Compulsory Heterosexuality, Hegemonic Masculinity, and Dennis Reynolds

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Summary

Discussions of compulsory heterosexuality in relation to Dennis Reynolds are incomplete without the framework of hegemonic masculinity to guide them.

Notes

Content warning for mentions of canonical rape and sex crimes. This will probably be crossposted to tumblr later. Even if it is not, because I fear it may be too long, feel free to shoot me an ask at h-influenzae.tumblr.com and I'll answer it when I can.

Due to space and time constraints, this essay excludes Mac. It also doesn't go extremely in depth into the gender politics of IASIP in general. Feel free to hit me up if you'd be interested in reading my interpretations of those topics through the lenses I present here.

So in IASIP fandom I see a lot of discussion of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ as it relates to Dennis. As far as I can tell, this discussion defines ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ as ‘I thought I was straight because society wanted me to be, but I was actually gay.’ While I appreciate the work of everyone who puts in time to analyze the show, I need to step in and say that everyone is using the words ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ in an incomplete way. Compulsory heterosexuality originated as a lesbian term, and the field of masculinities later tacked on the concept of hegemonic masculinity to apply it to men’s lives.

If we want to discuss Dennis and his relationship to masculinity and heterosexuality, it is necessary to
use frameworks set up by queer studies and the study of masculinities. I know that this all sounds a little complicated, but I will break this down as simply as I can because I think if we really want to discuss these topics, then we need to discuss them correctly. Using these terms correctly adds depth to analysis, which I am sure is something that all of the passionate people analyzing IASIP want. This is going to essentially be a crash course into a few fields of study, so feel free to hit me up with any questions you may have. I am no expert in any of these topics, but I will try to answer your questions as best as I can.

**What is the exact definition of compulsory heterosexuality?**

“Compulsory heterosexuality is the idea that heterosexuality is assumed and enforced by a patriarchal society. This refers to the idea that heterosexuality can be adopted by people regardless of their personal sexual preferences. Heterosexuality is viewed as the natural inclination or obligation by both sexes. Consequently, anyone who differs from the normalcy of heterosexuality is deemed deviant or abhorrent.” – Wikipedia

**Where did compulsory heterosexuality originate?**


This essay is long and has many aspects, but since IASIP is such a gendered show, I’m going to talk about it here as a gendered framework and its relationship to conceptions of male vs. female gay persons.

Basically, Adrienne Rich talks specifically about how lesbianism is erased and degraded as a less valuable or invisible orientation due to society dictating that women naturally are oriented towards men and they should eventually give all of their time and emotional resources to men at the expense of their female relationships. Adrienne Rich posits that all female relationships represent a ‘lesbian continuum’ which isn’t necessarily sexual – all relationships between women whether they be mother-daughter, sister-sister, friend-friend, or lover-lover are treated as lesser than the male-female relationship. This is despite Rich’s claim that women often find the most meaning in these female-female relationships and are naturally oriented towards relationships with other women.

“I have chosen to use the terms lesbian existence and lesbian continuum because the word lesbianism has a clinical and limiting ring Lesbian existence suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range--through each woman's life and throughout history--of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman.”

Rich also makes a comparison to male homosexuality, stating that lesbians and gay men have very different social and political realities.

“Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through "inclusion" as female versions of male homosexuality. To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to deny and erase female reality once again [...] I perceive the lesbian experience as being, like motherhood, a profoundly female experience, with particular oppressions, meanings, and potentialities we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually stigmatized existences.”

Compulsory heterosexuality has always meant something more complex than gay men and lesbians sharing the same experiences when conceptualizing their sexuality.
How did the idea evolve?

In 1995, R.W. Connell wrote a book called “Masculinities” which came up with the gendered framework of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is defined thus:

“How hegemonic masculinity is defined as the current configuration of practice that legitimizes men’s dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of women, and other marginalized ways of being a man.” – Wikipedia

(Note: A really good breakdown of the concept of hegemonic masculinity is the book ‘Dude, You’re a Fag.’ Unfortunately, I got rid of my copy for some stupid reason, so I can’t quote it. I probably sold it during textbook buyback for like $5. Keep your books, kids!)

Hegemonic masculinity fits into the conceptual framework of compulsory heterosexuality in the way that it shows how the dominance of men over women also poses economic, social, and physical dangers to men who are perceived as threatening the patriarchal social order in some way. Because heterosexuality is a patriarchal institution based around the subjugation of women, men who do not uphold heterosexuality are punished. Additionally, male homosexuality is often equated with femininity. Men who are perceived as feminine are punished because they do not uphold the institution of patriarchy.

Participating in the institution of hegemonic masculinity and upholding the patriarchy generates social good for men. Thus, gay men may be convinced that being heterosexual is the normal and natural way to be due to the good this institution brings them.

How is IASIP fandom using these terms incompletely/incorrectly?

Simply put, I see discussions about Dennis and compulsory heterosexuality unlinked from the good the institution of patriarchy brings him. I see it unlinked from the very real harm their upholding of this institution causes all of the women around him. I have seen discussion about how sad it is that Dennis forces himself to have sex with women because he’s convinced it’s the way to be at least 100 times. However, this discussion ignores good that having sex with (and raping) women brings him. Dennis gets social status because he has slept with so many women. He also gets a socially sanctioned coping mechanism to fill up his ‘god hole’ through systematically treating women like toys. Dennis maintains his bond with Mac through the subjugation of women, primarily through the DENNIS system but also through their joint degradation of Dee, via watching his sex tapes together, etc. Heterosexuality makes Dennis feel, in his own words, powerful. Objectively, the institution of heterosexuality has brought him a net good. However, the good he gets from this institution is at the expense of women, because almost every sexual encounter he has ever had with a woman has involved some sort of a sex crime. Almost all of the women who have ever consented to having sex with Dennis have been filmed without their consent. Focusing only on Dennis’s suffering when he does not enjoy sex with women erases the significance of these crimes.

Where do we go from here?

Research/refresh on a topic before you meta about it so that you don’t mislead other people. I fully admit that I refreshed myself on these topics before I wrote this essay so that I did not mislead anyone. I had to make some edits to its original structure because I realized some of my claims were misleading. When you’re doing analysis of a text using social theories and frameworks, you should use them correctly. A benefit of this is that you may educate someone on a topic they’ve never heard of before! This can cause someone to look differently at the world. How wonderful!

Recognize that the characters we love harm women, and that in-depth discussions of compulsory heterosexuality in relationship to them inherently involve misogyny, sexism, and rape. I realize this
may produce cognitive dissonance in some people, but it is more intellectually honest than ignoring these elements. It is also more respectful to people who find meaning in this show’s dissection of misogyny, sexism, and rape.

Don’t sweat too hard if you got it wrong. Also, don’t feel like you have to think about this all the time or stop reblogging pictures of Dennis’s fluffy hair. This essay does not exist to suggest that you have to think about these topics at all if you don’t want to. Rather, if you choose to meta on these topics, my only request is that you do it with intellectual honesty and that you understand the topics that you are discussing.

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