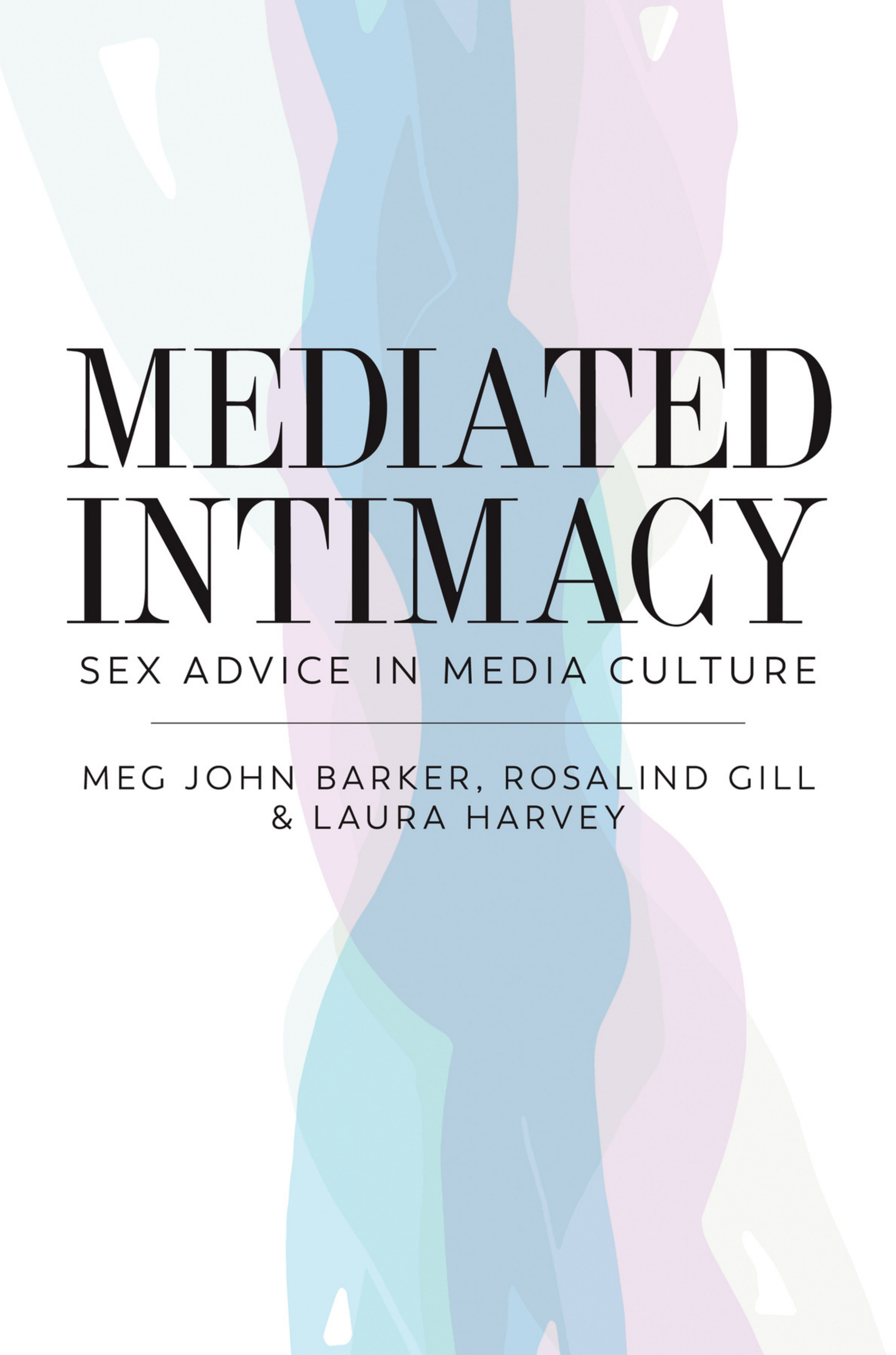

MEDIATED INTIMACY

SEX ADVICE IN MEDIA CULTURE

MEG JOHN BARKER, ROSALIND GILL
& LAURA HARVEY

Mediated Intimacy

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Sex Advice in Media Culture

Meg-John Barker, Rosalind Gill
and Laura Harvey

polity

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1

Mediated Intimacy: Sex Advice in Media Culture

The bold argument of this book 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 to 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 this 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 smartphone 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 this book.

Mediated intimacy builds on Michel Foucault's insight about the entanglement of power and knowledge in relation to sexuality. In *The history of sexuality*, Foucault (1978) overturned the 'repressive hypothesis' that had constituted supposed fact about eighteenth and nineteenth-century culture. Rather than being suppressed, he argued, discourses of sex were subject to a huge proliferation during this period, with especial interest in the sexualities that did not fit within the heterosexual bond that was becoming prescribed as the basic reproductive unit of capitalist society. Rather than silence and repression, he argued, confessional discourses, a fascination with 'perversions', and attempts to found the scientific study of sexuality were central to the period. More recently, writing about the late twentieth century, Ken Plummer (1995, pp. 3–4; emphasis in original) has charted the rise of a 'sexual storytelling culture' in which the 'modern Western world has become cluttered with sexual stories': 'every modern invention – mass print, the camera, the film, the video, the record, the telephone, the computer, the "virtual reality" machine – has helped, bit by bit, to provide a veritable *erotopian* landscape to millions of lives'. Plummer was writing at a time before the web, social media, online dating, smartphones or the 'selfie', yet his work showed remarkable prescience about the sexual preoccupations of the media of the time: 'a grand message keeps being shouted', he argued, '*tell about your sex*' (1995, p. 4; emphasis in original).

