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Mediated intimacy: Sex advice in media culture

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How to cite:

Barker, Meg-John; Gill, Rosalind and Harvey, Laura (2018). Mediated intimacy: Sex advice in media culture. *Sexualities*, 21(8) pp. 1337–1345.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/1363460718781342>

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Excerpt from *Mediated Intimacy*

The bold argument of *Mediated Intimacy* is that media of various kinds play an increasingly important role in shaping people's knowledge, desires, practices and expectations about intimate relationships. While arguments rage about the nature and content of sex and relationship education in schools, it is becoming clear that more and more of us – young and old – look not to formal education, or even to our friends, for information about sex, but the media (Attwood et al., 2015; Albury, 2016). This is not simply a matter of media 'advice' in the form of self-help books, magazine problem pages, or online 'agony' columns – though these are all proliferating and are discussed at length in the book. It is also about the wider cultural habitat of images, ideas and discourses about intimacy that circulate through and across media: the 'happy endings' of romantic comedies; the 'money shots' of pornography; the celebrity gossip about who is seeing whom, who is 'cheating', and who is looking 'hot'; the lifestyle TV about 'embarrassing bodies' or being 'undateable'; the newspaper features on how to have a 'good' divorce or 'ten things never to say on a first date'; or the new apps that incite us to quantify and rate our sex lives, etc. These constitute the 'taken for granted' of everyday understandings of intimacy, and they are at the heart of *Mediated Intimacy*.

Here we present a brief summary of the book and its conclusions:

Normativity and inclusivity

Sex advice - and media more widely - is largely heteronormative: presenting 'normal' sex and relationships as primarily happening between one cisgender man and one cisgender woman. This is embedded within the representation of men and women as 'opposite' and 'complementary' exemplified in the bestselling Mars and Venus self-help books (Potts, 2002), men's and women's magazines, romantic comedies, and chick lit (Gill, 2007). Sex remains centred around men's pleasure with the omnipresent male sexual drive discourse (Hollway, 1984) and assumption that men are focused on sex and women on love. Recent shifts from objectification to subjectification mean there is now an onus on women to be 'up for' sex, to demonstrate enjoyment, and to find it empowering, whilst still navigating the sexual double standard to be sexual enough, but not too sexual. This plays out in many sex advice materials which - implicitly or explicitly - emphasise the vital importance of women providing regular sex to male partners so as not to lose the relationship. However, TV shows like *Girls* and *Fleabag* begin to open up the possibility of a more messy, complex female sexuality as their characters navigate this territory.

There is increased representation of LGBT people and relationships in mainstream media, including some coverage of LG sexuality in sex advice books, and even high profile LG sex advisors speaking to a broad audience like Dan Savage on *Sex Box* or the authors of *Sex Tips for Straight Women from a Gay Man* (Anderson & Berman, 2012). However, representations focus largely on the LG, rather than BT, parts of the acronym, and those aimed at a wide audience still commonly represent lesbian and gay people in homonormative ways, focused around marriage and family, for example, and often de-sexualised. Most sex advice assumes a heterosexual audience, and a clear division between the kind of advice that would be required

by people of different sexual 'orientations', hence specific books and magazines aimed at LG people, and separate pages of mainstream sex advice books on this topic. This is despite the popularity of bromantic themes in media and popular culture, with increasingly fuzzy distinctions between homosociality and homosexuality (Ward, 2015), and the fact that questions of 'same-sex' attraction are the most common in newspaper agony columns: suggesting a far less clear-cut separation between hetero- and homo- attraction and experience. This is reflected in recent statistics that over 40% of young people regard themselves as somewhere between 'exclusively heterosexual' and 'exclusively homosexual' (YouGov, 2016).

Heteronormativity operates in conjunction with mononormativity (the assumed normality and naturalness of monogamy), the sexual imperative (that humans must experience sexual attraction) and the coital imperative (that sex = penis in vagina intercourse) to create the 'problem' addressed by much mainstream sex advice: that of continued sex in long term relationships. These interconnected assumptions also constrain the possible 'solutions' that can be provided to a series of positions and techniques which can be applied to the sexual script (foreplay, intercourse, orgasm) without posing any serious threat to it, or to the normativities that underlie it.

