

**Articulating Sexuality**  
*A Critical History of Gay and Lesbian Anthropology*

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to explore anthropological discourses regarding sexuality and relate them to the lived experiences of individuals. The paper is divided into two interrelated sections: historical and theoretical. Section one identifies a subfield within anthropology, gay and lesbian anthropology, most prominently represented by The Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists (SOLGA), and traces its emergence within the wider discipline of anthropology. It highlights the foundational scholars and theoretical shifts that have been crucial in defining the subfield as it is today and looks at how early anthropologists approached sexuality in general, and same- sex sexuality in particular. Special attention is given to female sexuality, exposing anthropology's long silence regarding women and sex. Section one also traces the historical, political, and intellectual development of social construction theory, the dominant paradigm underlying gay and lesbian anthropology. This exploration highlights how gay and lesbian anthropology engaged intersecting fields, such as French intellectualism, history, sociology, and radical feminist thought. Social construction theory was developed largely in reaction to essentialist approaches that see sexuality as a fixed and innate essence of individuals. In radical opposition, social constructionists argue that sexuality can only be understood and experienced as historical and cultural constructs. Thus this debate is explored in depth. Section two highlights essentialist or biological frameworks within American anthropology, such as sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, as well as contemporary American culture which seek to ground human sexuality primarily in terms of biology and reproduction. It begins by outlining sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, mostly prominently articulated by Edward O. Wilson's 1975 publication, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. After examining Wilson's work it explores several well-known studies of the 1990s that purported to have found a biological basis for "homosexuality." Drawing on a recent example from the Human Rights Campaign (the largest American gay rights organization), it then highlights the essentialist tone that much of the contemporary gay rights movement has adopted. By exposing the underlying assumptions of essentialist theories, it argues that these frameworks are not only limiting and dividing but have the potential to invoke greater homophobia. Engaging social construction scholarship and queer theory, it deconstructs rigid essentialist understandings of sexuality, while offering a more inclusive and open-ended framework from which to discuss and understand sexuality. Using queer theory as a reference point, it looks critically at the process of sexual identity formation and proposes a queered paradigm that both allows for identity construction while at the same time acknowledging the fluidity and inherent ambiguity of all identity formations.

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## Introduction

“Genitals are the given; what we do with them is a matter of creative invention; how we interpret what we do with them is what we call sexuality.”

– Michele Aina Barale,  
“Body Politic/Body Pleasured,”  
(Frontiers, 9, 1986, p. 81).

The underlying theme that informs this paper is the notion *that the personal is always political*. Like all questions, mine are deeply informed by my own history. For it has been my own experience of navigating through in-betweens – those gray, undefined areas outside society’s specified boundaries – that provoked me to question the prevailing notions of what constitutes “correct sexuality.” Finding myself both within and outside our culture’s fixed categories, I realized that while labels and categories help give order to the untidiness of the human experience, they are nonetheless limiting, and do not fully allow for the entirety of ways individuals understand, create, and experience themselves as sexual. Thus at the heart of this paper is a strong desire to make room for that messiness. It seeks not so much to understand or explain the messiness, but rather to advocate for a paradigm that allows such messiness to exist, without demanding it fit into constructed and artificial categories, seeking not mere tolerance of sexual diversity but rather aiming to invoke celebration and appreciation. It presents a more holistic discourse of sexuality, applicable to the everyday lived experiences of individuals who are placed into the crowded and mystifying category of “other.” At the root of the work is a commitment to widening the lens through which sexuality is understood and experienced. Taken as a whole, this paper is both informative and deeply provocative, offering a clear and concise historical outline of gay and lesbian anthropology, and challenging preconceived and often unconscious notions of what constitutes “normal” sexuality.

## **Part One**

### **Historical Outline of Gay and Lesbian Anthropology**

#### **Introduction**

Within the subfield of gay and lesbian anthropology the majority of scholars draw on social construction theory, an approach that understands sexuality as historically and culturally constituted. Scholars of this subfield reject essentialist or biological arguments that assume a fixed, static, and universal sexuality; instead, social construction theory begins with the premise that all sexuality – its identities, meanings and understandings – are facilitated by particular historical and cultural locations. Thus any exploration of human sexuality must examine the larger sociohistorical context in which sexual identities, meanings, and understandings exist.

Historically and culturally guided frameworks, however, have not always been at the core of anthropological approaches to studying sexuality. Much of early anthropology operated solely from essentialist and universalizing platforms, ignoring the influence of history and culture on sexuality. Not until the 1970s, prompted largely by feminist discourse, did anthropology start to reexamine essentialist approaches, replacing such models with a constructionist understanding of sexuality. The following section traces this theoretical shift, outlining how the subfield of gay and lesbian anthropology came to be recognized as it today.

Before outlining the history of gay and lesbian anthropology, questions of terminology must be addressed to facilitate an informed and appropriate reading of the piece. A number of historical terms have been used to describe same sex practices: homosexual, gay, lesbian, hermaphrodite, sodomite, transvestite, transsexual,

transgenderite, and so on. Many of these terms derive from late nineteenth and early twentieth century studies in sexology (Weston 1993:346). Each of these terms is infused with the subjectivity of the historical and cultural context from which they emerged.

The underlying theme of this paper is that sexual categories, desires, understandings and identities are not self evident entities, but rather historical and social creations that hold meaning only within the specific times and places in which they are conceived. Thus terms such as lesbian, gay or homosexual, are particularly modern and Western conventions, which hold little, if any, meaning outside modern Western contexts. Kath Weston highlights the problems of employing Western terms such as gay and lesbian; she explains that “to say ‘I am a gay person’ assumes the infusion of sexuality into total personhood in a way that might be incomprehensible to someone who touches the genitals of another man or woman in a society without a word for such an action” (Weston 1993:347).

With these considerations of terminology in mind, this paper applies the term *same-sex* as it relates to sexuality, practices, and, or, identities, rather than the more recent Western conceived terms like lesbian, gay, or homosexual. When such terms are used, they will be placed inside quotation marks, giving limited space to labels that are themselves restrictive and confining.

This paper acknowledges, too, that even the usage of *same-sex* behavior or practices may be contentious, as it assumes that individuals who appear to have the same genitals are in fact of the same biological sex or gender. This assumes a Western understanding of biological sex and gender, as in many cases it may be that individuals

outside of this context do not perceive of themselves as having the same sex or gender as their partner who may have the same genitalia.

In addition, it is important to clarify the concept human “sexuality.” Any specific definition of sexuality would be arbitrary and limiting, hence the closest approximation would only illuminate an understanding of the term and its complexity and not an absolute definition. Sexual expression is situational to time and place and thus varies from one culture to another. Indeed, what counts as “sexual” in one society or historical period might vary from the next. Furthermore this paper proposes that sexuality is not a static, self evident category which can be isolated outside of historical and cultural forces. It *is* necessary to distinguish between the term sexuality and sexual. Human sexuality refers to identity formations within certain social and historical contexts that are shaped by other social formations and articulations, such as gender, hierarchy, status, desire and attraction. The term sexual refers to particular expressions and experiences driven in part by neurological and physiological responses within the social context of human sexuality. Thus, though these terms can be teased apart, they cannot be understood or manifest in isolation. Therefore human “sexuality” is not a definable absolute but arbitrary and ambiguous.

### **Pre-WWII Anthropology**

In general, American attitudes about sexuality have tended to be restrictive in terms of what has been considered legitimate. As Gayle Rubin explains “For much of the twentieth century, sexual practice that varied from a norm of fairly straightforward, generally monogamous, and preferably marital heterosexuality with a possibility of

procreation was cast not only as undesirable but also physically unhealthy, socially inferior, or symptomatic of psychological impairment” (Rubin 2002:18). As the following section highlights, early American anthropology’s approach to sexuality was often infused with these same assumptions and biases of the larger American society.

American anthropology has often been at the forefront of responding to ideologies which take Western standards and morals as the universal measure of cultural superiority and advancement; the field has defined itself by the notion of cultural relativism, a commitment to understanding cultures in their own terms, free of value and judgment assessments. When it comes to sexuality, however, anthropology has been far less self-reflective and progressive in its thinking, frequently adapting taken-for-granted biases and homophobia that have underpinned much of the larger society from which anthropology has operated. In this sense anthropology has often been enmeshed in its own cultural setting to adequately examine sexuality from a lens not cluttered with Western ideas, rules, and at times even demands about what correct sexuality *ought* to look like (Rubin 2002:18).

Anthropologists working before WWII devoted little attention to the study of sexuality. As Carol Vance notes “Anthropology as a field has been far from courageous or even adequate in its investigation of sexuality. Rather, the discipline often appears to share the prevailing cultural view that sexuality is not an entirely legitimate area of study, and that such study necessarily casts doubt not only on the research but on the motives and character of the researcher” (Vance 2005:15). If the study of sexuality in general has been ignored by anthropology, the study of same-sex relations has been even further disregarded. As Kenneth Read notes, “When one attempts to unravel this tangled skein,

one thread stands out: namely, that anthropological research on homosexual behavior has been, and, to a large extent, still is consigned to the dark recesses of the discipline's closet" (Quoted in Kennedy 2002:94). Furthermore, Kath Weston explains that "Throughout the first half of the century, most allusions by anthropologists to homosexual behavior remained as veiled in ambiguity and as couched in judgment as were references to homosexuality in the dominant discourse of the surrounding society" (Weston 1993:339).

Anthropologist who did examine sexuality in general and same-sex sexuality in particular, did so from several deeply embedded assumptions. First sexuality was thought to constitute a self-evident category, an essence that existed across time and space regardless of differing social or historical settings. Sexual desires and sexual identities were not seen as historically contingent or socially constructed. Thus what appeared "sexual" to a Western ethnographer was assumed to count as sexual for the native as well. Assuming sexuality as a self-evident entity, questions of meaning were left unexposed and unexamined (Weston 1998:9).

Many of the early ethnographers who discussed sexuality also suffered from what Kath Weston has termed a "Flora and Fauna" approach; that is a heavy emphasis on collecting what were assumed to be objective facts and data. Questions of meaning, creation, and implication behind such facts went unexamined. Researchers were unaware and unwilling to examine their own biases and thus the data they collected was assumed to be filter free and was simply seen as an objective reality, the "what is" of the natives' lives (Weston 1998:6).

Coupled with a Flora and Fauna approach was what can be termed a “Colonial Gaze,” or the hypersexualization of so called “savages.” This lens tended to view the natives that researchers came into contact with as “primitive” and “pagan.” Focusing on their so called “unrestrained” sexuality researchers attempted to prove how “close to nature” these groups were. As Evelyn Blackwood explains, “The exotization of colonized peoples was achieved by the eroticization of their lives” (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:43). The so called “Hottentot Venus” is an infamous example of the hypersexualization by colonial Europeans of other peoples they deemed “primitive.” Taken from South Africa by Europeans, The Hottentot Venus was put on tour throughout Europe to expose her genitalia, which were perceived as exaggerated and in stark contrast to European women’s (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999: 43).

In addition, early ethnographers also assumed the universal and unchanging category of “gay” or “homosexual.” Behavior and identities that Westerners perceived of as “gay” were assumed to exist in other historical and cultural settings. Thus a gay identity in ancient Greece was equated with Western twentieth century gay identity (Weston 1998: 7-8). Furthermore, researchers did not distinguish between male and female homosexuality. The two were conflated, and it was assumed that what was true for male “homosexuality” was also true for female “homosexuality” (Blackwood 2002:77).