If sex was 'the Big Story' (Plummer, 1995, p. 4) more than twenty years ago, it is surely an even bigger story today. Contemporary Western media are suffused by discourses about sex and relationships, both in media products (TV shows, magazines, films) and in the interactive media in which we are all 'produsers' (Bruns, 2008) and 'playbourers' (Kücklich, 2005). Our aim in this book is to take seriously the key role that media play in our understandings and scripts of intimate life. Considering the volume of media concerned in one way or another with sex and intimate relationships, it is astonishing that there has been a relative absence of discussion about the kinds of ideas promulgated in media – particularly compared to the wealth of research about sex and relationship education in schools. While there is some public concern about the 'bad influence' that some media, particularly pornography, may have (Boynton, 2003; Buckingham & Bragg, 2003; Albury, 2014), and a growing body of literature about sex 'self-help' (e.g. Potts, 1998; Tyler, 2004; Jackson, 2005; Rogers, 2005; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Ménard & Kleinplatz, 2008; Gill, 2009; Gupta & Cacchioni, 2013), in general we know very little about how sexual relationships are depicted in the media, let alone about the everyday constructions of intimacy that pervade media culture.

In *Mediated intimacy* we look across a wide variety of different media and genres to ask in detail about the kinds of constructions of sex that are dominant, critically examining what sex is in media culture, who and what is depicted as 'normal', how issues of consent, coercion and violence are framed, which bodies matter and are made to count, and exploring media constructions of desire, risk and pleasure. We look both at 'mainstream' media and also at 'alternative' spaces – queer, feminist, and sex-critical media. As one of the first attempts to examine the mediation of intimate life, our priority is to map broad and emerging patterns, but we also want to note contradictions and 'lines of flight' – these are inevitable when looking across a diverse range of sources and might offer resources for hope, and room to move, breathe and resist dominant constructions. The analysis presented is a thoroughly intersectional one that attempts strenuously to take differences seriously. We seek to 'notice' and pay attention to exclusions and invisibilities – but also to the kinds of visibility (Gamson, 1998) that are allowed for different groups including those relating to age, health status, disability, sexuality, cis/trans/non-binary genders, class and race.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter we set out some of the key terms and contexts that inform the arguments made in this book. The chapter proceeds in three broad sections. We start with broad discussions of the 'transformations of intimacy' said to be marking Western cultures, drawing on social theory and feminist and queer accounts. Continuing our argument we then consider the significance of neoliberalism as a context for thinking about intimate relationships, turning subsequently to neoliberalism's gendered iteration as a postfeminist sensibility. The growing impact of consumer culture and the rise of 'lifestyle media' are also both central to understanding how intimate life is mediated and we consider these in the next section. Finally we discuss the expansion and transformation of self-help as a genre and set out our understanding of the notion of mediated intimacy, which informs the analysis presented here. The chapter concludes with a discussion of our key terms and a summary of the argumentative structure of this book.

Intimacy in Neoliberal Capitalism

Intimacy has become a key concept over the last twenty-five years, with a proliferating body of scholarship on 'intimate citizenship' (Plummer, 2003), 'intimate publics' (Berlant, 2008; 2011) and 'public intimacies'. The notion of intimacy, with its emphasis upon personal relationships, has displaced older sociological trajectories that were focused on family, kinship and community. For some, the concept is problematic for its privileging of adult sexual relationships and relative inattention to other dimensions – parent–child relations, sibling relationships, and wider bonds of friendship or affiliation. The turn to 'intimacy' is sometimes regarded as a symptom of a growing individualism not only in social life itself but also in social theory, with attendant implications that our personal relationships are about individual choice rather than (gendered) roles, responsibilities and obligations (Gillies, 2003; Edwards & Ribbens McCarthy, 2010). For others, however, the notion is appealing precisely for its promise to 'liberate' intimate relationships from their 'domestication' within the heterosexual nuclear family, and for its openness to broader constituencies, different kinds of affective ties, and more diverse forms of sexual practice.

Transformations of Intimacy

In recent years, feminist research, LGBT and queer activism and scholarship, and sociological writing about late capitalism/late modernity have coalesced around an interest in the ways in which intimate relationships might be said to be changing – with new household forms such as 'living apart together', the embrace of civil partnerships and same-sex marriage, and the rise of notions such as 'friends as the new family'. All these ideas – and many others – are captured by the notion that we are witnessing a 'transformation of intimacy'. For many of us, just thinking about our grandparents' experiences of intimate life and comparing them with our own offers a compelling sense that the transformation of intimacy theorists are on to something – exactly *what* that something is, however, is less clear and, as we argue in this book, there are many important issues to consider before we uncritically embrace the idea that everything has changed (for the better) and that we have moved to a bright, new, shiny and democratic form of Intimacy 3.0.

If intimate life is changing, then the causes of this are multiple. Feminist critiques of marriage and the nuclear family were important early contributors to the opening up of intimate life, by highlighting the centrality of power, ideology and even violence to these institutions, challenging the rigid separation between public and private spheres, and interrogating the myth of the family as 'the site of harmonious, well-adapted social interactions' (Gillies, 2003, p. 6). The radical psychiatry movement from the 1970s onward also offered a devastating critique of the nuclear family, indicting it for stifling freedom and individuality, and promoting schizophrenia and other mental health problems (Laing, 1971; Cooper, 1971). Women's large-scale entry into the paid labour market, alongside struggles for gender equality and an influential women's health movement concerned to educate and empower women to take control of their sexual and reproductive choices, were together also a significant engine of change. In turn the 'sexual revolution', the development of the contraceptive pill, and values of the 'permissive' or 'hedonistic' 1960s gave rise to new sexual practices and more casual relationships – developments that have arguably been intensified by online dating apps and platforms that facilitate 'hook ups' (Farvid, 2010; Moran & Lee, 2014). LGBT activism in the post-Stonewall period has also played a key role in transforming intimacy, through its emphases upon making visible alternative sexual identities and practices, pushing for legal equality, and in modelling new forms of kinship. Lifestyle media, exponential growth of 'self-help', and the rise of consumer culture are likewise central to understanding contemporary transformations (as we argue later in the chapter). Moreover, it is important to note the economic/material determinants of new forms of intimate life, and in particular the current prolongation of 'youth' as a life-stage in the context of high unemployment and spiralling housing costs which sees increasing numbers of young people remaining in the parental home throughout their twenties and early thirties. At a broader level, many have argued that sexuality and sex have undergone an opening up and postmodernization. Melissa Tyler (2004, p. 96) suggests that postmodern sexualities are characterized by a 'denaturalizaton of sex, by self-consciousness and reflexivity, by the proliferation of a plurality of meanings, acts and identities, and by pastiche and an indeterminate blurring of boundaries'.

