help books, the reader is constructed as lacking in a way that is fear-inducing, and the expert author provides solutions to alleviate this fear in ways which require the reader to work on individual self-transformation.

In order to construct sex and intimacy as a problem to be solved, books require the following assumptions.

- The sexual imperative: that 'healthy' individuals and relationships must be sexual.
- Relationship normativity: that a 'relationship' means long term heteromonogamous coupledom).
- The coital imperative: that 'sex' means the normative sexual script of 'foreplay' followed by penis-in-vagina (PIV) intercourse leading to orgasm.

These three normativities *create* sex advice books in their current form, and, at the same time, sex advice books *perpetuate* these assumptions in order to continue to construct the problem which is necessary for their existence. We will now briefly describe how each of these assumptions is reproduced in the books before returning to the limits that this places on the potential 'solutions' which can be offered.

#### *The sexual imperative*

Books reinforce the sexual imperative (Carrigan, Morrison & Gupta, 2013) in a number of ways. Sex is portrayed as a basic human need analogous to eating and breathing (e.g. *Litvinoff, 2008*) and as an essential feature of personal identity (e.g. *Berman, 2011*). It is also presented as a vital way of achieving personal growth and improving individual health and well-being, and readers are exhorted to work at it in order to gain the greatest rewards to mind and body, for example through enhancing the quality of their sexual desire (e.g. *Comfort & Quilliam, 2012*), through engaging in more frequent sex (e.g. *Mintz, 2009*), and through learning techniques to improve sexual experience (e.g. *Thomas & Thomas, 2010*, see Gupta & Cacchioni, 2013).

Perhaps even more marked than the claims that sex is essential for personal well-being are those that it is necessary for relationships. *Mintz (2009)* writes that 'sex is critical for marital health' (p.65), it is the 'glue' that holds relationships together, and 'without sex, marriages can fall apart' (p.62). *Kerner (2013)* states that 'the number two reason for divorce in this country [US], after financial conflict, is sexual dissatisfaction' (p.xxi). Sexual boredom and/or infidelity are proposed as reasons why a lack of sex in an intimate relationship will inevitably lead to break-up. For these reasons, readers are encouraged to aspire to 'great' sex (*Gray, 2003; Corn, 2013*).

### *Relationship normativity*

From this it becomes clear that a further set of normativities pervade sex advice books: those around the relational context of sex. Whilst virtually all of the texts present the drive for sex as natural, universal, and necessary to act upon, there are rigid limits around the contexts in which it is deemed acceptable to fulfil sexual desires. The books reproduce an ideology of sex in relationships which is mononormative and heteronormative. This is clear both in the omnipresence of these related normativities throughout the content and imagery of the books, as well as in the trouble which is present in the moments when any potential alternatives to monogamy and heterosexuality are considered.

So, for example, books which take a sex manual format, are often lavishly illustrated with photographs or pencil drawings. These illustrations almost exclusively depict male/female couples, and generally portray the same couple (e.g. *Comfort & Quilliam, 2012; Page & Stanway, 2011*), or set of couples (e.g. *Berman, 2011; Thomas & Thomas, 2010*), throughout the book, reinforcing through repetition the sense that normal sex will occur in a heteromonogamous and coupled context. Open non-monogamy is rarely considered, and any form of group sex is presented as dangerous to the relationship (e.g. *Banks, 2004*) so readers are encouraged to try alternatives such as having sex in front of a mirror (e.g. *Berman, 2011*).

Men and women are presented as being naturally different yet 'complementary', and many books are sold on the basis of readers requiring expert help to understand where the 'opposite sex' is coming from in relation to sex (e.g. *Gray, 2003; Corn, 2013*; see Potts, 1998; 2002; Tyler, 2008). There is an intriguing paradox in the clear message that sex must be in the context of heterosexual relationships, but also that men and women are assumed to have naturally very different sexual drives and desires. Many sex advice books deal with this by simply ignoring the fact that people could – presumably – find a better sexual match with somebody of the same gender, presenting heterosexuality as the only, natural and normal sexuality (e.g. *Bake, 2010*). Others present 'gay and lesbian' relationships in tokenistic sections (e.g. *Page & Stanway, 2011*), reassuring readers that same-sex attraction does not necessarily mean that they are gay (e.g. *Mintz, 2009; Cox, 2011*) and/or suggesting that people in same-sex relationships generally face distress and/or sexless relationships (e.g. *Berman, 2011*).