Perhaps most noteworthy regarding anthropology’s early approach to sexuality is the sheer lack of research and commentary on female sexuality in general and female-same sex-relations in particular. Several reasons account for this absence. A deeply entrenched homophobia, based in the assertion of heteronormative relations as the only

acceptable standard of human sexuality, which underpinned both the general society and the academic halls of anthropology departments, indeed, accounts for the lack of research on same-sex sexuality in general and female same-sex sexuality in particular. The personal experience of Margaret Mead, the most well-known twentieth century female anthropologist, highlights the prevalence of homophobia within academia and its effect on individual scholars. Although Mead had female lovers throughout her lifetime, the most prominent of whom was Ruth Benedict, she made no mention of them in her autobiography published in 1972. Mead in fact wrote two biographical books honoring Benedict and yet in neither of the books did she make any reference to their love affair (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:40).

Not only did anthropologists like Mead shy away from exposing their own sexual experiences, but other anthropologists waited to publish their research when it exposed same-sex practices in other societies. In 1970 Evans-Pritchard wrote an article on the “sexual inversion among the Azande,” yet he did not publish his piece until forty years after his fieldwork. Another ethnographer, Van Lier, who worked in Surinam in 1947, stopped his research into the *mati* relations among lower-class Creole woman after he realized such research was not encouraged. Like Evans-Pritchard he waited nearly forty years before publishing his work (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:40). These instances of Margaret Mead, Evans-Pritchard, and Van Lier all speak to the fear and stigmatization associated with same-sex sexuality of early twentieth century anthropology. Indeed homophobia played a fundamental role in impeding research on same-sex sexuality in general and on female same-sex sexuality in particular.

In addition to homophobia, the assumptions of male researchers also hindered exploration of female same-sex sexuality. It is often suggested that little ethnographic research was done on women because male scholars had trouble getting access to them; and while limited access to women certainly played a role in deterring research, it does not account for the overall reasons that female sexuality remained undocumented and unexplored. As Blackwood explains, the lack of research on female same-sex sexuality had much to do with the limitations of male researchers. These limitations included “men’s reticence or inability to ask questions of women or get answers about women’s practices as well as their ignorance of sexual diversity” (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:41). Furthermore, Blackwood explains that for many male researchers the notion that females would engage in same-sex relations with one another seemed unthinkable (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:41). Thus male ethnographers were not recording female same-sex practices for in their minds it simply did not exist.

In fact, it was assumed that when female same-sex sexuality did occur it did so only in situations where females were “deprived” of access to men. Thus one might expect to find female same-sex relations in settings like female harems or polygynous households where women had little access to males. Middle Eastern harems were often used as examples of settings where same-sex practices occurred due to “heterosexual deprivation.” As Blackwood notes, however, most of these reports “were greatly exaggerated, a product of the imaginations of European travelers and writers who projected their own sexual fantasies of ‘the Orient’ on the forbidden women of the harem” (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:41). “Heterosexual deprivation” theory, as Blackwood refers to it, thus made the sweeping assumption that females would never self

consciously choose female partners over males if the latter were accessible (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:41).

Coupled with the assumptions of male researchers that female same-sex practices were nearly nonexistent, the impact of colonialism also accounts for the lack of reporting and research on female same-sex sexuality. Blackwood explains that stories about female same-sex eroticism have often been erased or rewritten as a result of colonial conquests. “Stories such as those about the warrior women of the king of the Fon, who were called the Amazons of Dahomey, remain in people’s memories, but the precise circumstances under which those women lived, loved, and worked are not generally known or have been suppressed as a result of both colonial and postcolonial interventions” (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:43).

Some of the most prominent anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead considered sexuality a legitimate field of study, but devoted little attention to same-sex relations (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:39). Malinowski published *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* in 1927 and Mead published *Sex and Temperament* in 1935, not to mention *Coming of Age In Samoa* in 1928.

The Culture and Personality School founded by Ruth Benedict and others, addressed issues of sexuality; however, Blackwood argues it “sustained only a limited interest in the topic” (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:40). Its perspective on sexuality operated from the assumption that in any given society certain individuals would possess a “presocial homosexual nature” (Weston 1993: 346-47). The attitudes toward such individuals, however, would vary between cultures. Thus one culture might esteem and create socially acceptable positions for individuals with a homosexual “nature,” whereas

another culture might reject and ostracize such individuals (Vance 2005:21). It did, though, allow for an understanding of sexuality that took into consideration social influences. As such it appears quite similar to social construction theory, the dominant paradigm within gay and lesbian anthropology today. It is important, however, to distinguish between these two frameworks. Although they are similar in many respects their underlying approach to studying sexuality is fundamentally different.<sup>1</sup>

Ruth Benedict's piece, *Anthropology and the Abnormal* illustrates precisely how cultural influence models operate:

Many of our culturally discarded traits are selected for elaboration in different societies. Homosexuality is an excellent example, for in this case our attention is not constantly diverted, as in the consideration of trance, to the interruption of routine activity which it implies. Homosexuality poses the problem very simply. A tendency toward this trait in our culture exposes an individual to all the conflicts to which all aberrants are always exposed, and we tend to identify the consequences of this conflict with homosexuality. Homosexuals in many societies are not incompetent, but they may be such if the culture asks adjustments of them that would strain any man's vitality. Wherever homosexuality has been given an honorable place in any society, those to whom it is congenial have filled adequately the honorable roles society assigns to them. Plato's Republic is, of course, the most convincing statement of such a reading of homosexuality. It is presented as one of the major means of the good life, and it was generally so regarded in Greece at that time (Benedict 1934:268).

Benedict's point is that society structures beliefs and attitudes about what is acceptable behavior and what is not. With regards to "homosexuality," she argues that some societies create socially acceptable spaces for "homosexuals" while others reject and condemn such individuals. According to Benedict, "homosexuality" is a universal trait; within all societies some individuals will possess a "tendency toward this trait" (Benedict

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between social construction theory and the Personality and Culture model will be more fully elaborated in the upcoming section when social construction theory is introduced.

1959:268). The concept of “homosexuality” itself is not questioned but assumed to hold universal significance. As such, Benedict makes the assumption that Greek “homosexuality” constituted the same entity as the early mid-twentieth century American “homosexuality” of her day; the only difference being that Greek society created an honorable role for the “homosexual,” whereas twentieth century American society treated the “homosexual” as abnormal and pathological.

As outlined, early anthropological attempts at understanding sexuality were essentialist in nature, assuming sexuality as a fixed and innate essence of individuals, unaffected by time and place. Often sharing the prevailing biases of the larger society, pre-WWI anthropology failed to take into consideration the role that history and culture played in shaping experiences and understandings of sexuality. Researchers assumed the universal meaning of phenomena they perceived as “homosexual” without situating such behavior and identity in its appropriate historical and cultural context. These underlying assumptions and biases hindered early anthropology from more meaningful and in depth explorations of sexuality.

Nevertheless, these early essentialist frameworks continued to permeate anthropological thinking. As the following sections highlight, they were recycled by post-WWII masculinist approaches as well as today’s more recent developments within sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. The shift in anthropological thinking did not come until the 1970s as feminist scholars began to examine historical and cultural forces that shaped sexuality, laying the foundation for what would come to be known as social construction theory – the underlying framework of gay and lesbian anthropology today.

## **Post-WWII Anthropology**

Post-WWII gay and lesbian anthropology is defined by two frameworks. First, the masculinist approach, focused attention on sexual acts primarily among males and viewed sexuality as innate and unchanging, continuing pre-WWII essentialist approaches. Second, feminist social constructionist frameworks emerged largely as a reaction against masculinist approaches, emphasizing gender structures and the sociohistorical factors that shaped sexuality (Lewin 2002:110).

Like the early male ethnographers before them, male social scientists of the post-WWII era who investigated same-sex sexuality focused primarily on the cross-cultural study of same-sex sexual behavior, primarily among males. They were interested in sexual acts, not the embedded meaning or political implications behind such acts. This over-emphasis on acts alone is what Kath Weston has referred to as the “ethnography” of homosexuality (Lewin 2002:111). One of the feminists primary critiques against masculinist approaches indeed was the assumption that “sexual acts” could be simply recorded as objective facts without a broad and in-depth understanding of the historical and cultural setting in which such acts were situated (Lewin 2002:111).

In addition to focusing on de-contextualized sexual acts, the new masculinist approaches tended to view “homosexuality” as a self-evident and universal category, one that could be found in any cultural and historical setting (Lewin 2002:111). Lacking any serious consideration of the various meanings embedded within sexual practices, identities, and beliefs, scholars working in this tradition assumed the universality of what they termed “homosexuality.” Thus the term homosexual could be unproblematically applied to all manifestations of same-sex behavior existing throughout time and space.

With the “homosexual” identity assumed as universal, one could then speak of our “gay ancestors,” creating mythical connections between Western gay identity and other forms of same-sex eroticism and behavior (Blackwood 2002:77).

Because of their belief in a universal category of “gay” which was thought to be observed across cultures and throughout history, many researchers began cataloging societies based on the presence or absence of “homosexuality”. In fact, transcultural typologies of “homosexuality” became emblematic of the 1980s masculinist work. Masculinist typologies were similar to the Culture and Personality School discussed earlier, as they assumed that “homosexual” individuals existed within all societies, and that cultures merely determined how such individuals were regarded; the idea of “homosexuality” itself was not questioned as a concept created and structured by different historical and cultural settings.

Such typologies or classificatory systems sought to assess “the level of ‘tolerance’ or ‘acceptance’ for “homosexuality” across societies,” and “correlate specific practices or forms of social organization with the presence of transgendering or same-sex sexuality” (Weston 1993:342). In addition, they included three different varieties of “homosexuality” that could be observed within a given society: transgenderal or gender-differentiated relations, transgenerational or age- differentiated relations, and egalitarian relations (Weston 1993: 342). While these forms differed slightly, at their root they were all focused on behaviors involving genital sexual activity between males (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:46).

Greenberg (1988), Herdt (1987) and Murray (1992) were among the most noteworthy scholars to produce such typologies (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:46).

Greenberg is responsible for defining the three types of homosexuality: transgenderal, transgenerational, and egalitarian. The Native American male “berdache,” who took on the clothing and activities usually assigned to the females of their societies, was seen as an example of the transgenderal category. Transgenerational forms were considered forms of homosexuality in which sexual partners had a significant age division between them; Melanesia and ancient Greece were used as examples of such. Egalitarian forms, marked by an equal reciprocity in sexual acts between partners, were often assumed to be found overwhelmingly in Anglo-European societies (Weston 1993:343).

Other defining works of the post-WWII era include Alfred Kinsey’s report (1948), Ford and Beach’s *Patterns of Sexual Behavior* in the Human Relations Area Files (1951), and Marshall and Sugg’s *Human Sexual Behavior* (1971). Similar to the masculinist typologies, Ford and Beach’s work focused on individuals and specific types of sexual acts. Borrowing from Kinsey’s early work, they reported how many of Kinsey’s respondents engaged in “mutual handling of the penis” and the percentage of males who engaged in “anal copulation” (Rubin 2002:21). Two decades after Ford and Beach’s work, Marshall and Sugg published *Human Sexual Behavior*, and as Gayle Rubin points out, their work “floundered on the presumption of homosexuality as intrinsically pathological” (Rubin 2002:21).