One highly influential perspective on transformations of intimacy comes from theorists of 'reflexive modernity', including Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim. Their accounts of the remaking of intimate relationships foreground long-term social processes in the context of postindustrialization, the decline of tradition, and the growing importance of individualization. Giddens suggests that couple relationships have become 'democratized', severed from ascribed positions and social laws, and are today more likely to be the outcome of individual and personal understandings and negotiations – presuming 'equality in emotional give and take' (Giddens, 1992, p. 58) rather than of fixed social scripts. In this context, intimate relations have become more egalitarian, but also more freighted – without fixed guidelines to shape them. They are also arguably more important than ever – as they are part of the way that people ground their self-identity and narrate their place in the world:

> Where large areas of a person's life are no longer set by pre-existing patterns and habits, the individual is continually obliged to negotiate life-style options. Moreover – and this is crucial – such choices are not just 'external' or marginal aspects of the individual's attitudes, but define who the individual 'is'. In other words, life-style choices are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of self. (Giddens, 1992, p. 75)

Giddens argued that as traditions and older social structures and bonds give way to a situation in which people become responsible for the design of their own lives we are all increasingly 'making it up as we go along'. He contends that Western societies have seen the development of more democratic relationships grounded in mutual self-disclosure and pleasure. He dubs this the 'pure relationship'. A pure relationship:

> refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it. (Giddens, 1992, p. 58)

The 'pure relationship' might be thought of as the extension into contemporary times of the post war ideal of 'companionate marriage'. It is accompanied, Giddens argues, by a kind of 'plastic sexuality' – again freed from any scripts about pre-given or essential meanings. In a related vein, Steven Seidman (1989, p. 299) argues that sexuality has been released from the hegemony of heterosexuality, monogamy and procreation and come to be framed in terms of personal choice and a 'significant opening towards erotic pluralism and an ethics of tolerance'.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's 'individualization thesis' makes a similar argument, suggesting that individuals are now liberated from traditional social scripts and ties and have become free to make up their own rules – especially in intimate relationships. This brings great opportunities, but it also brings risks as we begin to think of our relationships as 'conditional' and potentially fragile rather than grounded in traditions, obligations, and social or institutional bonds. Furthermore, at the same time as it becomes socially unanchored, love becomes more important than ever before as a bulwark against growing isolation caused by the same social processes, and as a way of giving meaning to our lives. Zygmunt Bauman (2003) makes a similar point in his book *Liquid love*, arguing that there is a profound weakening of relations in the contemporary era, with contradictory desires to become entangled with another person, yet at the same time to make bonds loose enough so that they can be untied and re-tied at will. Interestingly, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue (1995, p. 73) that in this risky and vulnerable context, relationships with *children* take on heightened meaning, seeming to represent older notions of unconditional love and a bond which is 'more elemental, profound and durable than any other in this society'.

Little empirical research is furnished to evidence these claims about the transformation of intimacy. However, some theorists see lesbian, gay and bisexual relationships as being at the forefront of this trend towards democratization of relationships. Sasha Roseneil (2000, p. 3) suggests 'processes of individualization and detraditionalization are releasing individuals from traditional hetero scripts and from the patterns of heterorelationality which accompany them'. Judith Stacey (1996) argues that LGB families are emblematic of this new kind of 'postmodern kinship' because without the cultural scripts and institutional infrastructures that support heterosexuals, same-sex couples are effectively forced to fashion new forms of relationship – an idea supported by some research (e.g. Weeks, 2003; Ryan-Flood, 2009). But the extent to which intimate relationships really are 'democratic' in the sense advanced by Giddens is open to debate. He has been criticized for fetishizing change at the expense of continuities and for wilfully ignoring the enduring nature of gendered power relations and inequalities within heterosexual relationships (Jamieson, 1997; Smart, 2007). As Tyler (2004, p. 99) argues compellingly:

> the idea that Western societies have undergone a process of sexual postmodernization … deflects attention away from continuities such as

> women's continued familial dependence, from their exploitation as sexualized low paid workers; from intensifying regimes of bodily appropriation; from the continued primacy of heterosexuality.

Questions have also been raised about the ethical vision of the 'pure relationship', located as it seems to be in a (neo)liberal kind of rational choice theory in which we all move on the moment that our desires are not being satisfied. In this apparent new universe of mutual satisfaction and conditional commitments, what happens when things are difficult, for example, when one partner becomes ill? In reality, 'enduring love' (Barker & Gabb, 2016) seems to be rooted in 'acts of practical love and care' that are 'more important than a constant dynamic of mutual exploration of each other's selves' (Jamieson, 1999, p. 477). Nevertheless this body of work is important for pointing to the speeded up nature of change in intimate relationships, and opening up new questions about how we 'do' and experience intimacy today. How these new intimacies are represented in media is one of the questions for this book.

Neoliberalism

Thus far we have referred to some sweeping changes in social and cultural life without making distinctions between terms such as 'advanced capitalism', 'late modernity' or 'postmodernity'. Here, however, we want to say something about contemporary Western society as a *neoliberal capitalist society* – and to explain what we understand by this, as it is central to many of the arguments we make in *Mediated intimacy*.