Bodies

There are three main 'takes' on the body in contemporary culture: the surveilled body, the disciplined body, and the sexualized body. Female bodies, in particular, are under constant - and increasingly magnified - surveillance, including the 'gynaeoptic surveillance' of the 'girlfriend gaze' (Winch, 2013). Several forms of bodily discipline and 'aesthetic labour' are normatively demanded to shape bodies for sex and sexual desire (Bartky, 1990), and attempts to challenge this - for example in Lena Dunham's work - are responded to with punitive regulation. Certain bodies are sexualized - or asexualized - in gendered, raced, and classed ways in media and popular culture (Gill, 2008).

Turning to sex advice, specifically, (certain) bodies are omnipresent in sex advice books, particularly the sex manual which still appears to be one of the most common formats for such books to take. There was remarkable lack of diversity across the different texts which we analysed. The images of bodies within them were almost entirely young, white, slim, not visibly disabled, depicted in heterosexual coupled combinations with a taller, toned or muscular man with short hair and a shorter, slimmer, more delicate looking woman, with longer hair. In addition to reinforcing the heteronormative complementary gender model, such images give strong messages about which bodies are, and are not, deemed to be sexual or appropriate to be having sex. It was disturbing that, where images of older or same-sex couples were used, they were often clothed while other bodies were naked, and the few images of people of colour could be read as being hypersexualised or emotional (illustrating 'spicy' sex, or 'make-up' sex after a conflict, for example).

These images - and the text of sex advice books - certainly encourages the surveillance and disciplining of the body given the slim, toned and depilated depictions, and representations of high-heeled shoes and 'sexy' lingerie. Throughout all forms of mainstream sex advice, women

are encouraged to prepare their bodies for sex with beauty routines, garments, and other means of ensuring that sexy 'brain chemicals' are present. They are also required to come to know, and work on, their bodies in order to have better sex. For example, women are encouraged to have solo sex in order to better inform their partner about what kinds of physical touch will lead to their orgasm, while men are encouraged to have solo sex in order to improve their 'performance' (i.e. their capacity to last a long time before ejaculating). Thus women's bodies are presented as mysterious and men's as relatively straightforward. Sex is also emphasised as a means towards a more 'healthy' body in numerous ways, reinforcing the sexual imperative (Gill, 2009). Heteronormative penis-in-vagina sex is already foregrounded by the focus of sex advice around bodies being predominantly on genitals - often with detailed illustrations of those areas - rather than on entire bodies.

The self

The history of lifestyle media in general, and self-help in particular, has been shaped by current neoliberal, consumer capitalist, postfeminist understandings of the self. Specifically self-help locates problems within the individual - often assumed female - reader, rather than within wider cultural messages or structural inequalities, for example. The reader is also regarded as responsible for addressing those problems, and as requiring the help of the 'expert' advisor in order to do so. This is certainly the case in sex advice, as sexual difficulties are individualised and responsabilized, and 'sexpertise' deemed necessary to 'solve' the 'problem' of sex in intimate relationships.

In our analysis of the 'technologies of sexiness' that are proffered across sex and relationships media (Evans & Riley, 2014), we concluded that the ideal self in such media is one who has banished repression, overcome taboos, dealt with any 'issues', and become a properly adventurous (not boring) neoliberal lover. Recent research has looked into both the ways in which such an ideal self is constructed by magazines and online advice (Wood, 2017; Favaro, 2017), and the ways in which individuals draw on markedly similar discourses when discussing overcoming abusive sexual experiences, or 'working at' casual sex, for example (Van Hoof, 2013; Farvid & Braun, 2013). In addition to surveilling and disciplining of the body, people are expected to construct successful intimate/sexual selves through a complex management of their emotional states and self-presentation, all of which is particularly clear in the recent phenomenon of sex apps which encourage people to monitor, evaluate, and change their sexual selves.