In theory the various typologies were said to apply to both men’s and women’s sexual practices, however, as Blackwood notes, their findings were only based on male same-sex behaviors (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:46). Like early twentieth century ethnographers before them, 1980s masculinist approaches held the same unexamined belief that female same-sex sexuality was cross-culturally less common and less visible

than male same-sex sexuality (Blackwood 2002:77). As Blackwood argues, these approaches were “limited and often misplaced attempts to understand practices that were inadequately explored and analyzed” (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:45).

The early essentialist works and masculinist approaches both suffered from the same underlying assumptions and biases: the uncritically examined belief that “homosexuality” was a universal category, the over-emphasis on sexual acts alone without situating such acts in their larger historical, cultural, and political contexts, and finally the assumption that female same-sex practices were less established than male same-sex practices. Scholars often made sweeping generalizations about the societies they were observing, giving little if any critical analysis to the historical, cultural, and political contexts of the particular societies about which they were reporting (Weston 1993:343). In essence scholars read onto others their own cultural and historical understanding of sexuality and imposed Western sexual categories. They failed to understand, however, that such categories and sexual understandings can be articulated only within the given culture and historical setting in which they are conceived. Divorced from these contexts, they lose much, if not all, of their relevance.

At their core these approaches were ahistorical, universalizing, and essentialist. Thus this paper argues they were unsuccessful in providing a holistic and critically far-reaching framework for theorizing sexuality in general, and same-sex sexuality in particular. Nevertheless masculinist approaches did make several important contributions to gay and lesbian anthropology that cannot be discounted. Firstly, they were helpful in exposing the cross cultural diversity of sexuality. And secondly, they helped challenge prevailing notions of “normal” sexuality (Lewin 2002: 112). Although they stopped short

of viewing “homosexuality” as a socially constructed concept that held little meaning outside of modern Western society, which later feminist approaches would do, they did highlight that “homosexuality” took different forms in different cultures. In sum, to pluralize “homosexuality” was to move beyond the limited Western conception. As Kath Weston explains, “Positing different forms of same-sex relations also allowed analysts to trace regional patterns and to pose diffusionist questions. For example, are the rare forms of egalitarian same-sex relationships described for some New Guinea societies indigenous, or are they the product of the colonial encounter?” (Weston 1993:344). Ironically essentialist and masculinist approaches set the stage for the feminist constructionist approaches that emerged in the 1970s.

### **Emergence of Social Construction Theory**

Before discussing the historical development of social construction theory it is necessary to more fully define the theory itself as it relates to the study of sexuality. Social construction theory posits that sexuality, including sexual categories, identities, desires, and sexual knowledge, is mediated by historical and cultural factors. Although all social construction theorists understand sexuality as structured to some degree by cultural and historical factors, not all scholars agree about what can be constructed. In this respect social construction theory is not one cohesive theory, but various theories and perspectives that sometimes conflict. At the very minimum all social constructionist approaches understand sexuality as an entity infused with socially subjective meaning, acknowledging that physically identical sexual acts may carry entirely different social implications depending on the different cultures and time periods in which such acts are

situated. Thus constructionist approaches reject essentialist platforms that suggest transhistorical and transcultural definitions of sexuality (Vance 2005:20). Some argue that even erotic object choice itself (preferring females to males and vice versa) is not an innate essence of individuals but is constructed from what Vance calls “polymorphous possibilities” (Vance 2005:20). At its most extreme, social construction theory posits that there is no predefined and essential “sex drive” or “sexual impulse” that is a physiological part of an individual’s body. Instead, sexual desire is constructed *entirely* by cultural and historical forces. (Vance 2005: 20).

It is also necessary to distinguish between social construction theory and the Personality and Culture model; for although the two appear similar in many respects, they operate from entirely different foundations. While both frameworks acknowledge the variation in sexual acts and attitudes across time and space, the Personality and Culture model assumes the basic universality of such acts. As Vance explains, within cultural influence models “sexuality is seen as a kind of universal Play Doh- on which culture works, a naturalized category which remains closed to investigation and analysis” (Vance 2005:21). In this view, while different cultures might encourage particular sex acts and restrict others the basic nature of sexuality is assumed as a biological and unchanging entity. Thus categories like “heterosexual” and “homosexual” are seen as intrinsic and biologically natural. Society might determine the extent to which individuals, heterosexual or homosexual, are socially accepted or rejected; however, society does not shape individual sexual desire. In this sense the concepts of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” are taken for granted. Like social construction approaches the Personality and Culture model emphasizes the relationship between society and sexuality;

however, the approach does not go as far as social construction theory as it stops short of analyzing and deconstructing the concept of “homosexuality” itself. In this respect, the culture and personality approach is essentialist at its core as it assumes “homosexuality” is an innate and universal trait of individuals (Vance 2005: 21).

### **1970s Feminist Discourse**

By the 1970s feminists working within and outside anthropology began to examine sexuality in fundamentally different ways than had previous scholars. Exposing the flaws of earlier essentialist and masculinist approaches, feminist theory was among the first to articulate a social constructionist framework.

Feminist discourse of the 1970s articulated the notion that sexuality was mediated by historical and cultural forces and rejected the idea that sexuality was a biologically natural drive (Blackwood 2002:70). Feminists were interested in exploring the relationship between sexual behavior and social meaning. Unlike earlier scholars, who assumed the universalizing nature of sexuality and ignored questions of meaning, feminists focused on the embedded significance of different sexual acts, and particularly the role of gender ideologies. This was a radical new approach to understanding sexuality, as scholars before them working in essentialist and masculinist traditions had failed to consider the role that gender played in shaping sexuality (Lewin 2002:116-117). As Carol Vance states, “Social construction theory in the field of sexuality proposed an extremely outrageous idea. It suggested that one of the last remaining outposts of the ‘natural’ in our thinking was fluid and changeable, the product of human action and history rather than the invariant result of the body, biology, or an innate sex drive”

(Quoted in Rubin 2002:43). Unlike essentialist frameworks, social construction theory emphasized the role of the social on sexual identities, desires, and understandings. Social construction theorists sought to expose the normalizing discourse of essentialist and masculinist approaches, which viewed sexuality as static and unaffected by history and culture (Wieringa and Blackwood 1999:8).

The following section explores the work of Gayle Rubin, Adrienne Rich, Evelyn Blackwood, and Ester Newton; four seminal female anthropologists working within the 1970s feminist tradition who were among the first to employ a social construction approach to the study of sexuality, arguably founding gay and lesbian anthropology. They dismantled the influence of essentialist and masculinist thinking and infused the subfield with a socially and historically inflected understanding of sexuality. Common to each author's work are three fundamental critiques of masculinist approaches: 1) female same-sex practices cannot be treated as the mirror image of male same-sex practices, 2) any exploration of sexuality must examine the role of gender hierarchies within a given society, 3) and when discussing sexuality it is crucial to look at symbolic and embedded meaning. In addition to feminist thought, intersecting fields such as French intellectualism, sociology, and history also gave impetus to the development of social construction theory. Thus the influence of these perspectives on gay and lesbian anthropology will also be outlined.

Vance explains that Gayle Rubin rejected essentialist explanations which saw sexual inequality as the natural result of sex and gender differences, arguing instead that inequality arose from particular gender structures within a given society (Vance 2005:17). In her groundbreaking 1975 piece, *The Traffic in Women*, Rubin proposed the

concept “sex/gender system” which she defined as “the set of arrangements upon which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (Rubin 1975: 159). Unlike earlier scholars who failed to deconstruct sexuality and gender concepts, Rubin argued that the two domains, sexuality and gender, must be recognized as distinct from one another. Although interconnected and experienced as seemingly unitary, gender and sexuality constitute two individual spheres that call for separate explanations. As Vance explains, this meant that “theories of sexuality could not explain gender, and taking the argument to a new level, theories of gender could not explain sexuality” (Vance 2005:17). Blackwood explains that Rubin expanded on ideas of Marx, Freud, and Levi-Strauss, and located women’s oppression in systems of kinship, arguing that marriage exchanges “gave men rights in women that women did not have in themselves, ensuring heterosexual unions by creating an obligatory heterosexuality” (Wieringa and Blackwood 1999:9). In this sense women became a type of commodity by which men profited.

Like other radical feminists, Adrienne Rich was concerned with the masculinists’ sweeping assumption that male same-sex sexuality constituted the same thing as female same-sex sexuality. In her formative piece, *Compulsory Heterosexuality* (1980), Rich argued that “any theory...that treats lesbianism existence... as the mirror image of either heterosexual or male homosexual relations is profoundly weakened thereby, whatever its other contributions” (Quoted in Wieringa, Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:48).

Blackwood explains that for Rich, heterosexuality was as a political institution enforced by males, through which women were controlled and disempowered. Rich cited child marriages, brideprice, foot-binding, purdah (the segregation of women from men typical

of some Islamic societies), veiling, the chastity belt, clitoridectomies, and female infanticide, as examples of social controls that have operated as means to enforce heterosexual relations (Blackwood 2002:71-72).

In sum, Rich viewed female-female partnerships as forms of resistance to enforced heterosexuality (Blackwood 2002:73). This view, however, has been critiqued by feminists, most notably Anne Ferguson, on the grounds that it affords women only a negative agency, suggesting that women who choose women over men are doing so only to resist the oppression forced upon them by heterosexual demands. While this may be true in some cases, it ignores the fact that women may choose to partner with women out of personal preference, and not simply as a means to overcome their shared oppression. In essence it leaves little room for the active creation women play in constructing their desire, sexuality, and identity (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:54).

Kath Weston refers to Evelyn Blackwood's 1986 publication *Anthropology and Homosexual Behavior* as one of "the most useful introductions to the variety of social arrangements studied under the rubric of homosexuality" (Weston 1993:342). Like Rich and Rubin, Blackwood also argued for the critical examination of gender structures and their consequential impacts on sexuality. Opposed to the assumption that male same-sex sexuality could be applied to female same-sex sexuality, Blackwood argued that female and male sexuality could not be grouped together. She stated that "because men's and women's roles are structured differently in all cultures,...the structure of female homosexuality must be examined as well. A one-sided discourse on homosexuality does not adequately comprehend the complex interplay of factors which shape homosexual behavior, male or female" (Quoted in Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:48).

Blackwood cited case studies from Papua New Guinea and Chinese sisterhoods to highlight the different impact of gender structures on males and females. Ritualized semen practices were common among young boys in Papua New Guinea. These practices served as rites of passage in which young boys were instructed in masculinity. Equivalent practices for girls, however, did not exist; as girls were seen as possessing inherent femininity and thus not in need of a ritualized process to instruct them (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:51). During the nineteenth century, women in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong formed sisterhoods with other women. The majority of these women were silk workers and thus economically self sufficient. Entering into relationships together, they took vows before the goddess Guan Yin to never marry a man. Blackwood argued that these sisterhoods can be seen as forms of resistance to the oppressive conditions of marriage for women in China at the time. Men, however, had control over women and family property. Because they were positioned socially and politically superior to women, men did not need to create “brotherhoods,” as a means to achieve social and economic independence, as women did. Thus there are no accounts of male brotherhoods forming in China at the time (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:50-51). Blackwood suggests that ritualized semen practices in Papua New Guinea and nineteenth century Chinese sisterhoods expose the dissimilar ways men and women are situated within societies. As the two cases illustrate, gender operates differently for both males and females, demanding different roles and expressions, thus one cannot speak of male same-sex sexuality and assume that it applies to female same-sex sexuality. As Blackwood notes, “Both cases [male semen practices and Chinese sisterhoods] lack a mirror image of the male or female practice because cultural ideals of gender shape

sexual practices” (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:51). Indeed any serious consideration of same-sex practices must consider socially infused gender structures.

