

The sexual ethics and cultural diagnoses in Gayle Rubin's *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*, have brought a lot to the table in regards to perceptions and discussions of sexualities and sex acts among both feminist and academic groups. A genealogical account of sexualities has been made through a religious lens, but Rubin's assertions of sexuality's relationship with politics was refreshing. Rubin draws heavily from twentieth century political movements in which non-normative sexual groups have been ostracized, such as the governmental moves against "communists" during the red scare as well as police brutality against queer communities similar to that of the civil rights movement. She encapsulates socio-political concerns found within and outside of sexual conceptualizations when she says, "A radical theory of sex must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression" [Rubin, 275]. It is also important to note that, for Rubin, forms of sexual oppression are not episodic but systemic.

Situating Rubin's work *Thinking Sex* is crucial in order to understand many arguments she proposes. During the late nineteen eighties and early nineteen nineties, many feminist communities were hotly debating whether or not pornography was anti-feminist and/or harmful to the advancement of gender equality initiatives. After presenting a genealogy of sexual oppression (with inspiration from Foucault) and exposing dangerous assumptions made about sexuality, Rubin continues by dissecting popular culture's perceptions of the erotic in general. According to her, the "sexual morality" of the public "has more in common with ideologies of racism than with true ethics," and many formations of sexual normativity are imposed on others without creating any type of real sexual ethics [Rubin, 283].

While Rubin speaks to debates about controversial sex acts (such as pornographic and cross generational), it is clear that she is concerned with the formation of conservative feminist factions that would condemn and oppress sexual minorities in the same way as other entities have in the past. To combat this, she takes a long way around approach not by defending “fringe” sexualities at length, but by proposing a new ethic and perception of sexuality altogether. The formulation of a sexual ethic is necessary to prevent perceptions and judgements of sex acts based on socio-historical biases, policy, and popular opinion as seen both in Rubin’s past and her present. In addition to this ethic, Rubin created a insightful, though rather peculiar model labeled *The sex hierarchy: the charmed circle vs the outer limits* [for this model, see Rubin, 281].

Inspired by Rubin’s circle, a new model has been created to adequately capture perceptions of sexualities in this particular cultural moment. This particular cultural moment involves the breakthrough of transgenderism into the public sphere, trends toward secularization or culturalization of fundamental religious values, the saturation of sexual media within the public sphere, and consequences of marriages resulting from compatibility as opposed to social and/or economic gain. While Rubin’s sexual ethics may be seen as ahistorical, her charm circle may be seen as an effective, if slightly dated idea in regards to content.

While Rubin’s model was split between the *charmed circle* and the *outer limits*, I have presented a tripartite model to which includes what I would label as *charmed*, *undetermined/kinetic*, and *taboo*. The *undetermined/kinetic* portion of the circle responds to several issues that may be raised by Rubin’s dichotomous model. One function of the middle portion is to account for generational changes in perceptions and practices of sexual acts. Media portrayal of sexual acts has been a prominent vector for both gauging the sexual climate of