Safety and risk

Public health discourses of safety and risk have fed into media sex advice. Mainstream safe sex promotion has tended to focus on the use of condoms to prevent HIV and other STIs, and how understandings of safe/r sex in sex advice materials have tended to offer similar understanding of what constitutes safety and risk. Sex advice generally only covers the need to communicate about - and use - condoms for penis-in-vagina sex, rather than considering protection for other physical sexual activities (e.g. dental dams for oral sex, risk-aware consensual kink practices) or any forms of emotional risk involved in sexual activity. Also this is wrapped up in the language of sexual entrepreneurship: having the skills and technique to communicate about - and use -

condoms in appropriate, or sexy, ways.

In online sex advice the suggestion of other sexual practices as potentially safer than penis-in-vagina sex often actually served to reinforce the idea of penis-in-vagina (and to some extent penis-in-anus) sex as 'proper' sex. In television coverage - like the Jeremy Kyle show - the STI-test format reinforces both the individual responsabilising of sex, and a mononormativity as those with multiple partners are shamed for this 'risky' practice, in addition to those who don't use 'protection'. We also saw how recent moral panics around chemsex serve to reinforce homonormativity and mononormative intimacy as more acceptable contexts for (gay male) sex.

Pleasure

Pleasure has a contradictory place in mediated sex advice. Pleasure is present as an 'imperative' (to have sex, and to demonstrate pleasure, particularly through orgasm), but it is also strangely absent in any more detailed sense. It is rather assumed that the range of acts presented in sex advice will be pleasurable, and there is little unpacking of what pleasure is, of the multiple potential pleasures possible from sexual and erotic experience, or of the complex interweaving of pleasure and other experiences in sex (e.g. duty, shame, validation, disappointment, relief).

Our analysis of the TV show *Sex Box* revealed that even when the equation of pleasure and orgasm is questioned, orgasm is still reinforced as the correct climax or end-point of sex, with couples who did not 'reach' that 'goal' being sent back into the box! Similarly while one of the presenters continually asks the all-important question 'what is sex?' to disrupt the coital imperative, penetration is subtly reinforced as constituting sex in the way in which couples who do not penetrate in the box are treated.

Mainstream sex apps - like sex advice books - very much focus on the 'what' of sex rather than the 'how'. For example, not only does the *Couple Foreplay Sex Game* construct non-coital activities as 'foreplay', like the books, it also presents a range of activities as inevitably relevant and pleasurable to all users of the app, the only thing to 'rate' being how good each person was at achieving skill at the techniques. Similarly other apps construct sexual 'mastery' as learning a variety of one-size-fits-all techniques and positions which are assumed to constitute 'good sex' for everybody.

Communication and consent

'Talking about sex' was constructed in the following ways in online sex advice. First, it was portrayed as unnecessary, either not being mentioned at all, or being warned against as something that would 'kill the mood'. Given that communicating about sex relates to the 'how' rather than the 'what' of sex, it didn't fit well into the technique-oriented sexual entrepreneurship agenda which is how sex advice is generally sold to consumers. Secondly, in order to fit better into the 'what' of sex, communication was constructed wholly in terms of 'sexy talk': a skill which could be taught and learnt, particularly as part of the wide seduction industry, aimed at men (O'Neill, 2015). Thirdly, the most common way communication was constructed was as necessary but simple: the capacity to talk about sex should come easily unless there is a

problem in your relationship. This construction had some things in common with the fourth construction of communication as foundational. In both cases, advice given was very gendered. Readers - generally assumed female - were encouraged to discover how they work sexually and to communicate this gently to - assumed male - partners, thus reinforcing the idea that women's sexuality is complex and men's simple, as well as the idea that ensuring a good sex life is women's emotional labour. Finally, some more sex critical (Downing, 2012) advice drew on the idea of meta-communication: that not only are there no one-size-fits-all sexual techniques, but there are also no one-size-fits-all kinds of communication - different things work for different people at different times. In this kind of advice communicating about how to communicate lays the groundwork for communicating about sex - or anything else - in a relationship, and this is located within a constraining cultural context which makes it challenging. Sex-critical advice was also more likely to regard consent as one of the most important things to communicate about, in juxtaposition to other advice which focused on contraception and communicating what you like sexually.