Ester Newton’s 1972 ethnography of female impersonators, *Mother Camp*, was ground-breaking in that it was the first work to examine a modern, Western, urban gay population (Rubin 2002: 47). Gayle Rubin applauds Newton’s work stating it was effective in three areas: “It prefigures notions of gender as “performed;” provides an analysis of the political economies of homosexuality in the 1960s; and links types of performance to economic stratification, political orientation, and hierarchies of social status” (Rubin 2002: 47).

Deconstructing the notion of natural gender roles, Newton explained that the gender reversal of drag “questions the ‘naturalness of the sex-role system *in toto*; if sex-role behavior can be achieved by the ‘wrong’ sex, it logically follows that it is in reality also achieved, not inherited, by the ‘right’ sex” (Quoted in Rubin 2002: 48). Although a classic in the subfield of gay and lesbian anthropology today, at the time of its publication Newton’s work was largely dismissed “and followed by thundering silence and a painfully long hiatus” (Rubin 2002: 52). This silence speaks to the deeply entrenched homophobia of 1970s American culture and academia.

Outside of feminist discourses, scholars working within French intellectualism, sociology, and history also helped shape social construction theory. Michel Foucault’s 1978 *History of Sexuality* was monumental in shaping social construction approaches to the study of sexuality and remains a classic to this day. Rubin explains that Foucault proposed a framework that suggested all sexualities, the so called “perverse” and “normal” had histories. Giving sexuality a history suggested that what society deemed as

“naturally” normal or abnormal, was in fact a social creation, contingent upon any given society (Rubin 2002:39). Explaining the historical creation of the homosexual, Foucault put forth that “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (Quoted in Wieringa and Blackwood 1999:11).

Within sociology Mary McIntosh was the first to articulate a social constructionist approach to questions of sexuality. In her 1968 article, *The Homosexual Role*, she examined the historical construction of the homosexual in England. In opposition to the common views of her day which pathologized individuals perceived as “homosexual,” McIntosh proposed “that the homosexual should be seen as playing a social role rather than as having a condition” (Quoted in Rubin 2002:37). In addition she argued for a more fluid and open understanding of sexual identities, noting that “patterns cannot be conveniently dichotomized into heterosexual and homosexual” (Quoted in Rubin 2002:36-37). As Rubin notes, McIntosh’s work was foundational as it was the first within sociology to offer a historically grounded view of homosexuality, rather than assuming the universalizing nature of so called “homosexual” individuals (Rubin 2002:37).

Jeffery Weeks, an English historian of sexuality, elaborated on McIntosh’s ideas and argued that a distinction must be made between homosexual behavior and homosexual identity. According to Weeks, while sexual behaviors might correspond across time and space, sexual identities fluctuated and were products of specific historical and cultural settings (Vance 2005:18). As Weeks stated,

We tend to think now that the word ‘homosexual’ has had an unvarying meaning, beyond time and history. In fact it is itself a product of history, a

cultural artifact designed to express a particular concept... The term 'homosexuality' was not even invented until 1869... and it did not enter English currency until the 1890s... They [new terms such as *homosexuality* and *gay*] are not just new labels but old realities; they point to a changing reality" (Quoted in Rubin 2002:38).

Scholars working within feminism, French intellectualism, sociology and history helped articulate a social construction framework that radically proposed a gay and lesbian anthropology. For the first time in anthropology's history, concepts like sexuality, homosexual identity, and desire – once assumed as self evident, unchanging, universal entities – were now understood as relative to history and society. Infused with this premise scholars could begin to ask richer and more analytically sophisticated questions, questions relating to meaning, symbolism, and power. Furthermore, Elizabeth Kennedy notes that "Historical approaches freed studies of sexuality from the control of models derived from the medical profession, particularly from the assumptions that sex is solely a biological instinct or drive and that sexual variation manifests disease" (Kennedy 2002:96). Not only de-essentializing sexuality, these new approaches called into question notions of fixed sexual identities as well as providing "conceptual tools for understanding changing forms of homosexuality in the West" (Kennedy 2002:96).

The assertion that sexuality had a history was revolutionary. Placing the concept of sexuality on a historical trajectory inevitably assumed that indeed sexuality was susceptible to change. If sexuality were plastic, it followed that the rigid, taken for granted, categories and assumptions about universal and legitimate ways of understanding and experiencing sexuality must be called into question.

While social construction theory is the underlying paradigm within the subfield of gay and lesbian anthropology today, other fields, such as sociobiology and its offshoot,

evolutionary psychology still operate heavily from essentialist platforms. Perhaps ironically, much of the post Stone-Wall gay rights movement has also adopted an essentialist and biologically determinist stance. Section two not only highlights and offers critiques to these approaches but expands on social construction frameworks as well as queer theory, articulating a paradigm that is open ended, holistic, and expansive in its understanding of sexuality.

## **Part Two**

### **Sex as Social: Contesting Essentialism**

#### **Introduction**

The previous section outlined the historical development of gay and lesbian anthropology, focusing specifically on the shift from essentialist frameworks to social construction theory. As mentioned before, social construction theory is the dominant framework within the subfield of gay and lesbian anthropology today; however, essentialist or biological frameworks are still prominent within other areas of anthropology, such as sociobiology and its close offshoot evolutionary psychology. In addition to subsets of anthropology, explanations of human behavior grounded in essentialists and biological models are also popular within contemporary culture, as evidenced by much of the contemporary American gay rights movement. The following section explores areas within anthropology and contemporary culture which invoke essentialist platforms for explaining and understanding human behavior, namely sexuality. It begins by outlining sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, mostly prominently articulated by Edward O. Wilson's 1975 publication, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. After examining Wilson's work it explores several well-known studies of the 1990s that purported to have found a biological basis for "homosexuality." Drawing on a recent example from the Human Right's Campaign, it then highlights the essentialist and biological tone that much of the gay rights movement has adopted. Finally, it offers critiques to essentialist and biological frameworks, exposing their limitations and flaws. Using social construction and queer theory, it concludes by putting forth a more inclusive and far-reaching framework from which to discuss and understand sexuality.

## **Sociobiology and Evolutionary Psychology: Humans as Ants**

Developments within anthropology since the 1970s, such as sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, operate heavily from essentialist platforms.<sup>2</sup> Seeking to explain human behavior in terms of Darwinian evolutionary theory, sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists understand human behaviors as evolved traits which gave the human species an evolutionary advantage (McGee and Warmes 2008:406). Unlike cultural anthropology, which understands human behavior in terms of complex historical and social forces, sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, understand human behavior as largely genetically programmed.<sup>3</sup>

Harvard Biologist E.O. Wilson is most credited with introducing sociobiology to anthropology as well as the general public. In 1975 he published *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, in which he proposed that most, if not all, human behavior was controlled by particular genes (McGee and Warmes 2008:407). As R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warmes suggest, “In effect, [Wilson] proposed that humans were little more than the vehicles genes use to reproduce themselves” (McGee and Warmes 2008:407).

Wilson’s work received much opposition and criticism by cultural anthropologists broadly influenced by the Boasian tradition, which rejected attempts to explain complex

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<sup>2</sup> These developments are not unique to anthropology but overlap with other academic disciplines such as evolutionary biology and psychology. Due to the confines of this paper, however, my focus pertains to areas solely within anthropology

<sup>3</sup> Although similar, evolutionary psychology differs slightly from its predecessor sociobiology. Unlike sociobiology, evolutionary psychology emphasizes the role of the human mind and the ways it has been formed by natural selection. (McGee and Warmes 2008:408).

human social behavior simply in terms of biology.<sup>4</sup> Critics of Wilson's work, in particular, and sociobiology, in general, argued that looking at human behavior solely in terms of reproduction ignored the crucial influence of culture and learning in shaping human behavior. In addition, many were critical that most sociobiological research was conducted on animals and insects, rather than humans. In fact, Wilson's own work focused on ants. Many cultural anthropologists rejected the notion that any valid comparison could be made between insect and human behavior. Furthermore, critics also disputed the idea that specific human behaviors were determined solely by particular biological genes (McGee and Warms 2008:407).

Today sociobiology and evolutionary psychology remain two of the most controversial areas within anthropology. In fact, the authors of the textbook *Anthropological Theory*, McGee and Warms, note that each time their textbook is reviewed for a new edition, several reviewers argue that the section on sociobiology not be included (McGee and Warms 2008:407). Although sociobiology has been heavily criticized by most cultural anthropologists, it remains popular both within subsets of anthropology and the general public. McGee and Warms credit this popularity to recent medical successes and well-known research, such as the Human Genome Project, which investigates the role of genetics in human life. McGee and Warms note that "As evidence emerges that things as diverse as cancers and religious sentiments may have genetic and biochemical bases, people are more willing to examine the connection between biology and behavior" (McGee and Warms 2008:408).

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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent and more comprehensive critique of sociobiology and Wilson's work see Marshall Sahlins' 1976 *The Use and Abuse of Biology: An Anthropological Critique of Sociobiology*.

As the following section will highlight, the explanation of human behavior primarily in terms of biological factors is not unique to academia but has, in fact, gained popularity within the wider society. Much of today's gay rights movement and certainly the scientific search for a gay gene operate from an essentialist framework when they seek to ground human sexual behavior as biological imperatives. Further, these discourses remain largely unchallenged.

### **The 1990s: In Search of the “Gay Gene”**

During the early 1990s three prominent studies were published which all purported to have *discovered* the biological basis of “homosexuality.” Simon LeVay's work focused on the hypothalamus region of the brain and argued that the region in women and gay men is on average smaller than in straight men. Michael Bailey and Richard Pillard conducted survey research among gay men and their brothers and claimed that as genetic relatedness increased (e.g. case of identical twins), the similarity of same-sex siblings' sexual orientation also increased, thus indicating that “homosexuality” was genetically determined. In addition to LeVay and Bailey and Pillard's work, in 1993 Dean Hamer published a study in which he purported to have located a “gay gene” (Lancaster 2003:240). Although the three studies received much attention in the popular media, they have been heavily criticized by prominent academics. This paper focuses solely on critiques of LeVay's work, as his research is perhaps the most well-known and cited.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For a more comprehensive critique of Bailey and Pillard's and Hamer's work see Lancaster's *The Trouble with Nature: Sex in Science and Popular Culture* (Ch. 18). (2003)

## Simon LeVay

A neurobiologist at the Salk Institute in California, Simon LeVay published his well known “gay brain” study in 1991.<sup>6</sup> LeVay’s work examined a particular group of cells (called INAH) in the anterior hypothalamus region of the brain. According to LeVay, this region of the brain correlated with sexual orientation and was smaller in gay men and women than in straight men. Essentially, LeVay proposed that “gay” brains were biologically different than “straight” brains (Spanier 2005:37). Explaining his hypothesis he stated:

I tested the idea that one or both of these nuclei exhibit a size dimorphism, not with sex, but with sexual orientation. Specifically, I hypothesized that INAH 2 or INAH 3 is large in individuals sexually oriented toward women ( heterosexual men and homosexual women) and small in individuals sexually oriented toward men ( heterosexual women and homosexual men ( Quoted in Spanier 2005:37).