Neoliberalism is a term in widespread use in politics, economics, philosophy and geography. It is classically understood as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade' (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). It is regarded as a particular and distinctive phase of contemporary capitalism, marked by privatization, de-regulation and the 'small state'. Neoliberalism has achieved dominance in the West over the last thirty or forty years, going through different phases in which it has both spread out spatially and across domains, and also intensified (Peck & Tickell, 2002; Duggan, 2003), becoming a 'mobile technology' (Ong, 2006) which differs depending upon where and who you are. Neoliberalism operates across a transnational field structured by radically uneven power relations, differences and perhaps even incommensurabilities (Imre et al., 2009; see also Hegde, 2011). Increasingly, it is tied to debt and austerity and to ongoing processes of the financialization of everyday life, producing specific formations such as 'austerity neoliberalism' or 'austere meritocracy' (De Benedictis & Gill, 2016; Mendick et al., 2018). While many expected the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 to challenge neoliberalism's hegemony, instead it has shown itself to have extraordinary resilience; it is 'bullet proof', according to Paul Heideman (2014) and dubbed 'neoliberalism on steroids' by Catherine Rottenberg (2016).

This strange 'non-death of neoliberalism' (Crouch, 2011) is at least partly attributable to the way that it has taken hold as a powerful kind of common-sense in everyday life. For Philip Mirowski (2014) neoliberalism is not just an economic doctrine promoted from the top-down by a 'neoliberal thought collective', it is also a grassroots *everyday sensibility* that has permeated the most ordinary and mundane aspects of life as people strive to present newer and better versions of themselves to the world, becoming 'entrepreneurs of the self' (Foucault 2008, p. 226). Accounts of 'everyday neoliberalism' stress the way that it is 'reconfiguring the relationships between governing and governed, power and knowledge, sovereignty and territoriality' (Ong, 2006, p. 3). Its reach as a mode of governmentality is extending ever wider and deeper, calling into being actors who are rational, calculating and self-motivating, and who are exhorted to make sense of their lives through discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice – no matter how constrained their lives may actually be (Rose, 1999). Neoliberalism engenders a 'compulsory individuality' (Cronin, 2000) and 'not only constitutes new roles for states and markets but also offers an idealized conception of human life itself' (Larner, 2012, p. 363).

An interest in the 'psychic life of neoliberalism' (Scharff, 2016a) inflects some current writing – including our own – opening up to scrutiny the way in which a market ethic is reconstituting subjectivities (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2008; Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1992). Conducting life through an entrepreneurial spirit, the neoliberal self is hailed by rules that emphasize ambition, calculation, competition, self-optimization and personal responsibility. As Paul du Gay (1996, p. 124) has put it, the neoliberal subject is 'a calculating, self-reflexive, "economic" subject; one that calculates about itself and works upon itself in order to better itself'.

In this neoliberal moment, notions of 'character' have come to the fore (Allen & Bull, 2016): people are enjoined to be 'resilient' (Neocleous, 2013) and 'confident' (Gill & Orgad, 2015), 'aspirational' (Mendick et al., 2018), to have 'grit' and, above all, to work on themselves. Problems in life are figured in individual rather than social terms, and it is striking to see a language for talking about social structure and injustice being eviscerated. Neoliberal society calls on subjects to bear all the risks of living themselves, and – as if this weren't enough – they must also adopt a 'positive mental attitude', embrace meritocracy and success (Littler, 2017) and follow the edicts of the 'happiness industry' (Davies, 2015). Neoliberalism has an affective life too (Gill, 2017b; Gill & Kanai, 2017) – one centred on being cheerful and upbeat; one that repudiates injury, insecurity, vulnerability and anger.

Love, Sex and Everyday Neoliberalism

Beyond its force as a political and economic ideology, then, neoliberalism is also clearly an 'everyday' intimate and personal phenomenon – it has made itself, in Stuart Hall's (1988) famous formulation, not just part of 'them' but also part of 'us'. It is implicated in social and cultural life, and constitutes an increasingly taken-for-granted feature of the media landscape – seen in the dominance of ideas of 'self-help', the emphasis upon self-transformation (whether of homes, gardens, parenting styles or dating etiquette) in what has become known as the media's 'makeover paradigm', as well as in the repeated focus upon entrepreneurialism variously through reality TV musical talent shows such as *The Voice*, programmes about climbing the 'property ladder', or shows like *The Apprentice* (Couldry & Littler, 2011) which encourage individualism and competition as a route to 'making it'.

How, then, might neoliberalism relate to the mediation of sex and intimate relationships? One way is in how market rationalities increasingly shape intimate life. Arlie Hochschild (1983) argued that as long ago as the 1970s and 1980s, often considered to be the height of the second-wave feminist movement in the West, self-help books had an emergent 'commercial spirit' when talking about intimate life. Today, Eva Illouz (2007) argues that we are living in a time of 'emotional capitalism' in which economic relations have become deeply emotional, and intimate relations have become increasingly defined by economic models. Feelings are everywhere 'rationalized, quantified, subject to measurement and control' (Pugh, 2008, p. 153). Hochschild's more recent work (2012) takes this even further, suggesting that love and intimacy are increasingly 'professionalized' as key aspects of the intimate self become 'outsourced', e.g. to dating coaches and wedding planners. Clearly, our language for talking about relationships and even feelings increasingly borrows from the market – value, capital, investment, worth; dating profiles frequently present individuals as wanting 'the whole package'. Internet dating and other mediated sites require that we present ourselves and our desires for intimacy in ever more standardized, hyperrationalized and scripted ways (Simon & Gagnon, 2003); intimate relationships become framed as 'shopping' for a partner (see Thompson, 2017).

More generally, in neoliberal societies love and sex are increasingly presented through discourses of work and entrepreneurship. Bodies, relationships, sexual skills all become matters of training, self-management and self-optimization. As we explore in chapter 5, intimacy is increasingly framed in the media through the notion of 'technologies of sexiness' (Radner, 1993; Gill, 2007b; 2008; Evans & Riley, 2014). What we see in contemporary sex and relationship advice is a worldview that is profoundly shaped by neoliberal ideas and in which entrepreneurialism has extended 'into the nooks and crannies of everyday life'

(Littler, 2017). Rather than the state having shrunk or withered away, it seems to be dispersed across every sphere of life, and, crucially, located in individuals who are now required to work on and discipline themselves in every area of life – including intimate relationships.