There is a notable absence of the topic of consent across sex advice in many mediums. It was generally not covered in books, newspaper or online advice except in specific contexts such as in relation to kink or young people. Sex between adults - particularly within existing relationships - was assumed to be consensual. When consent was mentioned it was generally constructed in a simple 'no means no' manner, generally with a gendered assumption that men will initiate sex and women will be free to say 'yes' or 'no'. In this way, adults are assumed to be entirely agentic and capable of simply consenting to sex: something that flies in the face of statistics around the extent of non-consensual and unwanted sex. The same advice that presented a 'no means no' understanding of sex often also put pressure on people - generally women - to have sex even when they didn't want it. For example, women were encouraged to provide unwanted quickies so as not to risk losing the relationship, or told that they should begin having sex because women generally don't get into it until they've been doing it for a while. In this way readers are encouraged to become even less in touch with their bodily reactions, such that tuning into whether they do or do not want sex will likely become increasingly difficult.

More sex-positive and sex-critical understandings of consent on social media propose alternatives in the form of enthusiastic consent and consent cultures. Enthusiastic consent requires all participants to be articulating a clear 'yes' before sex takes place. However this still regards consent as a one-off moment rather than ongoing, and fails to acknowledge the cultural pressure on people - particularly women - to perform enthusiasm when they do not feel enthusiastic about things. The consent culture movement suggests that sexual consent is very difficult if the surrounding relationships and culture are non-consensual. Thus it encourages people to consider consent across their whole relationship - and all kinds of relationships - as well as recognising structural oppressions and power dynamics in play which make it difficult for people to tune into themselves and to freely consent - or not.

Conclusions: 5 top tips for sex advice

In the conclusions to Mediated Intimacy we played with the common sex advice trope of the '5 top tips' to come up with 5 top tips for sex critical sex advice from our analyses. These are the

touchstones that Meg-John tries to follow when creating their own sex advice (books, zines, and podcasts) with sex educator Justin Hancock (Barker & Hancock, 2017). The tips are as follows:

1. **Locate yourself - and your audience - within wider culture.** Engage in reflexive practice around your own (internalised) assumptions and invite feedback from diverse others. One advisor said 'I ask friends and colleagues and my editors/producers and audiences, plus whoever is asking for advice to give me feedback on how I'm doing. This includes thinking about my own values and prejudices and how my own experiences – personal and professional – affect my judgement.' Ensure that your advice recognises the role of wider cultural understandings and power dynamics in structuring all of our (sexual) experience. Engage your audience themselves in reflecting critically on cultural messages around sex and intimacy.

2. **Be prepared to reflect on other sex advice, and on your own past advice, with compassionate criticism.** As one advisor put it, 'it's good to show we can change, adapt, move on, grow. Having a record of advice allows us to reflect that journey.' Another said: 'my assumptions are being challenged all the time! The great thing about curating a website is that I can go back and edit things - to tweak language, to change the tone, to make a new graphic, to include something or take something away. To do this I'm informed by helpful criticism I've received, or by reading other blogs or papers, by attending talks and events and talking to other sex educators.'

3. **Assume diversity of people, bodies, practices, and contexts for sex.** This involves acknowledging that different things work for different people and at different times, and opening up multiple possibilities rather than offering one-size-fits-all solutions. One advisor said: 'It is hugely important to give advice that will not cause harm. For this reason I've always avoided being too prescriptive and instead tended to outline options for the reader, leaving them space to make their own choices from a more informed basis.'

4. **Normalise differences in amount and type of desires.** This applies to difference in individuals over time, and between individuals. Diverse desires and fluctuation over time should be presented as inevitable rather than as problems to be solved.

5. **Ground advice on consensual and caring treatment of self and others.** Weave the thread of consent and (self) care through the advice rather than it being an afterthought.