### *The coital imperative*

The coital imperative, that 'sex' means PIV intercourse leading to orgasm, is constructed through both the structure and content of sex advice books. Many of the mainstream books are structured in similar ways, following up introductory sections with sections on solo sex, foreplay, and then 'sex' (mostly depicted as PIV), often with a final chapter on more 'spicy' forms of sex. Quantitative analysis reveals that an average of 17% of the books is dedicated to PIV intercourse, compared to 5% on oral sex and 4% on manual sex, both of which are often relegated to the 'foreplay' sections, suggesting they are not 'real' sex (see Barker, Gill & Harvey, forthcoming 2015). As Potts (2002) and Tyler (2008) point out, this reveals a further gender bias in the books which recognise that the majority of women require external clitoral stimulation for orgasm, but the modes of sex which are privileged are not those through which this is most easily (or possibly) achieved.

Solo sex is predominantly constructed as a means for the reader to tune into how their body works in order to enable a partner to give them an orgasm (e.g. *Cox, 2011*), or as a means to practice specific techniques to improve the sexual experience of a partner (e.g. *Page & Stanway, 2011*). Sections of books are devoted to sexual problems (e.g. *Litvinoff, 2008; Berman, 2011*), which are those which interfere with the 'sexual response cycle' of desire, arousal, penetration and orgasm (see Barker, 2011).

So, through these three normativities (the sexual imperative, relationship normativity, and the coital imperative), the problem of sex in intimate relationships is set up. Relationships (and individuals) must be sexual, but within the confines of a heteromonogamous relationship and a specific form of sex). The spectre of the sexless relationship (including any relationship in which people are not having 'proper' sex) hangs over sex advice books, and is presented as doomed result in break-up and singledom (a further spectre, Wilkinson, 2012). Books warn against couples allowing life to get in the way of sex, and urge them to resist any drop off in sexual activity over time. They also present images of ideal kinds of sex and orgasms so that people can be ever-striving for better, more health-giving, relationship-restoring, sex. This is seemingly decontextualized from lives in which people are tired, stressed, worried about money or have to do housework or look after children. Even when cultural pressures are considered as a factor (e.g. *Comfort & Quilliam, 2012; Litvinoff, 2008*), the solution is presented as an internal one. Couples must make time, work at sex, replace negative or distracted thoughts with positive or sexy ones, and 'trick' their brains into 'stimulating the hot and wild sex chemicals throughout a relationship' (*Kerner, 2013, p. 64*). A happy sex life is presented as both the reader's choice, and their responsibility (*Berman, 2011; see Ahmed, 2010*).

Due to the presence of these normative assumptions, most books do not even consider many of the possible 'solutions' which could resolve the 'problem' of sex in intimate relationships (if, indeed, we consider it a problem). For example, the books cannot countenance the possibility that it might be acceptable to be asexual or celibate (either in a relationship or as a single person). They cannot suggest that it might be fine for a couple to have differing levels or types of desires and to get some or all of these met alone (through solo sex and/or fantasy and/or porn) or outside of coupledness (e.g. through casual/friend sex or some other form of non-monogamy). And they cannot conceive of any radical departure from the normative sexual script, or expansion of what counts as sex (for example sex without orgasms, or that does not involve PIV).

We now turn our attention to the two dominant – almost hegemonic - 'solutions' which are put forward in contemporary sex advice books, before considering moments of resistance to these models, and their underlying normativities, that do occur.

### **'Solutions' proposed by sex advice books**

Two main potential 'solutions' to the 'problem' are proposed in sex advice books. These are: varying elements surrounding the normative sexual script (such as positions, locations or clothing); and 'spicing up' the standard script with tightly policed forays into sex toys, kink, fantasy, erotica, or anal sex.