Postfeminism

Not everyone is positioned equally in relation to neoliberalism. As Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine (2008) have argued, the subject of self-invention is predominantly middle class (see also O'Flynn & Petersen, 2007). In relation to gender, recent feminist research suggests that women, and young women in particular, are increasingly positioned as ideal neoliberal subjects (Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). As Angela McRobbie (2009, p. 15) has argued, young women have become hailed as 'privileged subjects of social change' who must capably maximize newly won opportunities such as access to the labour market and control over reproduction. According to Bronwyn Davies (2005), the neoliberal self is defined by its capacity to consume, which further privileges the feminine through the long-standing association between women and consumption. The neoliberal incitement to self-transformation is also associated with femininity (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). It is still mainly women who are called on to transform themselves, which becomes particularly visible with regard to the management of the body and sexuality (Gill & Scharff, 2011; see chapter 5).

In this gendered, classed and racialized context, *postfeminism* has become a key term that speaks to distinctive gendered features of the current cultural conjuncture. In some formulations, postfeminism is defined by its relation to feminism – its assumed 'pastness' whether that pastness is 'merely noted, mourned or celebrated' (Tasker & Negra, 2007, p. 3). This relationship has long been understood as complicated – involving incorporation, repudiation, commodification, and featuring what McRobbie (2009) dubbed a 'double entanglement' in which feminism is both 'taken into account' yet attacked. Increasingly, however, postfeminism seems to have 'cut loose' from a particular relationship to feminism, and can be understood as a semi-autonomous 'mood', 'structure of feeling' or 'sensibility' whose primary relationships are less to feminism than to global consumer capitalism and neoliberalism (Gill, 2017b).

Postfeminism, some have argued, might be conceptualized as 'gendered neoliberalism' (Gill, 2017b; Henderson & Taylor, in press). Like neoliberalism, it should be used as a critical term, locating postfeminism as an object of study, a sensibility requiring critique. Rather than *being* postfeminists or neoliberals we identify ourselves as *critical analysts of postfeminist and neoliberal culture*, interested in interrogating the ideas and discourses that comprise contemporary common-sense.

This understanding highlights the patterned nature of the postfeminist and neoliberal sensibility – a sensibility that is simultaneously discursive, ideological, affective and psychosocial.

A number of relatively stable and patterned features of this sensibility have been identified recurrently across studies and contexts. These stress the significance of the body in postfeminist culture; the emergence of ‘new femininities’ (Gill & Scharff, 2011) that break with earlier significations in important ways; the prominence given to notions of choice, agency, autonomy and empowerment as part of a shift towards entrepreneurial modes of self-hood (Banet-Weiser, 2012); the importance of makeover and self-transformation, linked to the ‘psychic life’ of neoliberalism and postfeminism (Scharff, 2016a; Gill, 2016); and finally – as we have noted already in relation to neoliberalism – the distinctive affective tone of postfeminism, particularly its emphasis upon the upbeat and the positive, with the repudiation of pain, injury, insecurity and anger (Scharff, 2016b; Kanai, 2015; Gill & Orgad, 2017; Silva, 2013).

Consumer Culture, Lifestyle Media and Neoliberal Governmentality

An understanding of the mediation of intimate relationships would not be complete without some discussion of the role of consumer culture in constructing ideas about gender, sexuality and intimacy. In this section we start with a broad discussion of the rise of sexual consumer culture, then look at lifestyle media.

Consumer Culture

In recent years there have been many attempts to think about the force and pervasiveness of consumer culture, and its impact upon our sense of self and ways of being in the world. As we noted earlier in this chapter, place, work and family were formerly seen as among the key factors furnishing a sense of identity. Today, by contrast, we ‘consume ourselves into being’ (Evans & Riley, 2014) – a notion captured even more pithily by the slogan ‘I shop therefore I am’. Intimate life is not outside these processes, and it has been argued that consumer culture plays a key part in constructing our experiences of what it means to be sexual (Wood, 2017b). This has not always been the case, and at certain points in the recent past some groups have resolutely refused consumer capitalism’s role in shaping sexuality, trying to hold onto alternative and independent constructions. For example, the 1980s saw a battle over constructions of gay male sexuality, often fought over the heavily freighted figure of the ‘new man’ (Simpson, 1994; Chapman & Rutherford, 1988), as he became an object of more and more intense interest from magazine publishers (Nixon, 1996), companies interested in creating a new market for toiletries and male 'grooming' products (Edwards, 1997) and fashion and retailers more generally (Mort, 1996). A similar argument could be made about feminist constructions of sexuality: Rachel Wood (2017b) traces several key moments in the evolution of what she dubs 'consumer sexualities' in which earlier feminist articulations of sexual pleasure and practice – for example in books like *Our bodies ourselves* (Boston Women's Health Collective) – were largely supplanted by consumer definitions. For Wood the 1990s was a pivotal time in which feminist sexual cultures were 'made over'; it was not that feminism disappeared but it was *resignified* within the terms of a postfeminist consumer culture: 'sexual pleasure and knowledge were reframed as individual consumer goods, rather than as the basis for political liberation' (Wood, 2017b).

Today, the grasp of consumer culture is tenacious and sexuality is not only not exempt, but it occupies a central place. How could this be otherwise, asks Clarissa Smith (2010, pp. 107–8) pertinently:

> Why sex should not be commercialized when every other human endeavour is commercialized is unclear – just like any other academic, my life is entirely commercialized, from the foods I ingest, the clothes that keep me warm, to the music, books and films which entertain me; there is no pleasure, no emotion, no physical sensation that is not commercialized, and while I might want to claim my sexual self is some sort of authentic real me, the idea that this can be separated out from all the other ways in which I exist in this world, to be unsullied by commercialism, is ridiculous.