Although LeVay’s study was received with much media fanfare, his work was heavily criticized by several well-known academics. Feminist scientist Bonnie Spanier (1995), cultural anthropologist Roger Lancaster (2003), and feminist biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000), all provide detailed overviews and critiques of LeVay’s work. The following focuses specifically on Bonnie Spanier’s analysis of LeVay’s research.

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<sup>6</sup> LeVay himself is a gay man, and like other gay rights advocates, he sees scientific evidence for the biological basis of “homosexuality” as a beneficial tool in securing equal rights for gays and lesbians (Spanier 2005:36).

## Spanier's Critique of LeVay

LeVay's conclusions rest on various presumptions. First, LeVay presumes that the anterior hypothalamus region of the brain has some control over sexual orientation. Second, he posits that size differences within the anterior hypothalamus correlates with sexual orientation. Third, he assumes that "there exists such a thing as 'male-typical sexual behavior' in humans, it differs from some other unnamed behavior, and it is the *same thing* as sexual orientation" (Spanier 2005:38). And finally, LeVay's hypothesis operates from the assumption that "sexual orientation is based on biological influences that are specific to male and female identities" (Spanier 2005:39). Spanier is critical of LeVay's work precisely because of his uncritical acceptance and usage of such premises.

Spanier deconstructs LeVay's presumption of "male-typical sexual behavior." Spanier argues that positing such a thing as "male typical sexual behavior" incorrectly conflates sexual orientation with male gender. In a tongue and cheek manner Spanier highlights the inadequacy and futility of starting with any notion of "typical male behavior."

What does "typical male sex behavior, such as attraction to females" mean? Does the person – male or female – desiring women exhibit some male-typical sexual behavior by wanting to insert a penis into a vagina? Where does that leave lesbians? Is desiring to insert a penis into an anus very different from wishing to insert one into a vagina? Similar for whom? (Spanier 2005:39).

Further, Spanier calls into question the experimental design of LeVay's research. LeVay's research was based on his examination of the brain tissues of forty-one individuals who had died in hospitals in two states. Of these individuals nineteen were

self-identified homosexual men; one was a self-identified bisexual, sixteen were men *assumed* to be heterosexual simply because they did not self-identify as gay, and six women were also *assumed* to be heterosexual because their sexual orientation was not known. As Spanier notes, many studies have shown that men and women who identify as heterosexual often actively engage in same-sex behavior. Furthermore, simply because an individual identifies as “heterosexual” does not mean that he or she does not fantasize about, desire, and/or engage in homosexual activities. In a society that not only promotes, but often demands heteronormativity, while openly shunning homosexual behavior, that many individuals might hide and/or deny their same-sex desires and behavior is understandable. According to Spanier, “the categories “homosexual” and “heterosexual” are ambiguous and often arbitrary and thus not scientifically measurable or quantifiable (Spanier 2005:41).

Furthermore, Roger Lancaster notes that all of the “homosexual” men in LeVay’s sample died from AIDS- related illnesses. As Lancaster points out, AIDS and HIV medical treatments can often affect different brain structures (Lancaster 2003:242). Thus the differences in brain size that LeVay reported may actually have been due to medical treatments rather than so-called sexual orientation.

### **Explaining “Homosexuality,” Assuming “Heterosexuality”**

As Spanier successfully demonstrates, LeVay’s work is easily discredited on flawed scientific methodological grounds. For this reason alone, LeVay’s work can be dismissed as valid scientific research. LeVay’s work, as well as any effort to discover the biological basis of homosexuality, reflects problematic scientific assumptions that have

serious political and social implications. Central to LeVay's work is the underlying belief that "homosexuality" is ultimately something in need of explanation. By seeking to explain homosexuality, it is positioned as a curiosity, an anomaly, something outside of "the norm." Furthermore, what is perhaps most telling about studies such as LeVay's is that they are all done on "homosexuality" and not "heterosexuality." Thus heterosexuality is assumed as the natural, default mode of sexuality often based on the premise that human sexuality can be reduced to reproductive behavior.

Seeking to *explain* and *prove* the biological basis of "homosexuality" is not solely unique among academics and scientists, but has also become popular within much of the mainstream American gay rights movement. In fact, LeVay's work and other scientific reports proposing to have found the biological basis of "homosexuality" have been much invoked and championed by the gay rights movement in an attempt to secure equal rights. The following section highlights the essentialist or biological determinist tone that much of the contemporary American gay rights movement has adopted. By exposing the gay rights movement's essentialist framework, it then questions the political and social effectiveness of invoking biological models as a platform from which to argue for civil rights.

### **Human Rights Campaign and Herman Cain**

Founded in 1980, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) is the largest civil rights organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) Americans. Working to achieve full equality for the LGBT community, HRC seeks to elect pro-gay rights law makers, organize grass-roots actions in various communities, and educate the general

public about LGBT issues. Because of HRC's influence and visibility, this paper argues that HRC is reflective of the larger gay rights movement within contemporary American society; thus this paper uses it to speak broadly about what is termed the "mainstream" American gay rights movement.

Recently HRC took a strong essentialist tone in responding to former GOP presidential candidate and anti-gay rights proponent, Herman Cain. In an October 2011 interview with ABC's "The View," Cain argued that being gay was a choice: "You show me the science that says that it's not [a choice]." <sup>7</sup> Angered by Cain's implication that being "gay" is not an inborn biological orientation, HRC responded to Cain's comments with the following:

Cain's remarks are dangerous because implying that homosexuality is a choice gives unwarranted credence to roundly disproven practices such as 'conversion' or 'reparative' therapy. The risks associated with attempts to consciously change one's sexual orientation include depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior. <sup>8</sup>

### **Disputing Choice: To Choose or not to Choose**

HRC's concern with suggesting that homosexuality is a choice, and not an essential biological trait, is understandable. Sadly, conversion and reparative therapies have been, and continue to be, used to cure "homosexuals." And as the HRC rightfully points out, such therapies are dangerous and harmful and almost always adversely affect individuals subjected to such treatments. Many gay rights proponents are hesitant to invoke a social constructionist lens, which argues against the innate and static nature of sexual orientation. Instead, much of the gay rights movement hopes that by invoking

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.hrc.org/blog/entry/herman-cain-believes-being-gay-is-a-choice>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.hrc.org/blog/entry/herman-cain-believes-being-gay-is-a-choice>

essentialist models, which view “homosexuality” as an innate, inborn essence of an individual which cannot be changed, they can more fully secure equal rights for gays and lesbians. By grounding homosexuality in biology, many gay rights advocates hope to establish and legitimate the *naturalness* of “homosexuality,” thereby proving that gays and lesbians deserve the same civil rights afforded to “heterosexuals.”

Because of the negative connotation that anti-gay forces have imparted on the word “choice”, it appears that gay rights proponents have distanced themselves from the word, not wanting to align themselves with anti-gay rhetoric. Seeking to reject anti-gay assertions that being gay is a choice, gay rights advocates have resorted to an essentialist and biological discourse concerning “homosexuality.”

The word “choice” has indeed been employed by anti-gay rights advocates in negative and condemning ways. Underneath the anti-gay rhetoric that being “gay” is a “choice” is the notion that it is the wrong choice. By responding to anti-gay groups’ assertion that being gay is not a choice, however, the gay rights movement is essentially agreeing with anti-gay groups premise that there is indeed something wrong with choosing a partner of the same-sex. Essentially, the underlying message of the “born this way” response is: *Sorry I’m gay, but I can’t help it – I was born this way.* Therefore the naturalness of “gay” is established.

The question of choice is the wrong question. It is counterproductive to the gay rights movement. Thus this paper seeks not to answer this question but rather to unpack the question itself, exposing its problematic underlying assumptions. A more interesting and expansive question might be: *What are the diverse ways individuals create and*

*experience sexuality, desire, and romance? Ultimately, what are the various ways individuals choose to love one another?*

### **Other Choices**

The issue of choice can be explored through analogies in other areas of daily life where “choice” is never contested. One might “choose” to eat vanilla ice-cream over chocolate ice-cream, wear one’s hair short as opposed to long, or vote democrat or republican. The issue over whether or not such things are “choices” is never raised to any significant level. Presumably most would agree that all the above mentioned are indeed “choices,” – by which individuals make conscious, deliberate decisions about what they prefer within a particular context.

There are many choices individuals freely make, without having to revert to biological explanations. Choice is afforded to all these activities because it is not assumed that one choice is better or worse than the other. Although strong personal opinions might abound, society in general does not view choosing vanilla ice-cream over chocolate as inherently inferior or superior. In essence, society does not label one choice as “good” and the other as “bad.” Debating whether or not homosexuality is a choice inevitably imparts a value judgment upon this choice – often presupposing that it is inferior and thus in need of explanation, or justification. The gay rights movement must reconsider why it is so invested in the “born this way” debate to unpack its own defensive positioning.

## Reclaiming “Choice”

This paper asserts that gay rights proponents need not be afraid of the word choice. Instead of reverting to essentialist arguments, a more radical gay rights approach reclaims the word “choice,” using it as a source of pride, empowerment, and political force. Instead of letting gay rights opponents set the terms of debate, and then responding with a defensive posturing to the anti-gay claim that being gay is a choice, the gay rights movement might affirm *the right to choose* to love whomever one pleases as a source of true freedom and sexual liberation.

The “I was born this way” mantra is restrictive and defensive. More empowering and progressive mantras for the gay rights movement might be: *I choose to be as gay as I want; I support the freedom to choose who and how I love; or Love is always a choice.* Rather than leaving desire up to biological determinism, the gay rights movement could reclaim choice and boldly restore individual agency and power.

As evidenced by the previous examples, essentialist and biological models for understanding and discussing sexuality have been and continue to be employed both within American anthropology, “scientific” research, and the mainstream American gay right’s movement. The following section further explores the inadequacies of viewing sexuality purely in essentialist terms. Highlighting prominent social construction scholarship, it examines how a social constructionist framework must be applied to discussions of sexuality.

## Understanding Sexuality as a Social Construct

Contrary to essentialist frameworks, social construction theory examines the complex social processes that create, sustain, and inform ideas, concepts, and objects. Thus it understands phenomena as historically and culturally inflected. Feminist philosopher Sally Haslanger defines a social construct as something that is “an intended or unintended product of a social practice” (Haslanger 2005:17). Using this definition, institutions like the Supreme Court of the U.S., languages, scientific inquiries, wives, husbands, and concepts like gender, race, and sexuality, can all be seen as social constructs because each comes into existence only within an intricate social context.

By positing the concept of sexuality as relational to time and place, a social constructionist lens undermines essentialist assumptions that understand so called differences between “gays” and “straights” as absolute and natural. Instead, a social constructionist lens understands such “differences” as socially created and maintained as well as historically specific. Viewing so called differences as *social creations* rather than *natural givens* allows for an intellectually deeper exploration of the various forces that create and maintain such categories.