#### *Variations*

The main 'solution' proposed across sex advice books is varying the positions for PIV intercourse. *Bevan (2013)* explicitly states that the solution to 'growing stale' is mastering multiple positions (p.32). *Thomas & Thomas (2010)* provide ninety pages of photographs of positions for PIV. *Berman (2011)* has three separate major chapters containing positions for PIV. Elsewhere 'sexpert' Tracey Cox, whose books we analysed (e.g. *Cox, 2011*), is known for her 'golden rules' for avoiding a 'sex rut': always finish sex in a different position to which you started it, and never do the same position on two subsequent occasions (Gill, 2009, p.360). Intriguingly, whilst many books include pages of lavish illustrations of couples in different positions, these are almost exclusively artfully shot to avoid any depictions of penises, vaginas, or even vulvas. Thus genitals manage to be both omnipresent and invisible.

Several books also suggest altering costumes and locations for sex as a form of variation which safely keep the normative sexual script in tact (e.g. *Page & Stanway, 2011; Mintz, 2009; Comfort & Quilliam, 2012*).

### *Spicing it up*

The notion of 'spicing up' your sex life with more than varied positions, costumes or locations creates a tension for sex advice books. Whilst it is widely regarded as a key 'solution' to the 'problem' of sex in intimate relationships (e.g. *Corn, 2013; Bevan, 2013; Mintz, 2009*) and a requirement for 'keeping sex alive' (*Page & Stanway, 2011, p.119*), it also involves potentially deviating from normative assumptions and scripts. Some of the 'spicy' forms of sex lend themselves to being done alone (e.g. fantasy and porn/erotica), and some may involve something other than the normative sexual script (e.g. sex with toys, anal sex, and kinky sex – involving light bondage, sensation play or power play). Therefore books have to do a great deal of boundary work in order to encourage the reader to engage in spicy sex, without straying so far that 'something unspeakable will skitter across' (Rubin, 1984, p.282).

Most books manage this ideological dilemma (Billig et al, 1988) with an initial declaration of openness or questioning of what counts as normal, but then location of any form of 'spicy sex' at the very end of the book, suggest that it is of only minority interest. They also produce warnings about potential emotional or physical damage that are not present in relation to other forms of sex. Some present more 'extreme' practices in a sensationalist or ridiculing manner. A good example, is *Godson (2002)* who states that 'there is no such thing as normal' (p.66), but later begins her 'sexploration' chapter with: 'Warning: This chapter contains strong words, violence and graphic descriptions of sometimes illegal sexual acts that you will most probably never choose to try. For many people, it will be more information than they want about things they didn't need to know. For the rest of us, it's just really interesting' (p.156).

Boundary drawing is a key feature of these books – not just between 'normal' and 'spicy' but also between sharing fantasies and acting on fantasies (warned against if it involves straying outside normativity, e.g. *Berman, 2011*), between erotica and porn (e.g. *Litvinoff, 2008*), and between 'fun' kink (mostly adding light bondage or spanking to PIV intercourse) and 'real' BDSM (bondage & discipline, dominance & submission, and sadomasochism) (e.g. *Kingsley, 2011*).

The 'solutions' of varying positions, costumes or locations, or of 'spicing up' sex with limited forays into 'alternatives' severely restrict erotic imaginations. The focus on individuals learning sexual skills and techniques and/or buying products and toys to enhance their sex lives (see Harvey & Gill, 2011a & b), also locates the problem within the individual, rather than within the wider cultural messages which insist that people have a certain kind of sex at a consistent level (Barker & Iantaffi, forthcoming 2015). As *de Botton (2012)* eloquently puts it: 'sex manuals ... have been united in locating the problems of sexuality in the physical sphere. Sex will go better – they variously assure us – when we master the lotus position, learn to use ice-cubes creatively or apply proven techniques for attaining synchronised orgasms' (p.6). Such 'solutions' fail to recognise the role of sex advice media in constructing the very templates against which people judge themselves during sex, often preventing them from relaxing, and from 'being present' and experiencing pleasure in the ways that the books advocate (see Barker, 2014).