If there is no 'outside' to consumer culture, that does not mean there is no resistance to it, but simply that our intimate lives are increasingly shaped by definitions circulating among brands. We are under pressure to perform the 'right' kinds of sex and intimate relating, and this is more and more entangled with 'appropriate' forms of (sexual) consumption: the right underwear, the right kinds of dating profile, the right sex toys. The example of the 'Rabbit' vibrator shows this clearly. The product was introduced in 1983 but sales were slow until the Rabbit came to prominence in the drama *Sex and the City* (Comella, 2003). Manufacturers reported a massive increase in sales after an episode in which Miranda is depicted as gaining so much pleasure from it that she starts refusing invitations to go out, and musing about whether she will ever be able to enjoy a relationship with a man again. As Jane Arthurs (2003) argued *Sex and the City* was crucial in remediating ideas about feminism, consumption and sexual pleasure. The TV show *Grace and Frankie*, screening as we write, also has an important sex toy storyline concerning older women. The Rabbit – with its bright pink colour, and distinctive 'fun' ears – helped to re-signify the meaning of sex toys, locating them as part of a realm of fashionable feminine consumption (Attwood, 2005).

Their promotion in the well-lit, accessible chain of Ann Summers stores further reinforced this set of meanings, removing them far from the image of the ‘seedy’ sex shop, and complementing the home-based selling ‘parties’ vividly discussed by Merl Storr (2003), in which laughter and homosocial bonding were to the fore, facilitated by large volumes of alcohol. Here, then, we can see how a combination of product design, media exposure, place and space came together to significantly shift the meaning of dildos and vibrators, helping to render them into ordinary and everyday items that could be purchased on the high street, without embarrassment, secrecy or shame.

Other factors contributed to this, including the ongoing opening up and proliferation of discourses about sex (discussed more extensively in chapter 3) and the impact of neoliberal and postfeminist cultures with their emphasis upon notions of self-management, choice and empowerment. The meanings of lingerie, for example, underwent a significant transformation in the 1990s with the bra being re-signified in terms of a confident and active female sexuality. Prominent advertising campaigns at the time broke dramatically with passive depictions of women, and also with undergarments as functional support garments and ‘girdles’. Instead there was a new emphasis upon women as playful and sexually desiring subjects – in adverts that offered ‘sexy’ images of women in breast-enhancing bras alongside provocative slogans such as ‘Hello Boys’, ‘Look me in the eyes and tell me that you love me’ and – in a jokey nod to a famous Mae West quote – ‘Or are you just pleased to see me?’ This distinctively postfeminist shift, then, was intimately entangled with consumer culture. It is important to note, however, that such ‘feisty’ postfeminist constructions did not necessarily completely displace other circulating ideas – and it is notable how frequently advertisements for lingerie are still coded as opportunities for women to construct themselves as visual gifts for men (Amy-Chinn, 2006; Wood, 2017b), and in turn how heterosexual men are exhorted to buy underwear as a present (for example at Christmas or on Valentine’s Day).

In her study of women and sex shopping, Rachel Wood (2017b) finds that there are clear ideas among female consumers about the ‘right’ kind of sex shopping. It is ‘confident, respectable, knowledgeable’. Conversely, showing discomfort is seen as a sign of an ‘unhealthy’ or ‘problematic’ attitude to sex and sexuality. This complements the findings of many other studies which show the significance of constructions of the ‘Other’, in how people talk about their consumption of sexual media or products (Jackson & Vares, 2011; Storr, 2003). There seems to be an insistent – though unacknowledged – emphasis upon class, with interviewees distancing themselves from anything deemed ‘tacky’, ‘trashy’, ‘vulgar’ or ‘slutty’ – all words that are loaded with classed connotations. Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley (2014) argue that classed judgements remain highly evident even while an explicit language of class is muted.

Indeed, class becomes translated or refracted into different vocabularies of 'taste' and 'respectability'. Sexual consumption is, in Bourdieusian terms, a class-making activity (Kaplan, nd) – like much else, an opportunity for constructing subtle distinctions between oneself and others. These classed constructions also profoundly animate the expanding sphere of lifestyle media as we discuss further below.

Lifestyle Media

The rapid proliferation of lifestyle media in recent years is connected to other trends discussed in this chapter including the demise of fixed scripts about how to live and the breakdown of stable distinctions between the public and the private. The challenge to structural accounts of identity – for example based in class or ethnicity – and the idea of the self as a project to be worked upon and endlessly 'perfected' contributes to the vast social space now occupied by lifestyle media in which experts, coaches and other cultural intermediaries offer guidance on improving and optimizing every aspect of our lives from the appearance of our homes or bodies, to the way we raise our children, to the way we 'date', and how often and in what ways we have sex.

Lifestyle media have been driven by a variety of different factors – among them economic, political and technological changes as well as social and cultural factors. A multiplicity of factors – from the development of increasingly lightweight hand-held professional cameras, to the rise of social media, and the de-regulation of broadcasting – created the 'conditions of possibility' for lifestyle media to come to ascendance, displacing other forms and moving from the margins to the centre of media. Laurie Ouellette's (2016) excellent discussion of lifestyle TV highlights a number of different precursors including radio, etiquette books, conduct manuals, women's magazines and self-help genres which have shaped contemporary media. 'How-to' and advice programmes, for example, were a mainstay of early radio, offering tips on cooking, child-rearing and practical household jobs. In the 2000s, Ouellette argues, makeover programming shifted from its identification as a feminine genre largely confined to daytime TV, and moved into the mainstream – in a way that synchronized 'with the neoliberal project of privatizing and personalizing public welfare' (2016, p. 17).

TV talk shows were another important forerunner of the broader takeover of 'lifestyle', ranging from self-help oriented shows like the *Oprah Winfrey Show* or *Trisha* to more confrontational programmes such as the *Jerry Springer Show* and *Jeremy Kyle* (discussed in chapter 7) in which the 'money shots' involved shouting, fighting or other signifiers of emotional breakdown. One of the impacts of the talk show genre as a whole was to put 'ordinary people' on TV – with considerable debate about the impact of the resulting social diversity on screen, raising questions about the kinds of visibility on offer to previously marginalized working-class and ethnic minority participants (e.g. Gamson, 1998; 2014; Squire, 1994; Jensen & Tyler, 2015). 'Docusoaps' represent another sub-genre that were influential in shaping 'first person media' (Dovey, 2000). In the US these were often polarized between reportage of the lifestyles of the rich and (sometimes) famous, and those of the poor and marginalized, while in the UK there has been an enduring focus upon the emergency services (police, Accident and Emergency departments, border control) and other 'real life' occupations and settings from *Driving school* to *One born every minute*.