Thus social construction theory seeks to “challenge the appearance of inevitability of the category in question” (Haslanger 2005:20). In the popular essentialist understanding of sexuality, it is assumed that being “heterosexual” or “homosexual” are specific attributes with which one is simply born. In this framework sexuality is seen as a biological or behavioral fact. A social construction approach, however, rejects this notion and poses more interesting and provoking questions such as: What does it *mean* to be

“gay”? What is the complex social matrix in which a “gay person” is situated? What are the political implications for being labeled “homosexual” rather than “heterosexual?” Thus a social constructionist lens is concerned not with anatomical or biological differences between “gays” and “straights,” but the social *meaning* and *expectations* attributed to such categories – not only acted upon, but created and maintained in a specific context.

Although it may seem like individuals experience the world simply as it is, so called “reality” is seen through various lenses that color both what one sees and experiences or does not. In this sense, how and what one thinks is deeply affected by social forces. Because different conceptual lenses organize the world in different ways it is always crucial to ask: “What phenomena are highlighted and what are eclipsed by a particular framework of concepts?” (Haslanger 2005:17).

The dominant model within contemporary American society for understanding and organizing sexuality holds that individuals fall within a strict heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy. Like the dominant gender model, which assumes that individuals are either female or male, the sexuality model also assumes a strict either/or distinction – individuals are either “heterosexual” or “homosexual.” Within this model sexual orientation is understood in biological and essentialist terms; it is something with which one is born, a pre-social, timeless, and static entity.

This framework, however, is restrictive and limiting. Individuals who fall outside of the strict heterosexual/homosexual categories are, in Haslanger’s language, “eclipsed” – their experiences are denied validation and they are seen as “deviant” or “unnatural.” Essentially they become “others.” Furthermore, classifying individuals as either

“homosexual” or “heterosexual” creates a false divide between bodies, ultimately reinforcing a sexual hierarchy. “Heterosexuality” is viewed as the natural, default mode and “homosexuality” an inferior deviation from this. Thus “heterosexuality” becomes the dominant sexuality and “homosexuality” in need of explanation, tolerance, or subjection.

Applying a social constructionist lens to the concept of sexuality, however, rejects the mainstream assumption that “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” are naturally occurring phenomena and that individual bodies can be neatly separated into one or the other; instead it understands all sexuality as relational both at the individual and societal level to time and place. Likewise a social constructionist framework seeks to examine the questions: Who benefits from maintaining the homosexual and heterosexual binary? And who exercises the most power in defining bodies as “gay” or “straight?”

Furthermore, social construction theory challenges the prevailing myth that the relatively recent Western conceptualization of the heterosexual/homosexual binary is *the only* way to understand and organize sexuality. As a plethora of excellent social construction scholarship has shown, historically and cross-culturally, societies have understood and organized sexuality in a myriad of ways. As Roger Lancaster explains,

Anthropological studies of other cultures have shown that human sexual practices are remarkably varied-that there’s more than one way to organize the institutions of family, kinship, and sexual life. Some societies even require every male to engage in same-sex relations for extended periods of time. What all of this means is that nothing in ‘human nature’ gives us a heterosexual norm and a homosexual minority. *Sexuality is largely what we make of it* (Lancaster 2003:23) ( emphasis added).

The following exploration of scholarship framed by social construction theory highlights the various ways sexuality and gender is culturally constructed and maintained. These examples pose a potential challenge to contemporary heteronormative Western

understandings and definitions of sexuality which view “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” as fixed categories. Together, they suggest that sexuality is not simply an essential unchanging concept throughout time, but is a continually shifting and unstable category, situational to particular historical and cultural settings.<sup>9</sup>

### **Rayna Rapp/Ellen Ross Piece**

In “Sex and Society: A Research Note from Social History and Anthropology” feminist anthropologist Rayna Rapp and social historian Ellen Ross examine the multifaceted ways society, history, and culture structure ideas and experiences of sexuality. Rejecting essentialist claims, Rapp and Ross echo the social constructionist precept that sex is always *social*. As they note:

Sexuality’s biological base is always experienced culturally, through translation. The bare biological facts of sexuality do not speak for themselves; they must be expressed socially. Sex feels individual, or at least private, but those feelings always incorporate the roles, definitions, symbols and meanings of the worlds in which they are constructed (Ross and Rapp 1981:51).

Using the methods of anthropology and social history, they examine the various ways different societal domains inform and structure notions of sexuality. Specifically, Ross and Rapp identify three key contexts that are crucial in shaping sexuality: (1) kinship and family systems, (2) sexual regulations and definitions of communities, and (3) national and “world systems.”

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<sup>9</sup> Due to the confines of this paper I provide a general overview, rather than an in-depth analysis of each work. This general discussion, however, is meant as a starting ground for further research and provides a broad review of the literature one might turn to for more comprehensive discussions of social construction theory regarding sexuality.

With regards to kinship and family systems, Rapp and Ross notes that *kin terminologies, inheritance practices, and marriage patterns* are all significant factors in shaping how sexuality is understood, practiced, and maintained within a given culture. For example, kinship terminologies play a crucial role in demarcating who is an acceptable marriage partner and who is not. Within Dravidian terminologies (found in parts of South Asia, Australia, and the Pacific) there are fourteen named kin categories. In addition to naming parents and siblings, children also learn to name their potential mothers- and fathers-in-law, as well as potential spouses. As Rapp and Ross explain, “In such kinship systems, major messages mapping permissible and outlawed sexual partners are transmitted in language itself” (Ross and Rapp 1981:55).

The larger social *communities* in which families and kin groups are situated also greatly affect the organization of sexuality. As Rapp and Ross note, “Communities represent localized, face-to-face sociability; they are the material arenas in which groups of people larger than individual families live out their lives” (Rapp and Ross 1981:58). As an example of such, Rapp and Ross note the impact of the introduction of rural industry into some English and Welsh farming communities in the early modern period. According to Rapp and Ross, patterns of courtship and marriage changed to “reflect the new value that children’s, and especially daughters’, labor represented to the family economy as a whole” (Rapp and Ross 1981:59). Before this time, parents had primarily arranged marriages. Now night courting, arranged by the young people themselves, became more common, as young people asserted greater sexual autonomy.

World systems also profoundly shape sexuality. Rapp and Ross note major world religions as examples. For instance, Roman Catholicism’s definition of legitimate and

morally acceptable sex and marriage practices has greatly influenced both local and global experiences of sexuality. During the Counter-Reformation, the Catholic Church spoke out against lay and clerical concubinage, “the open acknowledgment of illicit sexual relations and paternity, with support for mother and child” (Rapp and Ross 1981:64). Thus, as Rapp and Ross explain, by the mid-seventeenth century the practice was rare and unmarried women, with children, were particularly victimized and stigmatized by society (Rapp and Ross 1981:64).

Using the three above mentioned areas (kinship and family systems, communities, and world systems) to highlight the complex and interconnected relationship between culture and sexuality, Ross and Rapp conclude by again invoking a social constructionist rendering of sex and sexuality. As they state, “...sex is a social experience, a lived and changing relationship, and not an ‘essence’ whose content is fixed” (Ross and Rapp 1981:71).

### **John D’Emilio – Capitalism and Gay Identity**

Lesbian and gay historian John D’Emilio examines the ways capitalism uniquely structured and gave impetus to the formation of gay identity beginning in the twentieth century. In his essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” D’ Emilio challenges the historical myth that “gays” and “lesbians” have existed throughout all times and cultures; instead, he argues that the formation of *gay and lesbian identity* is unique to a specific historical era which saw the emergence of capitalism and a free labor system. According to D’Emilio, the free labor system of capitalism profoundly transformed the structure of the nuclear family, the meaning of heterosexual relations, and the ideology of family life.

D'Emilio begins his essay by describing the function of the nuclear family within seventeenth century pre-capitalist New England colonial life. In the seventeenth century New England colonies, life was structured around the nuclear family. The family was an "interdependent unit of production," where husbands, wives, and children worked together to produce the goods they consumed. As D'Emilio explains, these households were self-sufficient, independent, and patriarchal (D'Emilio 1993:469). Because the self-sufficient family unit relied heavily on the use of child-labor, for seventeenth century Puritans, sex was conceived of primarily as being about procreation. Thus, as D'Emilio explains, the Puritans condemned any type of sexual behavior that did not lead to procreation (D'Emilio 1993:469).

By the nineteenth century, however, this self-sufficient method of production was gradually replaced by a capitalist system of wage labor. Men began working for wages permanently outside the home, while women primarily stopped working outside the home after marriage. Thus the nuclear family, although still dependent on its members, was no longer self-sufficient as men sought wages outside the home (D'Emilio 1993:469). As wage labor capitalism spread and the nuclear family was no longer the primary unit of production, the meaning of heterosexual relations and the ideology of family life also changed. Unlike Puritan ideals of sexuality, by the 1920s, heterosexual relations were understood as a means to experience intimacy, happiness, and pleasure (D'Emilio 1993: 470). Sex, in this framework, was no longer just about reproduction. Whereas seventeenth century New England colonists had relied heavily on the labor of children, by the 1920s producing offspring was no longer necessary for survival; therefore among the white middle class the family was no longer described as a mechanism for work and

production but rather seen as “the means through which men and women formed satisfying, mutually enhancing relationships and created an environment that nurtured children” (D’Emilio 1993:469).

By de-centering the economically self sufficient role of the nuclear family, capitalism created a social space which allowed the emergence of a gay identity. Although homosexual behavior surely existed within colonial New England, as D’Emilio explains, there was “no ‘social space’ in the colonial system of production that allowed men and women to be gay” (D’Emilio 1993:470). In other words the construction of a “gay” *identity* was not possible within the seventeenth-century cultural framework that structured survival around a “heterosexual” nuclear family. Through capitalism and wage labor, however, individuals no longer relied solely on the nuclear family and thus gained greater freedom in which to construct “homosexual” identities.<sup>10</sup> As D’Emilio states:

Only when individuals began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity – an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one’s own sex. By the end of the century, a class of men and women existed who recognized their erotic interest in their own sex, saw it as a trait that set them apart from the majority, and sought others like themselves “(D’Emilio 1993:470).

Concluding his essay, D’Emilio rejects essentialist notions of sexuality as absolute universals, reminding the reader that sexuality and sexual identities are deeply structured by culture – specifically modes of production. As he states:

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<sup>10</sup> As D’Emilio points out, it is important to keep in mind that capitalism affected different groups in different ways. Indeed, it was relatively easier for men to construct homosexual identities due to the fact that they had greater access and received higher wages within the labor force than women who were often economically dependent on men (D’Emilio 1993:471).

Claims made by gays and nongays that sexual orientation is fixed at an early age, that large number of visible gay men and lesbians in society, the media, and the schools will have no influence on the sexual identities of the young, are wrong. *Capitalism has created the material conditions for homosexual desire to express itself as a central component of some individuals' lives*; now, our political movements are changing consciousness, creating the ideological conditions that make it easier for people to make that choice (D'Emilio 1993:473- 474) (emphasis added).

For D'Emilio, being “gay” is not a fixed sexual orientation that has existed in the same way throughout all times and cultures, rather it is a socially constructed identity made possible within a unique historical and cultural setting which saw the emergence of Capitalism and a wage-labor.