### **Resistances**

So far we have presented a fairly uniform, normative, picture of sex advice books, and indeed the generic nature of both form and content of the genre is readily apparent upon analysis. However, it would be unfair to say that there are no resistances to the limited constructions of normal sex and relationships that we have covered thus far. As mentioned earlier, like other media, sex advice books are polysemic and contradictory, and many tensions and paradoxes are present, such as those already highlighted around presenting sex between the genders as difficult but same-sex

relationships as no solution, and around both challenging and simultaneously policing the notion of 'normal' sex.

Certainly contemporary best-selling sex advice books reveal a cultural re-drawing of the dividing line between acceptable and unacceptable sex (Rubin, 1984), although they leave intact the idea that such a dividing line, or hierarchy of acceptability, exists. Same-sex attraction is rarely excluded completely, bodies which have previously been deemed inherently non-sexual are generally included, albeit tokenistically (e.g. older and disabled bodies), and kink practices find their way into the 'spicy' chapter of the book and occasionally escape into other areas (e.g. *Zopol, 2009*, lists blindfolds alongside everyday kit for sex, and *Banks, 2004*, includes the potential of asphyxiation in a general section on safer sex). It is interesting to note that most books do explicitly question the idea that sex means PIV intercourse, despite implicitly reinforcing that norm through other aspects of structure and imagery. There is both a doing and an undoing of what counts as 'normal' sex then: a tokenistic acknowledgement that there is more to it than PIV, yet a repeated re-iteration of this elsewhere in the books in relation to what sex 'is'.

Just as no book offers a purely oppressive or emancipatory vision of sex, similarly it is not possible to simply divide sex advice books into those which are 'mainstream' and those which are 'critical' or 'alternative' because all books include moments of resistance, as well as reproductions of normative scripts and assumptions. However, it is useful to briefly touch here on those books which explicitly position themselves as inclusive of diverse sexualities or as critical of conventional messages around sex.

Again, there are points of both construction and contestation in these books. For example, *Godson (2002)* includes lesbian, gay and bisexual people throughout her book, and her illustrations of sexual positions are inclusive of PIV, anal sex, and strap-on sex, demonstrating that it is possible to follow standard formats in ways that challenge norms. However, the same book does some very clear boundary-policing around kinky sex. Similarly there are some books which take an explicitly 'myth-busting' approach to social messages about sex, with titles like *The Sex Myth (Magnanti, 2012)*, or *Everything You Know about Sex is Wrong (Kick, 2006)*. These often challenge some normativities (e.g. natural gender differences or the idea of sex addiction, *Magnanti, 2012*) whilst reproducing others as fact (e.g. the healthiness of sex, *Kick, 2006*). They also provide individualised rather than social 'solutions' in places (see Barker, Gill & Harvey, forthcoming 2015). This is also a feature of most books aimed at kinky readers, which generally present sexual negotiation and consent as an agentic act between equal individuals, rather than as inevitably embedded within social structures which limit and constrain agency (see Barker, 2013c).

Books aimed at lesbian and gay readers contest heteronormativity and sometimes mononormativity to an extent, whilst buying into many normative assumptions, about the sexual imperative and sexual dysfunctions for example. Klesse (2013) has demonstrated how such books construct a normative white, middle class ideal of a successful same-sex partnership through a standard self-help narrative of individualisation and responsabilisation. Similarly, whilst we found the one book which foregrounded disability (*Kaufman, Silverberg, & Odette, 2007*) to be refreshing in its inclusion of diverse bodies and practices, and in its consideration of sexual ethics and structural power dynamics, the same book has been criticised by Sothorn (2007) for reproducing the sexual imperative, and for 'rendering the project of disabled sexual liberation as a personal project of self-governance' (p.144) rather than locating it within a disabling society.

Two books explicitly highlight the 'problem' set up by other sex advice books, and consider different 'solutions' to those generally proposed. *De Botton (2012)* writes that mainstream sex books are 'intolerably humiliating' in their suggestion that the solution is just about mastering a technique or

position, and that this 'mocks the sort of challenges we are usually faced with' (p.6), such as mutual resentments over childcare and finances, craving sex with people we do not love, or having an affair and breaking a partner's heart. *Perel's Mating in Captivity (2007)* also recognises the problems that are set up by the cultural insistence on both the sexual imperative and on long term monogamous relationships. Whilst de Botton's 'solutions' mostly focus on changing the cultural mores around affairs, Perel considers open non-monogamy in addition to enhancing eroticism in monogamous relationships. Thus both present rather more of a radical/social challenge to other books.