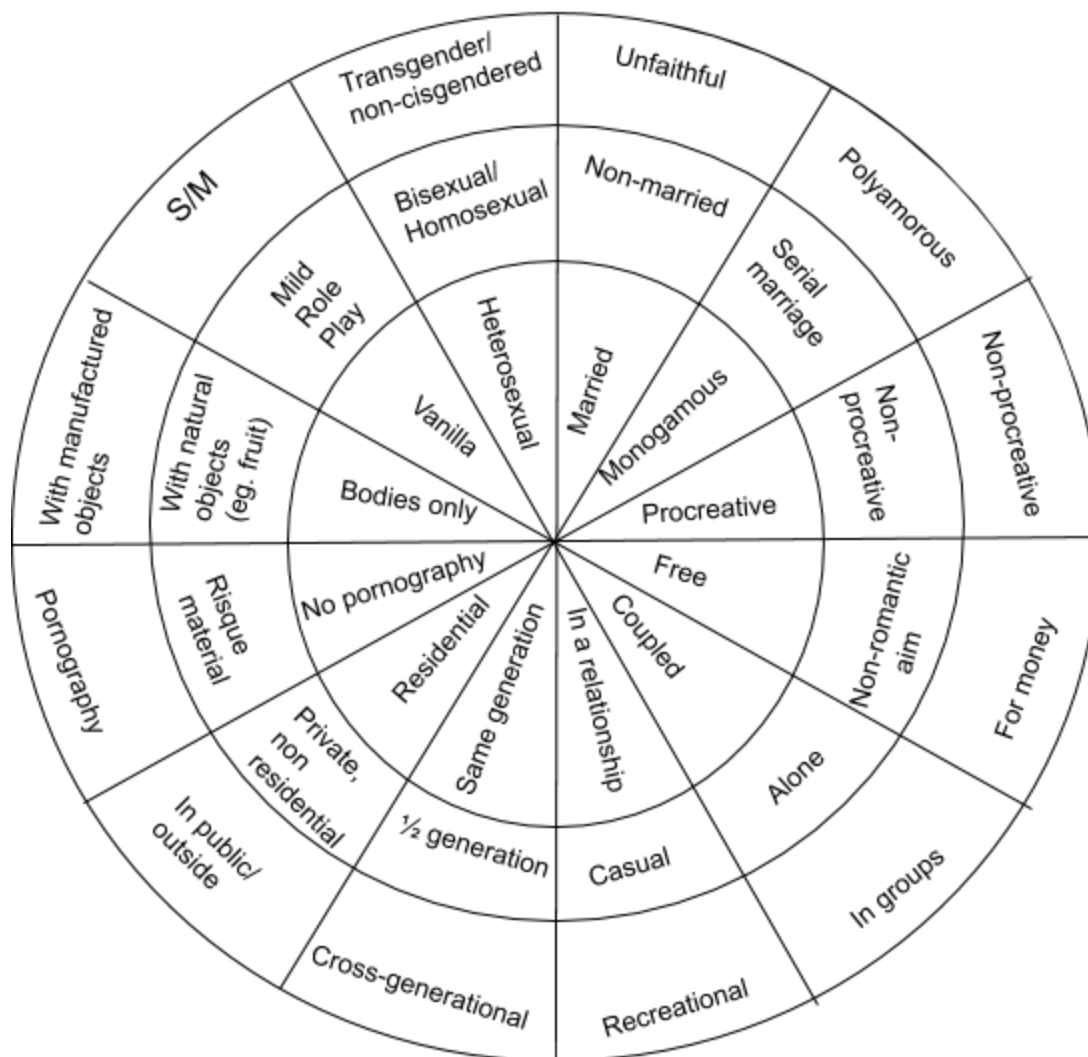
generations/communities and also asserting new sexual norms. For example, shows such as *Friends* and *Will and Grace* familiarized people with non-married/casual sex culture and queer culture, respectively. Another function of this middle portion is to disentangle classical sex dichotomies and highlight sexual acts that may be perceived ambivalently. This accommodates cultural-geographic discrepancies about sex while also accounting for sexual practices that are not as well known as their charmed or taboo counterparts. Different communities may perceive the same sex acts differently, and as a result it may not be clear whether these acts are “charmed” or “taboo.”

There are also notable changes in the content of Rubin’s circle; while the charmed circle itself is intact, many concepts within the outer limits have been dissected or rearranged in order to form a more comprehensive account of sexual practices. For example, non-procreative sex now occupies the middle and outer portion of the circle due to the fact that infertility, among other things, is better understood. This suggests that the context behind sex acts is also important when formulating judgements about their social permissibility.

Furthermore, Rubin’s schisms may be better framed as spectra, or at least multi-part pieces. Role-playing or non residential intercourse may not be entirely *charmed*, but they are now moved into a separate category from pornographic and monetary acts, which are seen as more extreme and immoral. Not only were these divisions made based on “moral” perceptions but also typicality of sexual practices and sexualities. For example, S/M intercourse may be seen simultaneously as more immoral and atypical than acts revolving around role-play or even costumed acts.

Again, media exposure has had a significant impact on discussions about different types of sexual practices/identities. Co-occurring with this media boom is the increased speed of information dissemination via social media and advancing communication technologies. As the world has “shrunk,” more individuals have come into contact with fringe sexualities, and as a result some of these have begun to become more socially acceptable, or at the least more intelligible.

In short, Rubin's development of sexual ethics and her ability to capture cultural perceptions of sexuality provide an excellent point for exploration. Though her work is now considered dated, her contributions to feminist theory as well as a strong, if not controversial defense of fringe sexualities cannot be ignored when analyzing the underpinnings of erotic and sexual performance and identity.



My own production of a sex charm circle