### **David Halperin – Socially Articulated Power Relations in Ancient Greece**

Similar to D'Emilio, queer theorist David Halperin also provides a socially constructed account of sexuality. Whereas D'Emilio focuses his discussion on *capitalism*, Halperin highlights the various ways sexuality is structured and maintained by socially articulated *power relations*. In his essay “Is There a History of Sexuality,” Halperin seeks to expand on Foucault’s premise that sexuality is not an innate, natural fact, but rather, a socially created and maintained discourse and experience.

Contrasting classical antiquity with the modern world, Halperin exposes the radically different sets of values, behaviors, and social norms that underpinned ancient Greek society. By juxtaposing these two cultures and time periods, Halperin seeks to challenge the assumption that there is indeed a static and universal “human nature” (Halperin 1993:417). Specifically with regards to sexuality, Halperin argues that “the

study of antiquity calls into question the assumption that sexual behavior reflects or expresses an individual's 'sexuality'" (Halperin 1993:417). According to Halperin, within contemporary Western society, sexuality is currently conceptualized by two prevailing premises; first, sexuality is understood as a separate, self-defined entity, and second, human beings are thought to be individuated by their sexuality. That is, it is assumed that individuals can be demarcated by different types or kinds of sexuality (i.e., homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual) – thereby giving each individual a sexual identity (Halperin 1993:417).

By studying ancient Greece, however, Halperin argues that these premises are indeed arbitrary. For according to Halperin, in classical Athens sexuality was not thought of as a separate sphere of existence, or the innate, inborn inclination of an individual. Rather, sex was used as a mechanism whereby hierarchical social structures were reinforced and maintained. As Halperin explains, sex “served to position social actors in the places assigned to them, by virtue of their political standing, in the hierarchical structure of the Athenian polity” (Halperin 1993:18).

Halperin explains that in classical Athens only a small group of adult male citizens held social and political power. Society was strictly divided by this elite group, who were considered citizens, and a subordinate group of women, children, foreigners, and slaves, who lacked full civil rights. Sex, then, was used as a mechanism to further ensure this divide. As Halperin explains, “Sex... [was] not a mutual enterprise in which two or more person jointly [engaged] but...an action performed by a social superior upon a social inferior” (Halperin 1993:418).

The Athenian ideological system construed radically different meanings for the acts of penetration versus being penetrated. To penetrate another was a sign of domination and power, whereas being penetrated was perceived of as weak and passive. In accordance with these cultural beliefs, sexual penetration was thought of as an act that occurred between a social superior and social inferior. Thus an adult, male citizen of Athens could have legitimate sexual relations only with individuals situated politically and socially inferior to him (women of any age, free males past the age of puberty who were not old enough to be citizens, foreigners, and slaves of either sex) (Halperin1993:418).

In addition to not thinking of sexuality as a separate sphere of existence, Halperin also argues that classical Greek society did not understand sexuality as generating individual sexual identities. According to Halperin the notion of individual sexual identities is a relatively modern one. Sexuality, in the antiquity, was not conceptualized in essentialist terms. Thus the current Western thinking that categorizes individuals as either heterosexual or homosexual would have been meaningless in ancient Greek society that did not perceive of two “different” types of sexuality (Halperin 1993:420).

Contrary to contemporary Western understandings of sexuality, which often assume that two individuals engaging in sexual acts share the same sexual identity regardless of their differing physical sexual positions (e.g. who’s penetrating), within classical Greek society sexual partners each maintained different sexual roles (either the superior “penetrator” role or the subordinate “penetrated” role). In other words, sexuality/sexual identity was demarcated not by the desired gender of a sexual partner

(same sex/opposite sex) but by the superior/inferior position that one assumed in sexual relations based on his or her social category.

What was considered inferior sex within classical Athens was not the desire to engage in sexual acts with a member of the same sex, but rather, the desire to be penetrated by a social inferior. This was viewed as “soft” or “unmasculine” (Halperin 1993:421). Individuals who engaged in such acts, however, were not viewed as having an inborn, sexual orientation. Individual sex acts were indeed imbued with meaning and deemed either social acceptable or unacceptable, but such individual sex acts did not denote a fixed sexual identity (Halperin 1993:423).

Halperin’s account of ancient Greece illuminates the complex ways various ideological systems both underpin and structure notions of sexuality, gender, and power.

As he states:

Unlike sex, sexuality is a cultural production: it represents the *appropriation* of the human body and its physiological capacities by an ideological discourse. Sexuality is not a somatic fact; it is a cultural effect (Halperin 1993:416).

Thus Halperin concludes by arguing that “sexuality” is not a stable category of historical analysis but is unique to time and place.

### **Arlene Stein – Contrasting Lesbian Narratives**

In her book *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* sociologist Arlene Stein juxtaposes 1950s butch/femme narratives of lesbian identity with 1970s feminist lesbian separatist notions of identity, highlighting the dissimilar ways

individuals understood and constructed their sexual identities in conjunction with the broader social forces that structured such narratives.

Seeking to understand the different ways women give meaning to their lives and structure their sexual identities in particular historical contexts, Stein interviewed two groups of women: those who formed lesbian identities during the postwar 1950s and those who formed identities under the 1970s feminist movement. Through her research Stein found that “lesbian” identified women of the 1950s experienced their sexuality primarily in essentialist terms – understanding their “lesbian” identity as an unchanging and innate sexual orientation. Contrary to 1950s narratives, however, a significant number of “lesbians” of the 1970s experienced their sexuality as a political and self-motivated choice.

As Stein explains, the 1950s were a time filled with great sexual fear and anxiety. Strict adherence to gender roles was advocated, and marital sex (between a man and wife) was promoted as the only legitimate form of sexual relations. Amidst this backdrop, “homosexuals” were vilified as sexual deviants. As Stein states, “female homosexuals (and prostitutes) often became the sexual deviants against which ‘proper’ female sexuality, heterosexual and sanctified by marriage, was defined” (Stein 1997:25).

Thus “lesbians” who came out during the period roughly from World War II to 1969 experienced their “homosexuality” in largely negative terms. Influenced by early century sexologists who often pathologized “homosexuality,” same-sex desires were greatly shunned and stigmatized. Harassment, legal sanctions, and often extreme violence were a common experience for openly-gay individuals or those suspected of being gay (Stein 1997:14). The medical model explained “homosexuality” as a fixed, immutable

aspect of one's core being. Lesbians were thought to suffer from "sexual inversion." That is they were considered "mannish women" – women who failed to conform to proper feminine gender roles of the time. As Stein explains:

To become a lesbian was to reveal something that had before been hidden, to disclose something that occupied the very core of one's 'being,' and to build an identity on the basis of one's stigma (Stein 1997:47).

Thus for many women who came out during the 1950s, they experienced their sexuality as an innate, inborn orientation. This narrative, however, changed quite dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s when lesbian feminism began advocating "lesbianism" as a political choice.

Women who came of age during the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a time of great social and political turmoil – the Vietnam War, Civil Rights movement, gay liberation, workers' rights struggles, and second wave feminism all greatly influenced the lives of such women. Thus the "lesbian" narratives of women who came out during this time must be understood within this historical context. As Stein explains, feminism and black power movements helped give raise to "identity politics" (Stein 1997:13).

Many women of this time period became involved or influenced by radical feminism. Departing from liberal or equal rights feminism, radical feminism argued that at the root of women's oppression was a patriarchal culture which systematically favored men over women. Thus radical feminists argued that the only way for women to achieve true liberation was by the complete restructuring of society. Some radical feminists went as far as to suggest that for women to be truly free they needed to break all ties with men – economic, emotional, and physical. These feminists advocated lesbianism as a political and cultural rejection of male domination. By consciously choosing to partner with other

women and breaking their dependency on men, they argued, “lesbians” could achieve true liberation. Within this ideology, all women were potential “lesbians” who, by breaking their ties with men and forming bonds with other women, could claim a lesbian identity (Stein 1997:20).

Because self-identified lesbians conceived of themselves as financially and emotionally independent of men, within radical feminism, lesbianism became equated with female autonomy and independence from an oppressive patriarchal system. As Stein explains, claiming a lesbian identity “...was an act of self-affirmation and love, an act of identification rather than desire. Ultimately, it was much more than simply a matter of sex” (Stein 1997:38).

In this context lesbianism was not seen as a biological orientation or innate pre-social essence, rather it was conceptualized as a political choice, whereby women consciously rejected heterosexual and patriarchal demands and instead formed partnerships with other women (Stein 1997:39). The reframing of lesbianism as a political choice and rejection of male domination opened up the possibility of lesbianism to a greater number of women. As Stein explains, lesbian feminism created an atmosphere in which women who had never considered claiming a lesbian identity now left men to form emotional and physical bonds with other women (Stein 1997:41).

Thus women coming of age in the early 1970s experienced their sexuality in largely different terms than women who came of age during the 1950s. Whereas “lesbians” of the 1950s had experienced their sexuality in largely negative terms – occupying a stigmatized and pathologized social role – many “lesbians” of the 1970s realized their sexuality as a self-conscious, politically inflected identity (Stein 1997:24).

As Arlene Stein's work demonstrates, there is no one essential "lesbian" narrative. Rather, notions of "lesbian" identity are unique to historical and cultural periods. And as evidenced by the dissimilar accounts of 1950s and 1970s "lesbian" narratives, broad social and political movements, such as radical feminism, influence individuals' understanding, experience, and construction of sexuality, sexual scripts, and sexual identities. Like the social constructionist tone of D'Emilio and Halperin, Stein states:

History is much less linear, much more complex than the popular narrative of gay liberation suggests. There is no single story of lesbian life: there are many stories, many simultaneous and overlapping "conversations" (Stein 1997:15).

Thus as Stein explains, the process of identity formation is a complex and flexible process that occurs both as a result of deep individual desires as well as broader historical and cultural forces outside the individual.

Together the work of Rayna Rapp and Ellen Ross, John D'Emilio, David Halperin, and Arlene Stein illuminate the multifaceted intersections of sexuality with cultural domains such as kinship and family systems, national and world systems, modes of production (e.g., capitalism), power relations (e.g., ancient Greece), and social movements (e.g., 1970s feminism). Their works suggests that sexual identities do not exist independent of culture, but rather are constructed through the complex juncture of the personal self as it is situated by larger cultural and historical forces. Furthermore their works highlight one of the central themes of social construction theory – namely, there are many ways to understand, experience, and structure sexuality. Ultimately, there are

many ways to “do it.” Contemporary Western society’s distinct heterosexual/homosexual binary is simply one way, among many, of constructing sexuality.

### **Sexuality Re-Imagined: Toward a Queer Future**

As demonstrated, a social constructionists approach provides an expansive, nuanced, and unhindered lens from which to explore sexuality, promoting a deeper exploration into the various historical and social forces that structure sexual desires, identities, and narratives. For simply assuming sexuality as an essential timeless entity ignores the complex socio-historical factors that are at play in shaping and maintaining sexuality within a given culture and time period. Thus a social constructionist approach allows for greater possibility in the ways individuals understand and experience sexuality.