Today's lifestyle TV includes all these elements as well as many more – from singing talent shows (*Pop-Idol* or *X Factor*), to 'gross out' challenges such *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here* to shows that ask if people can outwit the surveillance apparatuses of the state (*Hunted*) or conversely whether they are good enough to become government agents (*Spies*). Other formats champion people who have been mistreated at work (*Undercover Boss*), fight for consumers (*Watchdog's Rogue Traders*) or reward acts of altruism (*Secret Millionaire*). Competition, makeover and self-improvement remain central dynamics in much lifestyle media – and celebrity is an enduring element – but the scope of lifestyle media changes so fast that it is hard to 'pin down' in any definitive way; new hybridized forms constantly emerge, part of a complicated landscape in which brand loyalty and repetitive formats sit alongside a constant drive to innovation.

Lifestyle Media and Neoliberal Governmentality

One way of thinking about lifestyle media is as socializing agents for life in neoliberal society. The putative 'unfixing' or 'untethering' of the self in late modern capitalist societies reframes decisions about 'how to live' through a dazzling array of individual lifestyle choices about what to eat, what to wear, how to lose weight, who to date, etc. etc. Katherine Sender (2012) locates lifestyle media as guides in navigating the difficulties and possibilities of a world in which everything seems to rest upon individual 'choice'. Aiding in this process, Sam Binkley (2007) contends, is a new stratum of 'everyday experts of subjectivity' who 'mediate becoming'.

As we noted earlier in this chapter, power in neoliberal societies increasingly operates through exhortations to manage and work on the self. Foucault's work provides a valuable way of understanding this, highlighting the way that government has been reinvented, with the reduction or withdrawal of publicly funded social support and welfare benefits, alongside the refiguring of citizens 'as the agents of their destinies, who achieved goals of health, happiness, productivity, security and wellbeing through their individual choices and self-care practices' (Ouellette, 2016, p. 77). This process is understood as 'governmentality' and exists alongside law and institutional apparatuses of control or coercion. Increasingly lifestyle media play a key role in governmentality.

On the one hand it is clear that many of the topics of lifestyle media relate to areas that were or might formerly have been the subject of policies or state intervention – such as poverty or health. The subject of fat, for example, framed through a discourse of 'obesity crisis', is a mainstay of lifestyle media with multiple programmes on television including *The Biggest Loser*, *Ruby*, *One Big Happy Family*, *My 600lb Life*, etc. These programmes shift the focus away from inequalities and social injustice – what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls the 'slow death' of the poor and working class under neoliberalism – resolutely reframing weight in terms shaped by individual failure and class contempt. Participants are cast as 'their own worst enemies, as lazy, passive, self-hating and controlled by excessive appetites' (Sender, 2012, p. 37). In turn, thinness, good health and wellbeing are cast as ethical qualities, with blame and hostility meted out to those who do not 'succeed'. This is a good example of the way that health is governed by neoliberal biopolitics, in which lifestyle media are deeply implicated.

More broadly, lifestyle media promote a market-mediated, reflexive individuality (Couldry, 2004), calling on individuals to govern themselves and make the 'right' choices. Nikolas Rose argues:

> Advertising images and television programmes interpenetrate in the promulgation of images and of lifestyle, narratives of identity choice and the highlighting of the ethical aspects of adopting one or other way of conducting one's life … This embodies a shift away from emphasis upon morality … and towards ethics – the active and practical shaping by individuals of the daily practices of their own lives in the name of their own pleasures, contentment or fulfilments. (Rose, 1999, pp. 178–9)

Lifestyle media shapes neoliberal citizens 'who do not need to be governed by others, but will govern themselves, master themselves, care for themselves' (Rose, 2006, p. 150).

Consuming the Other

Ostensibly these practices of self-governance interpellate all of us, but a significant body of research interrogates this assumption. Indeed, Helen Wood and Beverley Skeggs argue that the very idea that 'bettering' oneself is a 'choice' helps to mystify and perpetuate the reality of stark inequalities: 'choice mediates taste, displaying the success and failure of the self to make itself' (2004, p. 206). As Celia Lury (2011) puts it:

> The argument that all are much freer to acquire the lifestyle – and thus the identity – of their choice runs the risk of slipping into an imaginary

> world of equal appearances, and thus of becoming a rhetoric that all are equal, even if some remain more equal than others. (2011, p. 197)

In a fascinating project, Dana Kaplan demonstrates how class and sexuality have become profoundly entangled. Researching Israeli culture, she shows how particular lifestyle media played a key role in redefining the meaning of sex, making 'sexual expression in consumer culture' into an idiom of 'reflexive individuality' organized around good taste, sophistication, openness and a version of sex as a recreational project. Here and elsewhere, sexual explicitness gained a certain aesthetic quality and constructed a symbolic class boundary (Machin & Thornborrow, 2006). Kaplan shows how visual and textual representations of sex together self-consciously assembled a notion of 'recreational sexuality', and, furthermore, made it into a status symbol. This was done in two ways: first 'by deeming "recreational sexuality" a "must" in the new middle-class lifestyle, and second by rereading porn as an art form' (ms 17). Particular magazines (such as *Monitin*) depicted recreational sexuality as a desirable middle-class lifestyle, linked to ideas of luxury, wealth and above all cultural capital. Mehita Iqani further illuminates this process, arguing that the look and feel of particular media can help establish these values: 'glossiness exploits the powerful subtleties of texture and light to create a sense of luxury, seductive sensuality and desirability' (Iqani, 2012, p. 100). In this sense the medium does indeed become at least part of the message – arthouse photography constructs sex as stylish and desirable, as good-looking people are shown having sex in glamorous or exciting 'cosmopolitan' settings. This re-signifies sexual representations, breaking with notions of 'sleaze' (McNair, 2002), but, crucially, *only some* have the authority to capitalize on this construction. In turn, as Kaplan argues, the middle class classifies its 'others' as failed entrepreneurial subjects with neither taste nor human capital.