Perhaps it is when we read *across* sex advice books that there is most scope for challenging normative assumptions (although such reading can also leave an overwhelming impression of hetero- and mono-normativity, especially if restricted to the more mainstream texts). As Attwood (forthcoming 2015) points out, reading across can enable us to see the diversity of practices that are considered under 'sex' and the diversity of contexts in which sex can take place, blurring the lines between sex and other activities such as play, leisure, spirituality, art, and relaxation (Barker, 2013b). Such a reading-across also highlights the contradictory 'solutions' that are proposed, such as *Kingsley (2011)* and *Corn (2013)* arguing that all men and women both really want men to be more dominant sexually, whilst *Keesling (2011)* and *Kerner (2013)* both present female dominance, assertion and empowerment as the universal answer to the same problem. This disrupts the gender normativity that is present in any of the books taken alone, although most books still construct the responsibility for ensuring 'great sex' to maintain the relationships as more 'women's work' than it is men's (Potts, 1998; Tyler, 2008; Gupta & Cacchioni, 2013).

## Conclusions

The construction of sex in sex advice books presented here is consistent with that in other forms of sex media that we have analysed such as television documentaries (Harvey & Gill, 2011a & b) and magazines (Gill, 2009). However, there may be scope in other forms of media to destabilise some of the normative assumptions we have described. For example, our analysis of newspaper problem pages revealed that aspects which are presented as solid and unimpeachable in sex advice books, seem far more shaky and precarious in that medium. The most common problems in these columns relate to infidelity and to attractions to the 'same sex', suggesting that neither mononormativity nor heteronormativity are as stable as sex advice books present them as being. Also the fact that men and women are represented equally in concerns around sexual problems suggests that sexual experience may be much less gendered than the advice books portray it (see Barker, Gill & Harvey, forthcoming 2015). Barker (2013c) has also demonstrated that the format of online blogs opens up the possibility of considering sex as a highly social situation, where agency operates within multiple intersecting power dynamics.

Whilst textual analyses like our own, and those of other authors such as Potts (2002) and Gupta & Cacchioni (2013) are very helpful in this area, it is useful to supplement these with research on the ways in which audiences read sex advice books and negotiate their own understandings and experiences of sex in relation to these. Woodiwiss (2014) has conducted such research in relation to books specifically aimed at survivors of sexual abuse (analysing both the books and reader accounts), but we are not aware of any research which does the same with readers of more general sex advice books. However van Hooff's (2013) research on heterosexual couples does open an important window on everyday experiences of sex. Van Hooff's participants construct sex as an essential feature of long-term relationships, drawing upon discourses of the sexual imperative, natural male sex drive, mononormativity, and sex as women's work, much as they are present in sex advice books (van Hooff, 2014).

We would like to see attempts towards more sex critical forms of sex advice books, and will be engaging in such possibilities ourselves in future with colleagues who are experimenting with such

writing (Barker & Hancock, forthcoming 2017). So far our vision for sex critical advice books are that, instead of being framed around a specific sexual script, the framing should be around consent and ethical treatment of self and others, as well as around mutual pleasure/fulfilment. Normative underlying assumptions would be replaced with the following:

- Sex can happen in diverse contexts with none prioritised over others.
- Differences in amount and type of desires (in individuals over time, and between individuals) are inevitable and acceptable, not problems to be solved.
- There is benign variation of both bodies and sexual practices (Rubin, 1984).
- People are socially and culturally situated, making sex fundamentally a biopsychosocial experience.

Of course it is debatable whether the self-help format can produce a sustained social/radical challenge without lapsing into individualistic project of self-transformation (see Barker, 2013b). One of the key tensions in writing the forthcoming book will be how to address an individual reader in a way that still situates sexual experience more socially. We also hope that supplementing the book with other media (podcasts, online videos and discussions, and workshop materials) will help with this, given the potential of multi-media approaches outlined above.

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