The insight that there is no essential “correct” way to understand and experience sexuality has the potential to liberate individuals and society as a whole from normative discourses that both stigmatize and demand certain forms of sexuality and allow for a limited range of “acceptable” sexual expression. Furthermore, if social construction theory begins with the premise that concepts are socially constructed, it follows that they can indeed be deconstructed. Thus the following section deconstructs rigid essentialist understandings of sexuality while offering suggestions for restructuring the way sexuality is currently discussed and understood within academia and popular culture.<sup>11</sup> Using queer theory, a more radical extension of social construction theory, as a reference point, it looks critically at the process of sexual identity formation, offering a queered paradigm

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<sup>11</sup> I am referring to areas such as evolutionary biology, sociobiology, and evolutionary psychology that employ essentialist frameworks when discussing sexuality. Obviously areas like cultural anthropology, cultural studies, feminist and gender studies, and queer theory already operate from the framework I am advocating.

that allows for identity construction while at the same time acknowledging the fluidity and inherent ambiguity of all identity formations.

Firstly, this paper proposes to employ “sexual preference” rather than the more commonly used “sexual orientation.” “Orientation” implies a rigid and fixed understanding of sexuality; whereas, “preference” invokes a more fluid and open-ended view. Furthermore, the term sexual preference invokes a greater sense of self-agency in understanding sexuality. Orientation implies that the individual has little or no control, over his or her sexual desires. Invoking the term preference, however, acknowledges the active role individuals play in creating and experiencing their sexual, romantic, and erotic desires.

Secondly, it is crucial to understand the construction of sexual identity as an ongoing, fluid process, and thus not reify socially created and maintained sexual categories. For this reification leaves little room for re-imagining sexual paradigms, scripts, and identities. A sexual paradigm that allows for an expansive and un-defined range of identities is most beneficial in discussing sexuality. Research by anthropologist Bill Leap suggests that a paradigm shift that rejects rigid labels and understands identity as fluctuating process may well be underway among young adults. In a 2005 article in the *Advocate*, titled *Same-sex but not “gay,”* Leap discusses American teens and young adults’ rejection of labels such as “gay” and “lesbian.” According to Leap, the growing rejection of labels among young people suggests a cultural shift. The article sites Eve Lincoln, 19, who dates women but does not label herself as “gay” or “lesbian.” She explains that, “ I date people—not genders, not bodies with certain genitalia, [but] strictly people with whom I feel a connection and to whom I am attracted.” Rejecting notions of

heteronormativity, she goes on to say that, “Most labels today have ‘heterosexual’ as the base and then everything else is deviant of it. If do not label myself by a label created by society, then I am denying them that heterosexual privilege” (Eillen 2005: 34).

Leap notes that for many young adults today, terms like “gay” and “lesbian” are often associated with the staunch political activism that came out of the 1960s and 1970s; the political embeddings of such terms are often foreign to young adults today who do not view themselves as political. Furthermore, Leap explains that for some women and minority youths with same-sex attractions, words like “gay” and “lesbian” represent only the white upper-class. Leap’s research suggests, inflexible categories such as gay and straight may be losing legitimacy as a younger generation advocates for a more open-ended and ambiguous sexual lens, ultimately a queered lens. Expanding on Leaps’ research the following section introduces queer theory and offers suggestions for queering the paradigm from which sexuality is discussed and understood.

### **The Theory Behind Queer Theory**

By most accounts queer theory first became popular beginning in the 1990s (Jagose 2002:76). Influenced by twentieth-century thinkers like Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Michel Foucault, queer theory comes out of a post-structuralist context which questions self-evident claims about identity (Jagose 2002:79). Within this post-structuralist framework, identity is understood “as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions” (Jagose 2002:3). Thus queer acknowledges the shifting ground upon which any social identity (sexual, gender, political, religious, etc.) is always constructed. From a queer lens, identity formation is an

ongoing, complex process – never fully cemented or completed. Seeking to deconstruct normative frameworks that naturalize identities in essentialist terms, queer exposes the instability of heteronormative identity categories. In her introduction to queer theory, Annamarie Jagose describes queer as:

...those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability – which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect – queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire ( Jagose 2002:3).

Essentially, queer defines itself by being indefinable – its meaning stemming ultimately from its intentional ambiguity. As Jagose so eloquently describes, “Queer is always an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming: utopic in its negativity, queer theory curves endlessly toward a realization that its realization remains impossible” (Jagose 2002:131). In a sense queer is more of an attitude – a transgressive posturing that resists hegemonic notions of sexual identities, sexual scripts, and gender roles. Challenging the so-called “norm,” queer seeks to disrupt the ostensible natural, obvious, and taken-for-granted societal assumptions about sexuality and gender. By positioning itself outside and against authoritative notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, queer seeks to de-normalize and destabilize dominant narratives of heterosexuality as the only legitimate and natural expression of sexuality.

In many ways queer theory is an extension of social construction theory. Like social construction theory, it rejects any attempt to universalize or essentialize sexuality, and instead understands sexuality as structured by larger historical and social forces. Queer theory, however, focuses more on disrupting and denaturalizing any and all notions of identity as stable and unified. Both queer and social construction theory are

indeed analytical frameworks used to discuss and understand social and historical phenomena. In addition to its theoretical aspect, however, queer is also a political practice. Thus queer advocates a self-conscious social and political stance in a way that social construction theory does not. One might *be* or *perform* queer by resisting normative articulations of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, one might, albeit somewhat ironically, claim queer as a transgressive identity or self definition – one that both refuses any absolute definition and resists whatever constitutes *the norm*. On the contrary, one does not speak of being or performing social construction theory. Nor does social construction theory represent a conscious identity in the way that queer does.

### **Fear of Queer**

Because of queer theory's deconstructionism, some fear that queer will completely erase and render meaningless all notions of identity. Indeed, taken to its logical extreme, a post-modern, deconstructionist, queer approach does just that. This paper, however, seeks to articulate a queer approach that is more effective and useful in understanding and discussing notions of identity. It neither advocates the complete elimination of identities nor suggests that all identities are essentially inconsistent to sexual liberation. Nevertheless, it seeks to loosen the rigidity of sexual identities, thereby widening the boundaries and flexibility around such constructions. Responding to the anxiety around queer theory's deconstruction of identity, Jagose notes that:

It is possible that identity politics will not disappear under the influence of queer but become more nuanced, less sure of itself, and more attuned to those multiple compromises and pragmatic effects that characterize *any* mobilization of identity (Jagose 2002:126).

Thus the concept of queer need not be entirely anti-identity. Rather it gives individuals the freedom and creative self-agency to actively construct and re-construct their own sexual identities without social demands and pre-given heteronormative sexual scripts. Indeed, queer stands as a point of departure – a provocative reminder that supposedly self-evident categories are always subject to alteration.

### **Queer Liberation**

The current sexual paradigm, which groups bodies into either heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual does not adequately capture the myriad of ways individuals experience, create, and understand their sexuality. In essence, this paradigm reinforces a binary divide between bodies – creating not an open-ended space in which to explore sexuality but instead creating contentious opposition between forms of sexual expression deemed “normal” or “appropriate” and those labeled as “deviant” or “un-natural.” A more far-reaching and nuanced paradigm, which can encompass a broader range of sexual expressions and alternatives to rigid notions of heterosexuality, is provided by a queer lens. Rather than seeking a limited and definite answer to the question, “What *is* human sexuality?” a queer paradigm expands this question and asks “What are the diverse and unique *possibilities* through which individuals have and continue to express and experience their sexuality?” While the former assumes sexuality is unitary and static, the latter allows for an ambiguous and unrestricted understanding and exploration of human sexuality. As Mimi Marinucci explains, for queer “the goal is the proliferation and multiplication of categories” (Marinucci 2010:36).

Ultimately, queering the lens from which sexuality is understood is an enormous step toward sexual liberation. I define sexual liberation as the freedom of self-definition – the freedom to structure *our* own identities, create *our* own meaning, write *our* own narratives, and speak *our* own voices (without heteronormative, societal and so called “scientific” demands and restraints). Positioned against normalizing discourses and heteronormative stipulations, queer creates an unrestricted space in which alternative identities and interpretations of sexuality outside the heterosexual and scientific norm can be continually constructed, deconstructed, and re-imagined. In essence, it carves out a space in which personal subjectivity is rendered possible. And indeed, it is in these unrestricted and undefined spaces where true sexual liberation is achieved and a more accurate representation of human sexuality is articulated.

### **Conclusion**

Paradigms that understand human sexuality primarily in essentialist or biological terms have been present throughout much of anthropology’s history. As this paper has shown, American anthropology’s approach to studying sexuality and same-sex sexuality in particular, has often been ahistorical, essentializing, and often infused with the same heteronormative assumptions and biases of the larger American society. Early Pre-WWII anthropologists understood sexuality as a self-evident category, an essence that existed across time and space regardless of differing social or historical settings. Researchers focused on collecting what they *perceived* to be objective data and rarely questioned the meaning or socio-political contexts of various behaviors and identities. In addition, early ethnographers also assumed the universal and unchanging category of

“gay” or “homosexual.” Anthropologists working in the post-WWII masculinist tradition focused their attention primarily on same-sex behaviors among males, often ignoring and dismissing female same-sex sexuality. In general, early twentieth century and 1980s masculinist approaches failed to critically take into consideration the role that history and culture played in shaping experiences and understandings of sexuality.

It was not until the 1970s, that anthropology began to reexamine essentialist approaches, replacing such models with a constructionist understanding of sexuality. Prompted by outside discourses, such as the feminist movement, sociology, history and French intellectualism, anthropology began to deconstruct notions of sexuality and gender as self-evident, unchanging, and stable categories. Today, gay and lesbian anthropology, represented most prominently by the society of gay and lesbian anthropologist (SOLGA), is a growing and vital subfield within anthropology. Scholars within this subfield employ both social construction and queer theory, and understand sexuality and gender as relational to time and place.

In spite of these changes, particular subfields within anthropology, such as sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, continue to employ essentialist and biological frameworks. In fact essentialist perspectives predominate in the biological sciences as well as popular understandings of sex and gender. Even the American Gay Right’s Movement invokes essentialism when advocating for equal rights for gays and lesbians on the basis of sexuality as a biological imperative. While it may be reassuring to make universalizing claims about so-called *human nature*, such absolutes ignore the role of culture in shaping the human experience of sex, sexuality and gender. It must not be forgotten science itself is a particular cultural lens that must also be situated in both

historical and political contexts. Therefore the normative assumptions of science, including, and especially, those of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, must be questioned. Any research that starts with a conception of sexuality as singular and universal must necessarily provoke a particularly selective understanding of human experience and expression and thus ignore what it is and what it means to be human. More specifically, sexuality is inflected with meaning, symbolism, power, and privilege, all of which are cultural constructions. Cultural anthropology in general, and gay and lesbian anthropology in particular, are certainly well-suited to offer alternative paradigms that provide more inclusive and open-ended lenses from which to understand and discuss sexuality and gender.

As this paper demonstrates, essentialist or biological frameworks are inadequate for capturing the myriad of ways individuals experience and create sexuality. Furthermore, if anthropology's central question is: what is it to be human? , essentialist frameworks that reduce sexuality in particular and human behavior in general to biology and the processes of natural selection are an extraordinarily narrow range of all there is to explore and know about being human. While some academics and scientists take comfort in their simple and neat explanations for the complex human experience, those affirming stories of cause and effect leave little room for the vast terrain of human consciousness.

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