Increasingly, lifestyle media – once obsessed with the rich and famous – displays a fascination with the lives of the poor, marginalized and disenfranchised: benefits claimants, people who live in trailer parks, 'gypsies' and other racialized, religious or ethnic groups. This offers a new visibility to sections of society that have traditionally not been considered 'worthy' subjects of television, but it is far from straightforwardly positive, as a language of voyeuristic, contemptuous Othering predominates, in which conditions of difficulty or struggle are commodified for mainstream consumption – a dynamic bell hooks has dubbed 'eating the Other'. 'Ethnicity becomes a spice', she argues, 'a seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture' (1992, p. 21). This operates in a context in which the dynamics of racism have changed from 'colour blindness' to a 'postracial logic' in which racial and ethnic identities are commodified or presented as 'niche lifestyles', unrelated to the reality of racism (Squires, 2014).

Often programme-makers attempt to have it all ways: on the one hand presenting the shows as an opportunity for ignored voices to be heard so that a distinctive group or culture (e.g. Roma people) can be understood and appreciated; on the other mocking, exoticizing, and undermining: 'Bigger. Fatter. Gypsier' announced the promotional slogan for a new series of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*.

These dynamics of Othering do not operate solely in relation to race and ethnicity, and a large body of work examines lifestyle TV as a project of class-making (Allen et al., 2014; Biressi & Nunn, 2013; Jensen, 2014; Jensen & Tyler, 2015; Wood & Skeggs, 2011). Tracey Jensen and Imogen Tyler (2015) see in reality television formats such as *Benefits Street* or *Benefits Broods* the making of an 'anti-welfare common sense', as a key cultural mechanism in winning consent for harsh neoliberal policies such as cuts to disability and invalidity benefit or the introduction of the 'bedroom tax'. Notions of 'poverty porn' (Jensen, 2014) feed into 'virulent welfare myths' in which particular figures become the 'lynch-pin of legitimation', effectively becoming 'weaponized' as orchestrations of public opinion, which frequently refers to people from television shows such as 'White Dee' from *Benefits Street* (Allen et al., in press) or even fictional characters, such as Vicky Pollard from *Little Britain*. A whole architecture of 'common sense' is built around these powerfully circulating and affectively loaded figures (Tyler, 2013).

Sex, Love and Lifestyle Media

Love and relationships constitute an ever-growing focus of lifestyle media. A number of different trends can be observed. First, an increasing focus upon the *psychological*, an emphasis upon probing ever deeper into the recesses of our psyches. As Annette Hill (2005, p. 122) points out this includes 'advice on how to improve our relationship with ourselves' – highlighting the idea that intimate relationality is not just about relations with others. Lifestyle media is saturated with 'psy experts' of various kinds – urging us to look inside, overcome barriers and resistances, makeover our psychic lives. This offers a very intimate approach to what Foucault dubbed 'care of the self' (which we return to in chapter 5).

Secondly there is a move towards more and more *extreme or intense forms of encounter* – perhaps as a response to the need for magazines or TV shows to stand out in a crowded mediascape, and also a reflection of what is perceived by some to be a 'numbing down' (Dovey, 2000) (or densensitization) of media audiences as a result of over-stimulation. Furthermore, Sam Binkley (2007) argues that since the 1970s there has been a class fraction, understood as a vanguard, who have been focused upon ways of connecting their values and experiences to consumer choices. This group craves 'intense transforming moments' and learning and growth through new, challenging or indulgent experiences that have the search for meaning and authenticity at their core. In dating shows this trend can be seen in the generation of more and more 'extreme' formats, such as naked dating shows, in which participants are literally stripped bare. *Undressed*, for example, stages a 30-minute date in a bed, instructing participants to 'undress each other' and then to engage in 'intense' activities of one kind or another – whether this is kissing, giving each other a massage or talking about the social issue they feel most strongly about. At the end of the 'date' participants have to decide (within 30 seconds) whether they want to see each other again. Another example is *Married at First Sight* in which couples are 'matched' by 'experts' and meet for the first time at their wedding. The show has been criticized by some for its 'cheapening' of marriage, and for its exploitation of participants. It might also be considered interesting for its displacement of contemporary Western ideas of romantic love, and interest in arranged marriage – practices that are widespread throughout the world. Often shows like this are couched within a language of innovative 'social experiment', adding to their status and cachet by elevating them above the 'humdrum' of ordinary dating shows.

A third interesting trend concerns the way that lifestyle TV is becoming more focused upon *non-normative groups and identities* – whether disabled people, those with 'embarrassing' problems, or those who reject or live outside dominant gender and sexual norms. The same ambivalent dynamics discussed above characterize much of this programming, but at times such shows can seem to open up different value systems and possible ways of being or relating. Joshua Gamson (2014) discusses RuPaul's *Drag Race*, a makeover show with a difference that has been on US television since 2009, hosted by the eponymous celebrity drag performer and former model. Gamson argues that the show consistently interrogates, complicates and critiques the fixity of a gender binary. RuPaul mentors contestants as they are transformed across gender lines, highlighting the performative aspects of masculinity and femininity. Paul's aim is to mentor people to overcome the 'adversity of gender norms and stigma' through the mantra of CUNT (Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent). Other shows featuring Paul accentuate the understanding of the self as a reflexive project, while facilitating both subversions of gender and the possibility of new ethics – all the while framed through a familiar affirmative sense of being positive and opening yourself to possibilities. As Laurie Ouellette notes, a small number of other reality TV programmes are also beginning to take as their focus the lives and loves of transgender people, including *I am Cait* (2015–) and *I am Jazz* (2015), which represent 'a rare space to negotiate new ethical formations and techniques of self-fashioning with the larger transgender community' (2016, p. 68).